

Examining Abraham Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty as a Contemporary Catalyst  
for Theological Engagement in the Public Sphere

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Nividi Kevichusa, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works- including electronic media-have been identified and sources clearly stated.

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*Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:17 (NIV)*

## ABSTRACT

In the strenuous relation between church and state, it is noted that the church tries to establish its influence and dominion in the public sphere, thus overriding the state, or the state tries to intervene and tend to diminish the influence of the church in the public sphere. With this continual disparity, how can contemporary Christians, who are part of the church, hope to effectively engage in the public sphere, which is predominantly influenced and governed by the secularised state? This thesis will thus seek to critically examine three theological components, namely radical orthodoxy, public theology and their understanding on church and state, and analyse them in light of Abraham Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty which calls for the separation and autonomy of all spheres in society.

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## INTRODUCTION CHAPTER

In George Orwell's *1984*, the story describes a government that has complete authority and rule over its people. Big brother is always watching and forcing its citizens to comply in a manner that is for the good of the state. Thereby, under this regime, the state is not only sovereign, but powerful, and authoritarian. The state is thus the ultimate power holder and totalitarian to the fullest.<sup>1</sup>

Next, we have George R.R. Martin's popular book and television show, *Game of Thrones*. In episode three, season five, it depicts a religious order called the Sparrows, led by the High Sparrow.<sup>2</sup> This religious group denounces material wealth, seek God (in their own notion of god), and leads an ascetic lifestyle. They however hold immense power through their Faith Militant, and have immense control over their members, and as the story unfolds, over the head of state. Here the religious order is almost above reproach and powerful and authoritarian.

These two fictitious stories are examples of how the church and state tend to try and have dominion over the other, and place itself as the ultimate ruler. And so, even though it is a fictitious example, it is not far from the reality and issues of our world.

The notion of religious freedom and religious radicalization are concepts which at times tend to be at loggerheads with each other. Upon closer examination, I noticed that on one hand we have religious voices which tends to be shunned and ignored by the state which is predominantly secular. Thus, religion is on the defensive where it strives for its freedom to participate, engage and be vocal in the public sphere. On the other hand, various religious groups develop a tendency to dominate and infiltrate society, and are on the offensive. This, is both a societal

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1949), np.

<sup>2</sup> George R.R. Martin, *Game of Thrones: Book One A Song of Fire and Ice* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996) also in Sarah Hughes, "Game of Thrones Recap: Season Five, Episode Three- High Sparrow," in *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/apr/27/game-of-thrones-recap-season-five-episode-three-high-sparrow>. Accessed April 2, 2022.



and academic issue, where we have a dichotomy of religious and secular ideologies clashing with each other.

The concept of church and state had its tensions since the time of Jesus, when he was asked – “to whom should we pay our taxes?” And, Jesus replies, “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.”<sup>3</sup> There, we see the first sign of separation between these two spheres, between what is due to the crown, and what is due to the cross. Nevertheless, among evangelicals today, the separation of church and state is not a popular concept embraced by them, and in fact tends to be denounced by many.<sup>4</sup> Churches and Christians by and large, would rather see a Christian world, where the church is viewed as the epitome of truth and justice in the world. This concept is also known as “political ecclesiology.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, this idea is made popular by Radical Orthodoxy, which seeks to reclaim a medieval position in the public sphere, and thereby, place theology as the queen of science.<sup>6</sup> RO in this way takes an offence stance in their engagement where it seeks to criticise modern society, due to it being permeated

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:17, NLT (New Living Translation).

<sup>4</sup> James Lankford and Russel Moore, “The Real Meaning of the Separation of Church and State,” in *Time*, <https://time.com/5103677/church-state-separation-religious-freedom/>. Accessed April 2, 2022. And “The US and Religion: A Complex Relationship between Church and State,” in *Evangelical Focus*, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/life-tech/14095/the-us-and-religion-a-complex-relationship-between-state-and-church>. Accessed April 2, 2022.

And in, Jeff Brumley, “Most Americans favour church-state separation, but many evangelicals do not,” in *Baptist News Global* <https://baptistnews.com/article/most-americans-favor-church-state-separation-but-many-evangelicals-do-not/#.YIKOZNNBx0s>. Accessed April 2, 2022. And in Mia Nelson, “Most Americans have a misunderstanding of separation of church and state” in *Liberty Champion*, <https://www.liberty.edu/champion/2021/03/opinion-most-americans-have-a-misunderstanding-of-separation-of-church-and-state/>. Accessed April 2, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Doak, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Critique,” in *Theological Studies* 68, (2), 2007, 369. (368-393), she mentions RO’s theological account on taking on a socio-political mission of the church, and Milbank’s insistence on “the church as the only true locus of true justice,” 373. Also in Alain Epp Weaver, “After Politics: John Howard Yoder, Body Politics, and the Witnessing Church,” in *The Review of Politics* 61, no. 4 (1999): 637–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1408403>, 637.

<sup>6</sup> David Van Biema, “God as a Post-Modern,” in *Time Magazine*, 09, 2001, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1001474,00.html>, Accessed, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

with secular philosophy and ideology.<sup>7</sup>

This theological concept can be problematic because our present world is largely polarised and continues to witness divisive ideologies, in politics and religion. In the contextual example of France, we witness the concept of *laïcité*, which is hostile towards any form of religious symbols and practices in the public sphere. For example, the passing of a bill by the French government which seeks to prohibit parents from teaching their children about faith and religion in the confinements of their home. It states, “parents who educate their children at home represent a danger to the Republic.”<sup>8</sup> In the example of France, the concept of *laïcité* strives for a separation of church and state. However, even though it claims for secularity and strives to be impartial, there is a tendency to favour the state more, at the cost of pushing religion away from the public sphere. This is at times understandable due to the rise of religious radical groups that seek to threaten the secular state. The attack on the French satire magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2015, which resulted in the death of eleven journalists, and the beheading of the French teacher in 2020 both by radical Islamic terrorist in Paris resulted more stringent rules against religious freedom. As per the latest political update, the far-right wing political party in France had a narrow loss in the recent elections, however their tendency to curb religious freedom continues to be a concern for religious groups in the country.<sup>9</sup>

And so, while government policies such as the banning of Hijab has always been a controversial move by the French government, in the face of religious terrorism

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<sup>7</sup> John Milbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, “Introduction: Suspending the Material the Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Also in Rym Momtaz, “5 Things to know about France’s bill to combat Islamist radicalism,” in *Politico*, December 9, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-law-emmanuel-macron-islamist-separatism-security>. Accessed March 15, 2021. Also in Jayson Casper, “Hundreds of Churches Threatened by France’s Plan to End Muslim Separatism,” in *Christianity Today*, February, 9, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/france-terrorism-law-evangelical-churches-muslim-separatism.html>. Accessed, March 15, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> “Tensions over race, religion in France’s presidential race,” in *The Week*, April 21, 2022. <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2022/04/21/tensions-over-race-religion-in-france-presidential-race.html>, Accessed April 25, 2022.

stringent actions had to be taken by the ruling government. Thereby the state seeks to ban every religious garb and practices from the public sphere. Thus, such government policies not only affect Islam, but other religious groups as well.

Meanwhile in India where I hail from, we have the current ruling political party, the BJP, which is backed by a religious majority Hindu group, and their Hindutva ideology and is antagonistic towards any form of the secular. In New Delhi, the storming of a public university JNU, (Jawaharlal Nehru University) by a group of thugs, backed by the religious Hindu political ruling party, attacked students residing on the university campus.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the continual attack on secular journalists and control over print media continues to be a significant issue in a country that calls itself secular in its constitution.<sup>11</sup> However, it tends to be evolving more as a religious nation or implementing and advocating a civil religion, namely Hindutva.

Thus, we have a religious majority group that has gained immense political power and seeks to dominate and infiltrate their religious ideologies in the public sphere, where they seek to turn India into *Hindustan* (a concept where the entire country will be a Hindu nation.) Coming from a country like India, where religion is deeply imprinted in the culture of the nation, the one with the majority tends to rule and at times overrule others. The concept of *Hindutva* with a Hindu religious ideology tends to control, influence and even rewrite history in their quest to place

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<sup>10</sup> JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) is a public university in New Delhi, India's capital, largely emphasising liberal arts, secular ideology, strong socialism, communism, and secular teachings. The university is a residential campus, and the students were violently attacked by the alleged Hindu-ruled political parties which brought nationwide condemnation. "JNU violence: Who said what on-campus attack by armed, masked mob which injured 20," in *The Wire*, New Delhi, January 6, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/jnu-violence-news-reaction-live-updates-1634273-2020-01-06>. Accessed March 15, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Kanishka Sarkar, *Hindustan Times*, February 15, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/journalist-siddique-kappan-arrested-last-december-while-on-way-to-up-s-hathras-gets-5-day-interim-bail-to-meet-ailing-mother-101613373432316.html>. Mahtab Alam, "Attacked, Arrested, Left Without Recourse: How Was 2020 For India's Journalists," in *The Wire*, December 26, 2020. <https://thewire.in/media/journalists-arrested-press-freedom-2020>. Accessed March 15, 2021.

Hinduism as the state religion in India.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the attack on the university campus at an Indian university, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, which is prone to be more secular, proved to be from a religious angle.<sup>13</sup> Currently India continues to face the ban on beef, implemented by the majority ruling political party, BJP, due to Hindu sentiments banned the sale and consumption in almost all its states, except for the seven North-Eastern states in India and one state in South India.<sup>14</sup>

Looking at a pro secular state, and pro religion state, Christians are not far from contributing to this secular divide. In my home state of Nagaland for example, the state boast itself as a Christian state, thus still implements the Prohibition Act that curbs the sale and consumption of alcohol implemented by the state government under the orders of NBCC (Nagaland Baptist Church Council).<sup>15</sup> The church in

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<sup>12</sup> Snigdha Jain, “BJP and its Hindutva politics- the slow saffronisation of India,” in *The Week*, April 25, 2018. <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2018/04/25/bjp-and-its-hindutva-politics-the-slow-saffronisation-of-india.html>. Accessed March 15, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> In India, Hindus by their religious affiliations are vegetarians, and hence abstain from consuming all meat products. However, the right-wing political parties tend to ban meat, in other states of India, which is a reality that has happened in certain states where the consumption and sale of beef is banned. The cow, which is considered a sacred deity to Hindus. “Clash between JNU students over non-vegetarian food,” in *The Economic Times*, April 10, 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/clash-between-jnu-student-groups-over-non-veg-food-cops-say-6-injured/articleshow/90766572.cms>. Accessed April 18th, 2022. And in, Hemani Bhandari, “JNU students over non-vegetarian food in canteen,” in *The Hindustan Times*, April 11, 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/jnu-students-clash-over-non-veg-food-in-canteen-101649622471801.html>. And, “The State where cow slaughter in legal in India,” in *Express News Service*, October 8, 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-no-beef-nation>. Accessed April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> The violence infiltrated by Hindu far right groups lead to the deaths of a Muslim man as far as 2015, <https://www.outlookindia.com/topic/cow-slaughter>. While the latest update is from April 12, 2022 in Delhi, the country capital where a caretaker was killed by ‘cow vigilantes’ or *Gau Rakshas*. <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/delhi-farm-house-caretaker-killed-by-cow-vigilantes-news-191227>.

More information on <https://www.outlookindia.com/topic/cow-slaughter>, Accessed April 12, 2022.

Aparna Alluri, “Meat Ban: India isn’t vegetarian but who will tell the right-wing?” in *BBC News*, April 8, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61020025>. Accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> *Nagaland Baptist Church Reaffirms Stand on Liquor Prohibition Act*, Feb 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. <https://thenortheasttoday.com/states/nagaland/nagaland-baptist-church-council-reaffirms-stand-on-liquor/cid2511993.htm>, Accessed April 25, 2022.

*NBCC urges Govt. to implement the NLTP Act*, Nagaland Page, Feb 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

<https://nagalandpage.com/nbcc-urges-govt-to-implement-the-nltp-act>. Accessed April 25, 2022.

And in, Eastern Mirror a local newspaper in the state where the CBCC (Chakesang Baptist Church Council) continued to urge the government to sustain the ban on alcohol saying “It further stated that if Hindu majority states like Gujarat and Bihar can enforce the ban with satisfactory results,

this way holds much power in implementing and enforcing moral values in state policies. Sadly, in the quest of the church to dominate and maintain power in the state, Christianity fails to be precisely what it is called to do. We also have the infamous attack on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, which was a political move, sadly backed by the majority of American Christians. Therefore, such religious incited violence or forced implementations in the public sphere, from Christian groups tend to mar contemporary church-state relations.<sup>16</sup> It thus appears that Christian presence can be seen on the public sphere, but for all the wrong reasons.

And so, it makes it difficult for contemporary Christians to participate, engage and contribute actively in the political public sphere, without appearing to infringe the rights of others (the public) in the public sphere. While on one hand, contemporary Christians have much to contribute to the good in society, the tendency to be theocratic is a palpable concern. But at the same time, it is no mistake that Christian influences have been dwindled in the public sphere, and so some hold the view that society is now permeated with secular ideologies and have banished religion from the public sphere, and thus we now live in what Taylor calls as “a secular age.”<sup>17</sup>

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the Christian majority state like Nagaland should be able to perform better with the blessings and support of our Almighty God with whom nothing is impossible,” in *Eastern Mirror*, March 7, 2022, <https://easternmirrornagaland.com/chakhesang-baptist-church-council-urges-govt-to-fully-implement-the-nltp-act/>, Accessed April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

<https://easternmirrornagaland.com/chakhesang-baptist-church-council-urges-govt-to-fully-implement-the-nltp-act>. Accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Jenkins, “How the Capitol attacks helped spread Christian nationalism in the extreme right?” in *The Washington Post*, January, 26, 2022,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/01/26/christian-nationalism-jan-6-extreme-right>. Accessed January 30, 2022.

Tobias Creamer, “Nations Under God: How Church-State Relations Shape Christian Response to Right Wing Populism in Germany and the United States,” in *Religions*, 12(4), 2021:

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040254>, 1-21, and also in *The Atlantic*,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/evangelicals-catholics-jericho-march-capitol/617591/> Accessed January 30, 2022.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/january-web-only/january-6-attack-russell-moore-post-christian-church.html>. Accessed January 30, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor argues that the present world is now dominated by secular ideologies and a profuse denial of the transcendence both intellectually and politically. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2007).

Inspired by such concepts, and concern, certain Christian theological groups strive to re-claim the public sphere and connect the world, back to God.<sup>18</sup> While not necessarily endorsing a theocratic society, their lofty claims does appear to be radically religious and dominant.

And so, how do contemporary Christians hope to critically and effectively engage in the public sphere, without adapting a theocratic tendency? How do we engage in a sphere that is predominantly secular, without infringing the rights and beliefs of others?

This research seeks an answer, where neither the church nor the state is ignored or alleviated, and both spheres are allowed to grow, thrive and progress.

This paper thus seeks a theological response on how contemporary Christians can effectively engage in the public sphere, while remaining concerned yet critical of both spheres. It thereby seeks a theological enquiry to contribute how an effective contemporary theological engagement can be applied in the public sphere, and how contemporary Christians can effectively hope to engage in the public sphere.

Through this research, I will examine three theological concepts on church and state understanding, namely Radical Orthodoxy, Public Theology, and Abraham Kuyper's separation theory of Sphere Sovereignty.

This research will thus pursue to derive how a theological application can be applied for contemporary Christians to effectively engage in the public sphere, based on an understanding of Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty.

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<sup>18</sup> Without going into much detail of Habermas's work, in the simplest terms, Habermas describes the public sphere as those spaces which are not private, and so all areas which are *polis*, i.e. common spaces. In the understanding of this paper, the public sphere is thus the sphere or realm of the common space in society that comprises of religion, politics, arts, education, economics, science etc. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Berger and Frederick Lawrence (Massachusetts: MIT Press), 1991, 2-3.

## Problem Statement

The problem of church and state relations continues to grow since the time of the separation of church and state.<sup>19</sup> While on one hand, the state has grown more secular, the church at times, appears to have its own fragmented theology.

The tense dichotomy of religion and the secular is seen in the example of France, where the state is completely secularised and tends to shun all forms of religious symbols in the public sphere.<sup>20</sup> For them, there is no nation under God. Such a school of thought arises from an enlightenment form of thinking and modernity which ushered in the age of reason, and decided to do away with religion, but due to the rise of religious radicalization and extreme acts of religious violence. As a result, religion in all its forms is not welcomed and tends to be shunned in the public sphere.

In the West, we continue to witness a steady decline of Christian voices in the public sphere, and therefore, as a response, certain Christian groups take the initiative to react to such hostility as a means to place the role of the church back in society. However, their methodologies are at times questionable. In many Eastern and South Asian countries, the rise of religious radicalization is an alarming call which threatens the peace and stability of democracy in society.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy L. Hall, "Separation of Church and State by Philip Hall," in *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol 18, No 2 (2002-2003), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602272>, 488.

<sup>20</sup> Albert L  o, "The Churches of France and Their Separation from the State," in *Harvard Theological Review* 7, no. 3 (1914): (396–423) <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S0017816000011482>, 396-398.

Also, in Tyler Mikulis, "To Decline is not to Disappear: Europe's Disregard for Religion Creates Unnecessary Conflict," in *EARS*, 2021, [https://europeanacademyofreligionandsociety.com/weekly\\_comments/to-decline-is-not-to-disappear-europes-disregard-for-religion-creates-unnecessary-conflict/](https://europeanacademyofreligionandsociety.com/weekly_comments/to-decline-is-not-to-disappear-europes-disregard-for-religion-creates-unnecessary-conflict/). Accessed January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Also in Harriet Sherwood, "Christianity as a Default is Gone: The Rise of Non-Christian Europe," in *The Guardian*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion>. Accessed January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

And in Charles Pope, "The Decline of the Church in Europe," in *Catholic Standard*, 2019, <https://cathstan.org/posts/the-decline-of-the-church-in-europe>. Accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> The threat of religious radicalization in middle-eastern countries, where we have the rise (and now rule) of Taliban, in Afghanistan, the rise of Hindutva in India, as a religious political ideology, and emergence of Christian nationalism in America, and the recent news regarding the overturn of Roe vs Wade in America which is supported by majority of American Christians

Thus one cannot ignore the rise of religious radicalization, nor the state trying to defend its secular values to protect the common good of all.

