

# Abraham Kuyper and Michael Walzer: The Justice of the Spheres

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In 1880, at the founding of the Free University of Amsterdam, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) delivered the inaugural address entitled “Sphere Sovereignty.”<sup>1</sup> In this speech, Kuyper compared sphere sovereignty to state sovereignty, which granted unlimited power to the state, and in Kuyper’s judgment, led to an idolatrous worship of nation.<sup>2</sup> Kuyper believed that such states used all the other spheres of life to enhance their own power, including the academic spheres, thus squelching genuine academic pursuits. Elsewhere, Kuyper critiqued what he described as “popular sovereignty.”<sup>3</sup> Derived from the French Revolution and its cry “No God, No Master,” popular sovereignty absolutized the rights of the individual, which resulted in idolatrous worship, in this case, of the citizen. In response to these idolatrous conceptualizations of human authority, Kuyper urged that the Free University be guided by the principle of sphere sovereignty. Believing that each sphere of life received its initial authority by God, and was finally responsible only to God,<sup>4</sup> Kuyper proposed that academic work in various disciplines also was authorized by and responsible to God. Thus, the new university would be “free” of coercion by other institutions and dedicated not to the glory of the state or the individual but to God. This pluralistic social theory, in which each sphere is legitimate and unique, continues to be influential, especially among Reformed Christians.

In 1983, American political theorist Michael Walzer also proposed a pluralistic theory of justice. Walzer’s famous book—*Spheres of Justice*,<sup>5</sup> is a response to

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 463-90.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>3</sup> James Skillen, ed., *The Problem of Poverty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 43-44. See also Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 87-88.

<sup>4</sup> “There [within each sphere] another authority rules, an authority that descends directly from God apart from the State” (Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 468).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

libertarian theories such as those of Robert Nozick,<sup>6</sup> which lauds the rights of the individual over against the State. In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer focuses on the question of distributive justice: How shall we determine who will receive particular burdens or benefits within society? The libertarian perspective that Walzer opposes urges that the individual's property rights alone answer these questions. Walzer, however, observes that there are in fact numerous legitimate criteria that have been used for distributing society's benefits and burdens, and that these criteria shift over time and from culture to culture. He writes:

Different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents; and that all these differences derive from different understandings of the social goods themselves—the inevitable product of historical and cultural particularism.<sup>7</sup>

In brief, Walzer argues that burdens and benefits are distributed differently according to the sphere of justice to which they pertain. Goods are not like berries growing in the meadow that can be picked by any passerby but instead are culturally produced and socially defined products that gain both their meaning and their value within a particular cultural setting. For Walzer, it is fruitless to attempt to determine an abstract distributional methodology for various goods apart from that setting in which they are actually found and distributed. Theories of distribution must therefore be concretely historical and specifically oriented to the appropriate social sphere.

These two thinkers, almost exactly one hundred years apart, use similar language to address similar issues. Both fear that the state may wield improper control over other spheres. Both recognize that each social sphere requires its own particular and appropriate norm, and that injustice will likely result when the integrity of one sphere is compromised by the intrusion of another. They seem an unlikely pair: Kuyper was a man of the nineteenth century and Walzer of the twentieth; Kuyper was a vigorous Calvinist and Walzer is a nonpracticing Jew;<sup>8</sup> Kuyper was a Dutch prime minister and Walzer is an American democratic socialist and academician. Both, however, seek a political passageway that navigates between the poles of a radical individualism and an all-encompassing state. Thus, both propose pluralistic systems of justice that acknowledge diverse types of institutions and communities within pluralistic societies. Both are convinced that other political theories derived from rights from either the state or the individual alone are inadequate. Finally, both even use the same term—

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974). For Nozick and others in the libertarian tradition, claims to goods are made by individuals only on the basis of property rights. Such claims are prior to any claims made by the state or other social institutions.

<sup>7</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Walzer clearly affirms his Jewish identity. See, e.g., Michael Walzer, "Blacks and Jews: A Personal Reflection," in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

spheres as a construct to legitimate moral claims made in specific areas of life. Given these similarities in aims and concepts, it will be fruitful to show the resemblances in the thinking of these two giants of pluralism. While there is no direct historical connection between the two,<sup>9</sup> we believe that a comparison of their work can serve to revitalize the concept of sphere sovereignty used by Kuyper, and conversely, ground and expand the concept of spheres of justice as presented by Walzer.

To demonstrate the fruitfulness of these connections, this article will do three things: first, present each scholar's view of spheres of justice; second, describe the strengths and weakness of each, showing how one strengthens the others; and finally, show how a theory of justice that unites Kuyper and Walzer can contribute to contemporary social-political debate. Specifically, our focus will be the question of distributive justice, i.e., how are society's burdens and benefits to be allocated among its members? While other applications of sphere sovereignty may be possible, this is the specific issue addressed by Walzer and thus the point of convergence between the two.

## The Spheres of Justice

### Abraham Kuyper

"Abraham Kuyper was a mountainous figure in the small, flat Netherlands."<sup>10</sup> He was a theologian, an orator, an editor, the founder of both a daily newspaper and a weekly church newspaper, the founder and president of a university, a member of parliament, Prime Minister of the Netherlands (1901-1905), and father of eight. In his lifetime, he shaped the nation of Holland, and since his death his writings have continued to wield influence in other countries where Reformed Christians gather, including the United States, Canada, South Africa, Great Britain, West Africa, and Australia.

In Kuyper's thought and practice, we find that Christian faith, economic theory, family relationships, ecclesial, power and political practice are consciously interrelated under the arch of Calvinist theology. Political rights, family and economic values, and religious truths coordinate and complement, rather than oppose one another. Princeton ethicist Max Stackhouse, for example, notes that Kuyper's approach integrates societal structures, individual responsibilities, and Christian morality.

He (Kuyper) held that it is a serious error to say that Christianity has, or should have, no implications for the organization of the common life or

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<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Walzer does not show awareness of Kuyper.

