

Sovereignty of God and Religious Tolerance:

A Kuyperian Perspective

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Abstract—Abraham Kuyper is well-known for his assertion on equal freedom for people of all worldviews or religions. This article argues that Kuyper has successfully reconciled these seemingly contradicting notions by developing a concept of civil liberty from a Calvinistic tradition. Attempting to apply a Kuyperian perspective of tolerance to our present time, this article uses a historical theology approach to explore the possibilities of engaging in interreligious dialogues that could lead to mutual faith-enrichments. Started with presenting the hesitation of religious scholars to develop a concept of religious pluralism due to the understanding that one should be a relativist to embrace religious pluralism; then, this article progresses to how Kuyper develop a tolerant Christian theological reflection on religious pluralism. The research shows how believing the absolute sovereignty of God does not necessarily lead to religious intolerance but could be the true root of religious tolerance. **Research Contribution:** This research seeks to present a theological reflection that might lead to developing faith-enriching interreligious dialogues. Using the perspective of the Dutch statesman-theologian Abraham Kuyper, this research attempts to show how faith in God's absolute sovereignty could be compatible with fostering tolerance towards other religions or worldviews.

Keywords—*abraham kuyper; historical theology; interreligious dialogue; neo-calvinism; religious pluralism*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a serious concern concerning embracing religious pluralism in Indonesia. According to Holifah and Saifulah, religious pluralism is generally understood by the public as moral relativism, religious syncretism, generalization of doctrine; thus, making faith superficial [1]. Noer argues that the exclusive attitude of religious adherents such as truth claiming, could hinder unity among diverse religious groups. He advises religious adherents to make progress toward unity with those from other faiths despite of differences [2]. As it is suggested by Saputra and Tayib, differences should not be a root of conflict in a pluralistic society but a starting point to know and to complement each other [3]. Fata and Fauzan criticize the concept of pluralism that is based on relativism, agnosticism,

nihilism, and atheism [4]. This idea is far from ideal, since the ideal version of tolerance should be built based on Godly benevolence without sacrificing our own religious conviction [5]. Beside of that theoretical problem to promote religious pluralism, at the practical level, religious violence in Indonesia happens quite often [6]–[8].

Abraham Kuyper is well-known for his famous adage: “There is no square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign of all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” [9]; yet he is also well-known for advocating equal rights for all kinds of worldviews or religions. In his political manifesto, he explicitly stated that everyone, such as “preachers who wish to combat the gospel,” a Jew who does not believe in the Messiahship of Jesus Christ, a Muslim who does not believe in the Bible, or a Darwinist who objects to the idea of creation, and a positivist who protests against any kind of faith, should have equal rights to express their worldviews freely [10]. Kuyper’s thought is also relevant to the Indonesian context, as indicated through some journal publications about his thought in Indonesia. Sianipar argues that Abraham Kuyper has a significant contribution to religious in the context of Christian education; Wiryadinata and Rumbay also attempt to show the relevance of Kuyper to education in the pluralistic society of Indonesia. Others, such as Siburian and Silitonga argue that Kuyper’s thought is relevant to construct a Christian reflection on politics and to use social media for evangelization [5], [11]–[14]. Even though rich of description, those articles do not attempt to explain why Kuyper has such a relevance to a pluralistic society like Indonesia. It is necessary to show how his commitment to pluralism had rooted in his belief upon the absolute sovereignty of God.

Toward that purpose, this article argues that Abraham Kuyper had successfully developed a Christian theological reflection that held together the absolute sovereignty of God and religious tolerance. He did so not by relativizing his Calvinistic faith but to develop the notion of civil liberty from a Calvinistic perspective that is rooted in the concept of God’s absolute sovereignty. Thus, a Kuyperian concept of civil liberty for people from all religions or worldview could contribute towards stimulating faith-enriching interreligious dialogues in

our time. Far from diminishing the faith of those who are in dialogues, such interreligious dialogues done on the basis of equality could lead to mutual faith-enrichment [15].

II. METHOD

This research is an historical theology work that attempts to analyse the life and contribution of a theologian or a theological movement. This method could also analyse how doctrines has developed in diverse Christian traditions. The historical background of an emerging theology is studied so it could be contextualized to other contexts [16]. The article will be written in this sequence: first, it will briefly analyse Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty; second, elaborate on how Kuyper asserted for all religions or worldviews to have an equal footing in the nineteenth century Netherlands; third, present the possibilities on developing faith-enriching interreligious dialogues in our time based on the notion of equality.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Sphere Sovereignty

The concept of "sphere sovereignty" was first clearly articulated by Kuyper in the oration on the foundation of the Free University Amsterdam. Under this concept, Kuyper states that Christ claims ownership over all spheres of human life, thus there is no absolute sovereignty or power that can rest in anything but God alone. However, this sovereign God has decreed a relative sovereignty for all spheres of human life such as family, church, government, education, art, and others, so they could all flourish. Each of the sphere should not intervene each other; the state should not intervene through telling parents on how to educate their children since that should be the sovereignty of the family sphere, and the same rule applies to each of the other spheres [17]. Kuyper was not being precise on how many spheres were there in our lives, but he warned his audience that if any sphere or spheres were to ever intervene among each other or breach the sovereignty of other spheres, human life could not flourish as originally intended by God. As Kuyper said:

Call the parts of this one great machine [of human life] "cogwheels," spring-driven on their own axles, or "spheres," each animated with its own spirit. The name or image is unimportant, so long as we recognize that 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. ... The cogwheels of all these spheres engage each other, and precisely through that interaction emerges the rich, multifaceted multiformity of human life [18].

