



## Subsidiarity in her/his own sphere. Women and Christian politics<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

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*This article is a discussion of the attitude of Christian social thought to women. In 1891 two influential Christian documents addressed this issue. Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and Abraham Kuyper's *Het sociaale vraagstuk der Christelijke religie* were responses to industrialization and subsequent Christian responses to feminism have had to face the legal, cultural and political aspects of the enhanced female participation in commerce which assumes equality for all consumers in the market-place. Catholic and Protestant political initiatives in Europe in the early 20th century, in line with these two approaches, assumed that the vocation of Christian women, inside and outside the domestic sphere, has to be that of a bulwark against materialism and liberalism. In line with this point of view they helped to counter the domination of market-place values over all spheres of social life. These documents are also part of latter-day efforts to reconsider women's place. Female involvement in industry and public life around the world increases unabated as "affirmative action" re-structures the public status of women. The ambiguous legacy of "economic rationalism" poses new threats since the burden of social welfare falls again onto the shoulders of overworked women. A sociological account which would be Christian must address historical, social and economic ambiguities. This article explores the issue, noting typical ways in which these two prominent Christian contributions will be interpreted.*

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## 1. The importance of the issue

This article explores feminism's challenge to Christian democratic thinking of both Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions. The under-development in biblically-directed Christian democratic politics and reflection in countries like USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand requires careful analysis. It might have something to do with the fact that the "women's issue" remains unresolved in Christian political thought. Whether this under-development can be challenged remains to be seen, but if Christian politics is to emerge then the challenge of feminism has to be met and the normative role for women in post-industrial society made plain. The under-development of Christian politics in these countries is linked spiritually to the dominance of utilitarian, communitarian and pragmatistic visions of civil society which have nourished feminism. The feminist challenge has provided ongoing support for moral, industrial and political changes which are viewed now as essential to women's role.

The remnants of Christian democratic thinking around the world claim to promote a fully participative multi-cultural civil society. There are large questions about Christian democracy as a political and cultural movement and some of these concerns centre on whether it has faced the gendered bi-unity of its own normative vision – God created humankind, male and female and they are to exercise stewardship over the development of the planet, from one generation to the next, as partners.

Such a vision seems decisive enough having a clear and definite things in relation to contentious "body issues" like family policy, the legal status of marriage, abortion, euthanasia, surrogacy and gay rights. But somehow the issues get muddled. Here I wish to limit discussion to the question of how women's public office-bearing should be viewed in a Christian way.

Paul poetically insisted that (the office of) woman was to be saved through child-birth, namely with the birth of a Saviour (1 Timothy 2:15). This view has not always tied the Christian church to a male-centred idea of ministry (*diaconia* or *latreia*) or excluded women from contributing fully to the ongoing sanctification of the entire people of God. But Christian thought has found it difficult to fully accept the office of woman, the vocation of motherhood, and the other competencies, talents and responsibilities which women legitimately hold. In this article I discuss these demands upon Christian political reflection against the backdrop of important themes in neo-Calvinistic and Roman Catholic thought. Undeveloped Christian politics and a reactionary posture about women's role may be two sides of the same coin.

Reformed people, when they have constituted sizable sectors within national populations in the last 200 years, have not found it easy to articulate biblical

principles for their political life. Time and again, the advocates of a Reformed world-view, whether in the Netherlands, South Africa or even Hungary, have not always been in a position to articulate a distinctively Christian vision, as they face the diversity of cultures and ethnicities in their national contexts. After all they also inherit their own ethnic characteristics. And in the push and pull of politics *religious* commitment sometimes becomes confused with ethnicity.

In the late 20th century, neo-Calvinist political reflection in South Africa has deepened its insight into how the application of the principle of *sphere sovereignty* could not mean the sovereignty of *races* in their own spheres. The attempt to extend the principle to race relations, accommodating the sphere sovereignty principle with an idea that ethnicity always divides civil society into mutually exclusive camps, is now totally discredited. In such a public-legal order the various camps have to have been divided in a public legal sense from the outset. How could that be done without one ethnic camp asserting its sovereignty in matters of the administration of public law? The problem with apartheid was not with the search (misguided as it is now seen to be) for a legislative way to respect the integrity of different cultures. Rather the problem was with trying to harness the need for such civil respect into a public legal division, on ethnic lines, and in which one racial group had to govern the boundaries by developing laws which maintained the ethnic demarcation. Hence when law-making and administration is located on one side of such a legal (ethnic) division it has the effect of allowing one (ethnic) group to control the public (and increasingly *ethnically* circumscribed) lives of those on the other side of the racial boundary.