<sup>10</sup> James D. Bratt, "In the Shadow of Mt. Kuyper: A Survey of the Field," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (April 1996): 51-66. Numerous works have appeared on Kuyper's life. The classic is by P. Kastreel, *Abraham Kuyper* (Kampen: Kok, 1938). Good recent works in English include Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's "Lectures on Calvinism"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

that it pertains only to spiritual yearnings seated in the heart or expressed in the privacy of the prayer group; or that society is best ordered by a secular, pragmatic politics that avoids religions wherever possible. On the contrary, the well-being of the soul, the character of local communities, the fabric of the society at large, and the fate of civilization are intimately related and cannot be separated from theological and moral issues.<sup>11</sup>

Before delving into Kuyper's theological and political theory, we must briefly consider the context in which Kuyper's thinking grew. Kuyper was the son of a Calvinist minister who pursued his doctorate in theology at Leyden. While there, he was attracted intellectually by the force and freshness of modernist theology.<sup>12</sup> As a liberal young pastor, he went to a rural congregation in Beesd. While serving this church, he was "converted" by his peasant parishioners<sup>13</sup> to a more orthodox form of Calvinism. Throughout his career as both a theologian and a politician, Kuyper would navigate between the poles of his more liberal teachers and his more conservative church members.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, other intellectuals within the broader European community in this period were developing social and political theories that would respond to their national ambitions. In very broad terms, two routes predominated. The first was an autonomous individualism ensuing from Enlightenment thought such as that of Locke and British liberalism and culminating in the French Revolution (1789).<sup>15</sup> It asserted the absolute rights of the individual and freedom from all other powers not authorized by the individual—especially the church or the monarchy. The other option was a unifying Idealist vision of German origin. In this view, the nation was seen as one spiritual and racial unity, which was then expressed in a form of state socialism. The first (French) option Kuyper called "popular sovereignty" and the second (German) option he labeled "state sovereignty."<sup>16</sup> He rejected both.

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<sup>11</sup> Max Stackhouse, "Preface" in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis Lugo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> This theology was dominant in the academic climate of much of northern Europe and is associated with figures such as Albrecht Ritschl. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this clarification.

<sup>13</sup> 1863-67. In Beesd, a more pietistic side of Calvinism was maintained. See James Bratt, "Abraham Kuyper: His World and Work," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 1-16.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Kuyper also formed political alliances with the Dutch Catholics, who shared many similar concerns and inclinations. His ascendancy to prime minister would not have occurred without this alliance. See here John Bolt, *A Free Church* both for a depiction of Kuyper's political thought and practice, and also for Bolt's attempt to put Kuyper's thinking in dialogue with contemporary evangelical public theology.

<sup>15</sup> Kuyper strongly critiques the French Revolution in Skillen's *The Problem of Poverty*, 43-52.

<sup>16</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism—Calvinism and Politics*, 78-109.

In rejecting the Germanic state-socialist option, Kuyper wrote: “The state may never become an octopus, which stifles the whole of life. It must occupy its own place, on its own root, among all the other trees of the forest, and thus it has to honor and maintain every form of life which grows independently in its own sacred autonomy.”<sup>17</sup> James Skillen, a political theorist in the Kuyperian tradition, describes Kuyper’s critique of state socialism in this way.

Kuyper used the term “organic” together with the idea of diverse spheres of society, to affirm the social character of human life, with its built-in obligations of mutual accountability, trust and service. Kuyper’s critique of socialism, in both its social democratic and state socialist forms, warns of the danger of reducing society to the state or the state to society. The organic character of society can be truly healthy and just only when its real diversity is preserved.<sup>18</sup>

For Kuyper, then, the state is not the totality of society, nor is it the only or final power in society. Instead, it is the regulative institution within society that respectfully regulates the roles and authorities of other parts of the organism.

Kuyper also rejected popular sovereignty:

In the Christian religion, authority and freedom are bound together by the deeper principle that everything in creation is subject to God. The French Revolution threw out the majesty of the Lord in order to construct an artificial authority based on individual free will. The Christian religion seeks personal human dignity in the social relationships of an organically integrated society. The French Revolution disturbed that organic tissue, broke those social bonds, and left nothing but the monotonous, self-seeking individual asserting his own self-sufficiency.<sup>19</sup>

In place of either popular sovereignty or state sovereignty, Kuyper proposed his model of sphere sovereignty. Using the Calvinist doctrine of common grace, Kuyper argued that the One God freely creates and rules all things, including social institutions and intellectual pursuits. God’s grace and God’s thoughts are found not only in the salvific work of Christ but also in all aspects of creation. Kuyper writes:

If thinking is first in God, and if everything created is considered to be only the out flowing of God’s thought so that all things have come into existence by the Logos—i.e. by divine reason or better, by the Word—yet still have their own being, then God’s thinking must be contained in all things. There is nothing in the whole creation that is not the expression, the embodiment, the revelation of a thought of God.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Skillen, ed., *The Problem of Poverty*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham Kuyper, “Common Grace in Science,” in *Abraham Kuyper*, 443.

Each sphere of life thus reflects the presence of the word of God, and is directly responsible to God for its very being and continued existence. Each sphere of life was created by the word of God, and forms part of the continuously developing order of creation. The legitimacy and role of each sphere is not then derived from either state or church, but directly from God, whose creative initiative brought it into being and sustains it. "Thinking God's thoughts after him," then becomes not only the task of the theologian, but of every believer in every sphere of life. Speaking of these spheres, Kuyper is nearly grandiloquent, saying

there are in life as many spheres as there are constellations in the sky and that the circumference of each has been drawn on a fixed radius from the center of a unique principle, namely, the apostolic injunction (*hekastos en toi idioi tagmati*) "each in its own order" (1 Cor. 15:23). Just as we speak of a "moral world," a "scientific world," a "business world," the "world of art," so we can more properly speak of a "sphere" of morality, of the family, of social life, each with its own domain. Because each comprises its own domain, each has its own Sovereign within its bounds.<sup>21</sup>

Explicating this concept of sphere sovereignty, Reformed theologian Gordon Spykman writes: "Each sphere has its own identity, 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>22</sup> Reformed philosopher Richard Mouw also elaborates on sphere sovereignty in this way:

Kuyper is not merely interested in strengthening mediating structures; he also wants to understand how these so-called mediating structures are themselves organizational manifestations of more basic spheres of interaction. For him, it is important to see the ways in which, say, familial relations are very different from ecclesial ones, or how artistic activity differs from scientific investigation. Whether it is good to have Rotary Clubs and Parent Teacher Associations is not as important a question for Kuyper as whether art and religion and business and family life are granted their allotted place in the God-ordained scheme of things.<sup>23</sup>

All things are allotted social space in Kuyper's model, and the whole scheme of things is divinely ordered. There are not spiritual spheres and secular spheres.

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<sup>21</sup> Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper*, 467. (We grant that Kuyper's exegesis of that text is a bit of a stretch, but cite him on this point to show his understanding of what he called the "creation order".)

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Spykman, "Sphere Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition," *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 167.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Mouw, "Some Reflections on Sphere Sovereignty," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, 91.

Rather, all human efforts to develop any aspect of life are spiritual, inasmuch as every sphere finds its origin and destiny in the word of its creator.

