

# Settling the “Social Question”: Three Variants of Modern Christian Social Thought

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This article examines three historic Christian responses to the “social question” prominent in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Christian social thought: the sovereignty, the Thomist, and the neo-Calvinist movements. Through a careful treatment of each movement’s core features, specifically exploring their core principles and views of nature, human nature, social organization, the meaning of law, and the aim of politics, each group’s positions are compared and contrasted, highlighting the cooperation between the Thomists and the neo-Calvinists against the sovereignty movement and socialism in the Netherlands.

## Introduction

The multidimensional “social question,” which incited so many different interpretations and proposed remedies, is arguably a very good illustration of heterogeneous Christian approaches to any given social problem. The miserable fate of the working classes became a pressing social issue in 1870–1914, preceding the horrendous fratricide that would eventually tear apart Abraham Kuyper’s “Christian Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Industrialization uprooted local peasants who used to belong to local communities and turned them into industrial workers, thereby upsetting the cultural complex of Christian Europe. Under the pathological conditions of uprootedness, anomie, alienation, exploitation, commodification, and a general nihilism, workers tended to give up their former religious and cultural identity to become cogs in a huge machine. They gradually developed a class consciousness, and nations turned into battlefields of capital and labor, bourgeois and proletariat. Workers started organizing themselves as a working class movement in labor unions, parties, and conferences.

In the 1870s, Christian movements increasingly became alarmed and explicitly reacted against, on the one hand, what they conceived to be the seductive power of socialism, which was alluring workers to materialism and religious unbelief, and on the other hand, to the “hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition” as is mentioned in *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>2</sup> In this period, Christian social thought—that is, Christian thinking about society, economics, and politics—began to take a more definite shape or, rather, more definite shapes. Although Christian churches, communities, and organizations have throughout the centuries been involved in poverty alleviation and care for the sick, they have generally been wary of judgments concerning the sociopolitical sphere, inasmuch as they themselves have been under siege since the French Revolution. The conceived *public* responsibility of churches and Christian associations to promote common justice and human liberty and, hence, to actively get involved in public affairs is explicitly expressed in *Rerum Novarum*. In the Netherlands, this Christian duty was embraced by three prominent Christian social-thought movements, namely, the sovereignty, the Thomist, and the neo-Calvinist movements (see fig. 1).

| <b>Core Features</b> | <b>Sovereignty Thinkers</b>     | <b>Thomists</b>    | <b>Neo-Calvinists</b>      |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Core principle       | Sovereignty                     | Subsidiarity       | Sphere sovereignty         |
| Nature               | State of nature                 | Teleological       | Christological             |
| Human nature         | Presocial                       | Rational animality | Symbiotic                  |
| Social organization  | Contract                        | Community          | Sphere                     |
| Meaning of law       | Will of the sovereign           | Natural Law        | Cosmonomos                 |
| Aim of politics      | Pacification of civil conflicts | Common good        | Consecration of the cosmos |

**FIGURE 1: Three Rival Versions of Christian Social Thought**

In this article, these three Christian movements are introduced as three rival Christian social thought currents that addressed the social question as a public issue that had moral, religious, political, and cultural dimensions. The new kinds of social sufferings and disorders were seen to be the aftermaths of the French and Industrial Revolutions and the fruits of distorted orders. They were symptomatic of a politico-theological problem as well. These three movements saw themselves

fighting for the political and cultural revitalization of Christian Europe with regard to the suffering of workers under the new industrial, capitalist conditions. The main argument of this article is that they provide different assessments of the social question, resting on distinctive Christian worldviews, concepts, and political and cultural aspirations. They presume different orders and views of reality, particularly regarding humankind, nature, and state and, therefore, they promote different types of statehood and different sets of virtues deemed necessary to settle the social question and to uphold the Christian European complex. Three different visions of Christian Europe and its future are, therefore, propounded.

## The Sovereignty Movement

The social question arose in the context of a weak sovereign state struggling for its legitimacy against revolutionary forces such as socialism and communism.<sup>3</sup> The sovereign state, defined by its constitutional independence from any other power, had been instituted for bracketing the creedal civil wars of the Western European Reformation. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, in which the legitimacy of sovereign statehood had been recognized, there had been no devastating wars on European soil, and Christian European culture could flourish after the wars. Since the French Revolution, however, the sovereign state could no longer live up to its Christian guardianship, the neutral arbiter, defender, and protector of the weak; instead it increasingly became an instrument for advancing ideological purposes. State power turned into an object of covetousness for revolutionary movements, including liberals, nationalists, and socialists. From a sovereignty perspective, the social question is symptomatic of a weakened sovereign state that is no longer able to live up to its original function in Christian Europe and, consequently, results in anarchy.