Similarly, when we look carefully at the history of Christian politics in the 20th century, we can find well-intentioned Christian attempts to extend the *sphere sovereignty* principle to *gender*, to the relations between male and female in civil society. Such applications of the *sphere sovereignty* principle to relations between men and women, whether in church, state, family and business, might come with loud affirmations that each gender is sovereign in its own sphere. It sounds neat. Men and boys will look after male business; women and girls will attend to female affairs. But who is to administer the boundaries, and who is to define what the boundaries are?

In post-industrial society the question of *women's place* is now a constant theme of political reflection world-wide. The issue was raised initially by utilitarian feminists, following Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and John Stuart Mill (1869), but Christian political reflection cannot avoid the issue.

## 2. Christian and feminist social theory

If, as feminist thought concludes, the domestic realm, the sphere of women, is a constructed invention of the 19th century, then the corollary is also true: the

public realm where men work is also an historical construction. Yet is social reality always so simple that it can be captured by such neat (post-modern) philosophical formulae? The work of Jean Bethke Elshtain on families and communities (Elshtain, 1982; 1986; 1990; 1993; 1996), along with others (Glendon, 1987, 1991; Glendon & Yanes, 1991), highlights the way *rights talk* functions as a trump card in social contestation. The trump does not only refer to public policy but also to the way we write history (Conway, 1994).

Nurseries, hospitals, orphanages, schools have long been important social institutions that presuppose ongoing female support. There are also important historical examples of women's educational institutions at all levels (Conway, 1994). Such action (often in obedience to the Gospel) did not require women to wait until men gave their permission. These tasks were taken up because no-one was taking them seriously and were sometimes efforts by women for women seeking justice for ignored causes. Mission agencies in many denominations have been run in this way for many decades. The question is not only why such involvement is so often ignored. It is also why such important public work does not become a precedent for further female involvement in adjacent spheres. The answer is complex and has to do with the fact that such initiatives were not in the first instance a matter of the political rights of the women themselves, even if such work involved intense political struggle. The historiographies which illustrate how women overcame the domestication or privatisation of their social roles should also account for the fact that women are often seen as a domesticating and civilising influence upon the barbarisms of public life. This misses the point.

Around the world official statistics indicate alarming rates of marriage failure and the widespread disruption to households. Any Christian democratic policy-making will need to appreciate these social trends, and explain why marriage and family life are so unstable. What does the large incidence of divorce and single-parent households indicate? Is it purely part of an inevitable process overthrowing an all-pervasive patriarchy? Christian democratic reflection need not shy away from developing its own critique of feminist ideology as it encourages a re-newed normative form of familial and household life. But it will need to better understand the various streams of feminism and how they view these same trends.

In the same year, 1891, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and Abraham Kuyper's *Het sociaale vraagstuk der Christelijke religie* were published as explanations of how and why social life was being transformed in a non-Christian direction. Waves of feminism and feminisation confronted the domestic and private lives of Christians on a daily basis with the consequences of legislation and commercial and industrial practices grounded in liberal, *laissez-faire* and utilitarian views. One hundred years later we might judge that

their insights lacked Christian depth, but we should not underestimate the differences in social context which Christian men and women then had to face as they worked out their discipleship in civil society.

Following Elshtain, the respective visions of Leo and Kuyper may have been grounded on “the presumption that authority must be single in form if a society is to be coherent and orderly” (Elshtain, 1990:51). Both explanations, as Christian rallying calls, insisted that marriage and family had to be a necessary part of any Christian democratic policy-making. The major doctrines in these statements have been widely accepted, ensuring that from thenceforth the internal life of both structures has been considered by Christians as a *public and political* issue (Browning, 1994). The law about these so-called private spheres is always of a public character with wide-ranging consequences.

Christian democratic social theory, after Leo XIII and Kuyper, may not easily acquiesce in the paternalism which was part of the 19th century liberalism. To take that route would be to take issue with the Christian principles basic to these respective political visions. Together and/or separately they promote systematic Christian social theory, aiming to give an account of societal plurality and complexity.

When Christian social theory now reassesses the female role in relation to societal plurality and complexity, the application of *subsidiarity* and/or *sphere sovereignty* will necessarily come to play a part.

### 3. The Christian response to the industrial revolution

These responses to late-19th century industrialism had everything to do with the Christian suspicion of liberalism and individualism. For both it was a *sine qua non* that rationalistic individualism, along with its humanist manifestations in science and scholarship, were fruit of the (French) revolutionary impulse. In the Dutch case, the rejection of individualism was publicly promulgated against what was perceived to be the tide of history. Both Dutch Catholics and Dutch Calvinists were highly suspicious of the social reform championed by the Liberals. Yet their united response to universal suffrage seems to have identified that policy change with the philosophical basis the Liberals and others adopted in their public campaigns to win women the right to vote.

