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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND POLITICAL RELATIONS

An address delivered before the International Congress of Calvinists, Amsterdam, October 25th,
1934.

THE dogma of the sovereignty of God as the central dogma of Calvinism has great significance for every province of life. For political life it acquired special importance because the notion of sovereignty originally belongs to this domain and therefore could not but lead to more concrete consequences. Of course only the main features of the question can be discussed here. In order to give as complete as possible an exposition I shall first trace the historical process of the doctrine, then its modern dogmatical position and finally its significance for political practice.

I

Let us first for a few moments consider the historical development. The dogma of the sovereignty of God took shape in the Middle Ages when Christendom was still undivided. As soon as theoretical reflection awoke and the need of a theory of the state on the basis of Christianity was felt, the sovereignty of God was made the corner-stone of political science. Not only did it procure the philosophical justification for the right of ruling and the duty of obeying, but it was also acknowledged as the governing principle for the form of the state and further for the scope of its activity.

We need not dwell at length upon the philosophical significance here as, throughout this period, it was generally and undisputedly accepted. It only lost this universal acknowledgment when Machiavelli—influenced by Renaissance-speculations—started preaching the pure reign of force, and when Hugo Grotius, though in quite another way, fundamentally undermined the sovereignty of God by teaching that law and state would be equally firmly established without a divine foundation since they possessed a sufficient basis already in human nature itself. To the medieval mind, however, it was an undoubted and undoubtable fact that every official in church and state only exercised power by virtue of a direct or indirect divine charge and that

every ruler was a more or less immediate representative of God's own exercise of power. The Christian mind accepted this without argument, it was a matter of course.

As to the importance of the dogma for the form of the state, this was a natural consequence of the "principium unitatis", which was so popular in the Middle Ages. This principle viewed the entire universe as an organism animated by one spirit and formed according to one law, in which every part in its turn, as ordained by divine harmony, presented an image of the whole, formed a microcosm over against the macrocosm. "Maxime ens est maxime unum et maxime unum est maxime bonum." The multiplicity results from the unity and returns to it. Humanity is a specific unity in the general unity of the universe, and it presents two sides, church and state, which, however, must always "ad unum reduci". That unity was found in God as the Author of the two swords of power, by which the authority in church and state was founded on His sovereignty. Both state and church were to be governed monarchically, as God Himself governs the universe monarchically. By stating this the form of the state was decided upon. Even where since Gregory VII the supremacy of the church was proclaimed, from clerical side, in the doctrine of the one sword, the clerical leaders still adhered to the principle "non est potestas nisi a Deo." The difference between the State-party and the Church-party only concerned the question whether the power of the state was indirectly or directly derived from God. No difference whatever existed with respect to the philosophical justification of government and its monarchical form.

Not only the philosophical justification and the monarchical form of the state, but also its character and the scope of its activity were dominated in principle by the dogma of the sovereignty of God. The medieval conception of life was thoroughly transcendental and in consequence earthly life was considered as a preparation for eternal life. This fundamental aspect was decisive for the purpose of the state. The church was entrusted with the care and advancement of the spiritual interests of humanity, which controlled the whole of life. The state was only required to protect and defend the church against its enemies and to enable its members to lead a quiet and godly life. Figgis expressed this in a terse and felicitous way when he said, that the state was merely the police department of the church.

It had to uphold and maintain the external conditions of life, which should of course be taken in the sense of the restricted character, which the medieval state in general bore as compared with the modern state.

In this manner the doctrine of the sovereignty of God marked the basic lines for the juridical nature, the form and the scope of activity of the state.

II

But in course of time influences arose, that began to weaken the dogma and even threatened its vital force. With the revival of ancient philosophy in general the ancient theory of the state also resuscitated and it was especially Aristotle's political doctrine which rapidly became prevalent. He taught that the state originated partly in the instinctive inclinations of man, partly in the conscious desire to form a social organization. So people became aware of what might be called the human side of the question and in consequence lost the feeling of the government being a direct institution of God. The human factors, which called authority into being, continually increased in importance, where matters of public law were discussed. Of course the sovereignty of God remained "*causa prima*", but for that very reason "*causa remota*"; "*imperium est a Deo et tamen per homines*". The voluntary submission of men to government in church and state is in this connection the "*potentia materialis*", God bestows the "*potentia spiritualis*". Is it not likewise God Who reveals His power where an entire nation with one accord takes a decision? Thus in opposition to the doctrine, which accepts authority as a direct mandate from God, the opinion gradually gained ground, that God only grants authority through the voluntary consent of the people. The outstanding problem now became, whether this consent by the people was a "*translatio imperii*" or only a "*concessio usus*", that is in modern terms: what is the relation between the authority of the government and the freedom of the people. As regards the form of the state, by accepting Aristotle's doctrine concerning the different forms of government, the monarchical form lost its divine character and the whole problem became a matter of utility only. Did not "*unitas principatus*" exist in the republic also? Nor was this change of view restricted to the state. For the church,

too, the monarchical form was called in question in the conciliar strife.