### **State of the Art**

The contested public sphere such as arts, education, and politics continue to witness a rapid decline and exclusion of religion particularly in the modern period we live in. Be it mainstream media, arts such as movies and music, social media platforms, or politics and education, a choice for the secular is preferred over the traditionally orthodox (and old-fashioned) religion or religious views, ideas and concepts. Moreover, with the arrival of the enlightenment in Europe, the progress of the industrial revolution, and postmodernism, paved the way for a more unbiased, equal society and ushered in the age of the secular, where reason would prevail over faith. Thus, over time, a secular ideology arose, which sought to promote the good of the people. However, in its quest to promote the state as a type of saviour, it also had its cracks and thus developed a tendency to become tyrannical. Moreover, the state now overrun and taken over by secular influences also excluded religion/ religious ideas and influence from the public sphere. And so, the state became completely taken over by a secular ideology which tends to exclude religion and religious ideas from the public sphere. This concern with the dominion of the highly-secularised state is particularly highlighted by the theological group that comes under the banner of Radical Orthodoxy, made popular by John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pinnock. They argue that instead of the state, it should be the church that should be the epitome of all that is good in society. And so, how RO argues against the secularised state, their understanding of the contemporary church, and how they present and solidify

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regarding abortion rights due to religious reasons. Kate Shellnut, "This is and isn't the Moment Pro-Life Evangelicals have been waiting for," in *Christianity Today*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/supreme-court-roe-wade-leaked-alito-prolife-abortion.html>. Accessed May 3rd, 2022. These are some brief examples of how religious majority groups tend to influence and infiltrate the political and public sphere.



their argument to present their version of the ideal theological creed, to benefit the wider society will be presented and examined.

The problem alleviates when the state (secular) is hostile towards the church (sacred)- and the latter in return seeks to dominate and Christianise the state or influence policies and pass bills. In the case of Christianity, an example is found in American politics, where the state government at times, holds a key influence in implementing bills and influencing policies based on Christian “moral” values. A contrasting example is France, where secular influence takes precedent and is hostile towards religious voices and influences in the public sphere. As a result, all forms, practices and symbols of religion are banned and shunned. This concept is one where the secular ideology is dominant in the state and is thus antagonistic towards Christian (and other religious) voices in the public domain. And so, faith groups are at risk of losing their voice, and the secular state is adverse toward religious participation in the public sphere, thus curbing religious freedom and active engagement.

Radical Orthodoxy therefore argues that religious voices are ignored by the secular state and secular ideologies. And so, in such cases, religion is deprived of its freedom to participate, engage and be vocal in the public sphere. Millbank retorts the secular as an empty façade of ideas that spark only a “materialistic, empty, soulless” concept, devoid of values and real meaning.<sup>22</sup> The mode of engagement for RO is thus an offensive stance towards the secular, where they are critical of modern society, which according to them is ruled by the secularised state. And so, RO tries to recover a more traditional Christian approach favouring a comeback of the patristic era, to make its mark in the public sphere. RO thus seeks to reclaim the spheres of influence in the public sphere, which is override by secular influences, and replace it with a Christian patristic creed.

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<sup>22</sup> John Millbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, “Introduction: Suspending the material, the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge Press, 1999), 1.

The next argument will be from Public Theology, which focuses on understanding the state and prompting Christians to participate in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, it also has its shortcomings, and is often criticised for being unfaithful to the church's true calling.<sup>23</sup> Breitenberg says that public theology in its quest to engage in the public sphere tends to contradict the thought of a civil religion taking place.<sup>24</sup> However, Paeth argues that public theology urges religious institutions to work along with emerging global civil societies and identify common concern areas. Thereby it is aware of the plethora of divisive concepts surrounding the idea of engaging in the public sphere, and seeking a more pluralistic approach in its engagement while upholding the stance for religious voices in civil society.<sup>25</sup>

In light of these two arguments, I will present Abraham Kuyper's separation theory called Sphere Sovereignty which calls for autonomy in both spheres, and derives a theological foundation to back its claim.

The research question will thus seek to answer,

How does Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty contribute towards a theological understanding for Christian engagement in the public sphere?

And so, for the first part of this paper,

I will examine the argument concerning the state and the contemporary church from radical orthodoxy, and their view of the application of creed, using Milbank's argument.

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<sup>23</sup> E. Harold Breitenberg, "To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?" in *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23 (2):2003, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23561835>, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Breitenberg, "To Tell the Truth: Will, The Real Public Theology Please, Stand Up?" 58.

<sup>25</sup> Scott R. Paeth, "Religious Communities and Global Civil Society: Moral Formation and Interreligious Cooperation in a Pluralistic Context," in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max Stackhouse*, eds., Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 158-159.

For the second part, I will present how proponents of public theology view the state and contemporary church, and their application of creed.

And, for the third part, I will critically examine Kuyper's theory of Sphere Sovereignty, which calls for the separation of church and state, and how his theory of separation balances out both RO and PT, and also examine and analyse whether this theory of Sphere Sovereignty can be used as a theological basis for contemporary Christians to engage in the public sphere.

Furthermore, it will seek to answer the following questions:

- i) How does radical orthodoxy argue against the secularised state and contemporary church?
- ii) What are some of the benefits of radical orthodoxy's argument on church and state relations, and what are some of the gaps and limitations of their argument?
- iii) What is public theology's argument towards the church and state relations?
- iv) What are their gaps and limitations, and benefits and contributions?
- v) What is Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty, and how does it contribute to the current discourse on church and state relations?
- vi) What are the gaps and limitations of his separation theory?
- vii) What are some of the critical observations, contributions, and conclusions based on this study?

## Why Kuyper?

Abraham Kuyper began his work as a minister of the Dutch reformed church in the Netherlands, and then progressed on to become the editor and founder of the newspaper called *De Standaard*. He also founded the Netherlands first largest political party, and advocated for the public funding of religious schools. He was also the founder of a university (Vrije University), and became a member of the Dutch parliament, and ultimately the Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905.<sup>26</sup> His theological and political life was thus very much immersed in the Dutch public life, and he contributed much on issues of poverty, universal suffrage, devotional and theological writings and the separation of church and state in the early nineteenth century Dutch context.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding his political contributions, he was a member of the Christian Democratic Party in The Netherlands, and the founder of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which was vehemently against the use of violence. In his theological stance, he was conservative and anti-modern. Bacote opined that Kuyper's concept of understanding Sphere Sovereignty enabled him and his followers to effectively engage in the public realm.<sup>28</sup> While Bratt frames Kuyper as a liberation theologian where he sought to throw any traces of oppression and build a new order of freedom and justice in society.<sup>29</sup> And so, his theology was broad and public and promoted active participation between Christians in the wider society.<sup>30</sup> Despite being influenced by Calvinism, and having delivered his Stone Lectures on Calvinism, he was also critical in embracing it all, and hence was known to be Neo-Calvinism in his theology. He believed that Calvinism needed to

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<sup>26</sup> James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 63.

<sup>29</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Dirk Jellema, "Abraham Kuyper's Attack on Liberalism," in *The Review of Politics* 19 (4), 1957, [https://www-jstor-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/stable/1404828?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/stable/1404828?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents), 480.

be updated, renewed and read through new lenses in order to be applicable to modern times.<sup>31</sup>

And so, as a result of his progressive approach many from his denomination, such as the reformed church, did not fully agree with his theology. They deemed him too liberal and accommodating towards others, for example, how he worked with the Catholics, and his stance on Christian socialism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the conservative groups in The Netherlands during his time were suspicious of him and viewed him as leaning more towards the left.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Kuyper during his time was loathed by his contemporaries such as the Dutch reformed conservatives, and the liberal secularist; since the former found his public politics too left, while the latter found his theological convictions too conservative. Nonetheless, Kuyper's theology was public and provided an effective engagement between Christians and the secular, even though it was the antithesis of modern society.<sup>34</sup>

It is interesting to note that he was against the liberal modern theology which had started to influence the Dutch church during the nineteenth century. To this, Kuyper was vehemently against modernism swaying the church. He was also critical of the French Revolution and thus remained critical of the concept of "cultural liberalism in every form."<sup>35</sup> Kuyper thus appears to be either a versatile theologian, or a politician who was an opportunist and sided with any group or party so long as it served his political purpose. Nevertheless, his contribution to both theology and politics makes for an interesting discourse especially pertaining to the relation of church and state, and how Christians can engage effectively in the public sphere.

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<sup>31</sup> James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Abraham Kuyper, in *The Problem of Poverty* makes a strong claim against wealth and economic inequality.

<sup>33</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Jellema, "Abraham Kuyper's Attack on Liberalism," 480.

<sup>35</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 15.

And so, Kuyper was known to be a combination of being “progressive and conservative, principled and adaptive, modern and traditional.”<sup>36</sup> He thus possessed both the experience of being a pastor and a politician. Kuyper however, did not practice both roles at the same time. In fact, it is said that when he was undertaking politics and sought election in the Dutch parliament, he gave up his ordination in the church.<sup>37</sup> Mouw says, “in this way, Kuyper made it clear that the exercise of authority within political life is different from the exercise of authority in the church.”<sup>38</sup>

In his speech, *Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life*, he makes it clear that former emperors and kings wanted to unite their world, through the use of force and violence (by the sword), and such concepts break the natural differences and diversity and uniqueness that people hold<sup>39</sup>. And so, he continued to promote concepts of plurality, separation and autonomy of all spheres throughout his writings.

According to Kuyper, the church and state are both viewed as constructive spheres in society; however, they must be curbed and limited in exercising their power and authority. For example, regarding the role of Christians, who are productive in their worship, they must also be productive in their duty to the government, in their work, and the community.<sup>40</sup> Kuyper’s understanding of the church is for it to be vocal against inequality, poverty, and the downtrodden in society. Thus, the rule is not to interfere, but the exception was in the face of injustice and oppression, she is expected to step in. According to Kuyper, “let whatever is oppressed have the church’s support: may the poor find the church to be a place of refuge, and may the church become an angel of peace, for rich and

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<sup>36</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 56.

<sup>38</sup> Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, edited by John Halsey Wood Jr and Andrew M. McGinnis, trans. Harry Van Dyke, Nelson D. Kloosterman, Todd M. Rester and Arjen Vreugdenhil (Washington: Lexham Press, 2016), Kindle Locations 1835-1837.

poor together.”<sup>41</sup> And so, he recognizes the role of the church in society as a vital contribution. However, as much as Christians are called to participate in society, this participation must not be an intrusion or intention to dominate the public sphere, and this is what Kuyper is cautious and critical about, and in this way, he introduces the concept of Sphere Sovereignty where each sphere in society should be autonomous.

With regards to the concept of sovereignty, Hübenthal states that, human nature behest freedom, and so it retains its uniqueness and individuality, and is free to determine their own choices and future.<sup>42</sup> Hübenthal also says that “the secular is provisionally the alterity which God voluntarily sets free in order to create space for human freedom.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, God grants, allows and freely gives away his intrinsic sovereignty to his created ones. Moreover, “the secular is shaped by human freedom, and not divine intervention,” but willed by the divine.”<sup>44</sup> And so, there is no interference by the infinite to the finite ones, but a granting or allowing of sovereignty and autonomy to exists. This is why Kuyper’s Sphere Sovereignty also makes it claim that within the spheres of family, education, politics, economics and arts, the concept of autonomy was crucial in allowing a healthy society to flourish; free from the entanglements of both church and state interference.

Thus for Kuyper, the concept of sovereignty is not only between church and state but also includes various spheres, such as academia, economics, art, etc.; and each sphere is autonomous and free to exercise its power within its own realm.<sup>45</sup> Mouw explains that for Kuyper, the founding of the Vrije University was a call for the academia to be free from both church and state interference.<sup>46</sup> Bacote also opines

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<sup>41</sup> Kuyper, *On the Church*, Kindle Locations 1838-1840.

<sup>42</sup> Christoph Hübenthal, “The Theological Significance of the Secular,” in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 4 (2019): <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0953946819868094>, 462.

<sup>43</sup> Hübenthal, “The Theological Significance of the Secular,” 464.

<sup>44</sup> Hübenthal, “The Theological Significance of the Secular,” 464.

<sup>45</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction*, 42.

that Kuyper's concept of understanding Sphere Sovereignty enabled him and his followers to effectively engage in the public realm.<sup>47</sup>

Hence, Kuyper's contribution to both theology and politics makes for a critical discourse concerning the relation between church and state, and how he effectively argues for the separation, while not severing off the relations of both spheres.

How and why a theological engagement is crucial, and how Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty can be applicable, will be analysed in the concluding chapter and through the exploration of this thesis.

## **Methodology**

The methodology I will use will be a critical analysis method, based on the literature review of primary and secondary sources.

- i) Critical analysis: A critical examination of Radical Orthodoxy, Public Theology, and Kuyper's theology will be presented, and what and how it holds for Christian engagement in the public sphere, particularly concerning church and state. Since the subject, itself holds a vast discourse, the scope of this research will focus its limit on church and state relations.
- ii) Literary analysis: In this method, a literature study of the text, both from primary and secondary sources, translated texts and critical reading, comparison, and critical literature and peer review will be conducted. I have chosen primary text from the main authors on this topic, such as John Milbank, William Cavanaugh, Max Stackhouse, Ronald Thiemann, while most of Abraham Kuyper's work are from

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<sup>47</sup> Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 63.



translated sources. My main focus will pertain to Kuyper's argument in chapter three, particularly on Sphere Sovereignty.

- iii) Comparative method: I will compare and contrast the three concepts of RO, PT, and Kuyper's theology, and narrow it down to three sections in each chapter, namely on church, on state and on creed. I will present the theological argument from these three sides, as well as the gaps and limitations on each of the three chapters.
- iv) A critical synthesis will be developed in my conclusion to show an appropriate position and methodology for Christian engagement in the public sphere using the texts and arguments provided.

### **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter one will begin by introducing the current debate on RO and its concepts, and critical analysis. RO, for example, seeks to reclaim the spheres of influence such as politics, aesthetics, and society with Christian values and principles. It also dismisses other contemporary Christian theologies for being too accommodating and modern, and critiques the contemporary church for embracing modernism. John Milbank's work on RO will be mostly examined in this chapter, with particular focus on church and state relations, and how RO establishes their ideal creed, to "re-claim" the public sphere. Regarding the state, Milbank believes that the state is largely influenced and dominated by secular ideology. He appears to be against the separation of church and state, as he believes that the "modern separation of science, philosophy, politics, economics, and ethics from an overarching religious vision is seen as the result of the Christian separation of divinity from law and cosmic meditation."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order* (West Sussex: Wiley), 2013, 115.

He further says that the political must be “sequestered paradoxically without the same gesture that is co-opted by the ecclesia.”<sup>49</sup> And so, such statements by Milbank further substantiates his radically orthodox belief that the state, society, politics, the world, and public sphere can only be wholesome through the inclusion and involvement of the ecclesia.

In chapter two, I will examine public theology, and its understanding of the state, and church and application of creed. Breitenberg says that public theology does not mean a public religion or civil religion, even though it is concerned with public issues.<sup>50</sup> Thiemann brings out the dichotomy of the role of religion in a pluralistic world, and the tendency of the secular modern world to evade and diminish religion from the public sphere. He mentions various faith-based community programs that aspire to help local communities, from a faith-based belief and principles, to support his claim that religion, particularly the Christian faith has done much to contribute to the common good in society.<sup>51</sup> However, he also mentions how public organisations are reluctant to grant access to religious-based groups, due to the former’s long history and tendency to infiltrate its religious beliefs in the public/political system. Thiemann for example states, “the tendency of some religious groups toward discrimination, intolerance, and fanaticism leads further support to those who would ban public funds from faith-based social agencies.”<sup>52</sup>

Thiemann mentions how the enlightenment sought to promote a state which is thoroughly secular, neutral and unbiased towards *any* religion.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in the European context, for example, Christianity has continued to witness a steady decline and demise of religion in the public sphere. Thiemann thus mentions that

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<sup>49</sup> Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 246.

<sup>50</sup> Harold Breitenberg Jr, “What is Public Theology?” in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, eds., Deirdre King, Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald F. Thiemann, “Public Theology: The Moral Dimensions of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” in *Zeitschrift Für Evangelische Ethik* 42, no. 1 (1998), <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.14315/zee-1998-0127>, 176.

<sup>52</sup> Thiemann, “Public Theology the Moral Dimensions of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 177.

<sup>53</sup> Thiemann, “Public Theology the Moral Dimensions of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 177.

“secular theories argued that as capitalist economics and democratic politics expanded, we witnessed a withering away of religion’s public role.”<sup>54</sup> He thus asks the question, what kind of public theology is suited to engage in a highly pluralistic world? The challenge he poses is for PT to develop a deeply theological theology, while not shying away to address public and societal issues.<sup>55</sup>

Thiemann therefore says that when religious traditions are committed to an exclusivist claim of the truth, they tend to assert their superiority over other religious and belief systems- thus segregating those who hold a different belief stand outside or are in “opposition to the sacred” Thiemann states that such kind of exclusivist claim tends to brand the other side as “infidels, blasphemers, apostates, and heretics,” and also paves the way for hatred and violence to enter the discourse.<sup>56</sup> PT thus propagates a pluralistic method in its engagement which is akin to Kuyper’s concept on pluralism that is ontological and religious, a theology that appears more balanced and creates a middle path.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, in chapter three, I will examine and present Kuyper’s concept of Sphere Sovereignty, and present his argument on the understanding of church and state. Constantinism is the concept that through God’s divine ordination on selected people, “universal principles and laws can be rightly regulated through governmental institutions.”<sup>58</sup> Kuyper was against the concept of “Constantinism” which sought to establish God’s divine ordination in government institutions, and so he argued that every attempt to revive a “Christian state” must be rejected by Christians.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Thiemann, “Public Theology the Moral Dimensions of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 179.

