

DRAFT

Kuyper, Sphere Sovereignty and the Possibility of Political Friendship

The idea of civic friendship has strong resonances in the civic republican views that in many ways animated the French Revolution (particularly through the thought of Rousseau), and often carries with it the statist overtones that were realized in that movement. However, for Aristotle, it is a crucial element in a political theory that recognized the importance of structural or associational plurality. Kuyper is an anti-revolutionary and, like Aristotle, is an associational pluralist. Unlike Aristotle, however, he does not have the view that other associations are subsidiary to the political community, and thus Kuyper's pluralism lacks the grounds of the reconciliation of plurality with civic solidarity that Aristotle articulates. Furthermore, Kuyper's attachment to not only associational but also "worldview" or "directional" plurality in the structures of civil society (separate schools, etc) further complicates his ability to recognize a genuinely *political* solidarity working across the divisions (both associational and directional) in society. Both of these commitments might be seen as barriers to a conception of the public sphere as a political *community*, and thus to reduce public discourse in this sphere to being either purely agonistic or purely procedural. Working with the idea that a kind of civic friendship or solidarity is crucial to the functioning of pluralistic democracies (and hence that the public sphere must be more than either agonistic or procedural), this paper examines not only the barriers to, but also the possibilities of a Kuyperian conception of "thick" civic engagement in the public sphere, predicated on a shared vision of the good (i.e., of civic friendship). Kuyper's own way of articulating the possibility of a political community is based in part on the national character of the Dutch state of his time. This paper will thus consider the challenges of re-interpreting a Kuyperian conception of "thick" civic solidarity in a post-national state.

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1. The Idea(l) of Political Friendship

This paper makes use of a term that can seem alternately an anachronism or a straightforward oxymoron: political friendship. I want to suggest that this concept has a vital role to play in pluralistic democracies and thus should have a place in political thinking that draws on Kuyper's Christian democratic pluralism. However, I ought to begin by characterizing the meaning and significance of political friendship.

The idea of political friendship implies first that the state is a kind of *community*. Though it has an institutional and legal expression, it is at heart a society of persons – conceived in this case as *citizens* – rather than a set of structures, procedures or positive laws. Moreover, the state on this view is to be thought of as a *moral community*, one held together by a shared vision of and participation in (some aspect of) the good life. Thus for Aristotle, the political community is the highest expression of the life of active virtue and hence the perfection of other moral communities (the family and the village in particular). In participation in the political community – i.e., in active citizenship – human beings achieve their *telos qua* political animal and thus enjoy the good life. Other communities may not have the character of a moral community as long as participation in them is not considered a substantive good both *for* and *by* its members but rather a merely extrinsic or instrumental good (one might think here of purely economic communities held together only by self-interest). If the state is this latter sort of community, however, the concept of political friendship has little meaningful role to play.

Political friendship, then, is the bond that holds members of the political community (i.e., citizens) in ties of mutual solidarity *qua* citizens. That is, members of the political community encounter one another, first, as free and equal (and hence not as

masters and servants, but potentially as friends), and, second, as fellow participants in a set of shared goods or a project valued by both as a common good.¹ All friendships are mediated by some vision of the good, and correspondingly all communities formed in accordance with a shared vision of the good display a form of friendship. If the state can be thought of as a moral community, then its members are friends in a particular sense. This implies, I should point out, viewing not only *political communities in general* as shared goods, but so viewing the *particular community* of which one is a member; one is not the political friend of all persons living in any state (even in any just state), but of those participating in one's own political community. Political friendship thus implies a certain degree of "patriotism:" common commitment to participation in one's own political community as a common good, and hence to one's fellow citizens as integral parts of that good (after all, one views one's friends as a good and desires their good).

The view of the state as a moral community held together by a political friendship stands opposed to both proceduralist and agonistic views of justice and participation in the political community. Proceduralist views see the just functioning of the state as the consistent and fair application of principles for the adjudication of disputes between autonomous persons or communities, rather than the achievement of some *substantive good* or end of the community as a whole. Citizen participation in a proceduralist polity requires willingness to abide by the principles of justice (usually determined in terms of positive rights and duties), but no substantive commitment to the common good beyond a

¹ Thus not merely as private goods (i.e., good for me), nor even as what Charles Taylor calls "convergent" goods (goods, that, though achieved by collective actions are still only private goods, not in principle shared). Cf. Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate" in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 190. Friendship is by definition a shared, rather than convergent good and, correspondingly, political friendship means viewing common participation in the state (which is constitutive of this relation) as a common good.

willingness to distribute these rights equally and consistently.² Agonistic views, on the other hand, see the aim of political participation to be the establishment of one's own (or one's own community's) view of the good as the ruling principle of state action and policy. However this view is in principle opposed to that of other members in the political community (if it can be so called) and hence it involves struggle and opposition of interests, values and principles rather than shared commitment to some vision of the common good. In agonistic polities, the only bond holding together citizens is their common commitment to using the machinery of state (elections, the courts, etc) to advance their conception of the good. This is a far cry from the substantive commitment that founds political friendships. Since both proceduralism and agonism view participation in the state to be instrumental to either merely private or convergent goods, in the eyes of one committed to the ideal of political friendship, they both yield a conception of the political community that makes being asked to sacrifice or die for one's *polis* about as compelling as being asked to die for the phone company or for a god one does not believe in.³

Obviously this ideal places a strong emphasis on common commitments rather than convergent private interests and this has led certain partisans of the ideal of political friendship to strongly oppose participation by citizens in other moral communities that could divide their interests from the common good and thus divide their commitment to the political community. Rousseau is perhaps the best example here. He opposes the creation of any "sectional associations" within a republic in the name of

² Rawls' conception of "public reason" is perhaps paradigmatic here.