In reaction to individualism, the Christian critics of such policies tended to fall into organicist viewpoints which, in time, became part of fascism (Kuyper’s son was associated with the Dutch national socialist movement) and racism (Kuyper’s philosophy was conscripted to give support for *apartheid*). There is an aspect of such neo-Calvinist thinking which in principle quite clearly failed as Christian thinking.

Likewise the later Papal association with fascism seems to have allowed the principle of subsidiarity to function as an ecclesiastical blindfold to unjust policies. Organic and communitarian views are not as world-changing as many imply. According to Mary Stewart van Leeuwen the communitarian emphasis within Afrikanerdom encouraged female *acquiescence* in structural injustice rather than calling forth any sustained Christian resistance (Stewart-van Leeuwen, 1992). But this being noted, it still can be said that the possibility remains for positive policy initiatives to arise from both of these Christian sources.

Current debate, about the reform of welfare provision, is often represented simplistically by the media. But despite the power exercised by contending groups to corner the discussion, and the widespread confusion about what the issues are, the public and legal significance of domestic and household life still needs clarification. Government respect for homemakers and child-rearers, for homes and children, cannot be sustained in a structureless vacuum.

Feminism is not confined to political parties and public legal debate, and the issue of women's place is not simply a women's issue. If church polity excludes women from the membership category of "voting membership" in the congregation, as some Calvinistic denominations still do, what happens when that church discusses government policy with respect to women, women's rights, suffrage and the like? Will women be asked to participate in such matters? Will the male church rulers who restrict women's right of access to ecclesiastical office, propose that women must follow their Christian vocation of *passivity* in the political sphere as well?

This is pertinent in polities like Australia where all adults have the vote, and by law *must* vote. The Presbyterian Church of Australia at its General Assembly of 1991 rescinded its 1974 decision to ordain women ministers. The ramifications of such a decision are still being felt and go beyond the church sphere. There are long-term pastoral and pedagogical implications for the next generation of Christian women. Some quasi-Presbyterian sects have even taken this 1991 change to mean that women's involvement in higher education should be controlled by the male headship principle. Girls who have gained university entrance have been forbidden to go on to further education.

The Roman Catholic and neo-Calvinistic traditions may have actually stimulated Christian political reflection among women, even if such traditions constrict female participation in the church sphere. Does a Christian woman have to leave the church, or at least become a dissenter within it, before she can give leadership in the public-legal realm? Or to put it more provocatively: does the church which proscribes preaching by women, or female elders, advocate the abolition of women's suffrage as well?

Kuyper at some points seems to imply that preachers and Christian educators will be prevented from putting forward a Christian (organic) view of society when state laws demand women's suffrage. For him, Christian women who try to do so as Christians will be seriously misreading the pagan roots of their "forceful personality development". This was how he described Anglo-Saxon women reared under utilitarianism (Kuyper, 1914:4).

But does women's suffrage have to be defended on an individualistic and liberal basis? It may be advocated by those who confess *Ni Dieu, Ni Maître*, but to assert that the issue itself is simply a liberal issue is to prevent Christian democratic politics from ever developing its own well-rounded world-and-life-view. Still, a Christian political historiography of the 19th century will have to explain why the utilitarians were in the vanguard of women's suffrage.

We consider Kuyper first. The major emphasis in this article is upon Kuyper's thinking about women, showing how, at a crucial juncture, he seems to have accommodated the Roman Catholic principle of *subsidiarity*. He may have tried to extend the *sphere sovereignty principle* but in asserting the male role for administering the line of demarcation between male and female roles he advocated *her subsidiarity in his sphere*.

We proceed by addressing the question: how are the *public* offices of woman in work – inside and outside the home – to be respected? Feminists resile from any arbitrary separation of private and public realms, the application of any universal (and male serving) criterion. And the meaning of the distinction between private and public still continues to be a matter for searching discussion in the social sciences.

#### **4. Abraham Kuyper – *Het sociaale vraagstuk der Christelijke religie* (1891) and *De eerepositie der vrouw* (1914)**

New Zealand first, and then the Australian colonies, granted women the vote late in the 19th century. For this and other reasons, Australia and New Zealand were lumped together by Kuyper as examples of the Anglo-Saxon imbibing of the spirit of individualism to a degree unknown in communitarian (Germanic) Europe (Kuyper, 1914), and presumably also in its colonies. Kuyper's philosophy, driven by a view of Christian social freedom (Kuyper, 1891; Hennis, 1994), seems thereby to construe the United States in communitarian terms (Heslam, 1998) but subsequently the USA followed the Australasian British colonies and granted the vote to women. It took longer for European countries to follow.

Kuyper's *De eerepositie der vrouw* (1914) was a series of newspaper articles on suffrage published in *De Standaard*, the paper Kuyper set up decades earlier. The series was republished as a book in 1932.