The social question was a very strong motive for the sovereignty thinkers to try to restrengthen sovereign statehood as the guardian of Christian Europe. The struggle among workers, bourgeois, socialists, and liberals was a civil war, which necessitated the intervention of a sovereign state free from any ideology. Jean Bodin, the original theorizer of the sovereignty principle, insists that the sovereign is “the earthly image” of God, “the great sovereign,” who, by his love commandments, commands peacefulness in Christian Europe.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Thomas Hobbes identifies the sovereign as “*the mortal god*, to which we owe under the immortal God, our peace and defense.”<sup>5</sup> While Christ is the immortal peace-giver, the sovereign state is the mortal pacifier—Christ’s representative on earth in Christian Europe. The latter could only thrive when the creedal civil wars of the Western European Reformation became pacified through the interventions

of the mortal god. Indeed, Schmitt argues that the more effectively the sovereign state manages to pacify, that is, the more absolutist it is, the more splendid are the cultural manifestations of Christian Europe.<sup>6</sup> European culture, as manifested through the minds of Suarez, Bacon, Galilei, Kepler, Descartes, Grotius, Hobbes, Spinoza, Pascal, Leibniz, and Newton, Schmitt explains, flourished in the seventeenth century when the sovereign state had the most absolute power on earth, only accountable to God and, thus, also bound to the divine commandments. This absolute sovereign state was certainly not an instrument to satisfy the whims and wills of its subjects. The mortal sovereign's distribution of civil rights had taken away the motives for religious extremism during the Reformation; welfare entitlements made working-class radicalism superfluous. Otto von Bismarck was the first to establish insurance and compensation schemes for workers in case of sickness (1883) and work injuries (1884) as well as worker's old-age pensions (1889). The health insurance scheme was introduced in the British state in 1911 and in the French state in 1930. The contributory pension scheme was established in 1925 in the United Kingdom and in 1910 in France.<sup>7</sup> By resolving the social question through its own legal institutions, the sovereign state simultaneously also strengthened its power over civil society—its labor unions, political parties, and corporate interest groups—and the labor and capital markets.<sup>8</sup> Through such continuous supervision, Christian Europe was to be safeguarded against conflicts among such groups.

For sovereignty thinkers as different as Maurice Hauriou, Ernst Troeltsch, James Bryce, and Carl Schmitt, Christian Europe could only flourish through the sovereign state because the sovereign—king or people—was an agent of God by definition. In other words, in order to qualify as sovereign, the sovereign state was strictly tied to God's will and independent from all other communities and associations, including the Church or churches, labor unions, political parties, and corporate interest groups, that arose in reaction to the social question. The sovereign state is the only power that can pacify civil conflicts and that can create the conditions of civil peace under which Christian European culture may flourish. In this sense, the sovereign state must supersede and transcend the violence inherent in nature. Indeed, for sovereignty thinkers, nature is the antithesis of Christian Europe. Nature is a violent condition, characterized by barbarism, fear, poverty, solitude, ignorance, and cruelty.<sup>9</sup> The sovereign state is erected to escape from this state of nature and to avoid collapsing back into it, as happened in the creedal civil wars of the Reformation. According to sovereignty thinkers, the state of nature can only be avoided when the mortal god is supreme in this world and, accordingly, holds the legal right to make and abrogate laws, determine war and peace, know and judge all controversies, and

elect all officials. The theological, religious, and political disputes expressed the impotency of individual human reason to decide in such affairs. Instead, it is the mortal god that is the foundation of Christian Europe and the basis of all legal rights and duties. Law becomes the equivalent of the sovereign’s will, derived from Christ’s will. Once a sovereign state is established, and people come to live outside the state of nature and inside Christian Europe, they can enjoy a safe, humane, and prosperous condition. As Hobbes says, “the safety of the people is the supreme Law.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the “death of God” in the nineteenth century is also the death of the mortal god, which entails lawlessness, anarchy, violence, and injustice, that is, barbarism and cultural regress.