With respect to the third problem, the mission of the state, the course of events was much the same. The influence of the Renaissance threw a totally different light on earthly life, gave it a much more independent value and so revived the ancient idea of the state. The process was expedited by the absolute failure of the medieval state, never very strong, but much enfeebled still in the fifteenth century. It proved unable to order the newly arising conditions in public life and to subjugate the disintegrating forces attendant on them. When Aeneas Sylvius, afterwards Pope Pius II, published his "de ortu et autoritate imperii Romani" in 1446, in this work all the old principles have become nothing but hollow formulas. The conclusion from all this was drawn by Machiavelli in 1510 and by Thomas More in his Utopia of 1516: they radically broke with the dogma of the sovereignty of God.

It was against this weakening of the doctrine that the theologians and the jurists of the Reformation directed their opposition. Amongst them the Calvinists in Switzerland, France, Western Germany, Scotland and Holland took a prominent place. From medieval science they adopted the principle that the government and the people both, in virtue of the law of nature, possessed certain unassailable rights. In accordance with medieval conception they considered the people as a corporate body, not, as in later times, as a sum total of individuals. But the Calvinists now again placed all this in the full light of God's Majesty.

When in the "Vindiciae contra tyrannos" the juridical foundations are laid for the Calvinistic theory of the state, God appears as the one party in a stipulatio, where government and people together are the counterpart as "correi debendi", each liable "in solidum", and both have to promise "ne quid detrimenti Ecclesia capiat", that is that the glory of God shall be vindicated as the main object of the political relations. God claims from both, prince and people, "rem integram" and punishes both for the guilt of either. After effecting this stipulatio people and government now conclude a second agreement with a view to preserving the state from corruption and the two compacts together form the "constitutio regis"; "populus regem constituit, Deus elegit". In this way the

entire structure of the state was again erected on the groundwork of the sovereignty of God, even though it was done in the conceptional forms of Roman private law, the only means of construction which science had to offer at that time. In other works, as in Beza's "De jure magistratum", Hotman's "Franco-gallia" and Buchanan's "De jure regni apud Scotos" we hear the same fundamental note strengthened by illustrations taken from the Holy Scripture, universal and national history and traditional theory of the state. The separate rights of government and people, of authority and freedom, were thus directly based again on the sovereignty of God, as it is revealed to us in Holy Scripture. The Word of God—that was the rock on which political relations were built and firmly founded. Lastly Althusius summed up the whole thought of this period and crystallized its principles into a systematic treatise. This important work doubtless deserves sincere admiration, but the vividly graphical, the intuitive-visionary element, which had so warmly appealed to the heart of the older generation, born as it was from the fierce struggle for religious freedom, had too much given way to a speculative form of thought. Its refined subtlety certainly corrected a number of former logical weaknesses, but at the same time, because of its rationalistic tinge, reopened the danger of the sovereignty of God losing its prominent place as the central dogma. Notwithstanding this, Calvinism now was in a fair way to exercise great influence in Western Europe and North America and it looked as if the dogma of the sovereignty of God would have a brilliant future allotted to it.

III

But this was not to be. Before long serious harm was done to the dogma by the development of the Roman Catholic theory of the state. The fierce opponents of the Reformation, the Dominicans and Jesuits (Molina, Bellarmine, Suarez), because of their general Christian standpoint, could have and should have accepted the dogma. For their purpose they need solely have contested its Calvinistic elaboration. But their view was limited to only one aim: that of ensuring to the church the supremacy over the state. To this end they premised, that God had given power to the Pope by a special and direct act, but to the secular