But even less than in North America, politics in Australia and New Zealand has not been greatly influenced by sustained Christian political reflection. Kuyper might have said that that had to do with the pagan spirit of Anglo-Saxon feminism, which he identifies with individualism, and he may be right to identify Anglo-Saxon individualism in this way (Miller, 1966; Northrop, 1946; Lipset, 1963, 1989). But what is the appropriate political response today of Christian women in those societies where a multi-cultural spirit now holds sway? Does Kuyper's insight have anything to say to them?

Van der Vyver has observed that Kuyper moved off his Calvinistic basis when he identified the political and legal structure of the USA with his own neo-Calvinistic aspirations (Van der Vyver, 1988). A recent analysis of Kuyper's worldview makes a similar observation (Heslam, 1998). In his inaugural pronouncement at the founding of the Vrije Universiteit in 1880, Kuyper's principle was captured in the title of that address: "Sovereiniteit in eigen kring" (literally "sovereignty in its own sphere" or "sphere sovereignty"). His *Lectures on Calvinism* (Kuyper, 1898) developed this approach and called for a distinctively Christian philosophy, jurisprudence, art and science.

For all its limitations, Kuyper's neo-Calvinistic view provokes a many-sided investigation of women's place in religious, ethical, legal, aesthetic and economic terms. His formulation of *Women's position of honour* (Kuyper, 1914) is the formulation of the political leader of an ascendant Dutch Calvinist working class. But if this is also evidence of a declension by Kuyper from the principles he espoused in his neo-Calvinistic world-view, we may wonder whether it means a reversion to a Roman Catholic view of hearth and home. Read in terms of a Calvinist-Catholic competition over "principles" – "sphere sovereignty" (*souvereiniteit in eigen kring*) in contra-distinction to "subsidiarity" – their subsequent parliamentary co-operation is ambiguous. Is this the basis for a neo-conservative Christian coalition which has been taken up later in the century? Is this a basis upon which conservative Catholics and late twentieth-century fundamentalists can find each other?

## 5. Christian democratic (mis-)applications

In Kuyper's political strategies, Catholics and Calvinists stood together against individualism and state absolutism. To explain how Kuyper accommodated the reforming element in his own thought with the reactionary and populist notions about "women's place" current in Roman Catholic circles, we have to consider the theoretical alternatives to individualism that were then presenting themselves. The corporatist and communalist views focused upon the community rather than the abstract individual. Yet conservatism built on this basis also finds confessional bed-rock in *Ni Dieu, Ni Maître!* It is not the abstract individual, but rather the inter-dependent community, which asserts its autonomy in this view.



In the parliamentary debates about suffrage, Kuyper and his Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) advocated a “householders suffrage” joining with the Roman Catholic Party (RKSP) on this issue. They lost. It was not only the suffrage issue but involved industrial legislation as well. This was part of a wider social welfare package seeking to address the “women’s issue” and the problem of poverty. Hillie van de Streek has shown how these Christian doctrines (*subsidiarity* and *sphere sovereignty*) were part of these early twentieth-century Christian attempts to restrict suffrage (Van de Streek, 1992a, 1992b, 1993; Van de Streek & Quak, 1989). So can Kuyper’s newspaper series (Kuyper, 1914) be read as the attempt to clarify this development of his principles? Could this have been a soft male supremacist version of “sphere sovereignty” via resort to a Roman Catholic view of societal authority? *Subsidiarity* within the family means that the head of household holds a sovereignty on the basis of an hierarchic principle.

According to Van de Streek the Roman Catholic (RKSP) and Anti-Revolutionary (ARP) policies on the family in the 1920s and 1930s in the Netherlands confirmed the trend in the Kuyperian view of marital “sphere sovereignty” in the direction of Roman Catholic female “subsidiarity”. This occurred when parliamentary co-operation brought these two Christian parties to the joint advocacy of policies trying to restrict female participation in the workforce.

Admittedly, this was not just an abstract opposition to “women’s rights” – it also involved wider questions and an emergent welfare policy promoting the legal protections designed to strengthen the social web centred in families, households and conventional marriages. Such legislation aimed to protect women *in* their familial responsibilities, acknowledging the *public right* of wives and mothers to choose to stay at home. In a radically utilitarian market, as found in the English-speaking world, welfare state policies have often been biased in terms of women’s domestic *place* as a private right, a market choice. But in this respect questions about how the household is related to the economy, and how the household is itself an economy in its own right, are raised with increasing forcefulness, needing *public clarification* by policy makers. This means that when governments develop policies about families they need to refer to an ethic of social inter-dependence which will allow legislators to keep in mind the perplexing ethical questions about variant family and household forms. It would also require legislative commitment to marriage as a public institution. So although we can now discern emergent problems in the neo-Calvinist worldview we would not want to deny the advancement of insight that such a search for just policies represented.

