

The Relevance of Solidarity and Subsidiarity to Reformed Social and Political Thought

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A paper prepared for
The International Society for the Study of Reformed Communities
July 9-12, 2006
Princeton, NJ

The genesis of this paper is two-fold. First, I am currently working on a popularly written book that seeks to develop for the ordinary Christian citizen basic Christian perspectives with which to evaluate public policy issues and questions. In working on this book, I have found the concept of solidarity—which has been most fully and explicitly developed in Roman Catholic social teaching—a very helpful concept. Similarly, I have long felt that the Catholic teaching of subsidiarity is, in essence, very similar to the Reformed concept of sphere sovereignty. Both solidarity and subsidiarity are useful in thinking through and reacting to contemporary public policy issues in a fully Christian manner.

Second, I was recently invited to take part in an “Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue on Public Policy” at Georgetown University. Scholars from both the evangelical and Catholic communities met for a full day and considered similarities and differences in the basic principles with which evangelicals and Catholics approach public policy issues. (As it turned out, the evangelical basic principles were largely Reformed in nature.) By the end of the day it was clear that our similarities were much greater than our differences.

Thus I think it appropriate and useful to consider two principles that have played major roles in Catholic social teaching—subsidiarity and solidarity—and to explore the extent to which they are compatible with and the ways in which they may be able to enrich and strengthen Reformed social and political thinking. In this paper I first consider subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty and then consider solidarity. In the last section I make a number of observations and reach several conclusions.

I might also add that as a political scientist I primarily specialize in public policy issues and questions, not political theory. Thus, as I approach this paper, I largely think in terms of applying Catholic and Reformed social theory to the world of concrete public policy issues. This may color some of my conclusions.

Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty¹

Subsidiarity. The Catholic concept of subsidiarity received its classic formulation by Pope Pius XI in his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*:

[T]hat most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals, what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy or absorb them.²

In their 1986 pastoral letter on the economy and poverty, the United State Catholic Bishops articulated the principle of subsidiarity in especially clear terms:

This principle [of subsidiarity] states that, in order to protect basic justice, government should undertake only those initiatives which exceed the capacities of individuals or private groups acting independently. Government should not replace or destroy smaller communities and individual initiative. Rather it should help them contribute more effectively to social well-being and supplement their activity when the demands of justice exceed their capacities. . . . [I]t defines good government intervention as that which truly "helps" other social groups contribute to the common good by directing, urging, restraining, and regulating economic activity as "the occasion requires and necessity demands"³

The term, subsidiarity, comes from the Latin word, *subsidium*, meaning help or aid. Thus, even in its origins subsidiarity signals the idea of aid or help being extended from one entity to another. And the state is posited as the entity that is to help the smaller or lesser entities—such as families, local governments, and voluntary associations—to be all that God intends them to be. As J. Bryan Hehir has written: “In brief, that principle [subsidiarity] seeks to establish how the state should help other actors in a society achieve their legitimate purposes.”⁴

Understanding three crucial perspectives that underlie subsidiarity gives a deeper insight into it. The first is personalism, as distinct from the Enlightenment, liberal understanding of individualism. Jacques Maritain saw the latter as a purely material concept that did not take into account human beings’ social and spiritual dimensions, and as a result saw human beings as an unconnected “fragment of a species.”⁵ R. E. M. Irving, in describing the political theory of the Christian Democratic parties, wrote: “The essence of personalism is its strong emphasis on the importance of the development of *all* dimensions of human personality, social as well as individual and spiritual as well as material.”⁶

A second, related perspective underlying subsidiarity sees human beings as inherently social beings. As Maritain put it: “By the very fact that each of us is a person and expresses himself to himself, each of us requires communication with *other* and *the others* in the order of knowledge and love.”⁷ Even more clearly, the Belgian Christian Democratic official, Paul Dabin, has written: “A fundamental element of Christian-Democratic political philosophy is ‘communitarian personalism.’ . . . According to communitarian personalism, human beings, conceived as persons, and society, conceived as a community of persons, are bound up together and cannot be separated, not even conceptually.”⁸