<sup>55</sup> Thiemann, “Public Theology the Moral Dimensions of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 184.

<sup>56</sup> Thiemann, “Public Theology the Moral Dimensions of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 184.

<sup>57</sup> Bratt *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 18-19.

<sup>58</sup> Amy Black, “Christian Traditions and Political Engagements,” in *Five Views on Church and Politics*, eds., Stanley N. Gundry and Amy Black (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 11.

<sup>59</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, edited by Jordan J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema, trans. Harry Van Dyke. Grand Rapids: Lexham Press, 2015, 85-90. Prior to Kuyper, Schleiermacher also vehemently argued against the merging of church and state, particularly to keep the state from interfering in the priestly functions of the church, and to keep

Kuyper was critical of a system where the “God-less state of liberals reject both the natural and revealed knowledge of God, whose motto is to leave God out of it.”<sup>60</sup> However, he was also critical of the “theocratic state of the Roman Catholics and the inconsistent protestants who insisted on making the state as the active promoter of the kingdom of God.”<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, Kuyper’s Sphere Sovereignty (*soevereiniteit in eigen kring*) is about how each sphere or realm such as arts, education, politics and religion all fall under different spheres, out of God’s divine and unique plan or rule. However, contrary to how other Christians tend to think of God’s divine rule, in Kuyper’s concept of Sphere Sovereignty, as the name suggests, each sphere is sovereign in its realm. Thus, it promotes the concept of separation of church and state and envisioned each sphere to function, govern and progress autonomously. Kuyper says, “the idea here is fundamentally the sovereignty of God, in its descent upon men, separates itself into two spheres. On one hand, the mechanical sphere of state-authority, and on the other hand the organic sphere of the authority of the social circles.”<sup>62</sup>

And so, I will examine how the concept of Sphere Sovereignty can prove to be an effective theological model for contemporary Christian engagement in the public sphere.

Chapter four will be the concluding chapter, synthesis, observations, and argument to reinstate Kuyper’s Sphere Sovereignty, and how and why it is vital for our contemporary context, particularly with church and state relations, how the sacred and secular network can be bridged. The chapter will thus conclude to

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the church from becoming corrupt, and misplaced priorities, in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans., ed, Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 85-90.

<sup>60</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism, The Stone Lectures of 1898*. (Oregon: Monergism Books, 2015), Kindle Location, 1335.

derive how Kuyper's separation theology can be an effective theological application for contemporary Christians to engage in the public sphere.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING RADICAL ORTHODOXY

### 1.1 Introduction

Radical Orthodoxy as a theological discourse is highly critical of the state, and the secular sphere, and they propose a Christian framework to re-claim the public sphere. The work of John Milbank will be the preferred text in this chapter.<sup>63</sup> According to RO, the state and the contemporary church is both dominated by secular philosophy and so for RO this is problematic. This chapter will focus on three concepts, namely on the argument of RO towards the modern state which is highly secularised, gained dominance and vetoed religion out of the public sphere. Secondly, the argument towards the contemporary church, and how it paved the way for secularisation to seep in the church, and pushed the influence of the ecclesia out of the public sphere. This resulted in RO seeking a traditional, orthodox methodology, and the yearning for a return of patristic Christian influence, thus cumulating in a preferred soteriological Christian creed/doctrine which they believe is vital on the discussion on engaging in the public sphere. Gaps and limitations will be presented, analysed and critiqued and a synthesis of this chapter will conclude.

### 1.2 Background

The secular realm is often intertwined with the age of modernity, and Gillespie says the dawn of modernity ushered in the secular age. He says that secularity paved the way for progress, development, and the liberation of a new era. However, with the rise of secularism, also came a hostility towards religion which the secular viewed as authoritarian. Thus, the rise of modernity resulted in removing religion from the public sphere. Gillespie opines that “modernity is a

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<sup>63</sup> Milbank’s major contribution towards Radical Orthodoxy and his strong critique of the secular is primarily why most of the definitions in this section will be based on his work John Milbank his corpus on *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, and *Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, and his work on *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*

secular age where man replaces God as the centre of existence and seeks to become the master and possessor of nature by the application of science and its attendant technology.”<sup>64</sup> And so, for Gillespie the modern world is perceived as the realm of individualism, representing freedom, liberty, growth and progression, but ousting God out of the picture. Thus, according to Gillespie, “seventeenth-century thinkers rejected scholasticism favouring science and religious belief and enthusiasm in favour of a secular world.”<sup>65</sup> He opines that the modern world in all its glory and splendour was a disappointment because it failed to live up to its expectations. In this way, religious authority, usually seen as an ideal influence over the public life, was slowly superseded by a notion of individual belief and values, which were autonomous and answerable to none.<sup>66</sup> He mentions religious fanatics and the event of 9/11 as those who were frustrated with the modern/secular age. Thus, even though concepts like “liberty, equality, prosperity, toleration, pluralism” were viewed as part of modernity, the secular age could not deliver the ideals it stood for. In this way, religious authority, usually seen as an ideal influence over the country, state, and public life, was slowly superseded by a notion of personal belief and personal values, which were autonomous and answerable to none.<sup>67</sup> Thus this hostility can be seen in the exceptional decline of religion in the public sphere, particularly in countries where Christianity was once dominant.

This notion is particularly asserted by Radical Orthodoxy, a reformed Anglican Christian theology that emerged in Cambridge, made popular by the book *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. They believe that the public sphere, comprising of the state, has been dominated, imprinted, and taken over by secular ideologies whose sole agenda is to shun religion, namely Christian voices from any public discourse.

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xi.

<sup>65</sup> Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, xi.

<sup>66</sup> Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 2.

### 1.3 Introducing Radical Orthodoxy

Milbank begins by claiming that historically, there was no secularism in the beginning; however, over time, it has dominated and suppressed the sacred sphere.<sup>68</sup> He believes that the world we now know is fabricated through the lenses of secularism, and so, theistic thoughts are shunned into the corner of private faith. The proponents of RO thus believe that due to this continual suppression of theological discourse, they now seek to radically respond and reclaim the world, which according to them, has been permeated by secularism. Thus, RO believes that through a distinct Christian ideology, they can revive the modern world.

RO thus promotes a concept that seeks a fuller authentic Christian doctrine and one which is “less accommodating and more meditative.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, RO believes that through a distinct Christian ideology, RO can revive the modern world.

According to Milbank, the concept of neo-liberalism has echoed in the form of political tyranny.<sup>70</sup> Milbank holds the belief that all other sciences apart from theology is bound on an ontology of violence.<sup>71</sup> He believes religion is constantly under threat, and mainstream secular influences often brush aside religious voices. Moreover, he mentions the context of Western Europe and the way religion is perceived as a threat and thereby less tolerated, whereas secularisation maintains a stronghold.<sup>72</sup> He also opines that religious influence has always contributed positively to the global world.<sup>73</sup> Milbank therefore argues that if religion is replaced in the public sphere, something inferior and perhaps more sinister will replace it.<sup>74</sup> For Milbank, the idea that people can hope to achieve goodness

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<sup>68</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds., “Introduction: Suspending the material, the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., “Introduction: Suspending the material, the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 3.

<sup>70</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), xi.

<sup>71</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xiv.

<sup>72</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> This stance is similar to what Michael Allen Gillespie argues and defends in *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.

<sup>74</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 36.



without an ontology of God is absurd.<sup>75</sup> In the next section, we will examine RO's argument towards the secularised state.

### 1.3.1 On the State

Radical Orthodoxy begins its claim to be radical by seeking to systematically critique modern society, culture, science, art and not shying away from their criticism.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, RO calls modern concepts of faith and reason a “modern bastard dualism.”<sup>77</sup> Milbank says that the state in its quest to be rationally relevant has deliberately avoided and ignored any references to the divine.<sup>78</sup> And so, the modern age and its secular values are nothing but an era of rapid materialisation, which according to RO, is “soulless, aggressive, and nihilistic.”<sup>79</sup> According to Milbank, the state should be under a divine influence and for this, he refers to Aquinas and Augustine's theory of the divine kingship where the king rules under (the influence and ordination) of the priest. Furthermore, he adds that such a rule is done under the new covenant.<sup>80</sup> Thus for RO, they believe the state should be governed directly under a divine, theistic rule.

Cavanaugh is another theologian who is highly critical of the (secular) state. He opines that there can be no “social progress” in a society that believes in a false saviour concept, which according to him, is how the current modern state views

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<sup>75</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 36.

<sup>76</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., “Introduction: Suspending the material the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 2.

<sup>77</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward eds., “Introduction: Suspending the material the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 2.

<sup>78</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward eds., “Introduction: Suspending the material the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 1.

<sup>79</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward eds., “Introduction: Suspending the material the turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 1. Abraham Kuyper equates modernism as a superficial reality and Christian heresy, and believes that theological modernism only concerns itself with earthly and not heavenly things, in Craig Bartholomew, *Contours of Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Illinois: IVP Academic), nd,42-43

<sup>80</sup> John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*. (Pondicherry: Blackwell, 2013), 247.

itself.<sup>81</sup> Moreover the state seeks to bring unity by isolating the public from every religious element, and instead replaces it with secular ideologies.<sup>82</sup> Milbank thus argues against the narrative that the modern state presents to show religion as “the prime source of violence,” and how it “markets the modern state as the great bringer of peace.”<sup>83</sup>

RO thus argues that Christianity in the public sphere has been shoved aside and taken out only when convenient for public use.<sup>84</sup> In fact, Milbank argues religious discourses are often silenced in public discourses.<sup>85</sup> Milbank mentions the French example of *Lacite*, where all religious symbols and voices are removed from public places, and in this way, there is zero toleration towards all religious practices, involvement, and engagement in the public sphere. He fears that religious and political theology will be overshadowed by “mere” human rights or taken over by a humanist concept.<sup>86</sup> And so, according to RO, the claim of the state to obtain peace, liberty, equality is dubious and false.<sup>87</sup> They claim that the state is elusive and is intertwined with a history of violence.<sup>88</sup> And so, they see no good in the state, nor identify any good in it, and for them theology alone is a master discourse, and earns its rightful place as the queen of science.<sup>89</sup>

RO argues that the state does not play fair, nor value and hold a neutral stance.<sup>90</sup> And so, the state has its own bias, and although it claims to be tolerant and equal

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<sup>81</sup> William Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 193.

<sup>82</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., “Suspending the material: The turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 14.

<sup>83</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., “Suspending the material: The turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 14.

<sup>84</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 110.

<sup>85</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 29.

<sup>86</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 36. Bartholomew points out that Kuyper also favoured Christianity over humanist ideology or philosophy, in Craig Bartholomew, *Contours of Kuyperian Tradition*, 40.

<sup>87</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, eds., “Suspending the material: The turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” 14.

<sup>88</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), 9.

it is not. Moreover, according to RO, the state can never be peaceful because it hails from an ontology of violence and can never hold dialogue with Christianity because it is fundamentally different. Cavanaugh mentions the *wars of religion* in Europe which were the “birth pangs” of the emerging state to monopolise the outcome of this event to establish their power.<sup>91</sup> Thus according to RO, the modern state is actually a culture of oppression, militarism, and increased socialism, seeking to replace and obliterate religion.<sup>92</sup> For RO, there is no middle way in dealing with the state. One ends up either rejecting it altogether or tolerating, accepting, and becoming part of it.<sup>93</sup> Which leads us to the next section on how RO views the (contemporary) church.

### 1.3.2 On the Church

RO longs for a more pure and original or orthodox representation of Christianity in the public sphere because it believes that the contemporary church has compromised its fundamental beliefs and paved the way for secularisation to seep in by embracing modernism. Cavanaugh says that with the emergence of modernity, Christians tend to yield to the concept of “state soteriology” and supports that with Christian claims.<sup>94</sup> Thus, secularisation removes the sacred from the secular, and RO blames progressive Christianity for this deluge. In fact, for Milbank, a step of dialogue with the secular is viewed as compromising Christian theology.

Milbank believes that the church’s failure to firmly establish the rule of the Gospel over public life created a moral void. Thus, the failure of the church to be united, created this moral void to be filled in by something else, which turned out to be the slow decay and exit of religion; and the entering and dominion of the secular over public life. Thus, in a way, as much as Milbank critiques secular

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<sup>91</sup> Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,” 191.

<sup>92</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,” 190.

theory, he blames modern theology and the contemporary church for the rapid secularisation and evasion of Christian voices in the public sphere. He opines that “the institution of the secular is paradoxically related to a shift within theology and not an emancipation from theology.”<sup>95</sup>

Gillespie backs this theory and says, “modernity came to be as a result of the displacement of religious belief from its position of prominence at the centre of public life into a private realm where it could be freely practiced as long as it did not challenge secular authority, science, or reason.”<sup>96</sup> And so, it is here that RO laments that the contemporary church failed to challenge the secular humanist notion of God and instead succumbs to a liberal interpretation of theology, thus falling under a secularist influence. Milbank also argues that theology reserves the right to point to God as the redeemer of humanity accurately; however, he says that liberal theology has tried to merge itself with philosophy and its jargons of using obscure terms to define God’s human existentialism properly. Thus, a general abstract definition of God is given priority over the “full knowledge and revelation of God in Christ.”<sup>97</sup> He critiques Barth’s Christology which is daunted with a “conceptualised heterodox reduction” of Christ.<sup>98</sup> Thus RO blames Barth, and insinuates that Barth was influenced by a post-Kantian philosophy and, in this manner, legitimises an “atheistic philosophy” where man is without God.<sup>99</sup>

Milbank fears that if our theological definition is not “radically” strong in defining God, then it runs the risk of being defined by others “idolatrous finite human classification.”<sup>100</sup> Thus the church and theology will be influenced and dictated by outside forces, which to him is problematic and perhaps even sacrilege. For him, Hamann, Jacobi, Wizenmann and Herder, are the “radical

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<sup>95</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 28.

<sup>96</sup> Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> John Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 21.

<sup>98</sup> Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” 22.

<sup>99</sup> Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” 22. Also check footnote 88, on Hemming’s comment.

<sup>100</sup> Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” 21.

pietists of the eighteenth century.”<sup>101</sup>

Regarding them, he says,

These thinkers did produce a theological critique of philosophy construed as the autonomy of reason, but in Barth’s work, as in those of later commentators, this central characteristic of their work is passed over, watered down, or else seen as an illegitimate confusion of faith and reason which betrays the pure word of God.<sup>102</sup>

He blames the contemporary church for embracing the notion of the secular, and criticised them for failing to preserve the “rule of Gospel,” which created a “moral vacuum” in society.<sup>103</sup> Thus RO blames the failure of the contemporary church to live up to its true potential, and they lament that this in turn paved the way for a secular influence to take precedence in society. In this way, Milbank credits the “voluntarist theological legacy of the church” that enabled Europe to endure the Reformation and, in return, constructed a politics that emerged without any integrity and essential foundation.<sup>104</sup> Milbank thus concludes that the contemporary church ceased to be true in its spiritual and divine calling and gave way to nominalism, which in turn paved the way for secularism to creep in. He therefore blames modernism and says it destabilised and de-publicised the church.<sup>105</sup> Milbank believes that this enabled the state to grow in politics without any (theistic) virtues or influences.<sup>106</sup> He thus argues that it is in the work of “radical pietists” where modern philosophy emerged.<sup>107</sup>

According to RO, the contemporary church has failed to confront the naturalist humanist concept and instead given way for it to flourish. Therefore, the contemporary church remains a “prisoner of the secular sphere.”<sup>108</sup> RO thereby

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<sup>101</sup> Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” 22.

<sup>102</sup> Milbank, “Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” 22.

<sup>103</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 18.

<sup>105</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 209.

<sup>108</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 209.

hopes for theological Christian voices to be more vocal in their traditional and orthodox roots. And so, it is clear that RO blames both the secular state, and the contemporary church, for the decline of Christian influence in the public sphere, and they long instead for a more orthodox creed, which they believe will help establish a true ecclesia, and representation in the public sphere. The third section of this argument will thereby focus on how RO believes a Christian creed is the solution to preserve the contemporary church and reclaim the public sphere.

### 1.3.3 On Creed

Milbank wants to raise the discourse of how one can faithfully engage a scholastic approach to address the divine and impact the world in return. In order to achieve this, he believes that one must go back to a credo patristic approach, which is undiluted and untainted. RO thus yearn for the patristic era and orthodox creed and long for an untainted creed or methodology which consists of liturgy, prayers, prose, poetry, sacraments, which all form the act of worship and invokes the divine.<sup>109</sup> In the hermeneutical ontology of the Biblical narrative, storytelling and events of the saints; they identify a “Christian ontology of participation”, and so, through these religious activities, RO believe the Christian life can be affirmed and preserved.<sup>110</sup>

#### 1.3.3.1 Presenting a Soteriological Creed

One of the Christian creeds Milbank presents is the concept of salvation by De Lubac’s Catholicism, where it is both an individual and a social endeavour. It is reconciliation with God, as well as with each other in a community. Thus, for him, and RO, this community means the church, which is the embodiment of

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<sup>109</sup> Wayne J. Hankey, “Radical Orthodoxy’s *Poiēsis*: Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic,” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly: Journal of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 80, no. 1 (2006): 3-4.

<sup>110</sup> Hankey, “Radical Orthodoxy’s *Poiēsis*: Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic,” 5.