³ The remark about the phone company comes from Alasdair MacIntyre. Cf., *After MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 303.

protecting the general will from degeneration into private wills.⁴ In other words, for Rousseau, not only should the state *be* a moral community for its members, but it should be their *primary*, even *only* moral community. Such views, of course, are extremely bothersome to associational pluralists like Kuyper and this can lead to generalized suspicion of the concepts of political friendship and of the state as a moral community.⁵ However, these concepts need not necessarily lead to a kind of statism or undifferentiated collectivism, as evidenced by Aristotle's articulation of it. For the Philosopher, too much unity in a state is a direct threat to the possibility of political friendship, since friendship can only be between free and equal – and hence, different, integral – persons or communities.⁶ Furthermore, though the political community is for him the end or perfection of all pre-political communities, it does not for that reason extinguish them. Families, villages and other communities are subordinated to the political community as lower ends to their perfection, but that does not extinguish their particularity or a certain degree of integrity and autonomy on their part. Within Aristotle's political community, other communities flourish. What prevents this from threatening the commitment to the common good constitutive of political friendship is the fact that these communities are *subsidiary* to the state, which is considered as a community of communities. Commitment to the good of one's family is compatible with commitment to the common good of the political community since the former community is a subsidiary part of the latter. Thus a certain kind of associational plurality can be preserved, even in light of the

⁴ Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), Book II, chapter 3.

⁵ For Kuyper, the degree to which the Rousseauian version of this ideal played a role in inspiring the French Revolution just compounds the concern. Of course, just what this degree is is a topic of much scholarly debate.

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, ch. 9-11, and *Politics*, Book 2, ch. ii-v.

ideal of political friendship.⁷ We will see, however, that, in articulating a Kuyperian version of the ideal, this Aristotelian defense of associational pluralism will not do, since Kuyper rejects the notion of a subsidiary relationship between non-political spheres and the state.

2. The Necessity of Political Friendship for Democracy

I want to argue now that the ideal of political friendship (with the concomitant view of the state as a moral community) is a necessary part of a workable understanding of the conditions that make democracies possible. Without a sense of participating with one's fellow citizens in a common good, the impetus for genuine democratic action in the political is lost. Without some realization of this ideal, democratic polities degenerate into (merely) procedural or agonistic republics, neither of which is sustainably democratic.

Charles Taylor makes an argument to this effect in his discussion of the liberal/communitarian debate. Central, he argues, to the civic humanist tradition is a conception of freedom whereby a society is only free where its citizens can have “a sense that the political institutions in which they live are an expression of themselves.”⁸ When citizens can identify with the state and its laws as a result of their active participation in it, they are not *subjects* to external forces but enjoy their full *dignity as citizens* and are therefore free; we can call this a “participatory” definition of freedom. If political participation – and the resultant identification with the laws – is constitutive of political freedom, civic virtue is a necessary component of freedom; a free polity is one in which citizens are ready to put their private interests to the side and engage publicly in the interests of the

⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1.

⁸ Taylor, “Cross Purposes,” 187.

common good. Without this disposition on the part of citizens, each could only identify with laws that advance or protect their private good and hence this identification would in no sense be a reflection of their dignity *qua* citizen. Civic virtue constitutes a form of patriotism that binds citizens together in common commitment to participation in a shared project: “the bond of solidarity with my compatriots in a functioning republic is based on a sense of shared fate, where the sharing itself is of value.”⁹ Each citizen is bound with others in the project of realizing a polity that reflects their dignity as citizens; i.e., a polity that is *free* in the participatory sense. This is a bond that one shares with other members of one’s own polity in a way that it is not with members of other polities; it cannot be reduced to cosmopolitan commitment to the dignity and welfare of all persons, since it concerns *citizen* dignity expressed in a *particular* constitution and set of laws. In other words, a participatory concept of freedom and the dignity of citizens entails a conception of the polis as a moral community and of a political friendship with one’s fellow citizens.

Taylor then goes on to argue that political friendship – understood in terms of a patriotism of civic virtue – plays a crucial role in maintaining liberal democratic regimes. It is necessary, he says, for citizens of democratic societies to respond with outrage to “violations of the norms of liberal self-rule”¹⁰ – amongst which he cites the Iran-Contra affair and Watergate. This kind of outrage cannot be sustained by an atomistic citizenry estranged from a shared commitment to the common good and lacking the ability to identify with the laws of the land as expressing their collective participation in this common good. In other words, only a sense that scandals like Watergate are an outrage

⁹ Ibid., 192.

¹⁰ Ibid. 195.

against our *collective dignity as citizens of this political community* can sustain the kind of outrage necessary to sustain liberal democratic regimes. Neither self-interest nor an abstract, cosmopolitan commitment to “universal principle unalloyed with particular identifications”¹¹ can fund the degree and extent of the required sense of outrage. What made Americans unwilling to accept Watergate (or Canadians to accept the Sponsorship scandal) was not individual self-interest nor commitment to abstract principles of fair play, but a sense that their *collective dignity as American citizens* was violated by the contravention of the norms of democratic self-rule; it was their patriotism of civic virtue – and their sense that their political community at its best exemplifies and enshrines their dignity as citizens – that underlay their response. Thus, without some sense of the state as a moral community and one’s citizens as one’s political friends, the degree of commitment to the common good of one’s particular political community necessary to resist violations of democratic norms cannot be generated or sustained.