This social nature of human beings, in Catholic social teaching, leads not to seeing society as a mass of undifferentiated men and women joined in a homogenized society. This would be the German Volk of Nazism and other collectivisms. Instead, it sees men and women falling into a plurality of social structures, which exist in hierarchical fashion. As Fanz Mueller explains:

Accordingly, the individual members are conceived as being incorporated into the large social bodies not directly, but through the medium of intermediate associations. Therefore, society is, properly speaking, not a mere aggregation of single human beings, but an ordered unity of associations, more specifically, a system of social organizations disposed organically in ranks and orders, each subordinate to the one above it.⁹

Or as Hehir has put it: “The person requires a multiplicity of communities to achieve and sustain full human development.”¹⁰ In *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul II expressed the same idea in these words:

In contrast, from the Christian vision of the human person there necessarily follows a correct picture of society. According to *Rerum novarum* and the whole social doctrine of the Church, the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good.¹¹

A third perspective underlying the principle of subsidiarity flows from the first two. It is that associations and communities, their right to exist, and their authority are inherent in them, given by God. They are not creatures of the state, existing and possessing authority only at the sufferance of the state. Jonathan Chaplin has summarized this aspect of subsidiarity in these words: “The state must enable lesser communities to be themselves. In practice this will mean that the acknowledgement of a substantial measure of autonomy on the part of lesser communities will be an essential ingredient of the common good. . . . [S]ince the spheres of authority of the lesser communities are also original and rooted in nature, they may never be conceived as mere delegations of political authority.”¹² Chaplin quotes the Catholic scholar, Heinrich Rommen, as stating: “All organizational forms have their intrinsic values and their objective ends, the upper form does not make the lower form superfluous; it must never abolish it, nor may it take over its functions and purposes.”¹³

Sphere Sovereignty. For those who are acquainted with the principle of sphere sovereignty as it was developed by Abraham Kuyper within Dutch neo-Calvinism, much of what I have written about subsidiarity will sound familiar. Although far from identical, there are strong parallels between the Reformed principle of sphere sovereignty and the Catholic principle of subsidiarity. First I will note three key similarities, and then note a major difference, a difference that upon closer examination is not as great as it first appears.

The three perspectives I outlined above as underlying subsidiarity are very similar to what Reformed thinking holds. Chaplin compares Reformed and Catholic social thought and concludes:

Each begins by repudiating the individualistic social theories characteristic of Enlightenment liberalism, and the universalistic theories developed in reaction, whether Romantic, Hegelian, or Socialist. The individual is acknowledged as an essentially social being, created by God to live within a variety of different communities, yet never to be subsumed within them.¹⁴

Kuyper roundly criticized the French Revolution and liberalism for reducing human beings to material things—to “instruments, tools.”¹⁵ And he wrote: “Human life . . . is so constituted that the individual can exist only within the group and can come to full expression only in community.”¹⁶ This has led Reformed thinking to emphasize more explicitly than does the

Catholic tradition the right of communities and associations to exist and the source of their authority being inherent in them and given by God. Kuyper stated here at Princeton in his famous Stone lectures:

In a Calvinist sense we understand hereby, that the family, the business, science, art and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the state does.¹⁷

This is at the heart of the Reformed principle of sphere sovereignty. The state, as well as the other communities and associations that make up the pluralism of all societies, receive their mandate directly from God. Thus, they possess a certain sovereignty in their areas or fields of responsibility. The state is not—in totalitarian fashion—to intervene in families, academic institutions, artistic endeavors, social welfare agencies, and the other myriad societal spheres, taking them over and seeking to dominate them and their activities.