The concept of sphere sovereignty was also salient in his Lectures on Calvinism delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898. On that occasion, he argued how the state should not intervene the sphere of the church by deciding

which churches were true and which were false. He argued further that the state should respect freedom and sovereignty of every church, thus the decision regarding which churches were regarded as true and which were as false should be given solely to the church without any state intervention. A continual state intervention to the church would hinder churches in that nation from growing [19].

B. An Equal Footing for All Religions

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Netherlands had moved towards a modern or a liberal society. The influence of the traditional Calvinism had withered even though the progressive minded political leaders still saw the country as a Protestant Nation. Problem occurred when the government had obliged every child to be educated for the future development of the nation, yet such an education should be conducted without any Christian dogma. Traditional Christian doctrines were seen as a divisive element among Dutch citizens, thus a more generic, liberal, or modernized Christian views which did not fit into the confessional mindset of many Dutch parents, was chosen to be the educational standard. Started in 1806, "Confessional instruction of the public schools" [20]. Kuyper's solution to this was not to claim that the modernist had no place in the public sphere, but to fight for an equal footing for all religions—including the modernists—on the basis of civil liberty. As he wrote in 1889:

God has so ordained that at the present time our four million fellow-citizens are divided into three almost equal parts: Rationalists [Modernists], Calvinists, and Roman Catholics. We accept this fact. And we maintain that in a people comprised of such a mixture, the state may not use its supremacy to favor one part of the nation over another. All spiritual compulsion by the State is an affront to the honor of the spiritual life and as an offense to civil liberty, is hateful and abominable [21].

Here Kuyper argued for the civil liberty. A concept of freedom which he developed from Calvinism and his faith on the absolute sovereignty of God. He argued that in Calvinism there was a stress on the notion of freedom of conscience that enabled everyone to serve God according to the dictates of one's heart [22]. Nothing could stand between the person and God while it comes to the matter of conscience.

C. Faith-Enriching Interreligious Dialogues

Kuyper saw liberal democracy as the best way for Christian public involvement. All religious or worldview communities should have an equal footing on the public sphere. He was always against imposing one "established religion" in a diverse society. Not even the government could intervene to the freedom of conscience that God has given to humankind. For Kuyper, the role of the government is not to impose a particular worldview or religion, but maintain order among the people of different worldviews so all people could have equal rights [23]. Under such an equal status, interreligious engagement and dialogues are made possible.

Following Michael Grimmit, Munjid divides the model of religious education into three categories: mono-religious, multi-religious, and interreligious. In the mono-religious model, people study their own religions to internalize doctrine, ritual, practice of their religions so their faith identities could be firmer. In the multi-religious model, people study many religions including their own religions to understand the uniqueness of each religion so they could foster tolerance towards other religions. The interreligious model also requires people to study many religions which include their own religions, yet it has a distinctive element, which is dialogue. In the interreligious model, students are not just prepared to accept other religions as it is, but to engage with other religious perspectives in dialogues. By engaging with the “other” faith tradition, interreligious dialogues compel the students to reflect and understand their religious identities in a more intense way from many perspectives. Munjid draws an example from speaking foreign languages. A Javanese whose native tongue is Javanese language would not lose her ability to speak Javanese when she speaks foreign languages. Sometimes when she speaks a foreign language, she still speaks her native language in her hearts, attempting to understand foreign concepts with her Javanese understanding. This practice would not diminish her ability to speak in her native tongue, it would rather enrich her Javanese understanding due to the continual inner interaction between her Javanese mind and other foreign languages [24].

IV. CONCLUSION

A strong faith does not necessarily lead towards fanaticism or radicalism. Kuyper has shown the way to develop a notion of civil liberty based on the conviction of God’s absolute sovereignty. If God is absolutely sovereign, all kinds of human sovereignty is always limited and relative. Be it the state, the family, the school, the religious institution, even each person, have their own limited sovereignty thus should not dominate other spheres of life; rather, they should function harmoniously under God given sovereignty for each sphere. Freedom of speech and freedom of worship is guaranteed by the civil liberty based on the freedom of conscience which God has given to every single person as a personal sovereignty. This concept of civic equality between people from all religions could be a basis for further interreligious engagements that might lead to mutual enrichments.

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