In a sentence, Kuyperians are fond of quoting Kuyper, “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”<sup>24</sup> For Kuyper, each sphere of life has its own legitimacy and its own nature, which in turn responds in either faith or unbelief to Christ’s claim as its Lord. Thus, no sphere is more spiritual or noble than another. Participation in family life, or economic life, or sports, or whatever are all potential ways of fulfilling the cultural mandate to “till the earth and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Each parcel of earth is to be cultivated in such a way that the creator would smile and say “well done, good and faithful servant.” Humans as stewards use their unique creative gifts to work within different spheres, in accordance with their talents, and in respect to the nature of a particular sphere. Each society’s accumulation of these labors results in diverse human culture. As Reformed theologian Henry Van Til stated it: “Culture is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, human work,<sup>26</sup> when properly directed, has social and cultural results. It also has a profound religious goal—the glorification of God, and service to the neighbor.

The task of believers in all walks of life, then, is to exercise their calling within their chosen sphere(s) of work, and it may well be that individuals do participate in multiple spheres of life. Using an example from art history, James Bratt writes

Kuyper would shudder at both the subject and style of Picasso’s definitively modernist *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, but he would envision their more seemly counterpart, the Calvinist matron, as simultaneously a family member, reader, believer, consumer, patriot, teacher—each role having its own independent integrity, all cohering together in her subjective being.<sup>27</sup>

At the center of her subjective being would be her faith, because all of life is an outworking of one’s basic religious commitment. As Skillen comments, “For

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<sup>24</sup> Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper*, 488.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (1959, repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 29.

<sup>26</sup> I take “work” here to be more and better than the sheer toil that permits mere existence. Although work might involve a paying job, I take work to also include some type of creative response to the mandate to “till and keep the earth,” (Gen. 2:15) through which the human nature as “re-creators” may flourish. For a famous treatment of the nature of work and society that distinguishes among labor, work, and action, derived from Greek thought see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>27</sup> James D. Bratt, “Abraham Kuyper: Puritan, Victorian, Modern,” in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, 14.

Kuyper, religion is not one thing among many that autonomous people choose to do; it is, rather, the *direction* that human life takes as people give themselves over to the gripping power of either the true God or false gods.<sup>28</sup> All of life thus ultimately becomes service to God, or to false gods.<sup>29</sup>

While insisting that the spheres are in fact limited and distinct, we do not wish to suggest that they are unrelated. Using the image of a prism, we can imagine that all the colors of the prism are refracted from one light source, and that each color shapes the spectrum shown within the prism. The sphere of family life, for instance, will influence how or whether its members might be involved in business, or academy, or sport, or art. Each of those spheres will in turn influence the family. The good of one will also spill over into another. For example, if the family's involvement in business is productive and fulfilling, the life of the family will be enriched in many ways. Then, if the family is happy and healthy, it may provide the emotional, physical, and spiritual resources for participation in business, art, sport, or academia. A theory such as this is permeable and open. Each sphere will interact with the others, and all are open to claims from the outside. The sphere of economics, for example, will be open to influences from family or ecology, as well as to claims based on need that are derived from religious beliefs.

In Kuyper's theory, the relationship between the state and the other social spheres is also clearly laid out. On the one hand, as noted above, the state is never to become an octopus, taking over roles that are rightfully accomplished in other spheres. On the other hand, the state has three important *positive* roles vis à vis the other spheres. Following his octopus comment, Kuyper asks rhetorically:

Does this mean that the government has no right *whatever* of interference in these autonomous spheres of life? Not at all. It possesses the threefold right and duty: 1. Whenever different spheres clash, to compel mutual regard for the boundary—lines of each; 2. to defend individuals and the weak ones, in those spheres against the abuse of power of the rest; and 3. to coerce all together to bear personal and financial burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the state.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> James Skillen, *The Problem of Poverty*, 17 (my italics).

<sup>29</sup> Scholars have also noted similarities between Kuyper's theory of sphere sovereignty and the Roman Catholic principle of "subsidiarity." The term *subsidiarity* is first officially mentioned by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and urges that greater institutions not involve themselves in matters that lesser institutions are capable of managing. On the possible relationships between sphere sovereignty and subsidiarity, see e.g., Henk Woldring, "Multiform Responsibility and the Revitalization of Civil Society," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, 175-88, and Paul E. Sigmund, "Subsidiarity, Solidarity and Liberation," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, 205-20, and Richard Mouw, "Some Reflections on Sphere Sovereignty," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, 92.

<sup>30</sup> Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 97. Kuyper's italics.



In these three ways, Kuyper envisions an activist state. The first sets up boundaries among the spheres in such a way that might prohibit, for example, a business model based on cost-benefit analysis from becoming the norm for all human action.<sup>31</sup> The second role has affinities to an “option for the poor.” The third role recognizes the legitimate power of the state to act in favor of the unity and good of the state.<sup>32</sup> In all three of these activities, we see that the state does more than merely *prevent* harm—e.g., protect the person and property. Rather, we find an active state that defends the weak, limits the scope of various societal powers, and compels support for the common good.<sup>33</sup>

Kuyper grounds his proposal for the inviolable legitimacy of each sphere, as well as the legitimacy of state power, by tying both to a belief in the absolute sovereignty of God.

From this *one* source, in God, *sovereignty in the individual sphere*, in the family and in every social circle, is just as directly derived as the *supremacy of State authority*. These two must therefore come to an understanding, and both have the same sacred obligation to maintain their God-given sovereign authority and to make it subservient to the majesty of God.<sup>34</sup>

The church also has an important though limited role to play. Kuyper writes, “The sovereignty of the Church finds its natural limitation in the sovereignty of the free personality. Sovereign within her own domain, she has no power over those who live outside of that sphere.”<sup>35</sup> The only sphere in which the church does have power is that of the spirit and of faith, and the church is permitted to enforce its rules only in its own realm. Kuyper said, “The government bears the sword which wounds; not the sword of the Spirit, which decides in spiritual questions.”<sup>36</sup> Kuyper also envisions important social and even economic roles for the church. He sees the church performing three activities that directly affect social-economic conditions and thus questions of distributive justice:

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<sup>31</sup> This is precisely what Nobel Prize winning economist Gary Becker has done in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>32</sup> Here Kuyper seems to be using the term *state* where we would more likely say *society*, as the following discussion will bear out. Kuyper also quickly adds that the state must not act unilaterally but that each citizen has a legitimate right to his own “purse.” Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 97.

<sup>33</sup> Such “compulsion” is seen daily, for example, in the collection of taxes.

<sup>34</sup> Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 98. Italics are Kuyper’s.