A Key Difference. Where subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty at first appear to differ greatly is in subsidiarity's emphasis upon a hierarchy of societal communities and associations, an emphasis that is absent in sphere sovereignty. Pope Pius XI, in *Quadragesimo Anno*, referred in the passage quoted earlier to "a greater and higher association" and to "lesser and subordinate organizations." Mueller, as I also quoted, referred to "a system of social organizations disposed organically in ranks and orders, each subordinate to the one above it." In contrast, Kuyper and others in the Reformed, sphere sovereignty tradition, have insisted that the various social spheres are not to be seen as being hierarchical in nature. Rather, they should be seen as co-equal spheres, all of which receive their mandates of "sovereignty in its sphere" directly from God.

The difference, however, is more apparent than real. Kuyper would not, of course, argue that the various spheres of human endeavor, with their specific structural manifestations, exist in isolation from each other, existing side by side, but not interacting with each other. Art, for example, comments on and holds up a mirror to all aspects of human existence: family life, religious life, political life, and more. Similarly, it would be a mistake to see Kuyper as privatizing religions, sealing it off in a separate sphere where it is active, but leaving the other "secular spheres" alone.

This, however, does not yet imply a hierarchy. But in writing about the state, the hierarchy that many Reformed thinkers have denied in theory tends to appear. Kuyper in his well known 1891 address to the First Christian Social Congress made clear, in good sphere sovereignty language, that the "tasks of family and society therefore lie outside government's jurisdiction."¹⁸ But then he immediately went on to state: "But as soon as there is any clash among the different spheres of life, where one sphere trespasses on or violates the domain which by divine ordinance belongs to the other, then it is the God-given duty of government to uphold justice before arbitrariness, and to withstand, by the justice of God, the physical superiority of the strong."¹⁹

Even more explicitly, H. Henry Meeter in typical Reformed fashion, first argues: “It [the state] has not the duty to take over the work of these spheres, as is the tendency in a totalitarian or collectivist state.” But he then immediately goes on to argue:

Nor may the Government allow them to operate unrestrained according to their sinful desires, as the *laissez-faire* policy of the Liberals would demand. That would be to shirk a great part of the duty which the State is called upon to perform in a sinful society, namely, to administer justice. It is rather the business of the State, negatively, to counteract whatever forces would tend to break down the moral operation of the several spheres of society in their God-given task; and, positively, to promote such conditions and relations as will be helpful to them in the pursuance of their cultural tasks.²⁰

If the state is to promote justice among the various spheres—to regulate relations among them and help empower them to fulfill their tasks—what has happened to their non-hierarchical nature? Kuyper once wrote that the “state must . . . keep each sphere within its proper limits. . . . The sovereignty of the state, therefore, rises high above all the other spheres by enjoining justice and utilizing force justly.”²¹ David Koyzis has made this same point in regard to Herman Dooyeweerd’s thought: “By allowing that the state’s task includes protecting the integrity of the various societal spheres and enabling them to fulfill their respective normative tasks, it would certainly appear that Dooyeweerd is conceiving the state as something of an overarching hierarchical institution.”²²

While Reformed theorists have allowed elements of hierarchy to enter their thinking, Catholic thinkers, such as Mueller, have made the crucial point that although the concept of subsidiarity has a hierarchical framework, “the relative worth of the lower body is not merely a derivative one, but of an original nature, based on the respective common good to be accomplished.”²³ Even the lower social structures have a worth and possess rights not at the sufferance of higher structures—the state in particular—but of their own right.

Koyzis, after an extensive study of Dooyeweerd and the Catholic Yves Simon concluded that the difference in their views on the hierarchical nature of society’s structures or spheres is, in practice, more apparent than real:

We have noted throughout the course of this study that a principal difference between Simon’s and Dooyeweerd’s political theories is that element of hierarchy. Whereas Simon is willing to concede to the state the status of hierarchical superiority over other communities, Dooyeweerd is definitely not. This difference between the two is very evident at the foundational philosophical level. Yet on the level of practice, it would appear that the distance between the two is not that great.²⁴

In short, there is a strong convergence between the Catholic principle of subsidiarity and Reformed principle of sphere sovereignty. There are differences. Although Reformed thinking sees the state as playing an over-arching, justice-promoting role in relation to the other spheres, it does not see the concrete social structures in the various spheres as arranged in a hierarchical fashion, as the Catholic principle of subsidiarity does. But the similarities between subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty outweigh the differences.