If proceduralism, according to Taylor, is insufficient to maintain democracy, then agonism too endangers the beating heart of democratic polities. Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that two developments in modern politics are moving western political life in decidedly undemocratic directions. In the “politics of displacement,” people no longer engage one another in public discourse in accordance with their *public identity as citizens* but rather appear in public clothed entirely in their various *private identities* (gender, race, sexual orientation), and hence public discourse degenerates into struggles for full recognition of private differences rather than being animated by shared orientation toward the achievement of some genuinely *public* good.¹² These politics, then, become a

¹¹ Ibid., 197.

¹² Cf. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (Boston: Basic Books, 1995), ch. 2.

“politics of difference” wherein the kind of community with which citizens identify is the “we” of homogenous private identity groups (the “gay community;” “the Quebecois” community) rather than the “we” of a variegated citizenry engaged *together* in a project of deliberation, argumentation, and compromise aimed at the good of the community as a whole.¹³ The recognition of difference is indeed crucial to pluralistic democracies, but, when confronted with someone with a different private identity “my recognition of her difference, by which I mean my preparedness to engage her as an interlocutor *given* our differences on the things that count politically... turns on the fact that I share something with her. She is in the world with me; she, too, is *a citizen*.”¹⁴ Recognition of difference is necessary to treating others in accordance with their dignity, but in political matters, this means also recognizing their dignity *qua* citizen. Without this recognition of a shared public identity, political discourse degenerates into “incommensurability” – the inability to actually understand and engage one another on a level playing field – and hence into zero-sum struggles for recognition rather than genuinely democratic deliberation, argumentation and compromise. Democratic politics for Elshstain – as for Taylor – requires commitment to the political community as a shared good and to its members as political friends (i.e., citizens). As with Aristotle, this by no means implies that democratic political communities must be either institutionally or directionally homogenous; rather that political friendship is a condition that makes democratic polities possible in associationally and culturally diverse societies.

3. *Kuyperian Barriers to Political Friendship*

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*, ch. 3

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67 [my italics].

Abraham Kuyper is committed to both democratic governance and the “multiformity” of society, both structurally (i.e., to the plurality of different types of institutions and associations within society) and directionally (i.e., to the plurality of different “world-and-life views” within a political community).¹⁵ If Taylor and Elshtain are correct (and we will assume for present purposes that they are), then it is crucial that his political vision include some account (or at least the possibility thereof) of (1) the state as a moral community; (2) the capacity of members of that community to recognize one another as “political friends” (i.e., as participants in a shared project constituting a genuinely common good); and (3) the grounds for a patriotism of civic virtue focused on this particular political community rather than on a cosmopolitan view of abstract political right. Kuyper’s means of explicating two of his central commitments seem to put up barriers to such an account.

In the first case, the associational pluralism for which Kuyper is rightly praised makes it difficult to see how it is possible for him to articulate a sense of the state as a moral community. As we’ve seen in the case of both Aristotle and Elshtain, commitment to a flourishing associational life outside of (or at least, not identical with) the sphere of the state is not necessarily a barrier to civic friendship (Rousseau notwithstanding). However, Kuyper’s “sphere-sovereignty” account of the relation of civil society and the state undermines at least Aristotle’s grounds¹⁶ for the reconciliation of associational pluralism and civic friendship. In Aristotle’s view, a logic of whole and parts defines the relation between the state and civil society: subsidiary moral communities have a degree

¹⁵ This distinction between types of pluralism comes from Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

¹⁶ Elshtain’s account of this in “Democracy on Trial” is too focused on the attitudes and dispositions of citizens to elaborate a “political theoretical” account of this reconciliation in terms of a normative theory of the relation between the state and civil society.

integrity and autonomy with respect to one another and the state, but only insofar as parts cannot be reduced to other parts nor assimilated whole-sale into the whole.¹⁷ As parts, the ends (and hence the moral character) of these communities are only made fully complete and intelligible as subsidiary ends to the *telos* of the political community (i.e., the good life as the life of active virtue). In other words, the moral character of civil society is derivative of the moral character of the political community (the state), on the Philosopher's telling.

For Kuyper, civil society is not subsidiary to the state and, correspondingly, the state is not the perfection or *telos* of the communities that constitute civil society. Though he occasionally refers to the state as “the sphere of spheres which encircles the whole extent of human life”¹⁸ this means only that, both within and between all spheres of human life, the state has a regulative role to play in securing justice. Justice, then, as the end of the state (and hence constitutive of its moral character) is universal in human life, but the ends of the various spheres of civil society do not derive from nor are subsidiary parts of justice conceived of as the ultimate end of human life. On the contrary, the moral characters of the spheres of civil society – their particular normative tasks – are a result of a direct mandate from God mediated (if at all) only by the order of creation, rather than by the authority of the state: “the family, the business, science, art and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high

¹⁷ One might use the image of a body. The hand has an integrity of its own, qua hand, and is hence autonomous from other parts of the body and even a degree of autonomy from the body as a whole in respect of its distinctive functions (only it can grasp, point, etc., and hence it performs these functions with a measure of autonomy). But these functions are only fully intelligible in light of the (subsidiary) role that their ends play with respect to the ends of the body as a whole (e.g., grasping an apple is only fully intelligible as a subsidiary part of the more general end of eating or sustaining the body).

¹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty” in James D. Bratt ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 472.

authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the state does.”¹⁹ This being the case, it does not follow from moral commitment to an institution of civil society that one has a moral commitment to the political community; religious, scientific, recreational friendship does not logically entail political friendship. Thus Kuyper does not have open to him Aristotle’s mode of reconciling associational pluralism and political friendship.