The state of nature, in terms of violence, floods, draughts, famines, diseases, ignorance, cold, heat, hunger, darkness, space, and so forth, is mastered, and after that, safety can be secured through the discovery of the laws of nature. Knowledge of the laws of nature—for instance, the law of gravity that has been discovered by Newton—makes it possible to overcome the same nature and thereby to safeguard Christian Europe. Science and technology make it possible to conquer ignorance, coldness, darkness, disease, distance, and wilderness. The discoveries of the mechanisms of book printing, steam, electricity, medicine, and the compass made such a conquest possible. The science of nature is, accordingly, a sovereign’s tool for organizing civil peace. In a sovereign state, subjects are called to rely on scientific discoveries for solving the problems and uncertainties that are inherent to nature.<sup>11</sup> The mastery of nature enables legal subjects to live in safety, security, peace, prosperity, tranquility, domesticity, and comfort. The mastery of nature also means the mastery of the violent human nature and its transformation into civil virtuousness, expressed in decency, good manners and politeness, punctuality, respect, hygiene, law-abidance, entrepreneurial spirit, philanthropy, and so forth. Such civil passions and virtues enable the thriving of civil society and markets and make any authoritative order of communities, traditions, and hierarchies quite redundant, if not dangerous to such prosperity and peace.

Civil virtues protect and prevent legal subjects from returning to the state of nature: The laws of the sovereign state are designed to make subjects peaceful and to make them control their brutal passions and natural lusts. Slaves were the men, women, and children who had to flee each other’s violence, but free and equal are all men, women, and children who stand for the one and only mortal sovereign. Freedom, the highest value in the cultural complex of Christian Europe, is realized through the unconditional obedience to this sovereign, who alone holds the power to keep them out of the state of nature and shape social conditions under which freedom becomes possible. For the sovereignty thinkers,

the social question is one of disobedience, lawlessness, and godlessness: The supreme Law has been ignored and discarded for the sake of unbridled natural lusts. The sovereign state, absolutist or constitutional, had to regain its power and authority in order to enforce its supreme Law and master the state of nature in which labor and capital fought each other. In this state of nature, neither human nor divine laws could rule the hearts and minds of men. The social question was, accordingly, to be settled through social legislation and law enforcement, to compel workers and employers to leave the state of nature and accept a civilized state of working together.

## The Thomist Movement

When Pope Leo XIII finally decided to explicitly refute the false teachings promoted by crafty agitators who were inciting people to revolt, he was very much aware that he was walking on thin ice.<sup>12</sup> The principle of state sovereignty, which has been dominant since the seventeenth century, made it nearly impossible for churches and other communities to say anything about the laws prevailing in West European societies. Yet Pope Leo XIII was very much determined to say something about the rights and duties of all those involved in the social question because the so-called sovereign state had been quite impotent to prevent such a situation and to resolve it. The pope's argument rests on the Thomist principle of natural law, which is incompatible with the concept of a *sovereign* state, which itself depends on the idea of a state of nature that must be transcended. Instead, nature, according to the pope and to Thomists generally, provides the laws, rights, and duties to which individuals, societies, governments, and all reasonable living beings have to conform if they wish to live according to their proper ends (*telos*). The Thomist movement had, at least in Western European societies, lost much of its influence during the creedal wars of the Reformation and the corresponding development of sovereign statehood.<sup>13</sup> However, by 1870, Thomism had regained some of its influence in a context of declining state absolutism and the making of written constitutions after 1848. This enabled Thomists to voice their alternative theology, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. Thomists such as Henri Lacordaire, Wilhelm von Ketteler, Claudio Jeannet, Albert de Mun, Charles Périn, and Henry Manning rejected the modern sovereignty principle for depending on a distorted philosophy of nature and theology.<sup>14</sup> As Jacques Maritain would put it, “the inner logic of the concept was destined to make Sovereignty free from every—even divine—limitation”; therefore, the sovereignty principle “must be scrapped.”<sup>15</sup>

Instead of the sovereignty of the state, Thomists promote the classical subsidiarity principle, which rests on an ancient, teleological or Aristotelian metaphysics of nature.<sup>16</sup> Nature is not some chaotic and barbarous condition that must be avoided at all costs, but it is a preestablished order that is ordained by God’s eternal law (*lex aeterna*). Nature and natural things are called to perfection through some kind of kinesis (*via naturalis*) whereby the imperfect substance grows toward its perfect form, its proper station (*telos, bonum proprium*). According to natural law principles, all activity has to follow the dictum of nature if it is to be good.<sup>17</sup> Acts that are against nature (*para physin, contra naturam*) create chaos and upset the natural, good order. A seed, a nonreasonable thing, follows the law of nature when it grows and becomes a tree, its end, with or without subsidiary assistance (for instance, by someone giving water or cultivating the soil). Humans, reasonable beings, follow the law of nature when they grow into truly virtuous persons, with subsidiary assistance, by cultivating the intellect and supporting faith. Communities are ordered by the law of nature when they provide the conditions for human beings to develop into virtuous persons. According to the principle of subsidiarity, it is a law of nature wherein a higher authority ought to abstain from performing those acts that fall within the jurisdiction of a lower authority.<sup>18</sup> The ends, rights, and duties of all organisms differ, and it is in accordance to natural law to respect these. However, higher authorities do have the duty, commanded by natural law, to provide subsidiary assistance (*subsidium*) when a lower authority is not able to govern itself and, therefore, not able to reach its *telos* unaided. In other words, authority, as structured by the subsidiarity principle, serves as freedom in Christian Europe.<sup>19</sup> This principle of subsidiarity would later be used as the basis for justifying solidarity in later encyclical letters.