Solidarity

Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching. The Catholic principle of solidarity condemns both individualism and collectivism. It emerges out of the personalism and the social nature of human beings that also underlie subsidiarity. The German Jesuit scholar, Oswald von Nell-Breuning, wrote that under solidarity “all individuals are involved as members of the social totality in the common social destiny of this totality; similarly the totality (society or community) is inextricably involved in the destiny of the members.”²⁵ Put colloquially, we are all in the same boat. Nell-Breuning then goes on to state that from this “principle of common involvement there follows . . . the principle of common responsibility: every individual as member of the community must ‘respond’, i.e., stand responsible for the welfare of each and every member.”²⁶ The principle of solidarity insists that all of us share in a responsibility for the well being of others. We are all part of a network of relationships that tie us to others—indeed to all human beings everywhere. Hehir has referred to solidarity as “a bond of moral obligation or duty existing among persons at every level of human society.”²⁷

Pope John Paul II, in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, clearly articulated the principle of solidarity and roots it in Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor:

Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue. . . . One’s neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One’s neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one’s life for the brethren (cf. I John 3:16).²⁸

In offering a biblical basis for solidarity, the 1997 document, “Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes,” issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference makes reference to Christ’s command to “Love your neighbor as yourself” and to Eph. 4:3-6 when it states: “In the words of the Apostle Paul we must strive ‘to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.’”²⁹

Catholic teaching is not clear on any limits or boundaries to solidarity. Does the Christian’s responsibility extend to all persons everywhere in need? Is the degree of responsibility equally great? Or is there a greater or lesser responsibility, depending on circumstances? Pope John Paul II spoke of the “globalization of solidarity”³⁰ in emphasizing the world-wide reach of the sense of responsibility for others that grows out of the principle of solidarity. The just-cited document, “Called to Global Solidarity” gives an especially expansive, virtually unlimited conceptualization to solidarity:

Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gn 4:9), has global implications and is a special challenge for our time, touching not one brother but all our sisters and brothers. Are we responsible for the fate of the world’s poor? Do we have duties to suffering

people in far-off places? Must we respond to the needs of suffering refugees in distant nations? Are we keepers of the creation for future generations?

For the followers of Jesus, the answer is yes. Indeed, we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. As members of God's one human family, we acknowledge our duties to people in far-off places. We accept God's charge to care for all human life and for all creation.³¹

Similarly, Pope John Paul II stated in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that solidarity "is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because *we are all really responsible for all.*"³²

Solidarity in Reformed Thinking. Solidarity as a specific, labeled Christian principle is rarely mentioned in Reformed writings. [In fact, after a limited search, I did not find any use of the term, solidarity, by Reformed thinkers. If any one can direct me to a source I may have missed, I'd be grateful.] It can, however, be found implicitly present in a number of Reformed writings, especially those dealing with the issue of poverty.

Kuyper clearly supported the concept of solidarity, even without using the term. This can be seen in his 1891 address to the First Christian Social Congress, in which he considered the problem of wide-spread poverty in light of changing economic conditions due to the industrial revolution. At one point he spoke of the organic nature of society and its interconnectedness:

If asked whether our human society is an aggregate of individuals or an organic body, all those who are Christians must place themselves on the side of the social movement and against liberalism. As you know, God's Word teaches that we have all been created from one blood and joined in a single covenant through God. Both the solidarity of our guilt and the mystery of the reconciliation on Golgotha are absolutely incompatible with individualism and point instead to a struggle within the interconnected wholeness of our human society.³³