prince only "ex vi rationis naturalis", as "proprietas consequens naturam". That was equal to a pious elimination, if not to a total denial of the dogma, an unintentional genuflection to the humanistic theory of the state. This was bad enough already. But worse still was that the anti-Jesuitical authors as Fénelon and Bossuet, though they energetically maintained the government as the vicar of God against the Jesuits, now changed the dogma, with complete denial of the popular rights, into the system of the "droit divin". So the prince became the absolute ruler, who was responsible only to God Himself, and to the people he was a vicar of God Almighty whom they had to obey unconditionally. "The divine right of Kings" of the Stuarts in England was likewise protected with the shield of the sovereignty of God. The inevitable consequence was that the dogma of the sovereignty of God was wrongly identified with the absolutism of kings. This was an unpardonable mutilation, as the revival of the dogma by Calvinism, a century before, had been directed especially against that absolutism and had founded on this dogma not only the power of the prince, but also the rights of the people. The force of facts, however, arising from the glory of the Bourbons and the Stuarts, entirely threw the historical truth into the background. The sovereignty of God and the absolutism of the prince became practically identical. And when the entire development of public life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries showed an increasing trend towards political ideals diametrically opposed to absolutism, the dogma of the sovereignty of God itself was, together with absolutism, more and more discredited. It was entirely forgotten, that in the Middle Ages the doctrine had risen from the opposition against the omnipotence of the Pope and that in the sixteenth century it was renewed to support the opposition against the omnipotence of the prince. Now it was only looked upon as a favourite weapon for the defence of the detested despotism. When in the "Glorious Revolution" in England William III dealt a decisive blow to absolutism by upholding the historical rights of the people, while at the same time maintaining the ancient rights of the king, the Calvinistic political doctrine had declined too much to defend this Calvinistic political act with the only peremptory arguments, derived from the sovereignty of God. It left that defence to John Locke, that is to the deistic, humanistic, rationalistic theory of the state. It was this theory of the state which

gradually gained ground and which now joined issue with absolutism. To this end it was necessary that it should entirely liberate itself from the sovereignty of God. Grotius was the first with his "etsi daremus esse non Deum"—even though it was in quite another connection; others spoke of "a Deo at a Natura". The authority was not "immediate a Deo", but there was only an "ordinatio divina approbans". Puffendorf and Thomasius still mentioned God as the final source of the power of the people; Wolff hardly speaks of it any more. All power in political relations was more and more considered as the innate right of sovereign man. Once more after a lapse of two centuries the dogma of the sovereignty of God had dwindled to an empty phantom; it had withered under the scorching glow of the unholy ardour of the humanistic device: ni Dieu ni maître.

The nineteenth century, however, brought revival. It commenced with section 57 of the Final Act of Vienna and the preamble of the treaty of the Holy Alliance, in which the doctrine of the sovereignty of God was once more proclaimed, but not without the old error. The Netherlands statesman Groen van Prinsterer was right when he made the remark, that the authors of this treaty had justly accepted the divine basis for the right of kings, but had apparently forgotten the same basis for the rights of the people. In a more effective way did Stahl, the Lutheran philosopher of law in Germany, tackle the problem, when in his theory of the state he once more brought the doctrine of the sovereignty of God into evidence over against the humanistic theory of the state. He made it the central dogma commanding everything else and tried to give it practical significance by founding upon it the politics of the conservative party in Prussia. This endeavour failed. Owing to the influence of Bismarck, Hegel's theory of the state and von Treitschke's historical deification of power became the basis for German state practice. The consequence has been that the two fundamental principles of Stahl's theory of the state, the "monarchische Prinzip" and the "Schrankentheorie" have been frustrated; monarch and parliamentary "Schranke" have disappeared together and have made room for the national-socialistic reign of force. But Stahl's leading principles have remained and it is to be hoped that in a new form the German theory and practice of the state will once more try to link up with these principles.

Holland has been more fortunate. The revival of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God was brought about there by the writings of Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper and de Savornin Lohman. As could be expected from Netherlands history, it developed according to Calvinistic principles. The doctrine itself was defended with force and ardour by arguments derived from Scripture and History and dealt with in its two consequences, the divine basis for the right of kings as well as that of the rights of the people. By the formation of a Calvinistic political party on this fundamental basis the doctrine became the source of strength for practical politics of the orthodox Protestants and consequently a living factor in the political relations of the Netherlands people.

So summarizing the results of historical evolution we can state: with the Roman Catholics the nucleus of the dogma is naturally not denied, as far as it is directed against humanistic principles, but the dogma itself is felt to be a preponderantly Protestant doctrine, which by its elaboration menaces the power of the church and consequently is not met with sympathy. In the Lutheran theory of the state it was acknowledged and defended by Stahl, but in political literature and practice it was afterwards well-nigh abandoned. Because Calvinistic theology has, in a general religious sense, made the doctrine the centre of the entire Calvinistic system of life, it has also been dealt with much more effectively and more completely in the Calvinistic theory of the state. That is why it only exercises its full beneficial influence when taken in the Calvinistic conception.

IV

I have designedly sketched the *history* of the dogma at some length, because it already in a measure includes its dogmatical and practical sides, and so enables me to deal more concisely with these points.