Pope Leo XIII, in line with Thomism, argued that communities, including states, families, and factories, could only be communities if they were structured according to the subsidiarity principle.<sup>20</sup> The social question was to be settled through the restoration of communities such as families and worker-employer relationships, with the corresponding rights and duties of individual members, and the formation of new communities in the manner of trade unions and new institutions and subsequent collective bargaining. All these authorities were to get actively involved in the process of solving the social question, which further made the very concept of the sovereign state quite incoherent. On the occasion of *Rerum Novarum*’s fortieth anniversary, Pope Pius XI was the first pope to explicitly emphasize the “subsidiary function”<sup>21</sup> of all authorities, including state authorities, in the resolution of the social question. By the time Pope John Paul II wrote his *Centesimus Annus*, “the principle of subsidiarity”<sup>22</sup> had been firmly established as a “rival version of political enquiry.”<sup>23</sup> During a colloquium held

in 1989, the president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, stated that “on the political level, subsidiarity is the keystone of the organization of life in common” and that “subsidiarity is expressed in the Treaty of Rome.”<sup>24</sup> In 1992, the principle of subsidiarity was introduced in the Treaty of Maastricht as the European Union’s (EU) constitutive principle of political community development.

Because beings are called to move toward their proper stations, the purpose of all authorities, including all human law (*lex humana*), is to promote these ends. The principle of subsidiarity orders the relationships among the various authorities that constitute social reality. A law can only be law, that is, legitimate as long as it accords with natural law and supports the different ends of all beings. Furthermore, nothing less than reason is able to discern the *telos* of these beings. Of course, reason, according to the Thomists, has to undergo some trials and transformations before being able to see and know the laws of nature. It is reason or wisdom cultivated within Christian communities, themselves sustained by Christian traditions, which is able to slowly discover the divine-natural order and the *telos* of beings in this order. Authorities, which are natural and divinely ordained, are legitimate as long as they govern in accordance with the teleological nature of things.<sup>25</sup> In this way, those who accept the duties and rights imposed by their positions are expected to possess both *sophia* (wisdom) and *phronesis* (prudence), which enable them to understand the movements of nature and prevent them from violating natural law. Governments are illegitimate and, hence, unjust, if they ignore or fail to discover the natural laws that are meant to govern all relationships among beings. In order to legislate and settle the social question in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, authorities need to discern the natural laws that are valid even if circumstances have radically changed, for instance through scientific developments or technological innovations.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, for Thomists, the state is a work of reason that implies recognition of natural law, that is, rational order of subsidiarity.<sup>27</sup>

From the Thomist perspective, the very idea that the social question is to be solved by strengthening the absolute power of the state is highly presumptuous and imprudent. It is naïve and, even more, unjust to think that a so-called sovereign state, on its own, emancipated from all traditions and the insights inherent in them, could ascertain the *telos* of so many different beings and communities and legislate and create institutions accordingly. The sovereign state, by claiming absolute power, negates such a thing as the principle of subsidiarity and, therefore, violates natural law. The Thomists hold that each person attains his or her *telos* within communities, through the cultivation of cardinal virtues, which in turn sustain the communities of Christian Europe, including families, guilds, com-

munes, parish councils, corporate bodies, cities, provinces, nations, monasteries, and universities.<sup>28</sup> However, the sovereign state perceives such communities as dangerous to peace, because they are seen to have fueled the creedal wars. As a result, their authorities are subdued to that of state authority, and their areas of jurisdiction are determined by the latter. In such a way, sovereignty thinkers promote individualism and undermine communities, thereby also destroying the hearths where virtues are cultivated.<sup>29</sup> The divergence between the virtues needed for sovereign statehood and the Thomist virtues reflects their different theologies and anthropologies, that is, their different visions of human beings, including their capacities or incapacities to will and do the good. The sovereignty thinkers have a more negative, pessimist anthropology, which is directly related to the experience of wars. The virtues that they advocate and deem possible are necessary to avoid evil and harm, and, in this sense, can be called minimalist; those of the Thomists are meant to promote the good because they assume that humans, as reasonable beings, are capable of willing the good; in this sense, these virtues can be typified as maximalist. The social question is, therefore, not simply a conflict that has to be pacified at all costs but is one that concerns cultivation, justice, the common good, and the salvation of souls.