<sup>35</sup> *Stone Lectures*, 108. Kuyper here develops the thinking on the relationship between church and state begun with John Calvin, continuing through Theodore Beza, and learned with considerable bloodshed when Holland freed itself from Catholic Spain. Calvin had argued that citizens might possibly throw off unjust rulers, but the actual conceptualization and practice of the separation of church and state may even yet be in progress, as evidenced, for example in the current court cases regarding educational vouchers for religious schools, crèches on public properties, and so forth.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

(1) the Word of God challenges the rich and comforts the poor, (2) charity demands that goods be shared so that no believer suffers want, and (3) the church brings about an equality within society that is symbolized at the communion table.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to the positive social roles mentioned above, the church also shapes the basic faith convictions of the believer, which in turn serve as guide for all other spheres of life. Faith, in Kuyper's tradition, is not the acceptance of unreasonable truths but the basis for a worldview that shapes all of life. Kuyper does not contrast a realm of faith with a realm of reason, but compares different faiths to one another, or contrasts faith with unbelief. For Kuyper, "faith is the function of the soul by which it obtains certainty."<sup>38</sup> Faith is the ground of certainty that makes all other knowing possible.

As noted above, the believer could simultaneously be a member of a church, a citizen of the state, and a participant in any number of social spheres. In all these aspects of life, the basic convictions of the Christian faith would direct her activities. Believers live out their faith in whichever sphere of life they choose to participate. Permit me a word picture to describe how Kuyper's system might appear.<sup>39</sup> Imagine that a prism has refracted light into its multiple colors. These colors represent the various social spheres of human existence—family, business, academy, and so forth. On one side of the colored lights stand the churches—guiding their members in the knowledge of God, which informs (but does not dictate) the basic convictions of each believer. On the other side of the spectrum stands the state, regulating the interactions among the spheres, assuring that the weak are not trampled, and calling on all persons to contribute to the common good. Neither church nor state defines the role of each sphere; instead, each derives its legitimacy and its role from God.

Having presented this general sketch of Kuyper's theory, we turn briefly to the incipient theory of distributive justice within it, so that we may later show how Kuyper's spheres relate to those of Walzer.<sup>40</sup>

While lauding the freedoms the marketplace provided, Kuyper was quite wary of economic power struggles and the potential inequities inherent in capitalism. By 1891, Kuyper was becoming an internationally recognized theologian and politician. His speech to the Christian Social Congress on November 9 of that year,

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<sup>37</sup> Skillen, *The Problem of Poverty*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. Hendrik DeVries (1898, repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 129.

<sup>39</sup> This is my own word picture, but one I think Kuyper might have liked.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, the *Lectures on Calvinism* (cited earlier) includes chapters on religion, politics, science, and art, but not on economics.

only months after Leo's *Rerum Novarum*, on *The Social Problem and the Christian Religion*<sup>41</sup> is a long critique of economic injustice. In it he writes, for example:

Where our father in heaven wills with divine generosity that an abundance of food grows from the ground, we are without excuse if, through our fault, this rich bounty is divided so unequally that one is surfeited with bread while another goes with an empty stomach to his pallet, and sometimes must even go without a pallet.<sup>42</sup>

He also clearly recognized that poverty was not a spiritual problem solvable through an increase in piety, but in fact a social and political problem requiring structural changes:

Whenever one uses the phrase "social question," one recognizes, in the most general sense, that serious doubt has arisen about the soundness of the social structure in which we live. Only one thing is necessary if the social question is to exist for you: you must realize the untenability of the present state of affairs, and you must account for this untenability not by incidental causes but by a fault in the very foundation of our society's organization. If you do not acknowledge this and think that social evil can be exorcised through an increase in piety, or through friendlier treatment or more generous charity, then you may believe that we face a religious question or possibility a philanthropic question, but you will not recognize the *social* question.<sup>43</sup>

Kuyper's theory of sphere sovereignty was thus an attempt to address this kind of structural problem. It is not, however, a full-orbed theory of distributive justice. If Kuyper's outline of sphere sovereignty is to contribute to contemporary dialogue on distributive justice, we will need to bring Kuyper into conversation with that literature. Michael Walzer, whose work in important respects seems to further the conceptual framework provided by Kuyper nearly one hundred years earlier, provides a fascinating option.

## Michael Walzer

Michael Walzer is a giant among contemporary political philosophers. In addition to his landmark volume *Spheres of Justice*, he is the author of over a dozen books and fifty articles.<sup>44</sup> He is editor of the journal *Dissent*, and a mem-

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<sup>41</sup> Translated by James W. Skillen in *The Problem of Poverty*. Kuyper would become prime minister of the Netherlands a decade after this speech in 1901.

<sup>42</sup> Skillen, *The Problem of Poverty*, 61. In Kuyper's time, the "social problem" was the problem of poverty and the related issue of class struggle that arose under conditions of the industrial revolution.

<sup>43</sup> Skillen, *The Problem of Poverty*, 50-51 (his italics).

<sup>44</sup> A selection of his important books and articles would include, among others: "Liberalism and the Art of Separation," *Political Theory*, 12 (1984); *The Company of Critics* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); "Objectivity and Social Meaning," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); "Exclusion, Injustice and the Democratic State," *Dissent*,

ber of the “School of Social Science” at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. His political philosophy charts a path among the libertarianism of Robert Nozick<sup>45</sup> the contractarianism of John Rawls<sup>46</sup> and the communitarianism of Amitai Etzioni<sup>47</sup> that has garnered wide attention.

Walzer’s deep concern with contemporary rights theory is that one norm of justice cannot adequately address the plurality of institutions and relationships found in different societies. Libertarians, for example, propose that only negative rights, such as those that prohibit harm to persons and properties are legitimate, but Walzer notes that negative rights alone do not adequately address issues of equality or need. On the other hand, the contractarian’s sole standard of equality does not address norms of desert or need. For Walzer, one standard for distributive justice simply does not work, especially across cultures. Thus for Walzer, justice, as with politics, must become a local affair. In the following quote, he critiques the multiplication of rights that results from attempts to find a universal cure for local ills.

The effort to produce a complete account of justice or a defense of equality by multiplying rights soon makes a farce of what it multiplies. To say of whatever we think people ought to have that they have a right to have it is not to say very much. Men and women do indeed have rights beyond life and liberty, but these do not follow from our common humanity; they follow from shared conceptions of social goods; they are local and particular in character.<sup>48</sup>

It is the goods themselves according to Walzer, within their cultural context, that determine the criteria for their own distribution. It is society that then determines both the nature of the goods, and the appropriate pattern for their distribution. “Distributions are patterned in accordance with shared conceptions of what the goods are and what they are for.”<sup>49</sup> Walzer therefore proposes the following theoretical framework for recognizing the nature of goods and the standards for their distribution.