*salvation* history. It is in this community where reconciliation takes place and is incorporated into the ecclesia. Thus, salvation is historical, social, and personal, and redemption for the past and the future to come.<sup>111</sup> Although Lubac is hesitant to construct a separate “private and social” sphere, he does distinguish “ecclesial history from secular and political history in general.”<sup>112</sup> According to Milbank when talking about the church, De Lubac is careful to avoid what he defines as “the sociological illusion of making society and the individual spatially external to each other, and yet this care is forgotten when it comes to distinguishing the church from secular concerns.”<sup>113</sup> Milbank therefore believes that the church is social, and hence should not be confined into a private affair. Thus, unlike modern society, which is individualistic, he believes that there can be no true justice and peace solely on an individual concept, instead this can only happen in a community, in a society, and in this case, this is the church and the working of grace which is present in an ecclesiastical community.<sup>114</sup> RO believes that the church is the visible image and representative of the invisible God here on earth and the “sacrament” of Christ.<sup>115</sup> Thus, it is from the church that begins as the point of *salvation* and redemption for the whole world.<sup>116</sup> And so, it is this concept of salvation, and saving the world, from sin, which compels RO to view the world, the state, and all those outside, as a group that is damned, and perhaps needs restoration and saving.

Cavanaugh also attempts to present the argument that the state fails in its quest to redeem society, and is a “false copy” of being perceived as a “saviour.” He opts instead to prove the concept of the “Eucharist” as the perfect embodiment for the Body of Christ, and it is in this Eucharistic community that perfect harmony in

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<sup>111</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 228.

<sup>112</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 228.

<sup>113</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 228.

<sup>114</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 230.

<sup>115</sup> Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds., Milbank, Pinnock, Ward, 212.

<sup>116</sup> Bauerschmidt, “Aesthetics: The Theological Sublime,” 213.

society can be formulated.<sup>117</sup> According to Cavanaugh, the Eucharist is an act of defiance towards the fabricated stability that the state holds over every falsehood which it claims.<sup>118</sup> Cavanaugh believes that it is in the Eucharist, the process of giving and receiving takes place, where we receive from Christ the gift (of life), and in return, we give back to others the same nourishment we receive.<sup>119</sup> This concept extends to the local community, where there are no barriers between nationalities or race. In the Eucharistic community, all are united in harmony and become one in Christ.<sup>120</sup>

It is thus through the practice of Eucharist, that local communities can come and partake together as one, leaving aside their differences. Pickstock says that it is through the Eucharist where healing and reconciliation between the world and God forms.<sup>121</sup> In the Eucharist, the body of Christ is made real, and the gap closed between the natural and divine.

Ward says,

It is not just a blurring of the boundaries between one person and another—though it affects that through the handing over and the eating of the ‘body’. The bread here does mediate the crossing of frontiers.<sup>122</sup>

Therefore, the way RO seeks to participate in society is through a “recovery of Christian tradition.”<sup>123</sup> This is done by building/extending / promoting a Christian community within a theological framework of fundamental Christian teachings, which they believe can be found in a soteriological understanding of the ecclesia.

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<sup>117</sup> William Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds., Milbank, Pinnock, Ward, 182.

<sup>118</sup> Cavanaugh, “Beyond Secular Parodies: The City,” 195.

<sup>119</sup> Cavanaugh, “Beyond Secular Parodies: The City,” 196.

<sup>120</sup> Cavanaugh, “Beyond Secular Parodies: The City,” 197.

<sup>121</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, 97.

<sup>122</sup> Graham Ward, “Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,” in *Radical Orthodoxy*, eds., John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 168.

<sup>123</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, 40.



## 1.4 Gaps and Limitations

However, RO is not devoid from criticism and according to Hankey, RO has become one of the prime contentious and prominent theologies in our current world.<sup>124</sup> RO dares to critique the insurrection and domain of the secular and vehemently defends traditional orthodox Christian thought.<sup>125</sup> Hankey thus says that RO declares that theology can defeat and override philosophy and rejects other Christian claims of theology such as liberal, contemporary and progressive theology. Thus, with its defiant stance towards the secular, one is tempted to ask, how will it hope to engage in the public sphere, which is predominantly secular?

Moreover, Milbank's tendency to use terminologies and languages appears to be far removed from reality. RO is thus accused of reclining into an "intellectual ghetto" where only those within its close circle can understand and dialogue with them.<sup>126</sup> Since it rejects dualism, pluralism and polarises secularism, and views it as its nemesis; engaging, dialogue, and debate between the church and state appears dim. Its contention with any secular thought and refusal to seek a "common ground between the Christian faith (the church) and the secular realm (state)" only widens the dichotomy.<sup>127</sup> RO thus appears futile in reaching out, beyond the walls and aisles of its own group.

Therefore, because of its assertive stance, Shakespeare argues that RO turns out to be the very thing it despises "nihilism, Kantian and conservative authoritarianism."<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, RO's bold claim to project itself as the queen of science and view all non-Christian discourse as "nihilistic and pagan

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<sup>124</sup> Hankey, "Radical Orthodoxy's *Poiēsis*: Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic," 2.

<sup>125</sup> Hankey, "Radical Orthodoxy's *Poiēsis*: Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic," 2.

<sup>126</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, 150.

<sup>127</sup> Douglas Hedley, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank's Theology Beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist," in *The Journal of Religion* 80, no. 2 (2000), 275.

<sup>128</sup> Steven Shakespeare, "The New Romantics: A Critique of Radical Orthodoxy," in *Theology* 103, no. 813 (2000): <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0040571X0010300302>, 164.

perversion” burns all bridges from seeking any dialogue or engagement.<sup>129</sup> Shakespeare thus throws the question for RO, whether it hinders in the way the church engages with the world? Does RO build walls instead of bridges? And does it limit theology from seeing God at work outside the realms of a Christendom sphere?<sup>130</sup> On this note, Shakespeare says that Milbank does avoid a theocratic solution of the church, and that the church needs to be self-critical.<sup>131</sup> However, Shakespeare says that it is by critically engaging with the wider world that the church can truly find its purpose, and this is where RO lacks, because it believes that it is only in the ecclesial community that true liturgy occurs.<sup>132</sup>

Gardener also questions RO’s method of “shutting down and silencing others.”<sup>133</sup> The first issue Gardener points out is that RO seeks to “reclaim the world,” however she questions their theological framework, because the reclaiming is done only from a Christian standpoint.<sup>134</sup> She says that if “modernity sites are to be resituated within the theological framework, does this mean that they are not yet within the theological framework?”<sup>135</sup> This is problematic, since RO refuses to recognise anything outside theology. Yazell in fact says that there is a danger in how RO’s political ecclesiology limits religious freedom for other religious groups as well.<sup>136</sup> Yazell also suggests critical engagement, because he believes that this concept enables both sides freedom, without dominating or marginalizing each other, which otherwise would be problematical.<sup>137</sup>

Engagement is the only one of the three options that is able to successfully proscribe a socio-political mission for the Church that does not interfere with the

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<sup>129</sup> Shakespeare, “The New Romantics: A Critique of Radical Orthodoxy,” 167.

<sup>130</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, 38-40.

<sup>131</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, Kindle location, 1989-1995.

<sup>132</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction*, Kindle location, 2027.

<sup>133</sup> Lucy Gardener, “Listening at the Threshold: Christology and the “Suspension of the Material,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry?* ed. Paul Laurence Hemming (New York: Ashgate, 2017), 128.

<sup>134</sup> Gardener, “Listening at the Threshold: Christology and the “Suspension of the Material,” 141-142.

<sup>135</sup> Gardener, “Listening at the Threshold: Christology and the “Suspension of the Material,” 142.

<sup>136</sup> W. James Yazell, “Radical Orthodoxy, Political Ecclesiology and the Secular State,” in *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, June 2014, Vol. 2, No. 2, 160.

<sup>137</sup> Yazell, “Radical Orthodoxy, Political Ecclesiology and the Secular State,” 163.

Christian goal of a just and peaceable society. It does so by allowing religious freedom within a secular society while recognizing the Churches role in redeeming and giving meaning to social institutions without taking them over and marginalizing non-Christians. Remnant Christianity is unable to avoid this problem because the functions of the State would be taken over wherever possible by the Church.<sup>138</sup>

In fact, Yazell believes that the correction and pointing out each other's deformities is crucial, so it is not only the church pointing out the faults in the state, but vice versa.

And therein lies the problem with RO, it closes all options for bridges or hopes for engagement with anyone but themselves. Moreover, Gardener throws the question of "theological framework" and whether there is a demarcation, a line or a boundary that RO draws out to determine who is on the inside and who on the outside.<sup>139</sup> Who is in, and who is out? Is there a sphere which is divided or does it all come under a *theological* sphere? Is there a territory which is reserved for God? Or does RO seek to reclaim the lost territory back to God? The language and terms they use in "reclaiming" is thus deemed ambiguous by Gardener.<sup>140</sup> While for Harvey, he believes that the task of theology is to understand "the dualism of the divine and human, the sacred and secular, knowledge and faith."<sup>141</sup> Thus, it is this struggle that theology seeks to engage and participate. Harvey also believes that RO runs the risk of becoming irrelevant and becoming a "private language" which only some can understand, which results in inclusivity and isolation.

Harvey therefore says,

Theology is always a new event of speech, that must test its own truth by

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<sup>138</sup> Yazell, "Radical Orthodoxy, Political Ecclesiology and the Secular State," 163.

<sup>139</sup> Gardener, "Listening at the Threshold: Christology and the "Suspension of the Material," 142.

<sup>140</sup> Gardener, "Listening at the Threshold: Christology and the "Suspension of the Material," 143.

<sup>141</sup> James Harvey SJ, "Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Enquiry?* ed. Paul Laurence Hemming (New York: Ashgate, 2017), 152.

constantly offering to humanity an understanding of what it is to be human, an understanding that is more coherent and generative than anything humanity can devise for itself. Without this critical attention and self-awareness, theology is always in danger of becoming a private language that betrays its own logic, at best a dead rhetoric, or vague spirituality that seeks to articulate the longing for transcendence.<sup>142</sup>

Another vital observation Harvey makes, is that RO seeks to only criticise those whom it seeks to reclaim. In Hemming's words, "RO establishes its critical and constructive claims against those with whom it might otherwise want to closely collaborate."<sup>143</sup> Thus Hemming says that RO appears to have deceived itself, for it fails to convince those it has set out to convince. And so, RO appears to have thrown a fist, towards those whom it ought to have reached out its hand.

As much as RO seeks to establish the ecclesial community in the public sphere, and derive a liturgical practice through the church, it can appear as either aloof, or arrogant. These traits can be uninviting to those whom it wishes to engage, (if at all it wishes to, since it also does not wish to cut off the world from God). Moreover, due to RO profusely unable to accept the otherness in their interaction, it may continue to wallow in its own private sphere, and a far cry from enabling an effective theological mode of engaging in the public sphere.

## **1.5 Summary**

In the overall context of the modern world, RO believes that the secular has superseded religious voices, and so RO takes an offensive stand against the onslaught of secular ideology in society. It acts as a defender of theology and argues that other non-religious discourses try to interpret religion, but their result is invalid because it has no theistic starting point. And so, RO believes that if religion is replaced, something more sinister will replace it in society. We have

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<sup>142</sup> Harvey, "Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation," 155.

<sup>143</sup> Harvey, "Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation," 155.

examples of religion being completely obliterated from communist regimes, where dictatorship and a tyrannical state centric government takes over. Such a secular state in this context, takes over not only the public but also the private lives of its citizens and thus results in an Orwellian state. Perhaps it would be correct to infer this is what RO warns its readers about.

Secondly RO also addresses the liberal tendency of the contemporary church in integrating a modernist approach in its theology. RO believes that the contemporary church has failed to reject modernism and secularity, and so RO strives to return towards an orthodox theology which it believes is untainted from secular influences. RO's starting point resonates from a theistic belief and understanding of the world and society. However, due to its aggressive approach against the secular, and all it disagrees with, one questions whether this will be an effective model for Contemporary Christians to engage and adapt? Does it accommodate liberty, autonomy, recognise diversity and pluralism? Does it respect other religious and even non-religious beliefs? Or has it become so radical that it has isolated itself in its own sphere? Thus, RO's approach towards all it considers an outsider, lies along the terms it uses to define the secular as *pagan*, *nihilistic* and *non-existence*. Those who disagree with them have no significant value to offer in the debate. Moreover, RO tends to take an offensive stance towards all it disagrees with. Gardener in her observation about RO notes that this is precisely the "powerful opposition" that RO tends to show towards its opposition, namely secular ideology, and the state.<sup>144</sup> Although she agrees with RO's "grounded" theology, which is found in the Eucharist, the church and RO's Trinitarian theology, she critiques its method in trying to "silence its enemies" and its tendency to shun all those it disagrees with.<sup>145</sup>

Thirdly, the offensive combative approach that RO uses in its rhetoric may not be theologically effective in its discourse, since it tends to offend more, than engage, and reach out. Nevertheless, RO's sole concern to maintain its theological

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<sup>144</sup> Gardener, "Listening at the Threshold," 127.

<sup>145</sup> Gardener, "Listening at the Threshold," 128.

foundation/ ground is commendable, even though at times it may appear to lack an explicit hermeneutical groundwork.

In the next chapter, I will present proponents of Public Theology and examine how they address the secular state, how they view the role of the contemporary church how traditional Christian creeds are interpreted by proponents of PT.

## CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

### 2.1 Introduction

We have seen in chapter one that RO tends to be hostile towards the secular state and the contemporary church, while seeking to establish a patristic creed as its theological basis.<sup>146</sup> In the current discourse between church and state relations, we will examine proponents of public theology, and its view on church and state. The scope of this chapter will thus seek to examine how PT responds towards the state, its understanding of the contemporary church, and its application of Christian creed. The chapter will thereby critically examine how PT differs on its critique on church, state and creed, and how it presents a theological application for Christian engagement in the public sphere.

### 2.2 Background

The concept of public theology originated in sociologist Robert Bellah's work on civil religion and the role of "a basic set of religious beliefs and values in the American political context 1967."<sup>147</sup> Public theology, as a term, is said to have been coined by church historian Martin E. Marty in 1974, who wanted to enhance the work of Bellah and the understanding of civil religion in the United States.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> The secular state will be only implied as the state throughout this paper. The state as a civil political secular government structure which is devoid of any religious affiliation.

<sup>147</sup> Breitenberg, "To Tell the Truth Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?," 56.

<sup>148</sup> Hak Joon Lee, "Public Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Political Theology*, edited by Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Philips, eds., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 45. Also in Breitenberg, "To Tell the Truth Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?," 56. Also in Katie Day and Sebastian Kim, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology*, 3 and Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," in *The Journal of Religions* 54 (1974):332-59, cited in Max Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, Scott R. Paeth, E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., and Hak Joon Lee, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 116.

Breitenberg also mentions the wide range of public theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Kuyper, Walter Rauschenberg, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, and Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Luther, Barth, Milbank and contributors such as Lincoln, Dorothy Day, MLK, whose work and contribution in academic and public life made a tremendous impact on society, 63.

Stackhouse says this term is used to emphasise the study of theology as a personal commitment, applicable to a particular community, can also contribute to a broader public discourse and impact not only individuals but also society.<sup>149</sup> Public theology, in this way, seeks to impact and address issues in public life from a theological standpoint.

Stackhouse opines that PT, seeks to actively engage with philosophy, science, ethics and denounces injustice, oppression and inequality.<sup>150</sup> He says PT is a much-needed theology, particularly in the contemporary modern world, where theology remains dogmatic.<sup>151</sup>

He credits the works of “Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and Abraham Kuyper and their scholarly colleagues for building, managing, extending, revising and refining public theology, thereby providing intellectual resources to civilise the tribes of Europe.”<sup>152</sup> Thus PT is public in the sense that it seeks to address, engage and contribute in the public sphere and hails its claim from a theological stand.<sup>153</sup>

The scope of this chapter will be limited to the discourse church and state relations, and concentrate on three major aspects, namely on how PT understand the state, the role of the contemporary church, and thirdly it's solicitation on Christian creed.

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It also appears in the work of Marty on his analysis of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in Martin E. Marty, “Reinhold, Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience,” in *Journal of Religions* 54 (1974):332-59, cited by Scott R. Paeth, E. Harold Breitenberg Jr., and Hak Joon Lee, eds., *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 116.

<sup>149</sup> Max Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 116.199

<sup>150</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 119.

<sup>151</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 119.

<sup>152</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 120.

<sup>153</sup> Hübenthal, “Theological Significance of the Secular,”455-469. Hübenthal uses John Duns Scotus’s theory on how the secular can be understood from a theological framework, using God’s love, the transcendent divine being, reaching towards the non-divine, temporary being. From my understanding of this article, the analogy can also be understood as a mode of engagement by the initiation of the sacred (being) towards the secular (beings), and the initiation of engagement of the infinite towards finite beings.



## 2.3 Introducing Public Theology

Public theology covers a wide range of public discourse ranging from politics, ecological concerns, human rights, social justice etc. However, this chapter will focus its limit on understanding church and state roles in the public sphere. The next section will seek to examine how public theology responds towards the state.

### 2.3.1 On the State

The inference taken here is that the secular state is ‘secular’ and thereby detached from the divine.<sup>154</sup> As a civil government entity, the state is thus expected to be impartial, unbiased and stand for liberty, equality, and fairness. It is neutral and devoid of any attachment towards religious groups. Thus, proponents of public theology argue that the idea of public engagement towards the state is how Christians perceive their role in society as Christians and citizens. Von Sinner highlights this in *Public Theology as a Theology of Citizenship*, where he says that even though Christians are aware that the earth is not their permanent home, they still need to be good stewards and contribute towards the betterment of the state.<sup>155</sup> Thiemann also calls for “public theologians to support the commitment of democratic regimes” in the state.<sup>156</sup> He calls for public theologians to support the state values of “freedom, equality, and toleration while refuting arguments for governmental neutrality and secularity.”<sup>157</sup> Thus proponents of PT take on an Augustinian stance in how they view and understand the state.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Hübenthal, “Theological Significance of the Secular,” 464.

<sup>155</sup> Rudolf Von Sinner, *The Churches and Democracy* 48-67, cited in Rudolf Von Sinner “Public Theology as Theology of Citizenship,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds., Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 238.