Although Kuyper here used the phrase, "the solidarity of guilt," this is not, of course, the sense in which Catholic social teaching uses solidarity. The phrase, "the interconnected wholeness of our human society," however, is precisely what the Catholic principle of solidarity is based on. Elsewhere in that same address Kuyper said: "We may not, as the priest and the Levite, pass by the exhausted traveler who lies bleeding from his wounds. Rather, we must, like the merciful Samaritan, be deeply moved by a divine sympathy—because suffering exists, because there is a crying need."³⁴ For Kuyper, the organic nature of society implied a responsibility of the stronger towards the weaker. One biographer referred to Kuyper's "keen sense of social responsibility, his sympathy for the laboring classes, and his love for the great multitude of the common people made him so early in his career a pioneer of the social frontiers."³⁵

Skillen has rightly pointed out that Kuyper balanced his sense of solidarity—his anti-individualistic, organic view of society—with his sense of societal differentiation: "Kuyper urges social solidarity (organic social life) in his own country and even internationally, but he does so on a basis that demands genuine respect for the differentiated integrity of society's many institutions, communities, and social relationships."³⁶

Paul Marshall, in a chapter on poverty, considers the Old Testament laws concerning treatment of the poor, as well as Jesus' command to feed the hungry and the early church's sharing of material goods. He then comments: "We are called to live out these commitments in our own lives. We cannot delegate our own responsibilities for the poor. We may not foist our own responsibilities off onto the state and say that welfare programmes will take care of the poor, leaving the rest of us, individually and corporately, to go our own sweet way."³⁷ Twice Marshall writes of our "responsibilities" for the poor. This lies near the heart of the principle of solidarity: we have a responsibility, or obligation, to help others of the human family who are in need. The idea of Christians having a responsibility to be concerned for the welfare of and to take actions in support of others is present in Reformed thinking.³⁸

Nevertheless, the principle of solidarity is largely unknown in Reformed thought as an explicitly articulated principle. This is surprising for two reasons. First, it can be clearly rooted in Scripture and, second, it is fully compatible with the neocalvinist concepts of personalism and men and women as social beings. I examine each of these in turn.

Biblically, the principle of solidarity finds its basis in Jesus' insistence that our whole duty is summed up in the command to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40). In Romans the apostle Paul instructs us to "let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another." (Ro. 13:8) As Christians we have, as it were, a debt we owe our fellow human beings. We owe them love. This is an obligation, a responsibility, as real as the money we owe the bank that financed the mortgage on our house. God has placed this obligation on us. Love means showing concern for and offering help to others. This is what solidarity is all about.

The parable of the Good Samaritan—to which Kuyper made reference in a passage quoted earlier—has much to teach us about solidarity. The Samaritan was truly good because he offered help to a fellow human being in need, even though he was someone he did not know and was a Jew—and Jews despised Samaritans. Yet the Good Samaritan recognized a solidarity with the hurt and bleeding Jew, and offered all the help he could give. It is this obligation or responsibility towards others—rooted in the command to love our neighbors as ourselves—that solidarity is all about. It is a network of obligations that bind us to all of humanity in a web of mutual love, concern, and help.

Also, solidarity is fully in keeping with personalism and human beings as social beings. It is opposed to both liberal individualism and collectivism. Catholic writers make this clear. Nell-Breuning begins his essay in *Sacramentum Mundi* with these words: "Solidarism is that system of securing social order which is equally opposed to individualism and collectivism."³⁹ He goes on to emphasize the "personal value and autonomy" of individuals, which is balanced by the importance of the "total social entity . . . which is a unit of social order."⁴⁰ All this fits with a Reformed view of society.

However, in reading Catholic writings on solidarity more emphasis seems to be put on the organic unity of society than on its differentiation. Subsidiarity and solidarity are rarely mentioned in the same breath. [Here again if I have missed some Catholic writings, please point them out to me.] Whereas in the Reformed tradition solidarity is approached more cautiously

and is often linked with sphere sovereignty. It may be that Reformed thinking is more fearful of collectivism than is the Catholic tradition or that sphere sovereignty lies more at its heart than does subsidiarity in the Catholic tradition.