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40 (1993): 55-64; *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Walzer’s work has spawned responses at popular and academic levels, e.g., *New York Review of Books*, 30, no. 12 (July 1983) and *Philosophical Quarterly*, 42 (1992): 161-81. See the volume by Michael Walzer and David Miller, *Pluralism, Justice and Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) for a recent update of the dialogue. See also Michael Haus, *Die Politische Philosophie Michael Walzer: Kritik, Gemeinschaft, Gerechtigkeit* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag), 2000, which includes a critical bibliography.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*.

<sup>46</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>47</sup> Amitai Etzioni, *The Essential Communitarian Reader* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, xv. Contra Walzer, we do believe that rights beyond those that protect life and liberty arise from our common humanity. We nevertheless cited Walzer in this way to show his opposition to a universalized standard for distributive justice.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

1. Goods have shared meanings and values that are derived from culture.
2. Men and women take on concrete identities because of the way they conceive and create, and then possess and employ social goods.
3. There is no single set of primary or basic goods conceivable across all moral and material worlds.
4. It is the meaning of goods that determines their movement.
5. Social meanings are historical in character; and so distributions, and just and unjust distributions, change over time.
6. When meanings are distinct, distributions must be autonomous. Every social good or set of goods constitutes, as it were, a *distributive sphere* within which only certain criteria and arrangements are appropriate.<sup>50</sup>

In the last point above, Walzer proposes the concept of distributive spheres as a means of determining patterns of distribution. He proposes that each sphere is characterized by the particular set of goods within it, which may then be distributed according to particular, culturally determined criteria. Throughout history, criteria for distribution have included physical strength, familial reputation, office, land ownership, capital, technical knowledge, and so forth<sup>51</sup> For example, in some societies male landowners were permitted to vote. Thus, the benefit society distributed was a vote, and the criteria were maleness and land ownership. Proper distributive justice, for Walzer, requires that the criterion for the distribution of a particular good match the type of good in question within a particular society.

Every criterion that has any force at all meets the general rule within its own sphere, and not elsewhere. This is the effect of the rule: different goods to different companies of men and women for different reasons and in accordance with different procedures. And to get all this right, or to get it roughly right, is to map out the entire social world.<sup>52</sup>

In Walzer's view, justice occurs when goods are distributed according to these locally appropriate criteria of distribution. Injustice occurs when the criterion for distribution is not appropriate to the sort of good being distributed, or when one type of goods can be garnered with resources that cross the borders of its sphere. Walzer provides a few quick examples of such "trespassing": "Wealth is seized by the strong, honor by the wellborn, office by the well educated."<sup>53</sup> Simony—paying money for an ecclesiastical office, is a classic example of such boundary crossing. In this case, the standard for distributing goods in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 7-10. My italics.

<sup>51</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

the sphere of the marketplace—money, is wrongly used as the standard for distributing a very different type of good—spiritual authority, in a very different sphere—ecclesiastical.<sup>54</sup>

Walzer notes that Pascal recognized this problem long ago, saying: “Tyranny is the wish to obtain by one means what can only be had by another. We owe different duties to different qualities: love is the proper response to charm, fear to strength, and belief to learning.”<sup>55</sup> While it is certainly proper for people to dominate in a given sphere based on the criterion appropriate to that sphere, e.g., the strong and speedy ought to dominate in sport, or the lovely in pageants of beauty, it is improper for a good to be distributed according to an unrelated criterion. “To convert one good into another, when there is not intrinsic connection between the two, is to invade the sphere where another company of men and women properly rules.”<sup>56</sup>

Walzer views money as the chief trespasser in contemporary societies. “Money seeps across all boundaries—this is the primary form of illegal immigration; and just where one ought to try to stop it is a question of expediency as well as of principle.”<sup>57</sup> For Walzer, justice requires that boundaries between spheres be defended against trespassers, so that the appropriate criterion for distribution within each is maintained. To defend the integrity of each sphere, we must know which criterion is being used for distribution within it. On Walzer’s view, there are three appropriate criteria for making distributions within the various spheres—need, desert, and equality.<sup>58</sup> We will examine each of these criteria in turn.

Focusing on the criterion of need, Walzer believes that no single master list of basic needs can be created because societies define both goods and needs in reference to their own particular cultural and political settings. Nevertheless, within a given bounded and defined community, agreements can be made to distribute some goods on the basis of need.<sup>59</sup> Societies can enact agreements that determine which needs are to be fulfilled and what kind of redistribution will bring it about. Such a redistribution should occur “in accordance with some shared understanding of their needs, subject to ongoing political determination in detail.”<sup>60</sup> This kind of redistribution already occurs in many cases such as families. For example, if an older child needs a larger lunch than a

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<sup>55</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Hammondsworth, UK: 1961), 96 (no.244). Cited in Walzer, *Spheres*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> Walzer also observes that community membership itself, i.e., citizenship, is a good that is distributed on the basis of particular criteria within particular countries, Walzer, *Spheres*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

younger one, the parent will pack the needed but unequal quantity of lunch for each child. Different societies also meet the differing needs of their members—be it for food, ceremonial garb, access to burial sites, and so forth. Within Western society, Walzer believes that redistribution according to basic needs may require that all have a minimal amount of money in order to actively participate in society.<sup>61</sup>

The second criterion—desert—implies entitlement on the basis of some observable grounds—I am entitled to this new sport coat because I paid the price that is asked for it. Alternatively, I am entitled to a given wage because I have performed the tasks required of the job. This criterion rules the marketplace. Walzer notes that entitlement on the basis of desert depends on many factors, especially the actual state of the economy.<sup>62</sup> As long as the merchant is selling a legally marketable good (not, for example, body parts) he or she is functioning properly in the sphere of the marketplace. Justice is served when the nature and amount of the desert fits the achievement.

As noted above, the inherent problem with money is that it tends to invade the other spheres.<sup>63</sup> Walzer says that, given complete rein, “A radically *laissez-faire* economy would be like a totalitarian state, invading every other sphere, dominating every other distributive process. It would transform every social good into a commodity. This is market imperialism.”<sup>64</sup> In light of this, Walzer believes that in some cases redistribution may be necessary. These redistributions could take three forms: blocking some trades, taxation, or challenging property rights. “All three redistributions redraw the line between politics and economics, and they do so in ways that strengthen the sphere of politics—the hand of citizens, that is, not necessarily the power of the state.”<sup>65</sup> For Walzer, the state must play the crucial role of guardian of the boundaries in order to maintain distributive justice.<sup>66</sup> If this role of guardian is expanded too far, however, the state itself can become the boundary-crossing tyrant who must be resisted.

