

The state as unifier

The protestant thought of Dooyeweerd

By Roel Kuiper

ABSTRACT

Dooyeweerd is important for protestant political thought, on at least three points:

- Society and government complement each other.
- National communities are created under the leadership of governments.
- The government needs to aim for the justice which God has demonstrated us.

Keywords: government and society, Dooyeweerd, nation state

Introduction

Protestant Christian political parties have existed in the Netherlands since the 19th century - indeed, it was in the Netherlands, along with Scandinavia, that this type of political party first appeared. Today, as enumerated in Paul Freston's *Protestant Political Parties*, there are a huge number of protestant groups all over the world which take part in politics. For many, the rich tradition of the Netherlands in this respect serves as a paradigm, and in this article I will draw from this tradition the political thought of Herman Dooyeweerd and discuss its relevance for today.

Who was Dooyeweerd?

When wondering which persons formed this tradition, names such as G. Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper come to mind, but I would like to highlight the contribution of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Dooyeweerd was a philosopher with a strong interest in matters relating to politics and society. He started his career as director of the *Kuyper Stichting*, the scientific research institute of the ARP ('the Anti-Revolutionary Party', the first political party in the Netherlands, formed by Abraham Kuyper in 1879). When Dooyeweerd became a lecturer at the Free University in Amsterdam in 1926, he continued to be involved in social issues, such as the Prison Service and rehabilitation of offenders in the Netherlands. After WWII, he contributed to the discussion on the rebuilding of the Netherlands. From this time originates his book *Roots of Western Culture* (English edition: 1979) which is a collection of articles written for a weekly paper. In the years which followed, he got involved in discussions within the

CNV (*Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond*; the Christian trade union) on social-economical issues and, in particular, on the relationships between employers and employees.

The state is still vital

Dooyeweerd was a great thinker. It has sometimes been said that he was the most original philosopher of the Netherlands, not excluding even Spinoza. He had a particular interest in the role of the State, to which he devoted several of his writings. One of his first books dealt with what he saw as the 'crisis of humanist political theory' (1931), in that it was unable to define what a state actually is ('a political theory without a polity'). In this he actually foresaw the impotence of liberal-humanist political theories against anti-democratic movements such as National Socialism. Thinking along the lines of Abraham Kuyper, Dooyeweerd however developed a more sophisticated political vision. His view of the state is helpful to us when reflecting on the role of the State in a globalising world, where a new need has arisen for cohesion and integration. It is striking that in the current global crises (the credit crisis, the ecological crisis, the crisis of shortage) there is once again a positive role for the State to play. The State is back. At the end of the 20th century it was still claimed that the State would certainly 'evaporate' –in particular the nation state. The globalising world economy would automatically lead to a different political world order, in which the market would dictate the rules, rather than the State. We now know better: the State is and remains necessary. It needs to protect communities against the storm of global developments and also to bring order to society on the basis of the rule of law. Dooyeweerd's political vision enables us to see what is needed for this. Just as within protestant thought the State has never been abandoned, so also Dooyeweerd did not give up on the State.

Protestant Political Thought

First let me now briefly outline what I believe to be at the very heart of Protestant political thought: it is distinguished by an undisguised recognition of the sovereignty of God, in both politics and society. It is God who governs the world –albeit through governments, officials and politicians. Governments are called upon to recognize him and administer society lawfully and with justice. They must do so in accordance with God's will (*Psalms 2, Psalm 72, Psalm 82, Acts 24:25, Romans 13, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2*). There is a direct connection between the justice of God and the justice which the authorities have to administer. For this reason, rulers receive their calling from God and are accountable to him, and all those who have authority have to further God's purposes in their work. This theory -which prevailed among the Reformers- recurred in the nineteenth century, being taken up by Groen van Prinsterer, and forming the basis of Kuyper's theory of 'the sovereignty of each sphere'. By this he meant that government

and subject, parent and child, employer and employee each relate to each other in the way God intended and bring him honour by fulfilling their specific responsibilities. They do not interfere with each other's sphere. Thus the State does not take on the responsibilities of the Family, while the Church does not interfere in schools.

Dooyeweerd's Relevance

Now then, back to Dooyeweerd. I will highlight three central elements of his political vision and relate them to the present discussion on the role of the State

1. Government and Society need each other

The first element concerns Dooyeweerd's treatment of Kuyper's theory. Kuyper pitted state and society against one another (see also the article by Peter Blokhuis), seeing the State as a threat to social relationships –its nature 'mechanical' unlike family and business, which he saw as 'organic'. His ideas of the State reflect his fear, shared by van Prinsterer, of totalitarianism. In the nineteenth century there was a concern that liberal forces would use the State to over-regiment society, creating a 'revolutionary state', centrally controlled and planned, in which freedoms would be nullified. In Kuyper's theory of 'the sovereignty of each sphere' there was a strong emphasis on the boundaries within which the State should properly operate. His political vision was in many ways a negative one. Theologically Kuyper explained this by declaring that the State was a necessary evil caused by the Fall of man.