Furthermore, Kuyper’s way of articulating the state/ (civil) society distinction further complicates the possibility of committed participants in other moral communities also feeling a sense of commitment to the state as a moral community. Society – which encompasses all of the spheres of civil society – is for Kuyper an *organic* phenomenon; unfolding in its multiform richness according to fundamental creational commands to human beings to develop their various potentials in service to and praise of their Creator. The bonds that hold the communities defined by the various sovereign spheres together are spontaneous, communal responses to a creational cultural mandate: in each sphere the natural sociality of human beings is expressed in the development of communities and institutions dedicated to particular normative tasks (child rearing, the pursuit of truth, the worship of God, etc.)²⁰ No deliberate intervention or construction on the part of human beings or institutions is needed for the unfolding and growth of these communities – only a willingness to respond faithfully to God’s commandments. Thus the character of the spheres of society as *moral communities* (i.e., as authentic responses to a normative call from God) is articulated by Kuyper in terms of their *organic* character.

¹⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 90.

²⁰ Cf. “Sphere Sovereignty” 467, and *Lectures* 91-2.

By contrast, the state has a *mechanical* character. For Kuyper, the only properly organic state would be “one organic world empire with God as its King” which served to unite the various families “in a higher unity” which “would have internally been bound up in the Kingship of God, which would have ruled regularly, directly and harmoniously in the hearts of all men.”²¹ Thus, if human beings had not fallen, there would have been no distinguishable political communities operating under human governance and in accordance with positive laws. Human governance and the existence of such states is a remedy for the effects of sin, not an authentic communal response to creational ordinances (and hence is not organic). Though divinely instituted, human political governance is “a *mechanical* head, which from without has been placed upon the trunk of the nation.”²²

The state has a normative call – to do justice – but this is fundamentally different in kind from that of the organic spheres of society. First, as just mentioned, this command is not a creational ordinance for human flourishing and the praise of God, but rather a mechanical remedy for the effects of sin on the healthy organic functioning of society. Second, the unifying force of the state is not natural human sociability but the power of the sword; i.e., what holds a political community together and gives reality to its normative task is the power of coercion, rather than spontaneous communal response to differentiated creational ordinance.²³ The normative task of political governance (justice) is:

²¹ *Lectures*, 92.

²² *Ibid.*, 92-3.

²³ Thus the principle characteristic of government is the power of life and death. As will be discussed below, these different unifying principles make for inevitable tension between state power and organic civil society which must then be resisted by constitutional principles grounded in citizen participation in accordance with the mandate to resist state sovereignty.

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.²⁴

These tasks have the character of procedural principles for the regulation of boundary disputes between communities, on the one hand, and of the relations between individuals, on the other hand. They are not aimed – as are the creational commands founding the spheres of society – at the achievement of an intrinsic, substantive good, but merely at the prevention of harm for the sake of individuals and communities. In other words: in contrast to organic communities, the mechanical community of the state does not in itself constitute and provide a substantive common (and hence, shared) good for its citizens as a community, but merely a set of procedural principles and negative freedoms that constitute a convergent good for the individuals and communities of society. Thus, on the face of it at least, Kuyper’s way of articulating the state/society distinction in terms of the mechanical/organic distinction makes it impossible to view the state itself as a moral community.

Furthermore, this view of the normative task of the state does not by definition imply the necessity of active citizen involvement in politics in pursuit of the common good. Civic virtue is expressed instead as a disposition on the part of members of society to *resist* the colonizing pressure of the state,²⁵ rather than active involvement in the political community as such. Citizen participation in the making of laws is, on this view, a *prudential* consideration – owing to the greater likelihood of a democratic government

²⁴ Ibid., 97. “The natural unity of the state” – given what has just been said – cannot mean “its character as an organic community” but must simply refer to the unity necessary to perform its (mechanical and remedial) functions. Cf. also “Sphere Sovereignty” 472: “The various spheres of life cannot do without the State sphere, for just as one space can limit other, so one sphere can limit another unless the State fixes their boundaries by law.”

²⁵ Cf. “Sphere Sovereignty” 473.

protecting the rights and freedoms of members of society²⁶ – rather than an *intrinsic* and necessary expression of the dignity of citizens. The dignity of human beings, on the contrary, is constituted by the *organic character of society* not by participation in the state (given its mechanical character).²⁷ Taylor, as we have seen, sees concern for the dignity of citizens – as expressed through their ability to identify with laws they have themselves participated in constructing – as essential for motivating resistance to anti-democratic movements. Similarly, Elshtain argues that recognition of others *as citizens* (i.e., as members of the political community) is necessary for genuinely democratic deliberation in a pluralistic society. In both cases, the capacity to treat *citizenship* as a substantive moral status – and one indissolubly connected with participation in political communities – is seen as an essential component of democracy. Kuyper’s “mechanical” conception of the state makes this appear difficult to achieve (though as we’ll see, other elements in his thought correspond closely with Taylor’s and Elshtain’s views).

The second of Kuyper’s fundamental commitments that seems to sow difficulties for articulating a version of civic friendship is his commitment to *directional* (or “worldview”) pluralism, particularly as this commitment intersects with his associational pluralism. Calvinism, Catholicism, Socialism, Liberalism, etc. all constitute “world-and-life-views” or “life-systems” (*weltanschauungen*), each of which are understood as deductive consequences from one fundamental principle (in the case of Calvinism, this principle is the Sovereignty of God). To those shaped by one or another of these systems,

²⁶ Cf. *Lectures*, 97-8

²⁷ “And finally to touch on the real point that lies at the heart of the social problem, 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.” Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, James W. Skillen, ed. (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1991), 44 [my italics].

every aspect of life – and hence also their participation in various social spheres – is shaped by their commitment to its principles. There is no aspect or part of life, whether individual or communal, that is not shaped by one’s life-system (hence the name).