Two Limits on Solidarity. It seems important to make explicit some limits, or boundaries, on solidarity, if it is to be useful in Reformed thinking. Otherwise it could turn into either a basis for a collectivist state or a guilt-causing ideal that appears so impractical that it immobilizes Christian-based action. The first danger—that of solidarity fostering a collectivist state—can be dealt by way of a proper emphasis on sphere sovereignty and subsidiarity. Both the Catholic and the Reformed traditions have strong—and as we saw earlier closely related—theories with which to resist collectivism. They need to be kept in mind and given an equal emphasis to solidarity.

In today's world the danger may not come so much from collectivism in the form of a totalitarian state, but in the gentler form of a responsibility-denying paternalism. Solidarity and paternalism need to be distinguished. God has created us to be choosing, willing, creative persons, who in our choosing, willing, creative activities mirror the image of God in which we have been created. Solidarity does not mean that the debt of love we owe our fellow human beings is elevated to the point where individuals are no longer responsible for their own choices or for doing what they can for themselves. God has made us morally responsible beings with the freedom to make real choices that carry with them real consequences. Solidarity does not mean others can, or should, shield us from all the consequences of our bad, sinful choices, or that we do not need to do what we can to help ourselves. That is why Kuyper, in his address on poverty, cautioned against government-sponsored material assistance to the poor, and emphasized (perhaps over-emphasized) “the continuing welfare of people and nation, including labor, lies only in powerful individual initiative.”⁴¹

If with the best of intentions we over-emphasize solidarity to the point where persons' responsibility for their actions is lost sight of or where they no longer need to do what they can for themselves, we are in danger of fostering an unhealthy dependence. That also undercuts persons' God-given opportunity and obligation to be creative, willing persons who contribute to the broader society. The wise social service agency soon learns how to offer help to those in need without turning those recipients into persons who become dependent on that help and never learn to develop their own abilities and talents. “Tough love,” it is often called: it is love as it seeks, in solidarity with those in need, to offer help; it is tough as it requires persons to do what they can for themselves and to broaden what they can do on their own. But this ought not to be used as an excuse for an attitude that is as unconcerned as it is uncaring. Even tough love is indeed love. We have a duty to seek the best for our neighbor.

Where the line between the gentle collectivism of paternalism and a proper acting on the basis of solidarity lies is not always clear. In fact, it will often be in doubt, and equally sincere Christians will disagree in concrete situations on exactly where it lies. But such a line does exist and we need to find it.

As I will shortly suggest, the Catholic tradition may tend to overemphasize solidarity to the neglect of subsidiarity, and the Reformed tradition may tend to overemphasize sphere

sovereignty to the neglect of solidarity, but both have within them the theoretical tools with which to resist collectivism.

A second limit on the application of solidarity is that we are not called to have the same depth of concern and to offer the same level of help for all persons in need everywhere. There need to be practical limitations, based on a distinction between a deeply-felt concern and concrete actions of help and relief. In an age of instant communication we are immediately aware of hurts and needs throughout the world, from the victims of an earthquake in Pakistan to religious persecution or starvation in Africa. As seen earlier, Pope John Paul II rightly spoke of the “globalization of solidarity.” Closer to home we are made aware of persons being thrown out of work due to plant closings, children who are abused and neglected, victims of tornadoes and hurricanes, and persons struggling by without proper health insurance. Solidarity could easily lead to feelings of responsibility that are so overwhelming that they lead to feeling of hopelessness and, ultimately, to inaction.

The answer, I would suggest, lies in a combination of there being a division of labor in the church and in the rule of proximity. There clearly is a God-intended division of labor among his followers. The apostle Paul teaches in I Corinthians 12 that the church is one body made up of many parts, with each part having its special calling or gift. This means each Christian is not called to be equally active in seeking to meet all needs around the world. All should be concerned; none should be indifferent. But all Christians as individuals and all churches or other Christian organizations have specialized callings that differ.