In the late 20th century these inner tensions and contradictions in Christian social thought remain. Public controversy will always be stirred when churchmen try to ban women from office in the church. Meanwhile the

increased female involvement in public life makes it impossible for such strategies to be consistent and advocate the abolition of women's suffrage as well.

When Reformed thought in its *anti-individualism* refers to the *covenantal character* of Christian belief, it often emphasises this in association with a notion of "Christian community". If it fails to distinguish between its own view and romantic/ corporatist notions, then its resultant view is problematic and can not be shown to be any more Christian than that based upon the "sovereign individual".

Christian social thought after Kuyper has had to try to recapture lost insight about how Christian women contribute to the corporate inter-weaving of civil society. When "community" has become a Christian dogma, Paul's teaching about headship in the marriage-bond is misread. Could this be a cause of the stunted growth in subsequent neo-Calvinistic social and political thinking (Veenhof, 1939; Zuidema, 1972; Stewart-van Leeuwen, 1993)?

This line of questioning assumes that the strain of corporatism in Kuyper's neo-Calvinism is at odds with the emphasis of the distinctive integrity of social structures *Coram Deo*. *Sphere sovereignty* implies that men and women are answerable for all societal relations, structures and institutions. The forms of their social life give expression in many ways to their God-given stewardship. Men and women are created as co-labourers in society. It follows that neither can be written out of the history of public life – either legally, sociographically or historiographically – without violating Divine law (Exodus 20:16).

The principle of subsidiarity applied to marriage and family, however, tries to guarantee to the husband/father authority in (his) own sphere. But when household roles in the Christian family are considered as the common denominator, then all kinds of unexpected analytical problems emerge: What about single women who live on their own? Do they qualify for the vote? What about widows who have to rule the household? And what of people who rent, or adult friends of the same sex who live together? Are they breaking God's ordinances? A tension is manifested in Kuyper's social thought, reminiscent of the problems many Christians still have in their attempts to reflect on society.

When the roles of husband and father are merged under the "subsidiarity" principle – as with paternal and priestly responsibilities in Roman Catholic ecclesiology – then the relation of the husband to the wife in the marital bond loses its distinctive characteristics. Headship, as a *marital* description of Christ and the church, becomes a universalistic justification for a particular hierarchic theory about all families and households, and all societal authority. Marital love becomes a function of family "community" and loses its distinctiveness. Such a fusion ignores the possibility, integrity and distinctiveness of childless marriage.

There are other serious implications for the neo-Calvinistic view of marriage. Its character as a sexual bond between the male and female is undermined when sphere sovereignty (qua principle) is interpreted as female subsidiarity to him in her sphere. It is either the physical strength or sexual potency of the male that becomes the criterion of the husband's headship rather than the male's calling to follow Christ and serve his wife as Christ serves the church. The character of sexuality is reduced to a coital act, interpreted as requiring male hierarchic initiative, rather than a bodily submission of each to the other as the Christian scriptures so plainly teach (Ephesians 5:21).

Or to put it another way: the male, head of household, is viewed as maintaining "sovereignty in her own sphere". This was apparently justified to obviate the pagan threat of individualism and feminism. But when the theory itself ascribes such public and legal ground for exercising such control, irrespective of what the married couple decide between themselves about the internal conduct of their marriage, we see the emergence of a new principle for women – her subsidiarity in his own household! Ironically, it is marriage, as such, which is lost to sight here. In his teaching about the man's headship in the marriage bond, Paul says it only makes sense, in the spirit of Christ's *servanthood*. It is a misapplication to apply it in a universal way to the historical form of the Christian household and family.

## 6. *Rerum Novarum* (1891)

Further analysis of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the fountainhead of modern Roman Catholic social teaching is called for. Leo's pronouncements led to the world-wide movement of Catholic Action (Truman, 1960) and this spiritual crusade against state collectivism and capitalistic individualism has continued to this day. On the one hand, the state is seen to extend its power, incorporating all of social life into its realm. Schools and other independent social organisations become parts of the state apparatus. On the other hand, the so-called freedom of the individual employer – interpreted as the freedom to make a profit – impoverishes and controls the working classes.

... working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hard-heartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition ... so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself (Leo XIII, 1891:206-207 in Skillen & McCarthy, 1991:144).

The challenge then is to respect the worker and honour the authority of governments. But how is such honour bestowed? A way has to be found to give *due respect* to workers and to the state. On the one hand the state must not do for individuals and institutions what they can do, and should do better, for themselves.

We have said that the State must not absorb the individual or the family; both should be allowed free and untrammelled action as far as is consistent with the common good and the interest of others (Leo XIII, 1891:224 in Skillen & McCarthy, 1991:145).