<sup>156</sup> Ronald Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” in *Zeitschrift Für Evangelische Ethik* 42 (3), (1998):182.

<sup>157</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,”182-183.

<sup>158</sup> Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol.2, *The West from Tertullian to Erasmus*, (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933), 117-118. According to McGiffert, Augustine was not against the Roman Empire and does not view the empire as his foe, rather for Augustine laws implemented by the empire are for peaceful life to exist, Augustine thus believed that the

Therefore, it ascertains that public theology seek a way to understand and respect the role of the state. Thiemann says that to understand the state, we need to gain a “detailed understanding of the secular such as the social, cultural-moral context in which public policies are developed.”<sup>159</sup> And so, PT strives to understand the state and appears more accommodative than RO.

Volf also opines that at times, Christians tend to evaluate and interpret the broader cultural context only from their Christianised perspective.<sup>160</sup> This can be detrimental and limit our understanding and quest to engage with those on the other side. And so, it is pertinent to understand each other and create room for discussion. Thiemann moreover says that “how Christians should relate to liberal democracy, a capitalist economy, and a secularised consumer society can only be determined through careful comparative study.”<sup>161</sup> He believes that in order to understand state structures, a steady laborious analysis must be undertaken between the church and state.<sup>162</sup> Thus in relating with state structures, Bretherton uses the term “consociational” where this term implies a mutual fellowship between different institutions or groups who are merged for a common purpose.<sup>163</sup> However, Bretherton is quick to point out that Lijpart’s theory is biased towards the state. His conception of consociational democracy is more state-centric and tends to favour the “cartel of elites” by manoeuvring, power-sharing, voting, and

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rules and laws stipulated by the state, should be upheld by the Church, and Christians should not condemn or rebel against the state.

<sup>159</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 184-185.

<sup>160</sup> Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 86.

<sup>161</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 185.

<sup>162</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 185.

<sup>163</sup> Luke Bretherton, “State, Democracy and Community Organising,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds., Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 96.

Bretherton also mentions Arend Lijphart, whose initial reflections were born out of trying to understand the paradox of The Netherlands, as an example of a county with a profoundly religious background that remains a stable liberal (secularised) democracy in Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 1–2, cited by Luke Bretherton, “State, Democracy and Community Organising,” 99.

making constitutional arrangements.”<sup>164</sup> Thus, the consociation system runs the risk of becoming ‘state-centric’ and marginalising the church. Moltmann, for example, mentions the danger of the state becoming a “state security system” where the state can run the risk of becoming a dictatorship.<sup>165</sup> Thus, if government and state hold the ultimate power, it will become what we witness in certain countries where there is a high level of state influence *and* interference by the government in the public sphere.<sup>166</sup>

It is therefore pertinent to acknowledge that the way which PT proposes for Christians to engage towards the state begins with the suggestion to *understand* state structures and its functions. PT thus discourages Christians from approaching the state only from a Christianised worldview, rather it seeks for a way to understand the state more broadly. Secondly, PT encourages its readers to be less hostile and anti-state, and instead support the state where it identifies the common good, such as equality, liberty and tolerance.

However, at the same time, PT also remains critical of the state and seeks to call it out when it identifies defects in it. Hübenthal calls it “to enlighten the secular.”<sup>167</sup> And so, in this way, where there is tyranny, corruption, violation of human rights, gender inequality, PT can enlighten the deformities in the state.<sup>168</sup> The state left

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<sup>164</sup> Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); and *Thinking about Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008), cited by Bretherton, “State, Democracy and Community Organising,” 99.

<sup>165</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God for A Secular Society: The Public Relevancy of Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1997), 24.

<sup>166</sup> Countries like China and North Korea are prime examples where the state government has an authoritarian rule and hold immense control in the public (and private) lives of its citizens.

<sup>167</sup> Hübenthal, “Theological Significance of the Secular,” 468.

<sup>168</sup> An example of this is during the financial crisis in 2008 which is highlighted by Bradstock and Russel where “the forgotten ideas of the church” was rejected and replaced by secular ideologies, thus resulting in excess greed and reckless behaviour by the state resulted in the financial fiasco. Jonathan Freedland of *The Guardian* comments, “while politicians had ‘been left looking flummoxed by the financial crisis, it had “been left to the Pope to offer the most comprehensive critique of our devastated economic landscape in Andrew Bradstock and Hillary Russel, “Politics, Church and the Common Good” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds., Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 164. I also mentioned this earlier where the concept of ‘the rule’ and ‘the exception’ can be an underlying factor in determining how to draw our boundaries when it comes to the church engaging and participating in the public sphere.

on its own, has its own share of horror and deformed ideologies as history has shown us. A way out would be to promote neither state-centric nor theocratic tendency, rather be supportive of the state, while remaining critical of its limitations. Thus, PT believes that Christians are citizens of the state and have a positive role to contribute as good stewards to society. However, PT is not devoid of being critical towards the state, and seeks to point out its limitations or its ‘deformities’ if and when the need arises. PT in this way does not omit the state out of its discourse, rather it seeks to formulate a way to understand, study and engage with the state.

### 2.3.2 On the Church

When it comes to the role of the contemporary church, how does public theology view the church? Hainsworth and Paeth point out that “the solution for Christians is not to cocoon themselves within their own intellectually, if not isolated colonies.”<sup>169</sup> However, Volf says that one must tread with caution, because in the zeal for many Christians to engage, they began to *impose* their personal (religious) beliefs on others.<sup>170</sup> Thus the contemporary church needs to be mindful of its limitations, and remember that it is also “a human nature beset by sin and finitude,” and so they “need to be cautious and not delude themselves into too great a faith in their righteousness or capacities.”<sup>171</sup>

Hainsworth and Paeth mention Stackhouse’s work in *God and Globalization*, where it is not about asserting a Christian imperative and resacralizing the public sphere, but about “constructing a moral infrastructure for a worldwide civil society that could lead to a highly diverse, cosmopolitan civilisation.”<sup>172</sup> By its

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<sup>169</sup> Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth, eds., *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2010, xiv.

<sup>170</sup> Volf, *A Public Faith*, 124.

<sup>171</sup> Hainsworth and Paeth, eds., *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, xv.

<sup>172</sup> Max Stackhouse, “Globalization and Grace” in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, eds., Hainsworth and Paeth, 35-36.

omission, the ‘secular space’ is free to choose and sets its own moral or political standards. Hübenenthal calls it “the alterity which God voluntarily sets free in order to create a space for human freedom.”<sup>173</sup> Thus, the role of the contemporary church, in trying to engage with the state, needs to understand that it is a separate realm, entitled to its freedom and space. And so, the contemporary church while holding on to its Christian foundations, also needs to be self-critical and aware of its earthly limitations. Moltmann also opines that the contemporary church must be critical of its limitations in asserting itself in the public sphere.<sup>174</sup> The contemporary church has to remind itself that it is not a perfect church, so long as it is an earthly church, it is finite and bound to err.

And so, public theology believes that the contemporary church in its relation with the state needs to seek to understand how the state and democratic government functions.<sup>175</sup> Secondly it seeks to identify a common platform, in this case, a ‘common good’ where societal issues can be worked out and contributed by church/theologians for the welfare and flourishing of the state.<sup>176</sup> And most importantly, it seeks to address deformities it sees in the secular realm, and bring about restoration through its engagement.<sup>177</sup>

Stackhouse also states that the contemporary church needs a conceptual framework of theology to engage, involve and reflect the social, political and

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<sup>173</sup> Hübenenthal, “The Theological Significance of the Secular,” 464.

<sup>174</sup> Moltmann, *God for a Secular Age*, pages 13-20, he argues that the contemporary church must address issues of, wealth inequality, what he terms as the “economic end times, ecological depreciation, the God crisis (a term he borrows from Metz, regarding Christian identity and Christian representation, understand Modernity, not shut away from it, and seek to understand modern concepts of liberty, equality).

<sup>175</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff proposes this in *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, edited by Terence Cuneo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2. Wolterstorff believes that for theology to go public, it needs to understand the role and duties of the state. The function of the state is to protect its citizens and is bound to the constitution, laws and policies. He thus states that through dialogue and engagement in earthly affairs, politics and matters of the state, ‘theology’ becomes ‘public.’

<sup>176</sup> Sebastian Kim and Katie Day eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 165, the term ‘common good’ for them is in the context of the financial crisis where they argue for the church to contribute towards the public sphere, a framework of engagement in the area of economic stability.

<sup>177</sup> Hübenenthal calls it to “enlighten the secular” of its deformations whenever possible, 468. Also by Moltmann in *God for a Secular Age*, 13.

economic issues of contemporary public society.<sup>178</sup> He also believes that “contemporary theology needs to defend against premature attacks of the perennial spiritualizers, reductionists, privateers and ideological dogmatism of Christianity.”<sup>179</sup> While Moltmann says that the church has to understand the implied theology of the modern world (state) and though an understanding of its origin, it can identify its strengths and its “congenital defects.”<sup>180</sup> This can be implemented through an ecclesiological interpretation of modern society that can bring about unity in socio-economic and political spheres in society.<sup>181</sup> Thus, PT believes that the contemporary church should not take a passive stance on the public sphere, rather create a space for dialogue and conversation. And so, PT has a robust understanding of the state, while promoting an active participation of the contemporary church in the public sphere, and remaining self-critical of its own limitations. In the next section how PT presents its theological claim for creed will be examined.

### 2.3.3 On Creed

Christian engagement in the public sphere uses theological creeds as its foundation. It needs to build up on a sound theological argument to follow its argument as to why Christians and the church need to be active in the public sphere and contribute to society and politics. In taking inspiration from theological claims an example is how liberation theology uses Christ as the liberator to free people from oppression. This theological theory is made popular by Gustavo Gutierrez.<sup>182</sup> And so, public theologians likewise find inspiration in their public engagement via theological truth claims and Biblical teachings. Stackhouse and Moltmann for example use covenantal theology to relate the

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<sup>178</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 4.

<sup>179</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 4.

<sup>180</sup> Moltmann, *God for a Secular Age*, 13.

<sup>181</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 18.

<sup>182</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: SCM Press), 1973.

James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press) 1975, and in Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Finland: Burns and Oates), 1987.

relational aspect between the human and divine nature.<sup>183</sup> While Volf, Von Sinner and Boff argue towards a Trinitarian interpretation in PT.<sup>184</sup>

### 2.3.3.1 Presenting a Christological Creed

In this section, I will examine how public theology uses a Christology creed as its inspiration to engage in the public sphere. Christology as a subject is the understanding of the nature of Christ, atonement, concept of salvation, incarnation etc. However, the concept of Christ as a political or public figure is also implied in the gospel narratives. Schwager and Palaver call this narrative a “dramatic model” that begins with Christ’s public ministry.<sup>185</sup> They argue that as Christ radically “confronted the structures of the world, Christian theology must also confront the structures of the public.”<sup>186</sup> They believe that the public, the law, and the rules were not in favour of Christ during his time, and he became a “victim” of the system.<sup>187</sup> Thus, it is commendable for followers of Christ to go against the tide, exert influence, gain a foothold in the world, and seek influence or take control over the public domain. Volf, however, disagrees with this argument. He opines that it is perhaps not so much about confrontation with the world or exerting power and influence because the early church was a far cry from gaining popularity and gaining influence.<sup>188</sup> The early church was marginalised and

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<sup>183</sup> Hainsworth and Paeth, eds., *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, x, and Moltmann, *God for a Secular Age*, 36-38.

<sup>184</sup> Von Sinner argues for a participatory method which he derives from a Trinitarian understanding, where the concept of perfect harmony and unity can be found in the Holy Trinity, and all three participate equally. Sinner believes that in this way the church can also engage in a participatory form of democracy where the church can participate in civil society. Von Sinner “Public Theology as Theology of Citizenship,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds., Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 244-245. Von Sinner believes that this concept is not to deduce the divinity or transcendence feature of God, rather experience the perfect unity and harmony of the Trinity, which he believes is pertinent for societal harmony, in cited in Von Sinner “Public Theology as Theology of Citizenship,” 244-245.

<sup>185</sup> Raymond Schwager and Wolfgang Palaver, “Christology,” in *The Wiley Black Companion to Public Theology*, eds., William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2019), 390.

<sup>186</sup> Schwager and Palaver, “Christology,” 396-397.

<sup>187</sup> Schwager and Palaver, “Christology,” 396.

<sup>188</sup> Volf, *A Public Faith*, 70.

persecuted, and their one goal was to continue to “walk in the footsteps of Christ.”<sup>189</sup>

In the gospels, we find out that to imitate Christ, is to be meek, be lacking, be persecuted, turn the other cheek, and strive for peace, even in the face of violence and unrest.<sup>190</sup> Moltmann mentions the sermon on the mount, where the Kingdom concepts are paradoxical to how early power and reign is perceived.<sup>191</sup> However, at the forefront of public issues and societal concerns, issues of social justice, this paradoxical concept may appear to be weak and docile.

A Christological engagement in public can also be one that “provokes, denounces, admonishes” as Christ did to the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>192</sup> However, Bigger strongly opines that to “criticise fellow humans who are not confessing Christians and challenge them with discriminating prophecy, is to fail in compassion and thereby betray the Gospel.”<sup>193</sup> Bigger here adds that many times how Christians tend to contribute to towards public discourse is a matter of concern.<sup>194</sup> And so, the critique should be focussed on the believing community, and not on those outside. Biggar thus says, “we follow Christ precisely so that we are open to discover the presence of the spirit among our equivalent of sinners, tax collectors, gentiles.”<sup>195</sup>

Thus, while the interpretation of Christ’s earthly ministry is sometimes inferred as a type of anarchist method to overthrow earthly powers and state structures; on the other side of Christology is the understanding of Christ’s divine nature where regardless of all his divine powers, he gives us an exemplary methodology of sacrifice and servitude for his followers to engage in the world.

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<sup>189</sup> Volf, *A Public Faith*, 70

<sup>190</sup> The Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-10, which calls for a paradoxical way to live out the Kingdom of God.

<sup>191</sup> Moltmann, *God for A Secular Society*, 49.

<sup>192</sup> Bigger, *Behaving in Public* 141.

<sup>193</sup> Biggar, *Behaving in Public*, 182.

<sup>194</sup> Nigel Bigger, *Behaving in Public: How to do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 142.

<sup>195</sup> Biggar, *Behaving in Public*, 182.



## 2.4 Gaps and Limitations

As much as PT appears to be an ideal theology for Christians to apply, there are areas in public theology which are under scrutiny. For example, Stackhouse asks the question how does the church hope to engage in the world without sacrificing its theological integrity entirely.<sup>196</sup> He proposes a method in the context of a secular society that appears to have “less to do with religion, and the sanctification of dimensions of personal and cultural sensibility that look more and more like new forms of religious effervescence.”<sup>197</sup> This is one of the common critiques for public theology where it is criticised for focusing more on social issues, and less on the spiritual aspect.

Another critique is highlighted by Breitenberg who says that while contemporary churches often communicate and promote public theologians, public theology as an active endeavour is often not produced by the churches.<sup>198</sup> It remains an academic venture mainly within the academic community, and not heard much among local churches or the wider Christian community. Thus, while its theological claims remain rooted, its public audience remains ambiguous.

Breitenberg also says that some criticise public theology as a “functionalist or instrumentalist undertaking that puts Christianity in the service of institutions, groups, powers, ideologies, or ideals that are often foreign or opposed to the Christian tradition.”<sup>199</sup> Public theology is thus viewed with suspicion and some churches believe that it loses its focus on the main fundamental ideas of Christian theology, by substituting its emphasis on other social issues. Breitenberg points out that one of the reasons why public theology is widely criticised (by Evangelicals for example) is because of its willingness to be accommodating towards other non-church related areas.<sup>200</sup> Such groups are thus sceptical of public

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<sup>196</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse*, 77.

<sup>197</sup> Stackhouse, *Shaping Public Theology*, 133.

<sup>198</sup> Breitenberg, “Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” 50-60.

<sup>199</sup> Breitenberg, “Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” 68.

<sup>200</sup> Breitenberg, “Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” 68.

theology because they believe it “derives its guidance from other areas apart from the church.”<sup>201</sup> And so, public theology in its willingness to engage in the secular realm, runs the risk of compromising its Christian foundations.

On the other hand, Thiemann opines that while public theologians tend to remain true to the biblical doctrine, they tend to fail in engaging effectively in the public sphere.<sup>202</sup> While on the other hand, conservatives like RO tend to enter the public sphere with a single-minded ferocity and maintain a stringent dogma, at the cost of offending its target audience.<sup>203</sup> Thiemann thus proposes that if contemporary Christians hope to find an effective public voice in today’s context, they must find a middle path.<sup>204</sup>

## 2.5 Summary

PT therefore attempts to build a theological framework for public discourse which is rooted and grounded in a Christological application, however, one of the critiques on PT is its tendency to be more public and less theological. And so, even though PT is non-passive in its public engagement, it is still limited to academia, and not churches, thus its public theology that so strives to be public, tends to remain restricted to a limited audience. And thirdly, its tendency to be theocratic is not explicitly condemned by its proponents, thus it runs the risk of interfering in the public sphere in its eagerness to engage and participate.

Moreover, PT needs a more robust doctrinal framework in its quest to be socially,

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<sup>201</sup> Breitenberg, “Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up,” 68.

Cites Richard Niebanck, “Grace and Public Theology: The Peril and Promise of a Post-Critical Epoch,” *Lutheran Forum* 23, no. 1 (February 1989): 11. See also Barth’s discussion of “The Command of God and the Ethical Problem” in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, vol. II, pt. 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 509-4

<sup>202</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 184.

<sup>203</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 184.

<sup>204</sup> Thiemann, “Studien - Public Theology: The Moral Dimension of Religion in a Pluralistic Society,” 184.

publicly and theological relevant and effective.

