

Sphere Sovereignty

by

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How does the school I am introducing [The Free University in Amsterdam] fit into the garden of Dutch society? Why does it brandish on the point of its lance the cap of liberty? And why does it study the book of the Reformed faith so intently? I can answer all three questions by pointing you to the notion of spheres sovereignty as that which characterizes our institution 1) in its national significance, 2) in its academic aims, and 3) in its Reformed character. [Only the first section is included in this translation]

Its national significance

The first part of my discourse aims to present the national significance of our institution. In this awesome century our nation, too, is struggling its way through a crisis, a crisis which it shares with all kindred nations, a crisis that pervades the whole world of thinking humanity.

Every crisis centers on a threatened way of life, whose deterioration prompts either prophecies of rejuvenation or predications of decline and death. What is the threatened way of life that I am talking about? What is at stake also for our

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nation in this crisis? And who would dare to repeat the customary answers: that the battle is between progress and tradition, or between the simple and the complex, or between the ideal and the real, or between the poor and the rich? The inadequacy, unreasonableness, and shallowness of each of these diagnoses has been exposed to the clear light of day. Some made the slogans, "clericalism" and "liberalism," the watchword, as though what mattered was the abuse or purification of ecclesiastical influence. At last, however, this pretense, too, was contemptuously torn away, until finally the awareness grew that the present crisis of the nations does not center on inequality, self-interest, or justice, but on a living person, on him who once swore to being King, on him who once sacrificed his life on the cross of Golgotha for the sake of his claim to royal sovereignty--this awareness, first grasped by the leading visionaries of our time, gradually spread from this nucleus to ever widening circles.

"The Nazarene: our holy inspiration, our inspiring ideal, our paragon of piety!" For a long time this is what people cried enthusiastically. But history passed judgment upon such praise as contradictory to the Nazarene's own claims. In His calm, divinely human consciousness, as lucid as glass, He claimed to be nothing less than the Messiah, the Anointed, and thus the King of kings, possessing "all authority in heaven and on earth." The scandalous sign tacked to the cross announcing the criminal arrogance for which he was sentenced to die was not that he was a hero of the faith or a "martyr to honor," but that he was the

king of the Jews, that is, the Bearer of Sovereignty. It is this sovereignty, the existence or non-existence of the power of the One born of the virgin Mary, around which the thinking minds, the ruling powers, and the kindred nations are as greatly agitated today as they were in the first three centuries. This precisely is the question of sovereignty: the king of the Jews is either the saving truth to which all nations must say Amen or the principal lie which all nations must oppose. This issue, once encountered in the blood of the Nazarene, has now once again torn a rift through the entire world of our spiritual, human, and national existence.

What is sovereignty? Do you not agree with me in defining it as the authority that possesses the right and duty, and wields the power to break and punish all resistance to its will? And does not that deep-seated national consciousness also speak within you, telling you that original, absolute sovereignty cannot reside in any creature, but must coincide with the majesty of God? If you believe in him as the Conceiver and Creator, the Founder and Director of all things, your soul must also proclaim the triune God as the only absolute Sovereign. But then--and I stress this--then at the same time we must acknowledge that this supreme Sovereign has delegated and still delegates his authority to human persons, so that on earth one actually never encounters God himself directly in visible form, but one always sees His sovereign authority administered in human offices.

This embodiment of God's sovereignty in human office raises the very important question: how does this delegation occur? Is

this all-encompassing sovereignty of God delegated to a single person undivided? Or does an earthly sovereign possess the power to compel obedience only in a limited sphere, a sphere limited by other spheres in which someone else is sovereign, and not he?

How one answers this question depends on whether he stands within the orbit of Revelation or outside it. The traditional answer given by those who excluded special revelation from their minds was, "As far as practical it must be undivided, but it must also permeate all spheres." They stipulated, "as far as is practical," because God's sovereignty over what is above falls beyond man's reach, and over nature beyond man's power, and over human destiny beyond man's control. But for the rest, they argue, we can do without sphere sovereignty. The state has unlimited power to command, disposing over persons, over their lives, over their rights, over their conscience, over their faith. In ancient times there were many gods; as a result, in the slogan "united power makes for greater strength," the single, unlimited state was regarded as even more imposing and more majestic than the divided power of the gods. Eventually, therefore, the state itself, embodied in Caesar, became God--the divine state which would tolerate no other states beside itself. Thus the passion for world domination was born--Divus Augustus!--with Caesar worship as its religion. What a profoundly sinful notion, which eighteen centuries later for the first time was self-consciously elaborated into a theory of the state in Hegel's idea of "the immanent God".

In contrast, Jehovah causes the mouthpieces of Messianic

prophecy to cry out in Israel, "This sovereignty must be delegated not 'as far as is practical' but wholly undivided and unbroken." And this human Messiah did appear, having power in heaven, power over nature, claiming power over all nations, and in all nations over conscience and faith. Even the bond between mother and child had to yield in the face of his call to obedience. This, therefore, is total sovereignty, extending over all things visible and invisible, over the spiritual and the material, placed in the hands of a Man. This is not one kingdom among others, but the absolute kingdom. "To this end I was born, and for this cause I came into the world--to be king." "All power is mine in heaven and on the whole earth." "One day all enemies will be subdued and bow their knees before me." This is the Messianic sovereignty once foretold by the prophets, to which the Nazarene laid claim, and whose beginnings He demonstrated in his miracles. It was, moreover, described by the apostles, and, on their authority, confessed by the church of Christ to be undivided, and yet delegated, or rather, assumed by Christ in order to be returned. For only if this sovereignty is returned from the Messiah to God himself, who will then be "all and in all," will that total harmony one day break through.

However--and here we encounter the glorious principle of liberty--this total sovereignty of the sinless Messiah at the same time implies the forthright denial and contradiction of all absolute sovereignty among sinful men on earth. It does so by dividing life into unique spheres, each with its own sovereignty.

Human life, with its material foreground which is visible