Finally, equality serves as the criterion for distribution in other spheres. Equality is always a comparative standard—equality of what and among which group? In areas such as political rights, equality is the legitimate standard. Each

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<sup>61</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, 105.

<sup>62</sup> “In the marketplace, desert seems to hang on the state of the economy. It cannot really be seen independently from a moment in the economy. The Market does not recognize desert. Initiative, enterprise, innovation, hard work, ruthless dealing, reckless gambling, the prostitution of talent: all these are sometimes rewarded, sometimes not, but the rewards that the market provides, when it provides them, are appropriate to these sorts of effort.” Walzer, *Spheres*, 108-9.

<sup>63</sup> On this see Robert Kuttner’s writings.

<sup>64</sup> Walzer, *Spheres*, 119.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

person who is a citizen has the same rights as those of other citizens. For example, in the political sphere, no one gets two votes because they are strong or rich or beautiful, and all citizens have access to the same judicial processes. Walzer does not however, imply that a purely equal distribution of goods constitutes a fair distribution. Rather, he uses the concept of “complex equality” to indicate that people can be different once their basic civil equality has been recognized. As Walzer writes, “Complex equality is the opposite of totalitarianism: maximum differentiation as against maximum coordination.”<sup>67</sup> Each person is unique, and permitting all persons to be uniquely themselves is the goal of complex equality. For some, this may require a different set of goods than others.

### Strengths and Weaknesses of Walzer’s and Kuyper’s Respective Theories

Since its publication in 1983, Walzer’s theory of complex equality and spheres of justice has provoked many responses, as well as some of his own clarifications. In this section, we will address three alleged weaknesses of Walzer’s theory and one principal weakness of Kuyper’s presentation. At each point, we will show how the weaknesses have been addressed or how one can strengthen the other. Walzer’s perceived weak points are (1) the potential relativism of a theory of rights based upon local customs and understandings, (2) the emptiness of his anthropology, (3) a lack of attention to the roles of church and state in distributive justice. For Kuyper, the principal weakness in extending the notion of sphere sovereignty toward contemporary theories of distributive justice is the vagueness about the nature of the spheres.

Political philosophers have challenged Walzer’s position, arguing that it is merely relativism, or conventionalism. Michael Rustin, for example, contends that Walzer’s pluralistic theory of justice may not guarantee basic rights:

It is, for example, difficult to find grounds within Walzer’s relativist position for intervention to end or mitigate gross social injustices (for example, the oppression of women) where these injustices have not already become the subject of contention within a society. But it is surely unreasonable to assign such overwhelming weight in deciding questions of justice and injustice to internal states of (real or apparent) consensus when these may depend so largely on force or ignorance.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, Brian Barry argues that Walzer’s theory merely recognizes social conventions:

His (Walzer’s) position would best be described not as relativism at all but as conventionalism: the view that justice (what really is just, not merely what is locally called just) is determined for each society by the shared beliefs of the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Rustin, “Equality in Post-Modern Times,” in *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality*, ed. David Miller and Michael Walzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 31.



members of that society about the meanings of the goods that are to be distributed among them. Since these meanings are socially defined, what is just is a matter of convention.<sup>69</sup>

In 1994, Walzer defended his theory against such charges by appealing to a notion of “thick” and “thin” morality.<sup>70</sup> Thin morality is a minimal level of morality that we all understand and agree upon while thick morality applies to particular times and places. As an example of thin morality, Walzer uses the example of those who marched for freedom in Prague before the fall of the Berlin wall. The march was specifically a march for *their* justice in *their* country. Nevertheless, others of us outside of Prague could identify with and perhaps support their effort to achieve that particular instance of justice because we also have a related though particular notion of justice. Thick morality, on the other hand, is that which applies uniquely to particular times and places, and is dependent specifically on unique cultural and political conditions.

Continuing the discussion of Walzer’s theory, we also note a lesser but related charge leveled by the British political philosopher David Miller. While largely agreeing that goods are distributed differently in different spheres, Miller argues that it is problematic to define a sphere of justice on the basis of the nature of the goods within it. For Miller, “Walzer’s approach has a great deal to commend it, but one difficulty it faces is that it seems unable to deal with the case where people seriously and authentically disagree about how justice requires a social good to be allocated.”<sup>71</sup> Miller points to education as a possible example of a social good about whose distribution people may legitimately disagree. On what grounds ought it be distributed—ability to pay, scholastic aptitude, vocational goals, societal needs, family ties? Instead of assuming that the nature of the good in question determines the nature of the distribution, Miller proposes that the grounds for determining what constitutes distributive justice in a given sphere be the type of human relationship that characterizes that sphere. For Miller, three basic *types* of relationships characterize societal spheres: solidaristic communities, instrumental associations, and citizenship.<sup>72</sup>

Miller defines solidaristic communities as those groups that include people who share a common identity and ethos, such as a family, a club, or a religious group. The defining criterion for distributive justice within these types of communities is that of need.<sup>73</sup> The second way of relating socially is by way of

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<sup>69</sup> Brain Barry, “Spherical Justice and Global Injustice,” in *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

<sup>71</sup> David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. “Each community embodies, implicitly or explicitly, a sense of the standards that an adequate human life must meet, and it is in terms of this benchmark that the much-contested distinction between needs, which are matters of justice, and mere wants is drawn.”

“instrumental association,” in which people engage with each other for a specific purpose to achieve a specific goal. This type of association is clearly seen in business relationships between buyers and sellers, or between managers and employees. The characteristic standard for distributive justice in these settings is that of *desert*.<sup>74</sup> The third mode of relating is that of citizenship: “Anyone who is a full member of a society is understood to be the bearer of a set of rights and obligations that together define the status of citizen.”<sup>75</sup>

Miller recognizes that these modes of relating overlap. It may be the case that my grocer, to whom I relate instrumentally in his store, is also my fellow church member whom I might turn to in situations of need, and an equal citizen of my country with whom I might sit on a jury. Nevertheless, each relationship with this same person may be different within distinct spheres and thus be made normal by a different criterion. Miller also recognizes that conflicts may sometimes arise among different spheres.<sup>76</sup> He believes that health care, for example, is a service that seems to stand at the border between instrumental association and citizenship. (It seems to me that community solidarity might also be in play.) Shall, for example, health care be distributed on the grounds of whether you can afford a health insurance policy, or on the basis of your equal standing as a citizen, or on the grounds of your needs as a member of the human family?