On the other hand, PT seeks to understand the role of the state, and hence tends to empathise with the role of the state. It also appears to be keen to listen, participate and engage effectively in the public sphere. However, it needs to be cautious in its approach, and not be too eager, lest it encourages theocratic tendencies. This I observe is something that PT needs to be cautious and explicit about, and draw its boundaries when it seeks to participate in the public sphere. There is thus a separation line that needs to be observed and respected, which will be discussed in the next chapter, as emphasised by Kuyper. To find the middle way, a balanced approach is needed. And so, in the next chapter, I will examine Abraham Kuyper's theology, particularly his theory on Sphere Sovereignty and his argument for the separation of church and state.

## CHAPTER THREE: INTRODUCING KUYPER'S SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse Abraham Kuyper's public theology, particularly on church and state relations and his concept of Sphere Sovereignty that calls for the autonomy of all spheres. Kuyper's legacy as a pastor, theologian and politician continues even after a hundred years, his work continues to impact and influence the contemporary context and impacted South Korean, Japanese, South African, Canadian, North American, Malaysian and Chinese context, and also in the field of justice, equality, poverty, inter-religious dialogues between Christians and Muslims, on issues ranging from economics to migration, and fashion.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Kuyper's influence can be seen in the works of Max Stackhouse, James K.A. Smith, Ronald Thiemann, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Miroslav Volf and Sebastian Kim. While Jordan J Ballor, Richard Mouw, and James D Bratt have written extensively on Kuyper's theology for the contemporary audience. Kuyper's work has also largely influenced North American, South Korean, Japanese and South African public theology.

For example, Harvey applies the concept of Sphere Sovereignty in the Asian context, particularly China and Malaysia, in Thomas Harvey, Sphere Sovereignty, Civil Society and the Pursuit of Holistic Transformation in Asia." *Transformation* 33, no. 1 (2016): <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0265378815595246>, 54-60.

In the Japanese context, by Harefa, Surya. "Resistance to Japanese Nationalism: Christian Responses to Proposed Constitutional Amendments in Japan," in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 4 (2019): 330-344.

Peter S. Heslam, *Kindai Shugi to Kirisutokyō: Aburahamu Kaipa- no Shisō Modernism and Christianity: The Thought of Abraham Kuyper*, trans. Inagaki Hisakazu and Toyokawa Shin (Tokyo: Kyobunkwan, 2002).

Richard J. Mouw, *Aburahamu Kaipa- Nyūmon: Kirisutokyō Sekai-kan Jinseikan e no Tebiki [Introduction to Abraham Kuyper: A Guide to Christian Worldview and Life View]*, trans. Inagaki Hisakazu and Iwata Mieko (Tokyo: Kyobunkwan, 2012).

In the South African context, by Robert J Joustra, "Abraham Kuyper among the Nations," in *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 1 (2018): <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S1755048317000554>, 146-168.

Also, on addressing the issue of fashion and secularity by Robert Covolo, "Faith in a Fashionable Age: Abraham Kuyper and Charles Taylor on the Secular Nexus Between *Mode* and *Modernité*," in *International Journal of Public Theology* 7, no. 3 (2013): <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/15697320-12341294>, 217-314. And in the Malaysian context stated in Thomas Harvey's article "Sphere Sovereignty, Civil Society and the Pursuit of Holistic Transformation in Asia," in *Transformation*, 33, no 1. (2016) : 50-64, SAGE Journals, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90008855>. Harvey talks about how Islam has dominated the social spheres of Malaysia, and Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty offers an alternate constructive approach to religious radicalization that seems to infringe people's public and private life.

It can thus be argued that Kuyper's public theology holds a global impact, and influences a diverse audience. Kuyper's theology has been thus applied on various contexts ranging from politics to race, inter-religious, economics as well as fashion.<sup>206</sup> This chapter will however limit its focus on Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty, particularly his understanding on state, society and the church, and whether the concept of Sphere Sovereignty can contribute towards a contemporary model for Christians to engage effectively in the public sphere.

### 3.2 Background

The Netherlands by the turn of the nineteenth century had developed a liberal democratic constitution, which was mostly spurred by liberal ideologies rampant throughout Europe during that time, and it was through this constitution that suggested the separation of church and state in Dutch society.<sup>207</sup> Jan Rudolph Thorbecke (1798–1872), who was a liberal politician and lawyer drafted this constitution with the hope of granting liberty to all Dutch people.<sup>208</sup> However, there were also those who wanted to hold on to their traditional orthodox or dogmatic Christian traditions and thereby did not want to adhere to such a liberal scrutiny.<sup>209</sup>

The context for separation of church and state particularly arose in the Dutch context due to the interference of the King in the religious sphere. The Dutch Reformed Church in 1816, witnessed the intrusion of King William I in the priestly functions of the church. This move by the King affected for both Catholics and protestants, particularly in the area of worship, since its church leaders were also entrusted with political roles such as cabinet ministers in the

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<sup>206</sup> Kuyper's collected works on public theology is a 12-volume series translated and published by Lexham Press which covers a wide range of topics ranging from education to theology, to economics, justice and on Islam. While Steve Covolo's book on *Faith in a Fashionable Age*, covers (and compares) a Kuyperian understanding between mode and modernity.

<sup>207</sup> George Harinck, "On doing what is just, right and fair: Essay on a Dutch example," in *In die Skriflig*, 54 (2020): 1, a2646. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v54i1.2646>.

<sup>208</sup> Harinck, "On doing what is just, right and fair," 2.

<sup>209</sup> Harinck, "On doing what is just, right and fair," 2.

state.<sup>210</sup> This move was more like a publicity move, however, it directly affected the church functions, pertaining properties, appointments of the clergy, and other priestly functions which now fell under the umbrella of the state.<sup>211</sup> Thus, the Dutch churches lost their autonomy and came under the direct rule of the state.<sup>212</sup>

In this way, the relation between church and state continued to grow increasingly closer with the state gaining more control and influence in the church.<sup>213</sup> This was especially in the organisation of its central synod. In response, Kuyper issued pamphlets where he urged the church communities to do away with state church control, and “liberate the church,” became his slogan.<sup>214</sup> He published pamphlets which addressed the removal of the royal decrees of 1816, and 1852, in this it contained the transfer of control regarding the church from the king, over to the Synod.<sup>215</sup> As a result of this conflict, it enabled Catholics and protestants to join forces together and be united in their struggle to emancipate themselves from state interference.<sup>216</sup>

### 3.3 Introducing Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper started his ministry as a pastor of the Dutch reformed church. Among the many caps he wore, was a professor of theology, an editor of a daily newspaper called *De Standaard* which he founded, the founder of a political party

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<sup>210</sup> James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democratic*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2013, 48.

<sup>211</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper Modern Calvinist, Christian Democratic*, 59. This was also a concern which was voiced out by Schleiermacher in his fourth speech as well, where he warned about the distortion and decay that would occur due to the merging of the church and state in Schleiermacher, *Speeches, Fourth Speech*, 88

<sup>212</sup> Many opposed this move, and in 1834, thousands left the state church. However, church opposition was interpreted as anti-state, and so the groups that opposed these new church measures could be legally arrested and imprisoned. Bratt, *Modern Calvinist, Christian Democratic*, 59.

<sup>213</sup> Justus M. Van Der Kroef, “Abraham Kuyper and the Rise of Neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands,” in *Church History* 17, no. 4 (1948):318.

<sup>214</sup> Van Der Kroef, “Abraham Kuyper and the Rise of Neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands,” 318.

<sup>215</sup> Van Der Kroef, “Abraham Kuyper and the Rise of Neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands,” 322.

<sup>216</sup> This significant outcry for reforms and separation of state occurred not only in church but also in the sphere of education which witnessed the official recognition of the Vrije University (protestant based) in Amsterdam and the Catholic University in Nijmegen (now Radboud University).

in The Netherlands (the ARP), and Prime Minister of The Netherlands from 1901-1905.<sup>217</sup> Kuyper's versatile background as a church minister of the reformed church in The Netherlands, to being a professor of theology, a pastor, editor of a newspaper, and member of the Dutch Parliament and ultimately Prime Minister from 1901-1905 shows his intense involvement and contribution in both church and state activities.<sup>218</sup>

The political party he founded was called the ARP (Anti-Revolutionary Party), and this was an antithesis to the ideals of the French Revolution, to which Kuyper vehemently opposed. Kuyper's ARP was a response towards men embracing violence and a lack of godly principles. He says, "what we oppose is the revolution by which we mean the political and social system embodied in the French Revolution."<sup>219</sup> Nevertheless, even though he was anti-revolutionary, he did not oppose political leaders who had the right to restore peace and end tyranny. Thus, he justifies "the Dutch revolt against Spain, the Glorious Revolution under William III, the American War of Independence, and the Napoleonic Regime's overthrow in 1813."<sup>220</sup> He believes that such acts are not destructive, but a means to restore society from tyrannical regimes.

Kuyper also believed that the concept of a "state church" is seen in a "particular ecclesiastical order" and so he was against the merging of church and state.<sup>221</sup> He laments that in other countries this merging of church and state has damaging results.<sup>222</sup> Kuyper argues that the churches which thrived best were the ones that were not under any political support, and only under the word of God.<sup>223</sup> And so, it was crucial for him to promote the sovereignty of each sphere, thus promoting

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<sup>217</sup> Mark A. Noll, Foreword in *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, ed. James D. Bratt, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 10.

<sup>218</sup> Noll, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 10.

<sup>219</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 2.

<sup>220</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 2.

<sup>221</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, trans., Harry Van Dyke, ed., Jordan J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema (Grand Rapids: Lexham Press, 2015), 573-576. (pages from the e-book version, not hard copy. On the hard copy page numbers are different).

<sup>222</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto* 576. Kuyper says that in other countries, the concept of a state church has resulted in a sad outcome.

<sup>223</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, 577.

the autonomy of both church and state in society, which he presented through the concept of Sphere Sovereignty.

### 3.4 Presenting Sphere Sovereignty

An important aspect of Kuyper's public theology is his religious foundation which was scriptural and conservative. However, he was progressive in his theological contribution and believed that "the public sphere should be a sphere of spiritual freedom, not of force or religious coercion."<sup>224</sup> His understanding of the public sphere was to acknowledge freedom for each sphere, not out of religious coercion or obligation. He believes that such kind of obligation or coercion renders the practising Christian as dull and ineffective.<sup>225</sup> He opined that only in a place of freedom and autonomy can the spiritual be truly effective.

Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty (*soevereiniteit in eigen kring*) is about how each sphere or realm in society such as arts, education, politics and religion all fall under different spheres, out of God's divine plan. During Kuyper's time, the relation between church and state grew increasingly closer, with the state gaining more influence and power.<sup>226</sup> Thus, Kuyper promoted the concept of separation of church and state, and envisioned each sphere to function, govern and progress autonomously, without seeking to intervene or interfere with each other. His famous slogan "a free church in a free state" became his logo and his mission initially started to "liberate the church" however this concept extended on to other spheres as well.<sup>227</sup> And so, Kuyper's concept of sovereignty is the underlying belief in a cosmological concept of God.<sup>228</sup> He ardently held the fundamental

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<sup>224</sup> Govert Buijs, "Introduction," in *Abraham Kuyper Pro Rege: Living Under Christ's Kingship, Vol 2: The Kingship of Christ in its Operation*, Abraham Kuyper, eds., John Kok with Nelson D. Koosterman, trans. Albert Gootjes. Washington: Lexham Press, 2017, 26

<sup>225</sup> Buijs, in Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ's Kingship*, 26.

<sup>226</sup> Justus M. Van Der Kroef, "Abraham Kuyper and the Rise of Neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands," in *Church History* 17, no. 4 (1948):318.

<sup>227</sup> Van Der Kroef, "Abraham Kuyper and the Rise of Neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands," 318.

<sup>228</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Monergism Books. Kindle Edition (Kindle Locations 1087-1089).



belief that the triune God triumph and reigned over the entire cosmos, in every sphere, both visible and invisible.<sup>229</sup> Thus, God is omnipotent and omniscient. Thus, there is a primal belief that this divine sovereignty which is delegated to mankind, stems from God, however in a limited form of authority.<sup>230</sup> According to Kuyper, the concept of Sphere Sovereignty is that God is sovereign without a doubt, but there is a separation or rather a delegation of power emitted by God's grace, where power is divided among the different spheres of society. This is possible only through the grace of God that is given out freely to all. Thus, for Kuyper, all earthly powers ultimately rests on God, because it comes forth from the grace of God.<sup>231</sup>

Mouw mentions, Gordon J. Spykman's quote, "each sphere has its own identity, and its own unique task, its own God-given prerogatives. On each God has conferred its own peculiar right of existence and reason for existence."<sup>232</sup>

Kuyper also leans towards a Calvinist claim that everything is determined and laid out, a divine concept, where it is God's (in Spykman's words) prerogative, for all the spheres to exist, function and grow, autonomously. Mouw mentions that for Kuyper the spheres such as family or state, exist and function not because the government officially *allows* it, but that the government has to *recognise* these spheres and their (autonomous) rights.<sup>233</sup> Thus, for Kuyper, the concept of autonomy was crucial and vital in allowing the spheres to be autonomous and progress. It operated as a concept to limit the rule and dominion of the state *and* church, also allows its autonomy to thrive and progress without outside (state/government/civil) hindrance.

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<sup>229</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Kindle Locations 1087-1089).

<sup>230</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Kindle Locations 1087-1089).

<sup>231</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1154-1155.

<sup>232</sup> Gordon J. Spykman, "Sphere Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition," in David E. Howerda, ed., *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 167, and also in Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 24.

<sup>233</sup> Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 24.

Mouw, to illustrate Kuyper's point, gives the example of a person who is both a mother, an elder in the church where the son attends, and an academic dean at the university where the son studies. Their role is different and the authority they exercise is on different levels. Thus, they are expected to operate relationally and professionally, as and when the role demands, and for the son to reciprocate accordingly, because at home, they are a mother, at church, the elder, and in university a professor.<sup>234</sup> And so, for Kuyper, there is no blurring out on the boundaries of these spheres, the church should not expect to rule over the state, and the state cannot impose its civil rule on the church.

And lastly, Mouw mentions that Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty is similar to the Roman Catholic "principle of subsidiarity," where in this principle, each realm such as state government, cities and neighbourhoods and families are all expected to not interfere, and do what they are able, within their capacity and realm.<sup>235</sup> Furthermore, in Kuyper's Stone Lectures, he mentions "a separate sphere of existence" where autonomy is vital in sustaining a well governing society.<sup>236</sup>

Hence, Kuyper builds on the argument that firstly, God is Sovereign, and everything falls under His rule by default. Secondly, God through His divine grace, bestowed and enabled the state to exist with limited authority. Thirdly, the state should not interfere in church programs or functions, and vice versa. Kuyper thus says that "the sovereignty of the State and the sovereignty of the Church exist side by side, and they mutually limit each other."<sup>237</sup>

We thus see the concept of sphere sovereignty in the two vital spheres in society, namely church and state.

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<sup>234</sup> Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 25-26.

<sup>235</sup> Mouw, Kuyper, page number.

<sup>236</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 96.

<sup>237</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Kindle Locations 1538-1539).

### 3.4.1 Sovereignty of the State

Kuyper's understanding of the state was a realm, where the sacred moves one step away from the spiritual, and forms the temporal aspect of human life.<sup>238</sup>

According to him, the state is an extension of the sacred sphere and came into existence, only because sin entered the world.<sup>239</sup> Thus, because of sin, the world disintegrates and therefore needs earthly structures to govern, protect and rule over humanity. He gives the example of a person who has to use crutches, because of a broken limb.<sup>240</sup> In this case, the state is the crutch, which has to rule and govern a world broken and tainted by sin. Thus, in the absence of sin, there would have been no need for the state, political life, police, army etc. However, the reality is that sin exists, and therefore the state has to exist. Thus, one of the reasons the state exists and government and civil servants exist is to oversee the proper function of the society. He says that "God has instituted the magistrates because of sin."<sup>241</sup>

Kuyper understood the that "the doctrine of election that mandated and empowered Christians public engagement and warranted democracy as the political order of modern life."<sup>242</sup> Thus, in his understanding of the state, it is God who has ordained and called everything to exist, including the state. And those under God are called "to attend to the structural, institutional, and philosophical dimensions of their witness, both for the health of the faith and the fulfilment of their public duty."<sup>243</sup> Bratt opines that for Kuyper, "public engagement, too, was part of Calvinist orthodoxy, a direct consequence of that heartiest of Calvinist

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<sup>238</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism: The Stone Lectures of 1898* (West Linn: Monergism Books, 2015), Kindle Location 1072.

<sup>239</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1099. While it is important to note the existence of the state as a result of the fall, Kuyper also believed that a form of regulative government would still exist even if sin had not entered the world. And for this, he gives the example of driving cars in lanes, which results in a regulative form of existence even though it may not be necessary to enforce it with threats, or rules. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 52-53.

<sup>240</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1111.

<sup>241</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1116.

<sup>242</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 10.

<sup>243</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 12.

perennials, the sovereignty of God.”<sup>244</sup> Thus, an important aspect of this is why Kuyper argues that since God is Sovereign, God has given humanity the freedom to choose how to govern and rule.

Kuyper calls it as a “three-fold deduced supremacy, the sovereignty in the state, the sovereignty in society and sovereignty in the church.”<sup>245</sup>

However, this man-made structure is governed by sinful men who are susceptible to sin themselves.<sup>246</sup> Thus the state has the tendency of becoming tyrannical if left on its own. Therefore, Kuyper takes on a theocentric stance where the ultimate right to rule, govern and be sovereign belongs only to God, (and not men) and it is only by the *grace* of God that the division of power and sovereignty are separated and delegated. This authority to rule and govern is thus available due to common grace.<sup>247</sup>

It is therefore vital to note that firstly his understanding of the state is that it exists and originated because of sin. Secondly, all state power and sovereignty exists because God willed it and bestowed this power solely out of his grace.<sup>248</sup> And thirdly, this sovereign power to be autonomous is for all spheres. Kuyper thus opines that there is an empathetic inference where the various spheres in a society consisting of family, education, politics and art do not owe their existence to the state.<sup>249</sup> Instead, these spheres exist because of a higher divine authority, and it is this authority that bestows grace and sovereignty to each sphere. He thereby makes the deduction that God is secure enough to grant autonomy to these earthly structures to exist, govern, function, and thereby these spheres are able to exercise their separation of powers in their specific realms.