## The Neo-Calvinist Movement

Similarly to the Thomists and differently from the sovereignty thinkers, the neo-Calvinists perceived the social question and the various proposed solutions as being against nature, that is, against divine sovereignty. In the Netherlands, the leader of the neo-Calvinist movement, Abraham Kuyper, nicknamed “the Dutch Calvin,” qualified the social question as the product of a revolutionary worldview, which has been propounded by the enlightenment movement. Kuyper founded a new newspaper (the antirevolutionary newspaper *De Standaard*) in 1872, a new political party (the Antirevolutionary Party) in 1879, and a new university (the Free University of Amsterdam) in 1880. He fueled a new schism within the Dutch Reformed Church and established a new Calvinist Church (*Doleantie*) in 1886 to try to counter the revolutionary spirit of the age. Kuyper, inspired by his mentor, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, observed that, after the French Revolution, the sovereign state had become the instrument for furthering the revolutionary worldview, which was actually a “philosophy of unbelief.”<sup>30</sup> Having left God, the Almighty Sovereign, the sovereign state was no longer a mortal god but an ideological construct used for non-Christian purposes.

In his speech delivered at the occasion of the opening of the Free University, Kuyper introduced the principle of sphere sovereignty as a radical alternative

to state sovereignty. The Free University was to be free from the revolutionary political ideologies, as well as from the dogmas of the churches, in order to serve Jesus Christ. According to Kuyper, the state sovereignty principle rested on a distorted metaphysics, which also included theology. Nature, or the cosmos, for neo-Calvinists, consists of spheres, such as family, religion, science, art, nations, jurisprudence, and trade. These are neither contractual associations existing under the laws of the sovereign state nor communities governed by natural law but are what Johannes Althusius called “symbiotic associations.”<sup>31</sup> These spheres are sovereign in themselves, that is, they have their own laws.<sup>32</sup> The laws of the spheres are ordained by what Althusius called God’s “law of symbiosis”<sup>33</sup> and what Kuyper called “the innate law of life.”<sup>34</sup> In both cases, it is a law that relates organisms that are different from each other and yet are able to interact with each other without subjugating each other. Kuyper rejects both the sovereignty idea that state power or any other sphere is absolute and the Thomist idea that interdependent communities constitute a whole or contribute toward a common good. God has created a very complex and wonderful order in which pluralism is meant to thrive and that the Reformation has recovered from the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. The different spheres that constantly differentiate themselves further from one another reflect the plurality inherent in creation, and they must be accepted and loved as part of this same created order. God’s love for his creatures permeates all spheres, which also implies that the latter are to serve him. By stressing the presence of God in his created cosmos and “the cosmological significance” of Christ, the neo-Calvinist theology diverges not only from that of the sovereignty thinkers who tend to stress the strict separation between the temporal cosmos and eternal divine laws but also from the Thomists who distinguish (without separating) nature and grace.<sup>35</sup>

More than any other neo-Calvinist philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd has theorized the concept of sphere sovereignty by postulating a *cosmonomos*, the divine law that permeates the whole cosmos, including all the ever-increasing spheres of this same temporal reality. Dooyeweerd emphasizes “the cosmic constitution of sphere sovereignty.”<sup>36</sup> According to Dooyeweerd, spheres are independent of human arbitrariness, placed in the divine world-order, and governed by Jesus Christ who, in his view, is “the Root of the reborn cosmos!”<sup>37</sup> For Dooyeweerd, the core of neo-Calvinism is “the confession of God’s sovereignty in Christ Jesus in which is included the recognition of sphere sovereignty of the various societal relationships.”<sup>38</sup> Sphere sovereignty, accordingly, “rests solely and completely upon the structure proper to the societal relationships, founded in the temporal world-order by God’s sovereign will.”<sup>39</sup> In order to distinguish his concept of law from the Thomist and neo-scholastic concept of natural law, with

the corresponding idea of a teleological order, Dooyeweerd originated the idea of the fifteen modal aspects that cosmically constitute the spheres. Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects include the physical-energetic, kinematic-motional, spatial, arithmetic, biotic, logical-analytical, cultural-historical, symbolic or linguistic, social, sensitive-formative, economic, aesthetic, juridical, moral, and pistic (Christian faith). These aspects are enclosed in “law-spheres”: The arithmetic aspect obeys numeric laws, the physical aspect obeys the law of gravity, the biotic aspect obeys genetic laws, the social aspect obeys social laws, the linguistic aspect obeys the law of syntax, and so forth. The fifteen modal aspects are the cosmic aspects of Christ: “In Him all these aspects of temporal reality find their true fulfillment of meaning, their deeper root-unity in the concentration upon service of God with the whole heart.”<sup>40</sup>