On the other hand social cohesion has to be maintained. Subsidiarity is the principle which is appealed to when demarcation disputes arise. The distinction is made between the body politic and the private societies that exist as parts within it. A second distinction is between the body politic and the state. The task of the state is the public interest of the whole. The whole plays its part in according public respect to the parts; the parts play their (own) part. The parts cannot be accorded *due respect* if it is assumed that the state, as guardian of the whole, should do for the parts what the parts should do for themselves. Each part has a distinctive *part* to play, which only it can do.

This way of construing politics leads to further questions like, how is the family unit to be construed in its political context? To answer that question we have to look a bit closer. Individuals and institutions such as the family have rights, recognised by the state, but not deriving from the state power. Likewise, in its own way, the church, viewed as supernatural in origin, holds the “most exalted of all authority”.

Man is older than the State and he holds the right of providing for the life of his body prior to the formation of any state ... thus we have the family – the ‘society’ of a man’s own household; a society limited indeed in numbers, but a true ‘society’, anterior to every kind of State or nation, with rights and duties of its own, totally independent of the commonwealth (Leo XIII, 1891:171, 173 in Skillen & McCarthy, 1991:159 fn 9).

In this way a legislative programme based on this principle recognises the family. But what is this “family” and how does the state (and the other social bodies) recognise it? It is almost as if the domestic sphere, whilst viewed as *private*, is shaped in its outer shell, by public policy. The inner life of the family, the domestic sphere, is beyond state competence. The state deals with families through the “family’s head”, and in this it is clear that the account of such authority structures is weighted in terms of male/husband/father.

Hence while the Roman Catholic version of Christian democracy is a response to the “women’s issue”, it seeks to set a limit upon the power of the state to interfere with the “internal life” of the family structure. It has a power deriving from its God-given duty to ensure that the family can play its part for the commonweal. But how is it to do so?

The assumption is two-fold: on the one hand, the state is paternalist and totalitarian *when it plays its part in maintaining the social order*, on the other hand, the family to be family should be structured on the same hierarchic principle to which the state, the guardian of the body politic, is also subject. The

prejudice implicit in this view is that the state cannot do its task aright if the hierarchic view of paternal authority is not also maintained throughout *all* social spheres. Therefore the same paternalistic structure (or pattern) has to come to expression in both family and the state. State correction and censure will be needed for the wrongful use of *paternal* authority. Hard decisions will have to be made, but how?

To answer this question the role of the state in society needs to be defined. The state has its own niche in the economy as protector of the common weal. It has a task to uphold the body politic in a way analogous to the husband's/ father's subsidiary authority under God in the household. The household, from the point of view of the body politic, is at a lower level in terms of the common good, but it should be viewed in its own terms, subject to God's natural order for humanity.

In brief: the state is paternalistic. The priest is "father" in the Church, and the father in the household acts from a position above wife and family, if not as "priest" for the family, then as its diaconal head. And of course there is the question of how the priest of the church is still truly the priest of the Christian household. Another related question about this Roman Catholic social perspective concerns the father's diaconate within the family. If the priest in the sphere of the church forms his role according to a "paternalistic" metaphor, as a father of the congregation in which all are brothers and sisters, can the priestly role be a metaphor for the father's role in the household? Apparently not. The *religious* character of the father's household role is not readily apparent within this hierarchic system, in which church and Christian family are closely enmeshed – but under church authority!

In its reliance upon a paternal analogy does *subsidiarity* underestimate the power of paternal evil? Is not female-ness defined in passive, rather than active, terms? What of paternal passivity? There are also other empirical implications of this world-view which need further exploration of Catholic communities worldwide. The philosophical basis might exclude women from public office but there is still considerable activism among Catholic women in the public legal realm outside the church sphere proper.

Roman Catholics who work outside the church sphere without a paternalistic and hierarchic view of the state often find themselves opposed to what is a *theory* promulgated by the church. Such a theory has power to isolate confessing Christians, and maybe also Christian husbands and fathers. Further sociological research about the feminisation of Christianity (not only Roman Catholicism) might look again with profit at the influence of the subsidiarist principle.

## 7. Distinctions and separations

How can Christian thought extract itself from these dilemmas? We need to look carefully at the current debate about these issues and carefully analyse what is at stake. When feminists deconstruct the arbitrary distinction between public and private the resultant analysis highlights the oppressions expressed in the private sphere which stand in the way of the expansion of female involvement in the public sphere. Some advocate technological development in the sphere of birth control and genetic engineering as the means of liberation from the oppressions of the private where women's bodies are required to conform to the male assertion of power (Firestone, 1971). Other more moderate liberals see liberation in the market mechanism itself, fostering an ideology and ethic of diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997). Feminist theory after Foucault has not only focused upon "public" and "private" as different and distinct realms but argues about the social construction of this distinction-cum-separation. Some critics adopt the view that a doubly reified distinction must operate in any attempt to distinguish sexuality from gender. Michelle Barrett has highlighted the problem of trying to make the *analytic* distinction between the biotic and the societal into a theoretical concept by which sex (as biologically defined) and gender (as socially constructed) can be concretely separated. Human activity can try to base itself upon an *analytical* distinction and act *as if* it is a *concrete* separation, but sexuality and gender (or more exactly biology and culture) cannot be *concretely* separated (Barrett, 1988).