Socially, this plurality of worldviews is expressed in the development of confessionally-oriented institutions within civil society. Thus Calvinists have their churches, Catholics their own, Communists their Workers Committees and so on. But this is not the end of it. Even institutions that are “common” – i.e., ones that do not by their nature or function represent one worldview-community rather than another – are shaped by directional pluralism. Within the school, for example, the curriculum cannot be strictly neutral between, say, socialism and Calvinism; one or the other life-system must shape the curriculum and hence shape the minds and hearts of the students.

Because of this, Kuyper often supported the development of parallel institutions each performing the same function (e.g., schooling children, advocating for workers) but each shaped by a different world-and-life view; most famously for Kuyper the establishment of Christian educational institutions from day-schools to the Vrije Universiteit, but also separate media and press networks, separate labour unions, etc.²⁸

This strategy for institutionalizing incompatible (and hence, competing) views of life in separate but parallel social institutions can in theory be extended to all social spheres but not to the state itself. At the level of politics, the various communities shaped by diverging world-and-life views must come together and participate in some form of shared practice. However, there is no neutral ground in politics either and simple logic

²⁸ It is debatable to what extent Kuyper was committed to this kind of “pillarization” in all spheres of society as an integral part of his own worldview. Thus it is not absolutely clear that he consciously supported the full-scale pillarization of Dutch society. Nevertheless, many of his ideas and causes lead in this direction.

prevents these communities from abandoning their particular life-systems in the political sphere: “even the most radical unbeliever, if he is a logical thinker, will have to grant that it is utterly absurd for a person to take such a confession of Christ on his lips and ignore the consequences that flow directly from it for our national politics.”²⁹ This means that political life too will be a locus of *principial struggle* between incompatible life-systems. For Kuyper this means that the various political options must be viewed ultimately in spiritual terms: “What we take exception to and resist is solely their disastrous *principle*, which is detached from Christ and which is the same in all these groups. Together [Liberals, Conservatives, Radicals and Socialists] form a single spiritual family, bred from a single stock.”³⁰ In spiritual struggles, though there may be temporary alliances, there can be no compromise: “But now we know that in our country too all spiritual conflict must finally culminate in being *for* or *against* Christ.”³¹ Even between Calvinists and Catholics, though they both confess Christ, there can be only cooperation, never unity.³² It would seem, then, that politics must ultimately be, for Kuyper, agonistic: a struggle between incompatible principles in a winner-take all battle. All alliances can then only be strategic, temporary and in principle tentative since no synthesis or unity is possible between antithetical spiritual principles. If this is the whole story, it is difficult to see how Kuyper could account for a set of fulsomely *shared* political values and goods that unite all citizens in a common commitment to and participation in a genuine political community. It would seem that Kuyper’s politics is an incarnation of Elshtain’s politics

²⁹ Abraham Kuyper, “Maranatha” in James D. Bratt, ed. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 210.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 214. Kuyper goes so far as to say of those who seceded from the ARP: “Really, they do not understand how by giving their vote to a Liberal in the context of our national struggle they are actually voting against their Lord.” (218) Cf. also “Sphere sovereignty 484.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 218-19.

of displacement, wherein our public identities (as citizens) are reduced to (or replaced by) private identities (our religious or worldview identities) and thus we are able only to identify with the “we” constituted by our incompatible worldviews rather than a genuine political community.

4. Kuyperian Resources for Political Friendship

It is close enough to a cliché to be true that Kuyper seeks to steer between the Scylla of liberal individualism and the Charybdis of collectivism and that he does so in his championing of the central role of civil society in his doctrine of sphere sovereignty. If what I have said thus far is correct, he must also steer between proceduralism on the one hand, and agonism, on the other, with respect to his understanding of specifically political life. The fact that two central dimensions of his thought seem to pull him in opposite directions – his associational pluralism toward proceduralism and his directional pluralism toward agonism – actually suggests to me that he has resources aplenty to do so. In seeing how this is possible, I will disclose the resources in Kuyper’s thought that point toward a Kuyperian conception of civic friendship (and hence of the state as a moral community).

In doing so, I want first to briefly establish that Kuyper has a sense of democratic politics that shares a number of important themes with the “civic humanist” tradition that Taylor articulates. First, Kuyper is a republican, at least of a certain sort. More than once he approvingly cites Calvin’s (alleged) preference for republican forms of governance, on the grounds that “it is safer and better to let several people together steer the ship of state so that one may restrain the other when the lust for power might

degenerate into tyranny.”³³ Citizen government of the republican kind is the most effective in discharging the normative task of the state, given the correlative power of human sin. In fact, a sense of sin is, for Kuyper, constitutive of the impetus that establishes and maintains constitutional governments in which the liberties of citizens (including their liberty to participate in government) are protected. It grounds: “a just constitution that restrains abuses of authority, sets limits, and offers the people a natural protection against lust for power and arbitrariness.”³⁴ In other words, for Kuyper, a republican government is best at ensuring the *negative freedoms* of its subjects and their communities from intrusion and abuse by either the state, individuals or other social spheres; very much in keeping with the previous discussion of the “mechanical” character of the state.

But there is an element of Kuyper’s “republicanism” that goes beyond and (perhaps) exists in tension with his sense of the mechanical character of government. Beyond merely being best at securing the *negative liberties* of those subject to a government, a republican form of government embodies the *positive freedoms of citizens*. Genuine political freedom is not “the free rein for arbitrariness” but rather “ours is a genuine *civil, and also moral freedom that does not disrupt but unites*, that derives its support precisely from *legitimate authority*, that offers and guarantees justice so that we may without fear consecrate heart, head and hand to what is good and beautiful, noble and just.”³⁵ This freedom is inseparable from active political participation by citizens,

³³ John Calvin, cited in Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: the Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties” in James D. Bratt, ed. *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 285. Cf. also, *Kuyper Lectures*, p. 83. Heslam suggests that this attribution of republicanism to Calvin may be disingenuous, but since our concern here is Kuyper’s views, it can here go unchallenged. Cf. Heslam PP.