The modal aspects of the spheres are unique and cosmically constituted. They can neither be confused with each other nor replace each other without creating an unjust, chaotic, lawless, and blasphemous order. Dooyeweerd’s definition of injustice, chaos, illegitimacy, and blasphemy, then, is the denial of sphere sovereignty. As he put it, the “denial of sphere-sovereignty is the immediate consequence whenever one chooses a starting point for a world and life view in temporal reality”<sup>41</sup>—starting points such as human reason or will. The social question is a result of precisely this denial in the sense that the conflict between capital and worker emerges within the context of industrial development in which the sphere of trade, largely determined by the economic aspects, illegitimately comes to imperialize other spheres. Real development, according to neo-Calvinists, refers to the differentiation of spheres in history, which also implies increased religious consciousness of the diversity of spheres—a consciousness manifested by the development of the neo-Calvinist movement in a differentiated Christian Europe.<sup>42</sup> For instance, in “pagan” Europe, the family was still undifferentiated and enclosed nearly all modal aspects. The differentiation of such a totality, typical for pagan societies, led to the different *sovereign* spheres of trade, state, guild, nation, and church.<sup>43</sup> The possibilities of such spheres might be pre-established, but it is only in historical time that they actually arise. In other words, the development of the spheres does not obey some teleological law and does not serve a common good, besides God himself of course, in the sense of obeying and glorifying Jesus Christ. There is no whole of constitutive parts because the spheres are constantly differentiating, nor “unity in diversity.” The constant generation of new spheres incites awe and gratitude for the diversity of a never-ending creation.<sup>44</sup>

Justice, that is, obedience to the *cosmonomos*, the neo-Calvinists stress, is to discern the spheres and to respect their respective sovereignties. In other words,

all these spheres should thrive according to their own laws and should not be forced to live according to laws that are not divine ordinances. Anarchy is the condition in which the laws of sovereign spheres are disregarded and subjugated to the laws proper to one specific sphere, as in the case of the state. According to the neo-Calvinists, the sovereign state became a godless and despotic power after the French Revolution. It had become the instrument of those who wanted to reduce reality to a few aspects and to a few laws only. The very concept of the sovereignty of the state denies the existence and, hence, the sovereignty of other aspects of reality. A state erected to master the cosmos is nothing less than an act of impiety and injustice toward God, doomed to trigger moral chaos and intellectual disorientation. The purpose of statehood, as Althusius has formulated, is a “happy symbiosis [*felix symbiosis*],” that is, the nourishing and conserving of “a pious and just life among the symbiotes.”<sup>45</sup> The social question is a product of intellectual, moral, and political confusion and could only be resolved by recognizing the existence of spheres and of their sovereignties, which, of course, further requires the belief in Jesus Christ and a God-created cosmos.

It is, therefore, not so surprising that the neo-Calvinists fought so ardently against unbelief, hypocritical faith, and religious laxity. Those who had been taking advantage of new economic, technological, and scientific developments at the expense of their fellow-beings, the workers, had ignored the *cosmonomos*, the divine law that commanded the love of God and one’s neighbors. The relationship between employers, the capital-owners, and workers not only involved an economic aspect but also moral and pistic aspects. Kuyper, in his Christian Social Congress speech, exhorted the poor, the “Christian workers” as he called them, not to be tempted by mammon and by the promises of liberalism, which had in fact sapped their “belief, life courage, and moral resistance.”<sup>46</sup> The poor had a much higher calling, namely, they were “called to consecrate the Cosmos to His [God’s] glory.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, the poor were better able to do this than the rich, who, Kuyper insisted, deserved not so much class envy as pity because it was more difficult for them to convert and turn to Christ.<sup>48</sup> However, neither Kuyper nor Dooyeweerd claimed that Christian faith (*pistis*) would be enough to get out of the revolutionary whirlpool. They were not so naïve to believe that the liberal and socialist ideologies would just disappear. The urgent steps to be taken were juridical in order to redemarcate the areas of jurisdiction of sovereign spheres like families and universities and recognize the new labor-related spheres that industrialization has brought about. Kuyper, therefore, promoted the establishment of councils of labor and councils of industry, which would negotiate wages and working conditions together. Workers could no longer wait, not a day and not an hour, Kuyper stressed, and their fate was unacceptable in his “baptized Europe.”<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

The three currents of Christian social thought and their movements shared the common worry about socialism that threatened to destroy “Christian Europe,” however different the latter might have been in the three theoretical frameworks. They also acted as countermovements to Christian socialism, associated with men like Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley who tried to rephrase and solve the social question according to their own ideologies.