Dogmatically the sovereignty of God has a negative and a positive side. Seen from the negative side it implies the absolute repudiation of all sovereignty of man as ultimate source of authority and liberty, that is of all competence in questions of law and state. In divers forms the supremacy of man has been made the basis notion of the theory of the state. Since the

Renaissance, when humanism deviated from the Christian train of thought, individual man, some quality of man or some form of community of men have by turns been made the source of law and state. For Machiavelli the central idea was "the man of power", who did not need justification from elsewhere. After him came Grotius who based his doctrine on the gregarious instinct of man and Hobbes who, taking an opposite standpoint, founded his system on the natural struggle for life of man against man. Rousseau started from the sovereign, free will of individual man, Kant pronounced human reason to be supreme. For Hegel the source of authority was the "objective Geist" incorporated in the state and for many German theorists after him it was the state as mere factual centre of power. For Kelsen it was the impersonal norm of law and for Krabbe the supremacy of the individual sentiment of justice. Fascism and national socialism uphold the popular myth of the race or the absolute value of national civilization as basic idea of the state which is invested in the dictator and makes him the self-sufficient source of all authority. But in whatever shape the principle of the sovereignty of man may appear, it is condemned by the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, because it expunges the boundary between the Creator and His creature, who can never be but clay in the hands of the potter. Upholding the doctrine of the sovereignty of God means proclaiming that no human authority is ever justified in itself, but always needs the justification of the will of God as revealed to us in Holy Scripture and in History.

Seen from the positive side the doctrine has a double signification. It first signifies that every legally existing government ought to be acknowledged and obeyed, not because the government has any claim to it derived from its own being, nor because the subject does so of his own volition or sees himself compelled to do so by violence or by fear of violence, but only because it is God's will and that will of God has a binding power for his conscience. But this government is God's minister, not His vicar in the sense that the power of government should be of the same nature as God's own power, that is without limits and responsibility. God has taught us in His Word, that He should be obeyed more than man, which is also more than any prince. So extreme cases may occur, in which it becomes both a right and a duty for the professor of the sovereignty of God, to refuse obedience to the government. Calvin himself cites

Daniel, who rightly refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar, and the Israelites, who wrongly obeyed Jeroboam's command to worship the golden calf.

But that is not all. The power of the government is limited not only on the one hand by God's own commands to mankind, but also on the other hand by the rights appropriate to the people. Those rights of the people are in their turn also derived from the sovereignty of God. As Holy Scripture teaches us, government exists because of sin and in order to bridle the outburst of sin by instituting order and discipline. It does not exist, as the humanistic doctrine of sovereignty asserts, to give full scope to the glory of man and to create a civilization where power reigns supreme and which need not show the least consideration for anyone or anything, as no right exists outside its own will.

The contrary is true. According to His sovereign will God has given a special task to the church, to science, to art, to the householder, to the social spheres of commerce and industry. For the performance of this task He has given them a special right, which they are to use for His glory and which must be respected by the government when fulfilling its own task. For the relation between church and state this means that the state can claim no supremacy over the church and the church no supremacy over the state, but that they are co-ordinate, each with its own task and its own right in its own domain, though co-operating on a basis of mutual understanding. Moreover, the people may have a right of co-operation in the work of the state itself. What practical inter-relations result from all this is a problem of positive law ; the ancient problem of the " *pactum subiectionis* ", or the adjustment of the relations between authority and liberty. For every nation the way in which this adjustment will take place depends on the development of its history, the stage of its civilization, on its nature and disposition. Also the general characteristics of a definite period may exercise influence whether they are normal or point to a crisis.

Eternal and unchangeable only is the principle of the sovereignty of God, it holds good always and everywhere and it ever demands that in constituting positive law government and people both seek His countenance, that they adjust their relations in such a way as will most serve to glorify His Name, and that in doing so they respect each other's rights. Rights which God

has allotted to them by His Word, by His providential guidance in history and by His ordinances in spiritual and material nature in order to serve Him only.

So the dogmatical significance of the sovereignty of God for political relations is this : it forbids the degrading of government to a mandate of sovereign man, or the debasement of man to a rightless object of an arbitrary and omnipotent state ; it claims the co-operating of government and people, each according to his own independent right, which God as the sovereign of both granted to each of them, to the glorification of His name.

V

Finally we come to the practical significance of our doctrine for political relations. In all countries where the Calvinists have played a part in public life, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God has made them the pith and core of the nation, showing a strong sense of state and a high-minded civic spirit which have exercised an extremely beneficial influence on political relations.