³⁴ Kuyper, “Source and Stronghold,” 310.

³⁵ Kuyper, quoting John Winthrop, “Source and Stronghold,” 281 [my italics].

without which (negative) liberty would merely divide and authority would be illegitimate.

Kuyper cites Alexis de Tocqueville in defense of the notion that active, co-operative participation of citizens in government is necessary for the maintenance of genuine liberty:

Nonetheless, the sharp criticism by the liberal de Tocqueville remains justified: “These citizens, who appear to be so interested in their freedom, year upon year relinquish almost unnoticeably part of their individual independence to the administrative arm. The very people who have brought down thrones and put the kinds of the earth beneath their feet bow before the whims of an ordinary civil servant without any protest.”³⁶

This “laissez aller” attitude is an abrogation of “the noble civic spirit” and of the proper pride of citizens in their status as citizens; in other words, it is a crisis of *civic virtue* and a sense of the *dignity* of citizenship. Where this civic virtue is in decline, the necessary checks on the power and extent of the state are removed and the way is paved for a roll-back of even the negative freedoms of individuals and the spheres of society: “Freedom is in danger precisely when citizens lack pride and the state lacks bounds.”³⁷ Thus the positive liberties of *citizens* – the freedom to participate in government in accordance with their dignity *qua* citizens – make possible and preserve their negative freedoms *as individuals and members of society*.

This view of Kuyper’s is grounded not just in a concern to mitigate the effects of sin, but in his positive Calvinistic vision of human flourishing and the proper role and nature of government. Constitutional governments alone, he argues, can create the framework within which the various spheres of society can develop organically and thus flourish in accordance with God’s creational commands for them, since they alone secure

³⁶ Ibid., quoting Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

³⁷ Ibid., 283. For a similar account of the role of civic virtue in maintaining negative freedoms, see Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 473.

the proper boundaries of the various spheres and of the state itself.³⁸ Furthermore, in “Maranatha” Kuyper argues that “popular influence” is “inherent in the nature of a constitutional government” to such an extent that it “cannot rest until it has touched bottom.”³⁹ In other words, the very logic of legitimate constitutional governments requires the fullest extent of popular influence, even to the extent of the enfranchisement of the “little people.” Citizen government (republicanism) is not merely a prudential preference for Kuyper based on its greater likelihood of success in minimizing corruption and injustice in government, but a *positive requirement* grounded in what he takes to be the fundamental commitment of Calvinism to the flourishing of society and the belief, in turn, that this requires constitutional government.⁴⁰

Thus Kuyper’s republicanism includes an account of what Taylor characterizes as “a participatory concept of freedom;” one in which freedom is not separated from a palpable sense of and concern for the *dignity of citizens*. But, as we’ve seen, implicit in this commitment is a sense of the political community as a moral community and of one’s fellow citizens as “political friends” (i.e., fellow participants in the political community, viewed by each as a shared good). If my discussion above is correct, this stands in tension with Kuyper’s view of the state as a merely “mechanical” institution, the good of which is constituted merely by its role in restraining the social effects of sin. Such a view explains only the importance of the protections of politically negative freedoms (i.e., the freedoms of members of society and civil society from intrusion by others). But since Kuyper himself seems to ground the possibility of these negative

³⁸ See “Source and Stronghold”

³⁹ Kuyper, “Maranatha,” 223.

⁴⁰ “Indeed, has not the entire Calvinist movement – even in Great Britain, the Netherlands and America alike – relied precisely on *the extension of popular influence* to strengthen their governments.” Kuyper, “Maranatha,” 223

freedoms on an account of the politically positive freedoms of citizens, he seems himself to transcend the limits of a merely mechanical conception of the state.

So the question then arises: what are the possibilities of articulating a Kuyprian conception of the state as a moral community, and hence a conception that can support a commitment to the centrality of positive political freedoms grounded in a robust conception of citizen dignity? What would a Kuyprian view of citizen dignity and civic virtue (inextricably interlinked concepts) look like? My account of this will have two stages. First, I will briefly discuss the doctrine of common grace as a way of overcoming the tendency of Kuyprian pluralism to slide into a kind of agonism. Then, I will discuss the possibility of viewing the state as an “organic” social sphere in its own right and hence of viewing it as a moral community in a robust sense. This will then also deal with the Charybdis of proceduralism (which Kuyprian views about positive freedoms commit him to slaying – or at least avoiding).

As we have seen, the fact that Kuyprian sees the antithesis as both *radical* and *ubiquitous* seems to condemn his view of participation in the public sphere to an agonism in line with Elstain’s worries about the anti-democratic character of the “politics of displacement.” While never effacing both of these characteristics of the antithesis, Kuyprian’s conception of *common grace* serves to “soften the edges” of that doctrine, if you will. Through common grace, God restrains the effects of sin in human beings and in society, allowing a degree of genuine creational goodness to be expressed even in the actions, organizations and commitments of the un-regenerate. Furthermore, the realm of common grace (social institutions, etc, that are not based explicitly on Christian principles) can itself be shaped and “ennobled” through the influence of special grace: “It

[the church] must purify and ennoble the ideas in general circulation, elevate public opinion, introduce more solid principles, and so raise the view of life prevailing in the state, society and the family.”⁴¹ Finally, just because Christians (and the Church as an organic social expression) are recipients of special grace, this does not imply that they too are without need for or participation in common grace. Indeed, Christian social institutions are “the terrain of special grace that has utilized the data of common grace”⁴² (including the results of scientific investigation, artistic creation, etc., in the realms of common grace). In both its restraint of sin and its mutual susceptibility with special grace to the positive influence of the other, common grace can thus offer some part of the groundwork for a more robust co-operation between Christians and non-Christians in the public sphere. Though ultimately the principial divide remains, Christians in the public sphere can unite with non-Christians in their affirmation of certain common goods, since common grace allows non-Christians to see what is good and true in Christian ideals, and vice versa. Thus understanding “citizenship” and the political community as an expression of common grace (particularly when under the influence of special grace) can provide grounds for viewing it as a shared good, in a way that agonism makes impossible.