According to the sovereignty thinkers, socialism necessarily leads to a violent state of nature by destroying the sole power, namely the sovereign state, capable of shaping a civilized human condition. The socialists, on the other hand, claim that the sovereign state is a bourgeois state that promotes capitalist interests at the expense of the workers. The social question, from the sovereignty perspective, is to be solved by making workers legal subjects who are entitled to certain rights and social safety.

This solution is far too one-sided according to the Thomists, who perceive both state sovereignty and socialism as violations of natural law. Socialism presumes a very narrow philosophical anthropology that ignores any natural order, natural rights, and natural laws, promotes class hatred, and destroys community life. The sovereignty thinkers, according to the Thomists, though being Christians, make the mistake of strictly separating the temporal from the eternal, therefore ignoring that the temporal has implications for the eternal fate of souls, and vice versa that the temporal is not devoid of the divine. According to the socialists, the Thomists long for a social order in which the elitist state is the head of an in-egalitarian Christian Europe and in which the poor are legitimately kept poor. Thomists hold that workers’ dignity is to be guaranteed within communities, in which everyone is given his or her due, which might well differ from that of someone else. The neo-Calvinists also have trouble accepting the Thomist order, which Dooyeweerd saw as some relic of the medieval ages. Only a Christian order, which is based on the law of symbiosis and, hence, recognizes irreconcilable differences, can guarantee a dignified life to workers and others.

Despite their divergences, the Thomist and neo-Calvinist movements joined forces to combat the absolutism of nineteenth-century liberalism, which had become the dominant bourgeois revolutionary ideology of the sovereign state. Wilhelm von Ketteler, a main source of inspiration for *Rerum Novarum*, insists that “liberalism exploits the basest passions of the people as a means to subjugate them.”<sup>50</sup> Van Prinsterer’s *Unbelief and Revolution* and Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism* are one giant attack on liberalism, which, in their view, is grounded in non-Christian principles such as popular sovereignty, sovereign will, universal

suffrage, and social contract. Christian Europe is not a market society, as liberals would have it. The liberal view of the market is distorted, indeed godless.<sup>51</sup> For Thomists, the market ought to be a marketplace organized in and by communities, and cannot be a separate, contractual realm devoid of morality, that is, of the virtues. Similarly, for neo-Calvinists, the market involves not only the economic aspect, but also the moral, aesthetic, juridical, arithmetic, and pistic aspects. At the same time, the sovereignty of all spheres also implies that the nonmarket spheres—family, science, art, and the nation—cannot be subordinated to the market sphere.<sup>52</sup>

In the Dutch political arena, the Thomist and neo-Calvinist movements jointly tried to counter the power of unbelief in the ideological movements after the French Revolution, including liberalism, nationalism, and socialism—movements that did not recognize Christ as the Governor of all governments on the earth. Confronted with such revolutionary movements, Thomism and neo-Calvinism failed to convince those without Christian belief: *cosmonomos* and sphere sovereignty are just as difficult to discern or demonstrate as the Thomist natural law and the subsidiarity principle. The founding father of Dutch Catholic party politics and promoter of *Rerum Novarum*, Herman Schaepman and Kuyper's Antirevolutionary Party established a political alliance against the liberals and the socialists in the name of Christ. The coalition managed to break liberal rule by 1900 and pursued a Christian social agenda. Kuyper did believe that neo-Calvinism signified a "higher stage of religious development" than Thomism, which, in his view, "represents an older and hence lower stage of development in the history of mankind."<sup>53</sup> He also held that the French Revolution and the corresponding inauguration of the social question took place in "Roman Catholic territory."<sup>54</sup> Yet, the Thomist approach to the social question in *Rerum Novarum* expressed, for Kuyper, a matured thinking about concrete social problems in the light of Christian faith. These two Christian social-thought movements eventually, in 1980, merged in the Christian Democratic Party.

## Notes

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), 29.
2. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), 3.
3. The era of sovereign statehood, Carl Schmitt observes, is "an epoch from 1492 to 1890." See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press, 2003), 148.

4. Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty: Four Chapters from The Six Books of the Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46, 50.
5. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. John Plamenatz (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), 176.
6. Carl Schmitt, *Das Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1963), 82.
7. Ralf Dahrendorf, *The Modern Social Conflict: The Politics of Liberty*, rev. 2nd ed. (London: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 52.
8. Carl Schmitt notes how, after World War I, civil society managed to gain control over the sovereign state, which entailed the loss of the constitutional independence of the sovereign state. It was no longer sovereign in its policies but had become dependent on parties, unions, and lobbyists. See Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 50.
9. Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive, Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 34.
10. Hobbes, *De Cive*, 157.
11. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 201.
12. Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 2.
13. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 151.
14. Romanus Cessario, *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2005).
15. Jacques Maritain, “The Concept of Sovereignty,” *The American Political Science Review* 44, no. 2 (1950): 354, 357.
16. Chantal Millon-Delsol, *L’Etat Subsidaire: Ingérence et non-ingérence de l’Etat: le Principe de Subsidiarité aux Fondements de l’Histoire Européenne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 12.
17. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 171.
18. Thomas C. Behr, “Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio, SJ (1793–1862) and the Development of Scholastic Natural-Law Thought as a Science of Society and Politics,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 6, no. 1 (2003): 99–115.
19. Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, *The Social Teachings of Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler*, trans. Rupert J. Ederer (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 92.

20. Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 13.
21. Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), 80.
22. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), 15.
23. Marinus Ossewaarde, “Three Rival Versions of Political Enquiry: Althusius and the Concept of Sphere Sovereignty,” *The Monist* 90, no. 1 (2007): 106–25.
24. Jacques Delors, “The Principle of Subsidiarity,” in *Subsidiarity: The Challenge of Change (Proceedings of the Jacques Delors Colloquium)*, ed. European Institute of Public Administration (Maastricht: EIPA, 1991), 8, 18.
25. See Curtis N. Johnson, *Aristotle’s Theory of the State* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 10; and Maritain, *Man and the State*, 126.
26. Heinrich A. Rommen, *The State in Catholic Thought: A Treatise in Political Philosophy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 207–8.
27. Maritain, *Man and the State*, 10.
28. As J. Budziszewski correctly emphasizes that “the principle of subsidiarity is *pro*-community, but *anti*-collectivist.” See Budziszewski, “The Problem with Communitarianism,” *First Things* (March 1995): 24.
29. Millon-Delsol, *L’Etat Subsidaire*, 123.
30. Guillaume Groen van Prinster, *Unbelief and Revolution*, ed. Harry van Dyke (Amsterdam: The Groen van Prinsterer Fund, 1973).
31. Johannes Althusius, *Politica Methodice Digesta* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 88.
32. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Essays in Legal, Social, and Political Philosophy* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), 116.
33. Althusius, *Politica Methodice Digesta*, 16.
34. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 124.
35. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 155. See also Yong Joon Choi, “Dialogue and Antithesis: A Philosophical Study on the Significance of Herman Dooyeweerd’s Transcendental Critique” (PhD diss.: Potchefstroomse Universiteit, 2000), 17.
36. Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1968), 50.
37. Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, 32.
38. Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, 46.

39. Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, 28.
40. Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, 32.
41. Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, 27.
42. Herman Dooyeweerd, *De Strijd om het Soevereiniteitsbegrip in de Moderne Rechts- en Staatsleer* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1950).
43. See Abraham Kuyper, *Heilige orde. Rede in den Bond van Antirevolutionaire Kiesverenigingen te Amsterdam op 30 Mei 1913* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1913), 17, 28; and Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 101–6.
44. Dooyeweerd, *Essays in Legal, Social, and Political Philosophy*, 116.
45. Althusius, *Politica Methodice Digesta*, 15, 61.
46. Abraham Kuyper, *Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1990), 62, 77. This is not to deny that Kuyper rejects government intervention with respect to the social question. For Kuyper, a government can only be a real government if it serves Christ. This implies that it may give resources to people who have no resources, but it cannot legitimately take away the responsibilities (such as upbringing of children) that belong to the spheres. See Kuyper, *Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie*, 71, 75.
47. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 71.
48. Kuyper, *Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie*, 15, 57.
49. Kuyper, *Heilige Orde*, 26.
50. Ketteler, *The Social Teachings of Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler*, 185.
51. Kuyper says, “I would like to acknowledge that Liberalism has undertaken serious attempts to develop the lower classes. But what did it offer the lower classes? Reading, writing, calculating! And what did it take from her? Belief, life, courage, and moral resistance. And what did it deny her? The vocational school and part in the capital.” Kuyper also refers to “Liberalism, which undermined the force of the Church and made the rich selfish.” See Abraham Kuyper, *Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie*, 62, 77.
52. Bob Goudzwaard, “A Response to Michael Novak’s ‘Human Dignity, Personal Liberty,’” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 5, no. 1 (2002): 121.
53. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, 215, 255.
54. Kuyper, *Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie*, 19, 49.