The prior question concerns the structure of the theoretical concept. The *biotic* is not formed by its separation from the *social* or the *cultural*. The biotic concept, as a concept, is formed in a logical opposition between the biotic aspect and all that is non-biotic. The biotic makes sense as an aspect of our experience, fully embedded, enmeshed within an ordered structure of experienced aspects of everyday life. It is this order in which all things function. The same holds for *social* qua concept.

An attempt to enforce a concrete (policy-oriented) separation ignores the analytical distinction between theoretically distinguishing (between two structural aspects), and concrete policy-making (about two distinct things). In this debate about sex and gender there is a persistent historical echo in the unresolved debate about separation of church and state, the relation of religion to politics. The *analytical* distinction between sex and gender, and any proposed *concrete* separation based upon the biological structure(s) of society, is similar to the question about the *separation* of church and state in relation to the *distinction* between religion(s) and politics. This indicates an ongoing underlying analytic conundrum which also has a bearing upon how we think about gender in the public sphere, the public recognition of the familial sphere and the legal recognition of various types of household as legal and legitimate social

forms. Put in these terms we begin to see that *women's place* also has to be respected in public-legal terms.

Any attempt to *separate* the roles of male and female in society on the basis of a *distinction* between male and female, simply compounds the analytic problems, not to mention the societal consequences of any resultant policies so based. Human persons are not things in the way that family, church and state are societal *structures*. Nor is sexuality an *aspect* of our experience in the way the biotic is.

## 8. Women commending the faith in all social spheres

This discussion is intensely relevant as the welfare state is dismantled. We need such sharp analytical thinking as we try to understand the relentless "privatization" that "deconstructs" or unravels community life at the local level in a "frayed web" (Elshtain, 1996). To avert local welfare disasters and promote social renewal from the grass roots, women (and unemployed men) will have to take the lead in negotiating the bitter accusations of entrenched feminists like Stacey (1987), showing a Christian political perspective to have concrete and positive everyday meaning for women. In such renewal women will also assume leadership roles in the local and global administration of civil society. Christian women must rise to this challenge, but it seems inconceivable without refining the Christian theory of society, and in this sense both Kuyper and Leo maintain their importance, historically and analytically.

Traditionally, Christian democratic thought may have allowed for women in the work-force as an emergency measure. The response to *laissez faire economics* and the culture shock of the "industrial revolution", discussed above, tried instinctively to *insulate* women and children. That legacy is still with us – in America that was the social gospel; in England and other countries it was Christian socialism.

But such insulation policies have not helped positively to form women's public role. A recent account of the principle of subsidiarity puts it in these terms: "It is wrong to steal a person's right or ability to make a decision" (Pollard, 1996: 102). This applies "thou shalt not steal" to the policies which form the social order. Insulation of women can also be a process which mutes women's public voice, and steal another person's decision-making responsibility.

The general principle, enunciated throughout this century by successive Papal bulls, is that those relationships and units which are "lower down" should, as much as possible, be left to make their own decisions, and develop their own organized life on their level. If a decision can effectively be made lower down, those higher up should get on with their own work and not interfere with another person's calling. It is in such a framework that Roman Catholic social

teaching addresses the question of female involvement in all spheres of life. This may be a useful and necessary perspective for accounting for inter-dependent responsibility within the business firm (Chaplin, 1994). However, when it becomes a basis for a general policy about women's involvement in all social spheres it means restricting women's formative contribution to the social order itself. It means redesigning the vocation women have *Coram Deo*.

The subsidiarity principle in virulent form is also alive and well around the world in contemporary politics. Government attempts to orchestrate social "reforms" are based on the view that the role of elected governments is to "steer", set policy guidelines for the national (entrepreneurial) ship of state. Direction becomes the government's task; the rest is up to the "rowers" who are also organized into a hierarchic system where higher set "lower down" policies about work distribution, resource allocation. The lower down do the heavier work; the higher up get paid bonuses for the overall functioning of the system (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993).

Thus when pro-marriage, pro-family policies imply such subsidiarist hierarchy, as they often do, it becomes clear why feminists like Judith Stacey view such policies as part of "backlash" feminism (Stacey, 1987). We have suggested above that Christian democratic support for communitarian views is problematic. Recently there has been an important shift within the social sciences to give greater respect to the *public* meaning and significance of family life. But the Christian political defence of marriage and family needs to develop a simultaneous critique of communitarianism and subsidiarity, not only in relation to "entrepreneurial government" but also of the neo-hierarchical view of male authority that is thereby implied. *Structural insight*, not just media victories over rights-oriented feminism is needed. Some advocates of "pro-life feminism" (particularly among non-fundamentalist Christians) show the influence of Christian democratic political theories, whether of Roman Catholicism or neo-Calvinism. And further analytic work is needed, particularly political theorising by Christian women.