However, common grace by itself is insufficient for the needed understanding of citizen dignity, the state as a moral community and civic friendship. This is because – as discussed above – it cannot be a general or universal commitment to certain (“cosmopolitan”) principles that anchors civic friendship, but a commitment to viewing *this or that particular state* as a moral community and thus a shared good (and

⁴¹ Abraham Kuyper, “Common Grace,” in Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 195.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 199.

correspondingly to viewing *one's fellow citizens* rather than "citizens in general" as one's political friends). Common grace is distributed universally, since it is primarily a grace that upholds the structures of creation, not one focused on this or that community, person, or activity. Hence it does not by itself underwrite a sense of political friendship, though it does provide some of the necessary groundwork.

What more is needed in order to be able to see one's own political community as a particular, but shared good, is also what is needed to defuse the temptation of proceduralism, *viz.* a vision of the political community as an authentic communal response to creational commands aimed at human flourishing (i.e., as an organism). This would allow this particular political community to be seen as a common project, aimed at the realization of a shared (at least to some extent) vision of human flourishing and thus of one's fellow citizens as equal participants in this project simply in virtue of being in community, rather than in virtue of a particular set of religious or ideological commitments. Though this requires rejecting Kuyper's view of politics and government as merely mechanical, it is in keeping with other significant aspects of his thought.

I want to get at this possibility by examining what it might mean to talk about the state as a "sphere" of society. Kuyper occasionally uses this term in association with the state, but, his view of its mechanical character prevents him from fully exploring what is implied thereby. The idea of a social sphere indicates, I want to argue, *both* an organic community participating in the realization of an aspect of human flourishing, *and* a set of institutional arrangements developed in order to organize and facilitate these organic, communal activities. Kuyper most clearly presents this view when he discusses the

distinction and connection between “the church as institute” and “the church as organism:”

Institute is related to *organism* as that which has been *built* to that which has *grown*. All that has been constructed of parts and pieces or *established* by force from without is an *institute*, an *organism*, on the other hand, is anything which its vital parts have produced on their own and which, subject to changes in its form, perpetuates and enlarges its own life.⁴³

The church as an organism is the “mystical body of Christ existing partly in heaven, partly on earth,” whereas the church as institute is “a local and temporally constructed *institution* grounded in human choices, decisions, and acts of the will.”⁴⁴ Any concrete church – say, the GKN or the CRC, or indeed any congregation where “two or three are gathered” – manifests both an institutional side and an organic side, the former giving concrete, local expression to the dynamic beating heart provided by the latter. It is not difficult to expand this characterization to all social spheres: all communities in civil society manifest both institutional particularity, organization, and administration, on the one hand, and organic community, development and flourishing on the other. The school, for example, is both a community of educators and students working together in response to God’s cultural mandate (organic side) and a set of institutions, policies, rules and standards (institutional side). Both sides are necessary to count as what I have been calling a “moral community” – one in which members understand their participation in this particular community to be with others for a common good. The “organic” side provides the moral goodness that is communally shared (since it is a response to commands for human flourishing), and the “institutional” side provides the framework

⁴³ “Common Grace” 187.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

for distinguishing this community as a *particular* expression or pursuit of that moral good and hence as *one's own* community.

Now, Kuyper's view of the state as mechanical would seem to restrict it to having only an "institutional side" and hence prevent it from being a genuine social sphere and a moral community. Government, on this view, works through the "institutional" means of construction (the assembly of disparate pieces⁴⁵) and establishment by force, rather than through the organic growth and development of a moral community. If this is so, then this further relegates citizen participation from the centre of political action, in spite of Kuyper's insistence that constitutional government by its essence involves citizen participation (see above). However, if we reject this "one-sided" view of the political community, there is a genuine possibility for seeing the state also as an organic community, as long as we can find some kind of "political" organic correlate to the political institution of government (construed as administration). With this organic side in place – a kind of "political public sphere" organized around a shared vision of the good – we have grounds for seeing the political sphere as a genuine community, even a moral community. But what, for Kuyper, could this be?

It is not sufficient, as already indicated, for the "public sphere" to be merely a set of forums for either agonistic struggle between publics or for the exercise by individuals of merely procedural "public reason" (à la Rawls); there must be community around some substantive vision of a genuinely common good. I want to argue, that, for Kuyper, this public sphere is (can be seen to be) constituted by the *nation* as the organic correlate

⁴⁵ These are the various ideological communities within the state, on the one hand, and the social spheres, on the other – the former arrayed in opposing fundamental principles and the latter as responses to different creational commands and hence as having differing normative tasks. The state's job is to put something together out of this disparate (even opposed) array – a job of patchwork rather than "growth."

to the institution of political governance. On the one hand, the (ethnic) nation is an organic community that is grown, rather than consciously assembled (at least in the case of, say, the Netherlands – the situation of post-national states will have to wait), since it develops in accordance with a shared history, language, cuisine, and – most importantly – a common “national character”⁴⁶ all of which are not assemblages of disparate parts nor are imposed by force. All of these aspects of nationhood can be conceived as particular expressions of human flourishing in accordance with creational commands (they put the “culture” in the cultural mandate, if you will) Every Dutch person is in organic community with every other Dutch person, then, regardless of divisions of class, ideology, gender, age, etc.⁴⁷