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<sup>244</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 11.

<sup>245</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1088.

<sup>246</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1122.

<sup>247</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1134.

<sup>248</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1145.

<sup>249</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 275.

Furthermore, he opines that the state exists to prepare the community for the future kingdom. Thus, the duty of the state, according to Kuyper, is provisional. His understanding of the state also stems from a theologically pre-destined interpretation of God's will, as influenced by Calvin. However, he opposes the idea of the state establishing itself as a saviour.<sup>250</sup> He believes that if political authorities try to rule over the sacred realm it is a direct violation of God's ordinances.<sup>251</sup> Moreover, Kuyper opposed state-centric tendencies, as seen in Hegelian Germany and the French Revolution, because he believed that the state swallows up the "society in such cases."<sup>252</sup>

Kuyper was also adamant that the sacred realm should be left independent and separated from the state. He thereby proposes the separation of powers, where the state would have its jurisdiction and not interfere in church functions and duties. And so, for Kuyper, the state acts not above God, but rules under God's influence.<sup>253</sup> Kuyper opines that the state should steer clear of church duties, should function in the physical sphere, and stay clear of the spiritual sphere, which is the church.<sup>254</sup>

It is important to note that Kuyper is critical towards the tendency of the state to become an omnipotent source of power, and he gives the example of French Revolution which cumulated only in violence and enabled state omnipotence.<sup>255</sup> And so, regarding state sovereignty, as much as Kuyper promotes it, he is also critical of it and cautions his readers/audience about the inclination of the state to overtake other spheres or claim itself as a sole authority.<sup>256</sup> He believes that the other spheres in society, which comprised of family, science, art, are social

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<sup>250</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 9.

<sup>251</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 21.

<sup>252</sup> Simon P. Kennedy, "Abraham Kuyper: Calvinist Anti-Revolutionary Politician and Political Thinker," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 61, no. 2 (2015): 175, <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/ajph.12099>.

<sup>253</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 48.

<sup>254</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kindle Location 1527.

<sup>255</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures*, 1238.

<sup>256</sup> Kuyper gives examples of state tyranny from Caesar, from Philip of Spain, and dictator like Napoleon, where the state asserts its sovereignty, and forgets that it owns its sovereignty in the first place to God. *Lectures*, 1250.

spheres and thereby do not own their existence to the state, even though the state exists to govern and help in the smooth running of society.<sup>257</sup> Moreover, Kuyper believes that the state should not intrude in the social spheres of the society.<sup>258</sup> He says that it is crucial to be aware of the “organic life of society, and the mechanical character of the government.”<sup>259</sup> And so, regarding the antithesis of the state and society, he says that all social spheres and state own their existence to God alone. Therefore, Kuyper believed that God, out of his abundant grace, enabled the state to rule, function, and exist. Secondly, the state and church should be independent in their spheres, and both should not seek to interfere in each other’s spheres. Thirdly, this separation is applicable not only to the state and church, but extends to all spheres in society.

#### 3.4.2 Sovereignty in Society

Kuyper’s ecclesiology is thus not confined only to the spiritual aspect of believers, but seeks to impact every sphere of life.<sup>260</sup> It is pertinent to note that while he opts for the church to participate in the wider society, this should be practiced with certain limitations. This does not mean that the church should be curtailed only to a personal and private sphere, but it has to restrain itself and acknowledge and respect earthly authority. And so even though Kuyper believed in protecting the church from state interference, he was never shy about promoting Christians from influencing the public sphere. Regarding the church, Kuyper believed that its members should not isolate themselves from public issues, but rather contribute to the good of society. At the same time, Kuyper opposed a theocratic church and opposed a national or state church. He thus believed that entertaining such a notion would also make the church tyrannical

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<sup>257</sup> *Lectures*, 1275.

<sup>258</sup> *Lectures*, 1280.

<sup>259</sup> *Lectures*, 1280.

<sup>260</sup> Robert Covolo, “Book Review: Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat,” in *International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 2 (2014): 247, <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/15697320-12341344>.

and corrupt, just as it has succeeded in making the state corrupt in the past.<sup>261</sup> It should be noted that he was also highly influenced by German philosophy, which called for the church to be separated from the state, and sided with Schleiermacher in his theology.<sup>262</sup>

With regards to the duty of civil servants in the state, he believed that they would enact true justice, without any ulterior motive, except that instilled by God.<sup>263</sup> Most importantly, he believed that citizens obey the law not because of fear, but out of a sense of duty and acknowledgment to God.<sup>264</sup> However, Kuyper is quick to point out that “obeying Christ’s kingship in public life and society does not imply a call to completely Christianize the society.”<sup>265</sup> He vehemently disagrees with the concept of religious implementation in the state. He does not adhere to religious symbols or adhere to Christian values in public spaces or public schools.<sup>266</sup> Buijs goes so far to comment that for Kuyper, to call the state a secular state, means to obey Christ as King, however, if Christians try to impose a Christian or theocratic state, Kuyper would have considered it as apostasy.<sup>267</sup>

Kuyper consequently believed that the intrinsic nature of humanity is to form societies, for man is a social being. He believes that the state comprises a group of people who are representatives of the larger public community.<sup>268</sup> Thus it was vital for Kuyper that in the larger society, church and state both remain

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<sup>261</sup> Kuyper, in his works, often cited the German concept of Empire and the French revolution as corrupt entities, which resulted in the decay of the state devoid of God and only corrupt and tyrannical state structure.

<sup>262</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 476. His separation theory also runs parallel with Schleiermacher separation of church and state, particularly on the fourth speech of Schleiermacher in *Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.

<sup>263</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 53.

<sup>264</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 53.

<sup>265</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 34.

<sup>266</sup> Govert Buijs in Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living under Christ’s Kingship*, vol. 2 eds., Jordan Ballor and Melvin J. Flikkema, trans. Albert Gootjes (Washington: Lexham Press) Kindle Location 26.

<sup>267</sup> Buijs, in Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ’s Kingship*, 26

<sup>268</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, 164.

autonomous, contribute to the common good, and at the same time, be aware of their boundaries and limitations.

According to Kuyper, Christians should understand the state and why it exists and respect its functions. Secondly, it should understand the role of the church and set its limitations. Thirdly, Christians should acknowledge that all spheres in society fall under the purview of God's common grace, and it is this grace that enables all to be sovereign.

### 3.4.3 Sovereignty of the Church

In the context of his own country during his time, the church's existence was threatened by nineteenth-century rationalism and the aftermath of the Enlightenment.<sup>269</sup> According to Kuyper, he believed that Christians lived in two homelands. And so, they are a citizen of both heaven and earth, and not confined only to earthly rules.<sup>270</sup> Bratt says that the liberals during Kuyper's time promoted their secular ideologies where they sought to end religious influence from society.<sup>271</sup> The church's role was thus susceptible to dimness in the public sphere. With this in mind, Kuyper presents his argument regarding the church's role in the state and how Christians can actively engage in the public sphere with certain limitations. Thus, Kuyper presents "the church as an organism and as an institution, in response to the social challenges of his day."<sup>272</sup> What is the church's relation to the world outside its walls? This question became more pressing as the church became increasingly separate from other social entities like the state and school, and as secularism increased, Christianity began to lose its stronghold. And so, regarding the relation of the church and state, Kuyper asks the question, how do we understand the sovereignty of the church in the state?<sup>273</sup> Because for him, as much as he understood the purpose of state existence, he was also against the

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<sup>269</sup> Ad de Bruijne, in Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, Kindle location, 359.

<sup>270</sup> Bruijne, Kuyper, *On the Church*, Kindle location, 376.

<sup>271</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 142.

<sup>272</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 117.

<sup>273</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1412.



church imposing its power on the state. He believed in the idea of “a free church in a free state,” where he considers both spheres to function freely within their domain.<sup>274</sup> He thereby takes the stand that the church should be free to operate and function without state or government intervention, and should practice the same in its relation and perception of the state and other spheres in society.<sup>275</sup>

Thus, for Kuyper, the separation theory entails and promotes sovereignty. The state should not have a state church, nor interfere in church function and activities, and Christian schools should not be restricted. Secondly, the church should not impose its religious values on society because this will result in theocracy. And so, Kuyper believed that the church should have its limitations.<sup>276</sup> For example, the state imposing law on religious matters is where he vehemently voices his disapproval.<sup>277</sup> He gives the example of his own country, a haven for those fleeing religious exile and persecution due to differences in doctrines or denominations. Kuyper, in fact, subtly says that “the church of Christ can reveal itself in many forms.”<sup>278</sup> It makes the underlying statement that denominations can have different doctrinal beliefs, and on such differences, the state cannot come to the aid of the Calvinist church to arrest and jail anyone who differs from them.

Bratt describes the Dutch church as having long benefitted The Netherlands as a predominantly Christian nation, however, the future of its Christian identity was not secure, and eventually, the church started witnessing more hostility and

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<sup>274</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1416.

<sup>275</sup> Another interference of the state was the curbing of Christian schools in the nineteenth century Dutch context, particularly in Christian education. The separation theory extended into the sphere of education and emerged during the “school struggle” (*schoolstrijd*) where public schools were monitored by the government to show no religious bias. Kuyper envisioned the education sphere, free from both church and state interference, and thus for him, autonomy also extended to the education sphere was crucial. Johan Sturm and Siebren Miedema, “Kuyper’s Educational legacy: Schooling for a Pluralist Society,” in *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of his Life and Work*, eds., Cornelis Van Der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 240. Also, a paper I wrote for Practical Theology under Professor Carl Sterkens, where I compared the separation theory between Schleiermacher and Kuyper regarding autonomy in the academic sphere.

<sup>276</sup> An example is when he mentions the treatment (gruesome conviction of Severus at the hands of Calvin and his followers), and how under Constantine the Great, heretics were punished under state-sanctioned laws. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1422-1435.

<sup>277</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1435.

<sup>278</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1444.

disinterestedness from society. Thus, to balance the role of the church in limiting itself, yet not diminishing away, from the public sphere, Kuyper had to understand and be critical of both spheres. Kuyper believed that the church was a representative of heaven on earth and thus was an eternal institution, while the state, even though it was for the good of society, was temporal.<sup>279</sup> He believed that Christians are citizens of two separate homelands, and these two homelands, namely the earthly and spiritual, both originated by the grace of God.<sup>280</sup>

Kuyper held the belief that God planned to divide the earth into separate realms, and until the eschaton, God will ultimately rule and become the only authority.<sup>281</sup> Thereby while allowing the autonomy of people, it also limits the authority of men and man-made structures on earth. When it comes to the role of the church in the world, Kuyper believes that the church is a representative of heaven on earth.<sup>282</sup> Thus, its members are called to partake and participate both in spiritual duties and earthly ones.<sup>283</sup> However, Kuyper was concerned that if too much power and influence is given to the church, it can become what he terms “Caesaropapism.”<sup>284</sup> This is where the Czar is both emperor and pope, where each domain comes under the Czar, which is problematic. Kuyper thereby believes that this concept is detrimental to civil society. His concern lies in the possibility of pastors becoming “haughty magistrates.”<sup>285</sup>

Furthermore, the exertion of power in both realms, be it the church or state, can lead to tyranny and corruption in society. Kuyper thus believed that church and state should each exercise their authority in separate realms. In this way, they would not clash with each other but continue to correspond and hopefully

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<sup>279</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 396.

<sup>280</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 381.

<sup>281</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 390.

<sup>282</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 399-404

<sup>283</sup> Bruijne, in Kuyper, *On the Church*, 399-404

<sup>284</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 34.

<sup>285</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 35-36.

complement each other.<sup>286</sup> Hence Sphere Sovereignty exists to promote sovereignty to all spheres, and to promote autonomy and growth.

### 3.5 Gaps and Limitations

However, it should be noted that Kuyper was far from perfect. He also had his limitations. One of his strong objections was towards how he perceived modernism. He was an anti-modernist, and according to him, modernism was a “superficial” false understanding of the present reality.<sup>287</sup> According to Kuyper, theological modernism in its quest to be socially relevant, tends to compromise its theological basis. It is thus bound to fail if it falls prey to the spirit of the times.<sup>288</sup> Molendijk says that for Kuyper, modernism was a real threat to Christianity and must be resisted.<sup>289</sup> Due to modernism creeping into the churches, Kuyper felt that the Calvinist state church (the *Hervormde Kerk*) had let go of its orthodox tradition and sold out to modernist theology.<sup>290</sup> This thought falls in line with how RO views the contemporary church and its liberal stance and is deemed ineffective in its theological foundation. Nevertheless, Kuyper believed that religious pluralism had to be respected in modern society, and the individualisation and privatisation of faith must not be encouraged.<sup>291</sup> The question thus arises where does Kuyper belong?

Noll throws the question, to which side, “does Kuyper belong? To the right with his strong advocacy of traditional values and his ardent defence of family rights? Or to the left with his relatively large role in government and his suspicions of the

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<sup>286</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 354-355.

<sup>287</sup> Arie L. Molandijk, “A Squeezed-Out Lemon Peel: Abraham Kuyper on Modernism,” in *Church History and Religious Culture* 91, no. 3-4 (2011): 397.

<sup>288</sup> Molandijk, “A Squeezed-Out Lemon Peel: Abraham Kuyper on Modernism,” 403.

<sup>289</sup> Molandijk, “A Squeezed-Out Lemon Peel: Abraham Kuyper on Modernism,” 412.

<sup>290</sup> Dirk Jellema, “Kuyper’s Attack on Liberalism,” in *The Review of Politics* 19 (4), (1957): 476, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/1404828?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1404828?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>291</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 21.

rich and powerful?”<sup>292</sup> It is thereby difficult to place Kuyper and understand where his loyalties lie. Was he a balanced theologian or an opportunist politician?

Another problem that Kuyper’s contemporaries had was Kuyper’s open willingness to welcome and work alongside other Christian denominations, such as the Catholics, under the banner of common grace, which was not welcomed by some of his reformed contemporaries.<sup>293</sup> Moreover reformed pietists found Kuyper’s public theology too “activist and hence less spiritual.” They found his theology more inclined towards societal issues and less focussed on spiritual matters.<sup>294</sup>

By the 1960s Kuyper’s legacy and theological reforms were viewed as “oppressive and alienating” in his own country.<sup>295</sup> In 1961, W.C. Hoogedijk commented that “Kuyper’s ARP had failed to develop a specifically anti-revolutionary vision for the political problems of our time.”<sup>296</sup> His critics also found his theology to be lacking a hermeneutical foundation. For example, Bugis points out that perhaps Kuyper lacks a hermeneutical discernment in his self-awareness. Therefore, Kuyper’s critique of culture or society becomes “trivial, mundane and maybe not much depth.”<sup>297</sup> Moreover, Buijs notes that Kuyper at times, appeared to be nonchalant in addressing specific societal evils and issues that ardently demanded a Christian response.<sup>298</sup> Although it is worthy to note that in his address to first Christian social congress in the Netherlands, in 1891, Kuyper addresses the issue of wealth inequality and the state turning materialistic and favouring only the wealthy class in society.<sup>299</sup> These issues are still prevalent

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<sup>292</sup> Noll, in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 8.

<sup>293</sup> James C. Kennedy, “The Problem of Kuyper’s legacy: The Crisis of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in Post-War Holland,” in *Journal of Markets and Morality*, Vol 5. (2002): 47.

<sup>294</sup> Kennedy, “The Problem of Kuyper’s Legacy” 47-48.

<sup>295</sup> Kennedy, “The Problem of Kuyper’s Legacy,” 49.

<sup>296</sup> Kennedy, “The Problem of Kuyper’s Legacy,” 51.

<sup>297</sup> Buijs, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ’s Kingship*, 32.

<sup>298</sup> Buijs, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ’s Kingship*, 33.

<sup>299</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty: A Translation of the opening address at the First Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands, November 9, 1891*, edited and introduced by James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Dordt College Press, 2011)

and relevant for our contemporary world regarding wealth inequality. In this way, the state also has its share of deformities and malfunctions which Kuyper rightly points out is a social problem that the church should address and shed light on.

However, Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty while promoting the separation concept to promote growth, progress and autonomy eludes the question of severance and segregation.<sup>300</sup> Kuyper's separation theory can be critiqued on the grounds of asking whether the separation theory promotes emancipation or segregation?

Secondly, if everything in society falls under common grace, how do we distinguish what to accept and reject? Should state corruption be addressed by Christians or the church?

One of Kuyper's strongest theological claims is on Sphere Sovereignty and common grace, both of which takes an elective concept of Calvinistic influence on establishing the role, function, and governance of the state. However, if the state turns tyrannical or corrupt, where does the concept of common grace lie under such conditions? And the ethical question of why does evil exist if God's sovereignty is over all the earth, including state structure. These are questions that Kuyper evades to address explicitly.

On state sovereignty, he believes in a Calvinist and Augustinian idea where everything is divinely laid out, and people should respect earthly government state structures. However, from his theological contributions we see that he was also critical of church interference, and hence wanted to avoid what he termed as a Caesaropapism or theocratic tendency.

Kuyper thus says,

In many different directions, we see therefore that sovereignty in one's own sphere asserts itself. In the social sphere, by personal superiority. In the

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<sup>300</sup> Strum and Miedema, mentioned this concern regarding the separation of schools, whether it would turn into a "self-imposed ghetto denomination," in "Kuyper's Educational Legacy: Schooling for a Pluralist Society," 242.

corporative sphere of universities, guilds, associations, etc. In the domestic sphere of the family and of married life, and in communal autonomy.<sup>301</sup>

Kuyper thus believes that in all these spheres the state should not intrude or impose its laws.<sup>302</sup> For Kuyper, the concept of divine ordinances kept two primary functions at bay, limited human activity in the state *and* the church. He remarked that God even establishes these limitations to his ordained ones.<sup>303</sup> Thus it should be noted that both spheres are finite, and hence prone to err, and cannot be expected to establish its rule over the other, divine or earthly.