Certainly Christian majoritarianism or establishmentarianism is not the answer; all religious world-views fight for their plausibility in a market where everything (including religion) is now bought and sold (Berger, 1963; 1993; Luckmann & Berger, 1966; Stark, 1994). Christian women can no longer leave the public defense of the faith to their menfolk. Such a public vocation cannot be a mere return to a historical situation where women no longer speak out or be publicly visible defending the faith. The new situation is a call to a new obedience, for all, both women and men.

Roman Catholic renewal in church and society feeds off a rich tradition, the unintended consequences which have surprising results. More than 50% of American parishes are effectively "rowed" by lay women (Wallace, 1992;



Ebaugh, 1991, 1993). But reform does not stop at the local parish. The human vocation is expressed wherever people do their daily work. Within the social order, all social institutions contribute to the God-given variety of human welfare in their own way, at their own historical level.

If in recent time *subsidiarity* was interpreted in horizontal terms in Catholic communities, recent announcements from the Vatican indicate an emergent re-emphasis upon the vertical dimension showing the Roman Catholic preference for male office-bearing. In a recent address, John-Paul II makes a direct link between the need to strengthen the all-male priesthood and the dangers wrought by increased lay involvement (including women) in the running of parishes and sacramental ministry (John-Paul II, 1998).

## 9. Conclusion

Both Roman Catholic and Calvinist versions of Christian social theory dissent from statism and individualism; they appeal to a God-given integrity for society, and in this context the question of the mutual social inter-dependence of men and women arises with new pertinence.

Men and women should not have to relate to each other as if the customs of gender and sex are norms for all social relations. Men and women as colleagues, fellow workers, are never simply *potential* sexual partners, or someone else's sexual partner. Where work-place rules are formed to consider the workplace as a quasi-domestic sphere the division of tasks may well serve to reproduce women's *subsidiarity* if not subservience. Such concrete changes to the way workers relate to each other never come easily, but this is why male and female must be encouraged to play their parts and proposed reforms must try to anticipate "institutional impacts" before implementation.

If there is a common strain in neo-Calvinistic and Roman Catholic political thought it is somewhat ambiguous. The reformed concept of the *sovereignty of the social spheres* has each structure with a limited office which societally delimits the spheres of the other structures. The Roman Catholic principle of *subsidiarity*, whilst appreciating distinctive societal roles, orders these hierarchically according to an *apriori* schema. Nevertheless *sphere sovereignty* and *subsidiarity* are not restricted in application to some social structures. Societal inter-dependence and integration are emphasised by both views. The diversity of the social order is respected. Each kind of social institution has its own contribution to make to the social fabric.

European Christian democracy has thereby developed Christian views of the public and political contribution of women. Yet industrial developments are somewhat at odds with the earlier Christian democratic advocacy of householder's suffrage and the paternalistic views implicit in church oriented

world-views. Yet these attempts to develop social theory in a positive Christian direction has also *included the re-appraisal of taken-for-granted dogmas about women's place*. This historical response is a powerful stimulus to further Christian democratic thought and action also outside of Europe.

Clearly this has not been a discussion of women's role in the church which is often a shadow of that required elsewhere. Women's work in the church sphere also has public-political implications which the substantial literature examines (Lehman, 1985, 1987, 1994; Wessinger, 1993; Ebaugh, 1993). Lehman's exhaustive research and Wallace's study (Wallace, 1992) highlight the indirect impact which a decrease in ordained male clergy has had upon women's wider social role. The older romantic notion that women's religion is essentially private and personal is thereby challenged. But if the church would develop a principled recognition of women's office in the preaching of the gospel, this might also have an immediate impact on any confessional hurdles standing in the way of Christian organising political organisations.

In North America, the United Kingdom, "old Commonwealth" countries like Australia and New Zealand, and, I guess, South Africa, Christian involvement in public life confronts cognitive and cultural obstacles distinct from those faced in local churches (Hutchinson & Campion, 1994; Manville, 1996; Burke, 1995). When a Christian social perspective is reduced to statements of church spokespersons, which it often is, then there seems to be no Christian approach when bishops have not spoken (Martin, 1978). These days, however, churches increasingly rely upon women to speak and agitate publicly for social justice and public virtue. Such a sustained movement in the ecclesiastical sponsorship of female dissent in public indicates a significant development in Christian political thought and action. Its political significance should be considered with care.

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