
Abstract

Civil Society and Sphere Sovereignty: Calvinist Understandings of Differentiated Society

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We consider the relationship between the state and the civil society that is consisted of differentiated associations or communities with *sui generis* rights and responsibilities in the civil society: the latter are innately unique to each community. Each of the units belongs to a sphere of society, of which the authority and competence is irreducibly proper to itself; as such it is to be thought of as being autonomous from the control of the state in terms of its own internal lawmaking. In this vein of thought, we discuss the idea of subsidiarity in the Catholic tradition and the idea of sphere sovereignty borne fruit in the Calvinist tradition; both ideas are germane to the understanding of those relationships. They acknowledge that the foremost purpose of the state lies in the creation of the necessary conditions for citizens and communities to complete their lives based on their original authority, rights, competence, and responsibilities. We examine both principles—*inter alia* more extensively the Calvinist ideas of sphere sovereignty—by juxtaposing them with one another. We argue that Dutch Neo-Calvinist philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd’s ontological notion of sphere sovereignty, among the ideas of the political theorists—such as Johannes Althusius, Christian Wolff, Tocqueville, Jacques Maritain, Abraham Kuyper—discussed in this paper, can be the most effective theory for the diagnosis of both the autonomy of social spheres and their adequate relationship to the state.