Public Justice

Dooyeweerd refined and nuanced the theory of the 'sovereignty of each sphere'. What is noticeable is that Dooyeweerd steered away from a theological interpretation of the state, avoiding any discussion about whether it was part of the created order, since this tends not to be fruitful or conclusive. In this he differs from various other theologians such as Klaas Schilder. Dooyeweerd's starting point was the nature and functions of the state, taking it to exist in fact for public justice. Unlike Kuyper, he did not see state and society as opponents, even though he was able to perceive their boundaries and individual tasks. So, he considered it the role of the family lovingly to raise children within the household, while it is the responsibility of the Government, as head of society, to administer and maintain public justice. Each needs the other. Dooyeweerd had no difficulty with a state which performed a directing role, as long as it continued to do so in accordance with public justice. Thus, the imposition of environmental restrictions on a company, for example, is not evidence of negative state involvement, but rather of the promotion of a legitimate public interest carried out in accordance with public justice.

Integration

According to Dooyeweerd a state has an important role to play in integrating society in accordance with public justice. This of course requires the state to recognise the specific nature of other relationships –and the state may never damage the nature of these relationships, for example by assuming the place of parents, employees or employers. Along with promoting public justice, the state must respect the responsibilities which belong to the various relationships which make up society. I have already mentioned that Dooyeweerd involved himself in social-economic discussions within the CNV.

Welfare state

When the Welfare state was being created after WWII, Dooyeweerd was exceedingly annoyed to see the functions of state and business being mixed. In particular, he strongly disagreed with the creation of sectoral self regulatory bodies (in Dutch *Publiekrechtelijke Bedrijfsorganisaties* or *PBOs*), which had power to govern a specific industry on behalf of the central government. He did not believe it was right that governmental functions should be exercised by businesses. In some branches (such as Industry) this idea has in fact failed. Elsewhere, mainly in the areas of agriculture and fishery, it has led to the creation of ‘-schappen’, organisations where employers and employees promote their interests together. However, there is currently some concern over the closed nature of these organisations and the lack of public accountability. According to Dooyeweerd, the responsibilities of the government and the interests of a sector should not be mixed in this way. Even where it is necessary to integrate different interests, certain key public principles should be adhered to. The state has the task of promoting public harmony by creating the right ‘symbiosis’ of all relationships, persons, interests and values.

2. The formation of a national community

I would like to mention a second element which was important to Dooyeweerd, which is the leadership role taken by the state in forming a national community. Put simply, it is the state which defines who its citizens are and who are not. If you are a citizen you enjoy all the rights and the legal protection of the state. Those who enjoy these privileges eventually coalesce into a national community with its own collective history and collective identity. It is interesting to note that Dooyeweerd does not relate nationality in any way to ethnicity or even language or geographical origin. National identity arises through the intercourse of a community of citizens under the leadership of a state. It is because of this that the USA can state that it is a ‘great nation’

Dooyeweerd’s view of the role of the state in the formation of a national political community is highly relevant today –not only to the issue of racial integration within

nation states such as the Netherlands, but also to the integration and governance of the peoples of the European Union. That the peoples of European countries are primarily focused on their own national political community, has everything do with the function and meaning of a national state. Only a European state can create a European political community. However, a European state is currently clearly a bridge too far. In fact, we see that European citizens are seeking the protection of their own national governments during the current crises. Dooyeweerd's view of the state helps us realize the crucial significance of states for citizens and political communities.

3. Views of justice and righteousness

Finally, a third element. The main task of governments in the public domain is to serve and maintain justice. But any opinions about what is just cannot be detached from deeper understandings of what is good and what should be called justice. And, for a Christian, all this cannot be detached from the Biblical revelation of God's purposes for the world. Dooyeweerd therefore continues to refer to Christian political theory, which seems right to me.

The use and application of Christian ethics in politics is controversial, not least because the consequences of adhering to certain Christian opinions could mean that others in society would start to feel restricted. Many also believe that Christians should finally start to realize that they occupy only a marginal place in our current society and should therefore realize that they cannot expect the bulk of society to adhere to Christian norms.

I believe that Christian politics and Christian political theory cannot do without a clear idea of what right and justice mean for the *whole* of society. Is it necessary to adapt the message once Christians have become a minority? Did the prisoner Paul keep quiet in front of Felix (Acts 24)? In any case, the idea that a government needs to aim for the justice which God shows us in the Bible, continues to be the heart of 'protestant thinking' in politics. Dooyeweerd was a learned spokesman of this thinking.

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