When Calvin had to incorporate the idea of the sovereignty of God, formulated for the province of the Church as the kingship of Christ, into a practical system for its organization, he had to avoid two pernicious extremes : the absolutism of the Roman Catholic Church and the individualistic lawlessness of sectarianism. For the political relations the same guiding principle held good, though the practical effect would naturally bear another character there. It was because of this that he did not tire with inculcating on his followers that they should honour the government as an immediate institution of God, which was given to them and placed over them as an act of divine love, as he qualified it. They were not to bow to authority, because the persons invested with it were not men with like passions as themselves, subject to all the iniquity that man is heir to. It is far more likely that sin will show in a worse form still in those clothed with majesty than in the ordinary citizen. But the duty of obedience was only founded on the fact that the government derived its competence to legislate and to give commands directly from God Himself. The citizen has to obey, not because the government wills it, and still less because he himself wills it or thinks it profitable, but because God has ordained it so. That is the origin of the strong sense of state

which has always revealed itself in the countries bearing the imprint of Calvinism and which has also helped towards moulding the mind of that part of the population which did not hold the same convictions. It is not obedience "perinde ac cadaver", for all exercise of power had to be tested by the law of God, Who had instituted that power to restrain sin, not to gratify man's love of dominion and lust of power. It is not obedience because the command of the government was in reality nothing but the citizen's own will, who himself had appointed the government in virtue of his own sovereignty. But it is obedience as the result of conscious volition in moral freedom, born from the conviction that no other way was possible, because God had so ordained it for the sake of His name. And that is exactly what every government wanting to keep a firm control stands in need of. It should not find will-less instruments, nor refractory rebels, in its citizens, but independent co-operators in a joint task who accept its guidance and obey its commands prompted by their own conscience. A Calvinist feels aversion to a weak and hesitating government, its task is to exercise power and to maintain order; he abhors slackness and weakness in the performance of duties which are imposed by God. The first duty of the government will be firmly to restrain every excess and with Calvin as the first to express his disapproval in the dedication of his *Institutes* to Francis I, all reformed authors testify to their hatred of disorderliness in the state.

"I detest seditions and all confusions as horrible monsters" Beza wrote in his "De jure magistratum". All these convictions were based on the well-known words of the apostle Paul: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God." This pronouncement remained the dominant note for the political relations for everyone that adheres to the sovereignty of God, and it was practically this principle which created citizens with an independent sense of state, evincing an understanding interest in all matters political, upon whom the government could absolutely rely, in normal times as well as in times of stress.

But in virtue of the same confession everyone calling himself a Calvinist as strongly insisted upon the defence of the rights of the people. These rights were given to the people

as a means of preventing the government from degenerating into tyranny and for that reason it has to respect them. If, none the less, they are violated, it is the task of the natural leaders of the people to defend those rights against the government and to protect them with those means which the existing law provides. With this the second pole of political relations, that of the civil liberties, was indubitably secured and, in the countries where Calvinism exercised influence, a strong sense of state as well as a high-minded civic spirit have developed, both so indispensable to a healthy view of political matters. The revolt of the Netherlands against Spain, the revolution against the Stuarts in England and the War of Independence of the North American states provide the historical illustrations of this fact. But not only in this resistance against infringement and destruction of freedom did that love of liberty reveal itself. It also showed in an increasing inclination of the citizens to play a part of their own in political life. The parliamentary form of government gave them an opportunity for this, and I have pleasure in recording in this international circle that in this country we have for nearly a century taken part in political life, forming a political party of our own which is based on the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. In a grim battle we have been able to prevent that a legal scheme of education, based on humanistic principles, should be forced upon our children, threatening to alienate them from the faith of their fathers. For other political problems touching Christian principles we have also tried to find our own solutions and to realize them wholly or partly in our national life. And when our country was brought to a bad pass by the late economic crisis, it was a Calvinist, true to type, who succeeded in uniting around him the various political parties, the socialists forming the only exception. As our Prime Minister he now endeavours to steer the ship of state a safe course through these turbulent times, firmly maintaining authority and at the same time thoroughly respecting the right of the people. Though avoiding the discussion of fundamental political differences as being unsuitable to these times of stress, he nevertheless openly avows that his strength is in his earnest conviction that the sovereignty of God holds good for the political as well as for all other domains of life.

The political consequences of Calvinism cannot be the same in all countries. The differences in national character, national

history and actual conditions are too great for that. But however great these differences may be, for every country and for every nation and for every time the unconditional truth prevails that in practice the best warranty for a healthy development of political relations is given there where the greatest number of followers reverently range themselves under the banner of the sovereignty of God.

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