Granting that there are plenty of questions remaining on the frontiers, we find that Miller has simplified and clarified the proposal made by Walzer. Rather than having a multiplicity of spheres defined by a multiplicity of goods, we have three types of spheres that correspond to three types of human relationships. Each of these spheres then has a particular and corresponding standard for distributive justice within it: solidarity community—need; citizenship—equality; and instrumental association—desert. Miller’s critique of Walzer has the nature of a friendly amendment, rather than a substantive challenge. Miller’s recommendations refine and strengthen the first noted weakness of Walzer. We now return to the other perceived weaknesses of Walzer’s theory, which will be buttressed by the theological perspective of Kuyper.

For Walzer, the presence of a basic set of rights, apart from those that arise from the nature of the goods to be distributed, is also problematic. This is due to his reluctance to acknowledge the importance of a common human nature for political rights theory. Under criticism, Walzer admitted the legitimacy of this charge, saying,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 28. “Each person comes to the association as a free agent with a set of skills and talents that he deploys to advance its goals. Justice is done when he receives back by way of reward an equivalent to the contribution he makes.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 35.

We need a theory of human rights to set the basic parameters within which distributions take place. The theory would derive presumable, from a view of persons rather than of the things they make, and it would establish limits on how these persons may be treated.<sup>77</sup>

Kuyper's theologically based system may eliminate this weakness. There, we find a view of persons as precious God-imagers who are uniquely responsible and creative.<sup>78</sup> Such an anthropology, derived from Christian tradition, could set the basic-rights parameters that Walzer lacks. It will also permit us to ground our understanding of Miller's community solidarity in an anthropology that assumes that all of humankind has the same nature. As all humans do have the same nature, and as we are all in fact "our brother's keeper," community solidarity may in some ways extend as far as the whole human family.

The third potential weakness we noted in Walzer's theory, is the relative lack of attention to the roles of state or church. While Walzer has written important works on questions such as just-war theory and other issues that involve the state,<sup>79</sup> his treatment of the role of the state in questions of distributive justice is minimal. In itself, Walzer's proposal does not address the nature of the state, nor its relationship to the individual. It proposes that people determine how various types of goods be distributed within particular societies, but leaves the relationship between the individual and the state unclear. Walzer's theory seems to depend on the nature of the goods themselves, with little consideration of the nature and types of human institutions that direct their distribution. As a result, Walzer's theory of distributive justice is susceptible to the aforementioned relativism, or what Kuyper called popular sovereignty.

Kuyper provides us with a plausible theological conceptualization of society that includes the state, the individual, and other spheres. Kuyper's viewpoint permits us to escape the either/or of state totalitarianism that claims that all institutions are authorized and derived from the state (state sovereignty) versus an individualism that urges that all institutions are merely the composites of the wills of individuals (popular sovereignty).

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<sup>77</sup> Walzer, "Response," 293. My reading of Walzer suggests there may be a gap in Walzer's anthropology. It seems he may not have sufficiently developed a "view of persons" (anthropology) that would in fact make it possible for his system to carry such a set of basic rights. A recent critical study of Walzer: Michael Haus, *Die Politische Philosophie Michael Walzer: Kritik, Gemeinschaft, Gerechtigkeit* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000), for example, only speaks of Walzer's view of humanity in relation to particular contexts but does not raise questions of the nature of humankind. (See especially the section on "Gemeinsames Leben und individuelle Zustimmung," 122-27.)

<sup>78</sup> While we did not directly speak of Kuyper's own anthropological views earlier, his writings and his theological tradition certainly do affirm a view of Creation and creature that assume that human persons are created in the "image of God," which would provide grounds for honoring women and men as Godlike.

<sup>79</sup> See e.g., Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

Kuyper, addressed the role of the state at some length. As noted above, his fear is that the state can become the octopus that grasps all things within its reach. Within sphere sovereignty, however, neither the state, nor the church, nor the individual, nor anything besides God alone may become absolute. For Kuyper, as noted above, the state has three crucial roles. First, when different spheres clash, the state compels respect for the boundaries of each. Second, the state defends its weaker members against the strong. And third, the state coerces the cooperation of individuals toward a common good.<sup>80</sup> These three clear roles establish how the state may properly function within its sphere. As such, they fill a lacunae within Walzer's theory. We now turn to the principal weakness in Kuyper's presentation.

Kuyper did not set out to write a philosophical exposition on distributive justice when he provided his address on sphere sovereignty at the inauguration of the Free University. Thus, it is not surprising that his remarks lack the pointedness and clarity of an academic treatise. In particular, Kuyper's conceptualization of spheres can become quite unwieldy. There seems to be no limit to their number or their types. We are also not clear as to whether spheres refer to institutions, or academic disciplines, or relationships, or something else. Thus, on its own, Kuyper's proposal is simply insufficient as a proposal for contemporary distributive justice.<sup>81</sup>

Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*<sup>82</sup> can serve to prune and condense Kuyper's organic and dynamic growth into a workable proposal for distributive justice. Whereas Kuyper's sphere sovereignty was directed primarily at justifying the independence of the Free University, the work of Walzer provides grounds for determining what the basic nature of each sphere is, and which standard of justice shall be used within it. Walzer's theory (with Miller's clarification) shows that relationships in contemporary society can be characterized on the grounds of only three basic standards—solidarity, citizenship, and instrumentality. These three basic types of relationships each then possess an appropriate standard of justice, respectively—need, equality, and desert. This condensation and clarification of the nature of the spheres and their regnant standards permits us to identify types of spheres and name their appropriate norms of justice. Kuyper's organic model alone would not make that possible.

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<sup>80</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 97.

<sup>81</sup> We recognize, of course, that Dooyeweerd and his school have used sphere sovereignty in sophisticated ways, seeing the spheres for the most part as aspects of created reality that are abstracted into the various sciences.

<sup>82</sup> Aided by the writings of David Miller, as noted above.

## Kuyper and Walzer Together

Kuyper and Walzer provide a complementary picture of distributive justice using the concept of spheres. While they address similar issues with similar language, I have found no direct historical link between them.<sup>83</sup> It may well be that the sociopolitical issues that they both address are so common that in seeking a pluralistic approach, they use similar language. Although Walzer is not dependent on Kuyper, each writer does contribute to the other. This concluding section will suggest ways that Kuyper and Walzer together provide a platform for a viable theory of distributive justice.