There is also the matter of proximity. It says that one’s solidarity-based responsibility becomes greater the closer God puts certain needs directly in one’s path. With greater proximity comes a greater responsibility to take action; with less proximity comes less responsibility. But one must be careful not to use this rule as an excuse for an uncaring, “I’m-glad-I’m-not-affected” attitude. Solidarity binds us by way of concern, prayer, and whatever help we can give—even if limited—to those who are in need, even when they are at a distance.

Concluding Observations

There is much the Reformed tradition can learn from the Catholic understanding of subsidiarity and solidarity. As I have tried to show in this paper, Reformed social and political thought has many similarities with the Catholic principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. I believe both can offer perspectives and insights that would supplement and strengthen, not undercut, Reformed thinking. In making these observations I am largely thinking in terms of the American context and how Reformed thinking could become a more effective corrective to current deficiencies in the American mindset.

Taking solidarity first, I believe a more explicit, self-conscious use of solidarity in Reformed thinking would help to counteract the individualism that is rampant in American society, and that also sometimes creeps into Reformed social and political thinking. There are areas where solidarity as an explicit principle could be applied, but where it now tends not to be applied. For example, issues such as global warming and other environmental issues are usually approached by Reformed writers in terms of the cultural mandate and the concept of

stewardship. This is right and proper. But our solidarity with others who are being harmed by environmental degradation could also be used. Also, too often there seems to be a lack of a cry of concern for those who are hurting in our own country and around the world. Theoretically, as I have pointed out Reformed thinking is strong in advancing the responsibility Christians owe suffering humanity. But in practice we often fall short. A “rugged individualism” is very much with us. It may be that a more explicit use of the term, solidarity, and more discussion of it, would strengthen Reformed social thinking and practice.

In regard to subsidiarity, sphere sovereignty properly emphasizes the autonomy (“sovereignty”) of the various spheres, each with its own function or law. But as a public policy activist and analyst I have often had difficulties in applying it in concrete policy fields.⁴² In practice there is so much overlap and interaction among the spheres and their concrete embodiments that one often lacks guidance as to who should be primarily responsible for what tasks. To take a very concrete example: Should schools provide not only lunches but also breakfasts for children in low-income areas? Sphere sovereignty would seem to say no, since feeding children breakfasts, when they are home and with the family, is an important function of the family and not that of the state. But if children—due to a lack of money or to neglect—are coming to school hungry, is it perhaps time for the state to intervene and provide food? But doing so encourages low-income families who are feeding their children as best they can to do even less for their children. One could argue the state is undercutting already weak family structures.

Subsidiarity’s concept of a hierarchy of social institutions and structures, with societal needs to be filled by the lowest one that can effectively do so, has some practical public policy implications that sphere sovereignty lacks. It places a proper emphasis on keeping responsibilities on the “lowest” structures compatible with a just order and the common good, and offers a basis on which to judge when a “higher” level structure should be relied on. Subsidiarity can thereby be a useful supplement to sphere sovereignty, as long as one does not make the “lower” spheres and their embodiments subservient to the “higher” spheres (which I do not believe subsidiarity, rightly understood, does). I am uncomfortable with the higher and lower language of subsidiarity, as it can be interpreted to imply more than it intends. (It can be interpreted to imply that the higher structures are over the lower structures, as in “lording it over” them, with the lower only having the role given them by the higher structures.) But the basic insight of subsidiarity that societal functions can best be carried out by the lowest level while protecting a just social order and the common good is a good and appropriate standard. I would apply this standard within the context of sphere sovereignty in order to protect one sphere and its concrete structures from improperly taking over the functions of another. Within the principle of sphere sovereignty there are many remaining questions of who ought to be responsible for what tasks. And here is where subsidiarity can help.

A final observation is that although the Reformed tradition can learn from the Catholic social teachings of solidarity and subsidiarity, there are also things the Catholic tradition can learn from the Reformed tradition. I did not develop them here because that is not the topic of this paper. But in passing I would mention the Reformed, sphere sovereignty emphasis on the various spheres having inherent, God-given areas of responsibility as one clear example.