But none of this yet constitutes a view of the nation as grounded in a shared vision of the good; in other words, as constituted (at least in part) by common values, commitments, projects, etc. rather than merely by shared habits, dispositions and tastes. The capacity of a national political community to share a vision of the good, given the reality of the antithesis, depends upon the actual influence of special grace on the national psyche of the whole, in keeping with the general capacity of special grace to “ennoble” common grace; i.e., only if it is a Christian nation, but one with which non-Christians can identify on account of the work of common grace. On the one side, the Christian citizen can share a vision of the good with her non-Christian countrymen if the national character and dispositions – which are manifestations of common grace – reflect a significant degree of the benign influence of special grace. Thus, in “Maranatha,” Kuyper enjoins

⁴⁶ Kuyper’s uses this concept repeatedly, particularly when discussing the effects of Calvinism on English, Dutch and American cultures in “Source and Stronghold.”

⁴⁷ “[O]ur national society is, as Da Costa said, ‘not a heap of souls on a piece of ground,’ but rather a God-willed community, a living human organism.” *The Problem of Poverty*, 52.

his Anti-revolutionary *mannenbroeders* if they have “true patriotic love” to “rise to the defense of the honour of Christ in politics” out of hope that the “anti-Christian principle... has not yet scorched shut the conscience of this nation.”⁴⁸ Love of country is inseparable from love of Christ, since the Netherlands has a “national conscience” shaped by Calvinist principles that persists even in spite of the ascendancy of non-Christian principles in politics. Correspondingly, the non-Christian citizen shares values with his Christian countrymen since his own conscience is shaped in accordance with this national conscience which bears the mark of extensive Christian influence. Thus, in a Christian nation, no one is a recipient of special grace in virtue of their nationality, but “public opinion, the general mind-set, the ruling ideas, the moral norms, the laws and customs there clearly betoken the influence of Christian faith. Though this is attributable to special grace, it is manifested on the terrain of common grace, i.e., in ordinary civil life.”⁴⁹ In a Christian nation, the national character and its moral intuitions are so shaped by Christian ideals that we can legitimately talk of a shared sense of the good transcending, but not neutral between, communities based on differing fundamental principles.

5. Conclusion: And Post-National States

Thus, by viewing the ethnic nation as the organic correlate of the government, there are grounds for viewing the national political community as a moral community and thus hope for viewing one’s fellow citizens as fellow participants in a shared project organized around a shared vision of the common good. Kuyper’s Netherlands, then, was a place where there was a real possibility of political friendship and hence of steering

⁴⁸ “Maranatha,” 214.

⁴⁹ “Common Grace,” 199.

between the anti-democratic options of proceduralism and agonism. This possibility, of course, depends on a shared national history, culture, and sets of dispositions and habits. In other words, it works only for a genuine nation-state (and then, only one that is a “Christian nation”). This solution, then does not seem to guide those of us living in post-national states (North American states being paradigmatic, but the same seems to hold increasingly for European nations) that lack a sufficiently wide-spread sense of national community. I will conclude, then, with some (very) brief suggestions about how to apply what we’ve learned to these situations.

What is requisite universally for a sense of political friendship, in Kuyper’s terms, is the existence of an organic public sphere acting as the correlate to the “mechanical” institution of government. These two sides, furthermore, need to be intertwined to an extent that – in Taylor’s terms now, but in accordance with Kuyper’s republicanism – citizens can identify with the laws and acts of the state as their own *qua* citizens. One cannot hope to “assemble” a *national* identity where there is no shared history, since “assemblage” is an institutional means, and what is needed is organic “growth”. But there is no necessity that the organic side of the state be any sort of nation, in the sense possessing a shared history, language, culture, set of traditions, dispositions or characteristics, only that the public sphere be shaped in accordance with the spontaneous community-building dispositions of citizens seeking a common good. Perhaps we can employ Dooyeweerd’s distinction between the internal and external functions of the state to guide us in thinking about this. In its “external” functions, the state regulates (aspects of) the enkaptic relations between other societal structures and also promotes justice for individuals within those social structures – very much in keeping with Kuyper’s

“mechanical” conception of the role of government. However, the state simultaneously has “internal functions” concerning relations “between government and citizens or between different branches of government.”⁵⁰ Some of these functions are purely regulative, but there is ample space for viewing the norms for relations between government and citizens, and hence also between citizens as such, as being norms *for human flourishing* in a particular mode, and not simply as procedural dispute-resolution or border-regulation principles. No essential reference needs to be made here to a national character, etc, but only to a substantive, normed relationship aiming at a genuine *human good*. The ideal of public justice, then, as the “name” for the totality of the state’s normative task, includes both regulative principles (external functions) *and* substantive goods; the difference being marked by whether the norms at stake are aimed at the internal or the enkaptic/external functions of the sphere in question. Thus agonism is avoided by relying on shared norms for the internal functioning of the state – including the relations between citizens qua citizens (political relationships between individuals) – and proceduralism is avoided by showing that at least some norms for political activity are more than regulative, but are substantial directives for human flourishing. “Political friendship” here can be understood – in Dooyeweerd’s technical vocabulary – as the ethical anticipation in juridical functioning, particularly in its internal functions.

⁵⁰ For a helpful discussion, see Jonathan Chaplin, “Public Justice as a Critical Political Norm,” *Philosophia Reformata*, 72 (2) (2007): 131.