The two basic questions of distributive justice are these: Who shall receive which of society's benefits and burdens, and, on what grounds? Philosopher Allen Buchanan, for example, writes, "Theories of distributive justice attempt to articulate, order, and justify principles that specify distributions of benefits and burdens (other than punishments)."<sup>84</sup> Philosopher David Miller (cited above) defines distributive ethics in similar terms: "The subject matter of justice is the manner in which benefits and burdens are distributed among men (strictly, sentient beings) whose qualities and relationships can be investigated."<sup>85</sup>

In brief, a theory of distributive justice derived from Kuyper, Walzer, and also Miller would propose: *Distributive justice is a state of affairs occurring when members of solidaristic groups are allotted what they need, members of instrumental groups are allotted what they merit on the basis of their contribution, and citizens are allotted benefits on the basis of their equality.* This proposal largely parallels that which David Miller developed in dialogue with Walzer.<sup>86</sup> By adding the theological underpinnings of Kuyper's sphere sovereignty to the Walzer-Miller proposal, we believe that their contemporary theory can be strengthened and improved.

First, using Kuyper and the Christian theology he espoused permits us to ground our anthropology in a more substantive way than do Walzer and Miller. Using this theological starting point, we describe human beings as created in the image and likeness of God. This combination of human's physical and spiritual nature as part of the image of God provides us with grounds for honoring certain moral claims. We might, for example, claim that all human beings need basic sustenance if they are to function as the re-creators of God's own creative work. This theological starting point also permits us to address basic questions

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<sup>83</sup> I find no references to Kuyper in Walzer's writings. In addition to the works by Walzer cited in this article, I consulted *Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) for possible references to Kuyper. As this title shows, Walzer is fascinated with the English Puritans and their revolution, as was Kuyper. It is interesting to note, that while there may be no direct historical connection, both writers are also deeply grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures

<sup>84</sup> Allen Buchanan, "Justice, Distributive," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (London: Routledge, 2001), 920.

<sup>85</sup> David Miller, *Social Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 19.

<sup>86</sup> David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

that are implied but not addressed within Walzer's proposal for distributive justice. For example: who is the being that merits what they need? Why is it that creatures called "human," are so worthy of respect? Why are human persons responsible for each other? Confessional answers from Christian faith affirmed by Kuyper are available to all of the above questions. Christian faith affirms that all persons are inestimably valuable. Each derives their nature from God, each is a child for whom the Son of God died, and each is a person with whom God desires to live. As humans are immeasurably precious and godlike, doing justice to them is to treat God in his image as we ought.

Related to the anthropological questions above, we may be able to use Kuyper's theology to ground political rights from the equality of all persons before God. The Christian faith understands the human person in relationship to God, to nature, and to fellow persons. As persons who image God, we are equal. As citizens and members of the family of humankind we are also equal. A set of basic human rights, that Walzer seems to lack, may be derived from this religiously supported equality. What kind of rights might this imply? Likely those commonly called negative political rights. These are the rights that protect our lives and some properties equally. They are not based on our participation in one or another local sphere, but on our participation in the human family. Such negative political rights then are also necessary to fulfill humankind's task of "tilling and keeping" the creation.<sup>87</sup> Thus, being like God, and being called to care for aspects of God's creation provides a basis for justifying the basic negative rights that Walzer omits or underemphasizes.

Second, as suggested above, Kuyper's theological starting point provides a transcendent lodestar that may serve to guide navigators in other spheres. Such a transcendent point of reference guarantees that no human and earthly sphere can become the absolute norm or good; the final norm and good is God alone. Ultimately, the good of each sphere is derived from the good of the One who is beyond them. No sphere, or aspect of it may become absolute; to permit this would be idolatrous. Kuyper's reflection on the proper role of the State,<sup>88</sup> *vis à vis* the other spheres also clarifies and strengthens Walzer's proposal.

Third, the fact that the spheres are set in place by God grants them an origin and status apart from the church or the state. Spheres such as business, or family, or sport are valid and independent apart from their relationship to church or state. From the Kuyperian perspective, neither the church nor the state is social institutions that authorize other spheres. Only God does so. Each sphere is genuine, legitimate, and inviolable in its own right. Institutions such

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<sup>87</sup> Genesis 2:15. Here, Kuyper's and other explicitly Christian traditions may provide surer footing for basic human rights than many other theories can. While some (such as Alan Gewirth) have attempted to construct a basis for human rights on other grounds, the Jewish and Christian belief that humans are unique, creative, and responsible seems capable of bearing the weight of heavy claims made in favor of the value of human life and the rights needed to protect it.

<sup>88</sup> Kuyper, *Stone Lectures*, 97. Kuyper's italics.

as church or state are not needed to validate the institutions or activities of other spheres of life because each is an integral part of creation and finds its legitimacy in the very structure of God's creation. All derive their legitimacy from the creator alone. Each goes forward with its own development, without need for authorization from other institutions.

Fourth, Kuyper provides bases for the social role of the church. This role supports claims to benefits or burdens within society based on claims of need and equality. Following Calvin, Kuyper insists that the church is to challenge those who have received much to use their goods in service of those who have little.<sup>89</sup> The church is also to distribute some goods on the basis of need. Finally, the basic equality among human persons seen at the communion table is to serve as ground for greater material equity in society.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the church's focus on the spiritual, does not imply that the church has nothing to say about how material benefits and burdens ought to be distributed. Following Kuyper, the sphere of faith with the church as leading institution becomes a key player in the process of just distribution

Finally, a strength of a theory of justice that unites Kuyper and Walzer is its comprehensiveness. All types of human interaction appear to be covered by the three basic types of spheres, and appropriate norms for distributing benefits and burdens within them are also universally applicable. Those three types of relationships: instrumental, solidaristic, and citizenship, seem to cover all the ways in which humans relate (some relationships are no doubt hybrids of these three).<sup>91</sup> The corresponding norms for distribution: desert, need, and equality, also seem to be complete enough to address all relevant questions of distributive justice. The Kuyper-Walzer viewpoint recognizes that the rights of the individual must be open to broader concepts of good, for both the individual and society. As noted above in reference to the popular sovereignty of the French Revolution, Kuyper does not permit the individual's political rights to become the sole basis for all others.<sup>92</sup> Rather, the rights of the individual are realized within a moral system that includes numerous spheres, individuals, and institutions.

In sum, the theologically based sphere sovereignty of Kuyper can provide important contributions to contemporary political theory. Thanks to Kuyper, we have anthropological and theological underpinnings that can ground and extend a spherical theory of justice such as that of Michael Walzer. Together, Kuyper, Walzer, and Miller unintentionally collaborate to provide bases for a workable, contemporary, pluralistic theory of distributive justice.

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<sup>89</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 695. Kuyper, like Calvin, seems to have in mind the needs of his fellow believers as a first responsibility, followed by those outside of his faith community.

<sup>90</sup> Skillen, *The Problem of Poverty*, 40-41.

<sup>91</sup> I do not know of, nor can I imagine a human relationship that is not characterized by some combination of solidarity, citizenship, or instrumentality.

<sup>92</sup> Skillen, *The Problem of Poverty*, 43-44; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 87-88.