Endnotes

¹ I have taken some of the material in this section from my book *Positive Neutrality* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993), especially chap. 4. (Paperback version, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995.) Also very helpful to me in writing this section has been Jonathan Chaplin, “Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty: Catholic and Reformed Conceptions of the Role of the State,” in Francis P. McHugh & Samuel M. Natale, eds., *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 175-202.

² Pius IX, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), paragraph 79.

³ U. S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (1986), paragraph 124. Available at www.osjspm.org/cst/eja.htm. The internal quotation is from Irma T. Elo and Calvin L. Baele, *Rural Development, Poverty, and Natural Resources* (Washington DC: National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy, Resources for the Future, 1985).

⁴ J. Bryan Hehir, “Religious Ideas and Social Policy: Subsidiarity and Catholic Style of Ministry,” in Mary Jo Bane, Brent Coffin, and Ronald Thiemann, *Who Will Provide? The Changing Role of Religion in American Social Welfare* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), p. 98.

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1966), p. 38.

⁶ R. E. M. Irving, *The Christian Democratic Parties of Western Europe* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 31. Irving’s emphasis.

⁷ Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, pp. 41-42. Maritain’s emphasis.

⁸ Paul Dabin, “The Search for the Intellectual Basis of Christian-Democracy,” in European People’s Party, *Efforts to Define a Christian Democratic “Doctrine,”* (Brussels: Parliamentary Group of the European People’s Party, Occasional Papers No. 2, 1989), p. 20.

⁹ Franz H. Mueller, “The Principle of Subsidiarity in the Christian Tradition,” *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 4 (1943), p. 147.

¹⁰ Hehir, “Religious Ideas and Social Policy,” p. 101.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), section 13.

¹² Chaplin, “Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty,” pp. 183-184.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 182.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 188.

¹⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed., James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), p. 46.

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¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1931), p. 90.

¹⁸ Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, p. 71.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1956), p. 163.

²¹ Abraham Kuyper, "The Antirevolutionary Program," in James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), p. 260.

²² David T. Koyzis, *Towards a Christian Democratic Pluralism: A Comparative Study of Neothomist and Neocalvinist Political Theories* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1986), p. 366.

²³ Mueller, "The Principle of Subsidiarity in the Christian Tradition," p. 151.

²⁴ Koyzis, *Towards a Christian Democratic Pluralism*, p. 366. On similarities and differences between sphere sovereignty and subsidiarity also see Paul E. Sigmund, "Subsidiarity, Solidarity, and Liberation: Alternative Approaches to Catholic Social Thought," in Luis E. Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 205-220.

²⁵ Oswald von Nell-Breuning, "Solidarism," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 6 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 113.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 113-114.

²⁷ Hehir, "Religious Ideas and Social Policy," p. 105.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), section 40.

²⁹ United States Catholic Conference, "Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Parishes," pp. 3 and 6. Available at www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/international/globalsolidarity.htm.

³⁰ From an address he gave May 17, 2001, to the members of the Foundation for Ethics and Economics. Available at www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=3683.

³¹ United States Catholic Conference, “Called to Global Solidarity,” p. 3.

³² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), section 38. Emphasis added.

³³ Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, p. 65.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 61.

³⁵ Frank Vandenberg, *Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 85. [need full citation]

³⁶ James W. Skillen, “Introduction,” in Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, p. 19.

³⁷ Paul Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 109.

³⁸ See, for example, the essays in Stanley W. Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen, *Welfare in America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), especially the essays by Bob Goudzward, James W. Skillen, John D. Mason., and the “Essay in Draft” included as an appendix. Also helpful is the essay by John D. Mason, “The Good City: Inner-City Poverty and Metropolitan Responsibility,” in David P. Gushee, ed., *Toward a Just and Caring Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), pp. 340-395

³⁹ Nell-Breuning, “Solidarism,” p. 113.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

⁴¹ Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, p. 72.

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