### 3.6 Summary

In conclusion, Kuyper is critical of both the state gaining too much power and becoming tyrannical; and the church implementing a theocratic influence in society. Thus, according to Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty, it acknowledges diversity, promotes autonomy and growth for each sphere to function and exist. Moreover, this concept is applicable especially for our contemporary audience because we live in a divisive world, where the gap between the religious and non-religious, the left and right continue to grow. And so, with the sovereignty theory, it promotes freedom, liberty, autonomy and limits each sphere from interfering while respecting each other's boundaries, which is crucial for contemporary Christians particularly when it comes to engaging in the wider public sphere. In the last section, I will present my deduction and analysis, and conclude how the concept of Sphere Sovereignty can be applicable for the contemporary Christian seeking to engage in the public sphere.

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<sup>301</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kindle Locations 1366-1368.

<sup>302</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 1365. This is why for example, Mormons are allowed to live and settle in their own communes, and why various cults are also allowed to live in their own communities, so long as they do not harm themselves or others. Kuyper moreover is clear that in instances where the boundary lines are crossed or grievances are caused, the state can and should intervene, 1377.

<sup>303</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 265.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUDING CHAPTER

### 4.1 Synthesis

The goal of this thesis was to examine a Christian engagement for church and state relations and to examine whether Kuyper's public theology, particular his concept of Sphere Sovereignty can benefit our contemporary debate, in light of how Radical Orthodoxy and Public Theology interpret its understanding on church and state engagement.

Thus, to effectively engage in the public sphere, what are some of the challenges that face contemporary Christians today? Looking in the political context, I gave the example of France and the *laïcité* concept as an example of a secular philosophy overriding the society. This might become dangerous when religious practices, symbols, and even garments are banned from the public sphere, in the name of fairness and secularism. Moreover, such state-centric tendencies have proven to be precarious and limit the liberty of its citizens. While in religious majority countries such as India, there is a Hindu majority political party as the current ruling government, thus religion takes precedence in society. Such instances are witnessed even in Muslim majority nations and American politics, where the Christian rights groups significantly influence state policies. In such cases, religion tends to take dominance and supersede other secular voices and in the long run, curtailing the liberty of its citizens.

There is thus a dichotomy between the church and the state, where one tends to overpower the other, at the cost of silencing its opponent. And so, as Christians, how can we find an effective theological mode to engage and participate in the public sphere? How can we participate, contribute and engage in the public sphere without imposing our religious values, or seeking to infiltrate our own faith beliefs and practices on others? Or without compromising our theological foundations in the quest to accommodate others? These are questions that seek a theological response and it is with this intent that I embarked on this thesis.

Theologically there exist various schools of thought with their arguments on how the church and Christians ought to relate to the state and engage in the public sphere. For this paper, I have narrowed it down to two diverse groups, which contribute to the debate in contemporary theology regarding church and state relations. In comparison, one group promotes an orthodox stance, the other a more liberal standpoint, and then I brought Abraham Kuyper's public theology, namely his concept of Sphere Sovereignty into the discussion, as a balanced middle ground.

For my first chapter, I examined RO, and its stance on the state, the contemporary church, and its proposed creed. RO is prevalent in Christian academia and contemporary theological discourses. RO appears almost like it's on a rescue mission to win back Christian representation in an area in which the secular state has continuously tried to shove the church and religious voices aside for years. RO, however, seeks to attack the highly secularised public sphere, and hence takes an offensive approach in its methodology. Thus, it takes an aggressive stand against secular ideologies, politics, and philosophy. For RO, the state is permeated with secular influence and is viewed as the enemy. However, RO does not stop there. RO also blames the contemporary church for failing to carry the torch of Christianity and complying with the secular philosophies and embracing modernism. RO thus blames the church for giving way to liberalism and secularism. Thus, RO has two opponents, namely the secular state and second, the liberal or secular (modernist) church. Furthermore, it seeks to confront both realms with a soteriological eucharist creed, which they believe is instrumental in maintaining a traditional orthodox theological foundation.

While for PT, the approach is more accommodating, and understanding towards the secularised state. It tends to lean towards an Augustinian approach on how it interprets state structure. PT thus seeks to understand and work alongside the state. PT, however, is also critical of the state, although it does not view it as its enemy per se. PT is thus cautious of an Orwellian concept taking place in the state and believes that a Christian theological response can point out these deformities



should the need arise. Thus, in their Christian engagement, PT seeks ways to understand the state and the role of the contemporary church in the public sphere. PT's interpretation of Christology also provides the lenses to work, participate, and engage in the public sphere by focussing on the work and teachings of Christ.

However, at times, PT tends to repel traditional or the more conservative Christians because they perceive PT as not being strong enough on its theological foundations and are suspicious of its willingness to accommodate a liberal approach. Moreover, even though PT claims to be public, it appears to cater only to the sphere of academia, and appears reluctant to effectively impact or address societal ills in the public domain. Much have been done in the past, and perhaps more can be done in the current context we live in.

And so, a middle path is found in Kuyper's public theology where we see a combination of the conservative and progressive theology. Kuyper's earnest appeal to maintain an orthodox tradition among the Reformed Dutch churches during his time was evident, since he was concerned about modernism creeping in the churches. However, while RO believes the state only seeks to replace and obliterate religion, Kuyper was more sympathetic towards the state and instead sought to work alongside the state. His concept of Sphere Sovereignty (and common grace) are two strong themes parallel with his public policies and political theory. In these two concepts, he firmly maintains a theistic perspective on how the state, governance, rules, and regulations existed. He puts the onus on God's grace and infers that the earthly state exists because of sin, and this authority came to be, because of common grace, delegated by God upon earthly structures of law and order. This grace is not only for believers but for everyone because the grace of God is available for all.

Kuyper's ideas resonate with PT, where they strive to understand the role of the state, and are thus more sympathetic toward the secular political ideologies, while remaining deeply rooted in his conservative stance. Thus, in Kuyper's public theology, particularly on church and state relations, he proposes a separation of

the spheres, also known as Sphere Sovereignty. This separation extends to theology, politics, education, family, art, trade, economics, etc. However, due to the separation of church and state, Kuyper was opposed by his contemporaries and was considered too liberal in his politics, although conservative in his theology. As a result, he was loathed by his peers and failed to sustain his popularity in Dutch politics.

However, as a pastor and theologian who worked, taught, and spoke tirelessly on Christians to engage in the public sphere, he was also mindful and critical of the church's role, which can sometimes appear domineering. He used words like Constantinianism and Caesaropapism, to describe a theocratic or Christian nation or state church. Kuyper ardently believed that the church would become corrupt if it gains too much power and dominance in the public realm. However, it is free to promote its beliefs to its members, and the state cannot stifle the church nor silence it.

Kuyper takes on a conservative Christian approach in his theology while leaning towards a liberal left in his politics makes an interesting combination. Kuyper was also an anti-modernist and constantly fought against the liberal nineteenth-century churches in his Dutch context. This aversion was partly due to the state interference in the church and seeking to control the religious sphere and limit funding for Christian education.

Kuyper thus believed that state and church should be separated and allowed to operate freely within their spheres. Despite his pluralistic stance on religion, he is orthodox and traditional in his position when it comes to theology. Kuyper understood the state existed due to sin, and believed that it is due to common grace that duties and state functions are bestowed by God. And so, he does not brush off the state completely, but appears sympathetic towards its role and existence. For the church and Christians however, to relate to the state, Kuyper believed that they should participate and contribute to the good of the society and seek the welfare of the city. He felt strongly that Christians should not shy away

from politics, but rather seek to influence and bring godly virtues into the public sphere.

Through this premise, a Christian theology of engagement for the contemporary audience would be to deliberate a Kuyperian model where we have on one hand a keen curiosity to *understand* the secular state and also remain critical of the role and limitations of the church while seeking to participate and engage in the public sphere.

In countries where religious faith groups have an immense influence in politics, the church's delegation of power and authority corrupts the faith and tend to distort the nation. In India, for example, it is a nation currently overruled by religious ideologies and holds an intense loathing of any secular media or philosophy. The future of universities, press, journalism, and art and literature are at stake due to the overwhelming control of religious ideologies that limit and restrict the freedom of any other thought in the public sphere. From censorship of media to consumption of meat (and the banning of beef) Indian civilians, including journalists, comedians, artists, and religious minorities gets arrested (and even murdered) based on religious grounds. These atrocities are carried out particularly in the interests of the Hindu religion, which is currently the ruling religious party in India.

However, religious control is not limited only to India. We witness this in the middle-eastern countries and examples of radical Islamic groups infiltrating and inciting violence in the name of religion. This interference is also seen, for example, in American politics, where Christian right-wing groups intervene in the private lives of its citizens in seeking to implement reforms and laws, citing religious grounds. Thus, Kuyper is correct in being critical of the church adopting a Constantinism approach, and his theology cautious us even today to remain critical and concern about such intervention by state and church.

In secular countries, with their vast secular political policies, religion is often curbed. Such instances of the state welding too much power can be detrimental to

the welfare of a free society. If the state fails to be accountable to anyone except itself, it risks becoming an Orwellian state. At the same time, if contemporary Christians and the church fail to check on itself, it runs the danger of becoming too radical, and superficial. Academic discourse and Christian contribution to these two realms would thus benefit and encourage a more open dialogue and conversation, where think tanks, public policies, local churches, and universities can contribute positively to lessen the divide between divisive political and religious ideologies. And so, the concept of Sphere Sovereignty both curbs the church from becoming theocratic, and the state from becoming tyrannical. My analysis from the research thus stems down to three observations addressed in the following sub-sections.

#### **4.2 Creating a space for dialogue and understanding**

The first would be to create a space for dialogue and understanding. This particularly pertains to *understanding* the role and contribution of the state in the wider community, society, and world. Thus, like Kuyper's suggestion, to understand why and how the state had to come into being, and acknowledging its role in governing and maintaining law and order in the public sphere. It is, therefore, crucial to respect the role of the state and understand why it had to come into existence, and the good it does in the world. Moreover, it is crucial that Christians do not adopt an aggressive stance towards all non-Christian beliefs or policies. For example, like how RO would undertake, and instead strive to create a space for dialogue and understanding.

Therefore, Kuyper's contribution towards the separation of church, state, and even education/academia is an example where he promotes the autonomy of all spheres. Moreover, dialogue is not a monologue, where only one party listens and the other speaks. If contemporary Christians hope to effectively engage in the public sphere, it needs to acknowledge that it is a dialogue, and thus not seek to silence their opponents, rather begin by listening and striving to understand the

other party. Kuyper does this by explaining the role of the state, why it had to exist, and sympathising with its role and positive function in society. Furthermore, he provides a theological basis on why the state had to exist, and embraces its function and existence in the society.

### **4.3 Creating boundaries and limitations**

Secondly, with regards to the role of the church, as much as RO and PT seek to promote Christian voices, influence, and participation in the public sphere, it should also be self-critical of its authority and function. And so, due to the autonomy that Sphere Sovereignty brings to each sphere, it limits each sphere within its boundaries and enables each sphere to be self-critical of its shortcomings. The contemporary church needs to be aware that it is a finite institution, worshipping the infinite being, nevertheless, it is finite in itself and prone to err. And so, the concept of Sphere Sovereignty, creates a forum for each sphere to grow and progress, yet be critical of each other and itself, which is vital for effective (Christian) engagement, since it fosters a humbling of oneself, and curbs an absolutist approach in viewing the discourse of the other side. Sphere Sovereignty thereby draws boundaries and demarcates each sphere to its distinct role and function. In this way, it creates a space to respect and acknowledge the various spheres which exists in the public sphere. Furthermore, it also builds bridges, since Kuyper vehemently promotes active participation for Christians to be vocal on issues of poverty, injustice and other societal ills, and his concern for the *Kleine Luyden* during his time.

### **4.4 Creating space for deconstruction and critical reflection**

Christians by and large tend to think of engagement and participation as a biblical mandate to reach out, Go and Make Disciples of all. However, in our zeal to engage, we tend to tread on the space of others. Sphere Sovereignty thus creates a space to de-construct the average Christian worldview, by creating a space for

critical reflection and deconstructing how engagement can be done effectively. This is done by acknowledging our limitations, acknowledging and respecting boundaries, and the awareness of terms like Caesaropapism, Constantinian, and theocratic tendencies of the church which Kuyper brings forth to our attention. So that both state and church do not lean towards an Orwellian nor a High sparrow role, rather it encourages one to critically reflect on our limitations as well, and to deconstruct how we engage, why we engage and where we can engage.

#### **4.5 Conclusion and Future Recommendations**

Kuyper appears as a versatile theologian, having gained experiences in both church and politics. He has thus seen the good and bad in both spheres and so his concern arises out of first-hand encountering in witnessing state and church tendency to interfere. He thereby proposes sovereignty for (all) spheres, in society and was well aware that this sovereignty comes forth from the sovereign power and grace of God. Thus, affirming his theistic claim and theological foundation. Regarding state sovereignty, he believes the state exists due to sin, and so a form of earthly governance is now needed to govern and rule society. (he uses the example of a broken limb that now needs crutches). Moreover, he denounces any theocratic tendency of the church and strongly believes in autonomy for both spheres. This concept is also reinstated in the education sphere, which he believed was crucial for academic progress and not to be curbed by state or church interference. Thus, regarding the first theological component of RO, which is highly critical of an Orwellian concept of taking over the public sphere, it can however appear to take on the role of the High Sparrow, in its zeal to establish an ecclesiastical community in the public sphere. While proponents of PT in its approach need to be more explicit in drawing its boundaries, it falls under the influence of an Orwellian ideology, due to its tendency to accommodate state structure.

And so, Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty appears to bring out the best of both worlds, of both theological application and state participation, while remaining critical of both spheres, and being aware of its limitations.

Why is the understanding of Sphere Sovereignty crucial or applicable for theological engagement in the public sphere? It is crucial because of the following reasons,

- i) It fosters the church and Christians to be self-critical and self-aware of their own faults and failures, and thus curb out a superiority Messiah complex, when they engage with the other side.
- ii) It enables the church and Christians to draw their boundaries and place limitations upon themselves.
- iii) It enables the church and Christians to foster a spirit of accommodating others, even if they disagree with their belief systems.
- iv) It builds bridges, instead of burning them.
- v) It seeks the common good in all, and with this awareness of sphere sovereignty, there is space for mutual respect, and space to grow within their own sphere, without the need to intrude or threat from others.

According to Kuyper, the concept of divine ordinances kept two primary functions at bay, limited human activity in the state and the church. He remarked that God even establishes these limitations to his ordained ones.<sup>304</sup> There are divine ordinances and human policies, which is at play here, and so Kuyper opines that just because the state passes decrees and policies, it does not mean it is above other existing societal spheres. The need to engage and participate by Christians in the public sphere, therefore must always rest on the fact that, the church is prone to err, therefore we must set respectfully set limitations on our need to engage. Secondly, we must acknowledge the role and good in others,

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<sup>304</sup> Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 265.

namely the state, though it is secular, and thirdly we must respect the boundaries and spheres of the others in our midst.

For further research, Kuyper's public theology can be deconstructed to address the issue of Christian fundamentalism and secular influences within contemporary churches. With the decline of traditional churches, yet the rise of radically right theologies, and the rise of hipster churches, that tend to denounce traditional creed, where do contemporary Christians draw a balance between sound doctrine and striving to remain relevant in the modern world?

Secondly, Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty can be further expounded contextually on the issue of the current migrant crisis, from a theological perspective, particularly on respecting borders, while building bridges. How spheres can be respected, autonomy promoted, and theologically engaged to contribute on the issue of migration, and address the humanitarian crisis without drawing theocratic tendencies. It remains both a macro and micro level on drawing boundaries, and seeking to build bridges.

The issue of migration for example hits refugees from war-torn countries such as Syria, or the crisis at the US-Mexican border, or those coming to Europe seeking refuge and asylum, which continue to draw theological enquiries.<sup>305</sup> Second, the migrant crisis also is an issue among migrants in India, who migrate from the rural to urban cities, in search of a better future, and the challenges faced by them, particularly during the pandemic in 2020.<sup>306</sup> It extends to the "illegal immigrants" in my home state of Nagaland, which is predominantly a Christian state, and the animosity and hostility faced by them from the locals, who are predominantly Christians, but wishing to chase away all illegal immigrants/migrants. In fact, in the Christian state of Nagaland, they are often termed as IBI (Illegal Bangladesh

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<sup>305</sup> Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith, eds., *Religion in the European refugee crisis*. No. 1 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>306</sup> Amarnath K Menon, "Covid 19 Fallout: How the Pandemic Displaced Millions of Migrants" in *India Today*, January 3, 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/news-makers/story/20210111-displaced-distressed-1755084-2021-01-03>.



Immigrants), and the issue of accommodating them remains a fragile topic. While one needs to respect state laws, as a Christian how do we turn our backs to the ones who are ridden with poverty and seek a better future? And lastly, as an international student in Europe, having to read news articles where certain political parties strive to pass deliberate policies to curb and discourage international students from coming to the Netherlands.<sup>307</sup> It struck me on a political, theological as well as a personal level, how the state and the church tend to perceive the outsider in our (their) midst, and raises questions or concern for the contemporary church and theologians to address, and perhaps engage?

Where do we draw boundaries, and where do we build bridges? And how does Kuyper's Public Theology address these issues of borders and bridges? Does it separate or segregate? These are questions that can perhaps be critically examined, to deconstruct theologically and engage politically, in the hope that contemporary Christians can effectively engage in the much-needed public sphere.

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<sup>307</sup> <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2019/07/dutch-government-plans-to-curtail-international-recruitment-of-students/>

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