

# Revisiting Sphere Sovereignty to Interpret Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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## Abstract

In this article, the Kuyperian concept of sphere sovereignty will be revisited in order to describe the multidimensionality of religious freedom. This article will show that true religious freedom requires not only a sovereign church sphere – the respect of church autonomy –, but also the freedom for religious expression in all other spheres of society. The first section will try to show that restrictions on religious expression in any sphere of society are restrictions on religious freedom. The second and third sections will provide examples of two global dynamics which in very distinct ways go against sphere sovereignty and specifically restrict religious expression in different spheres of society: “Islamic extremism” and “secular intolerance”. The article will conclude with a reflection about the virtues of sphere sovereignty as a guarantee against tyranny, and therefore also as a safeguard of religious freedom.

## Keywords

religious freedom – religious persecution – sphere sovereignty – Islamic extremism – secular intolerance

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## 1 Introduction

Currently, there are quite a few different approaches to assessing the level of religious persecution in countries throughout the world. However, these approaches and the tools they employ tend to be rather narrowly focused. They assess such matters as the freedom to hold religious gatherings, the freedom to wear religious symbols, the right not to be jailed for one's faith, etc. However, religious persecution is not merely a matter of states behaving well, but it also has all kinds of non-state dimensions: religious persecution may go on in schools, in families, in businesses, etc. To develop a broader and hence more holistic approach to religious persecution, we revisit the Kuyperian concept of sphere sovereignty. This notion of *sovereiniteit in eigen kring* is central to reformed political thought as a fundamental ordering principle of society (Kuyper 1880). It is often interpreted as a normative concept referring primarily to the role of the state regarding non-state spheres. However, given that the principle is based on a rich account of different spheres in societies, it is highly worthwhile to revisit the principle and explore its fruitfulness as an analytical tool to describe the multidimensionality of religious freedom (and by implication of religious persecution), in order to somewhat remedy the narrowly focused accounts referred to above. The potential fruitfulness of this approach will be briefly explored by assessing the role of "Islamic extremism" and "secular intolerance" as potential or actual "engines" of persecution in various contexts. We conclude with a reflection on the virtues of sphere sovereignty as a guarantee against very different types of "tyranny" in different spheres, and therefore also as a broad safeguard of religious freedom.

## 2 Restrictions on Religious Expression in Any Sphere of Society as Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Sphere sovereignty can be seen as being more than just an ordering principle of society. This section proposes a broader use of the concept of sphere sovereignty by operationalizing it as a gauge (measure) of religious freedom. First, the original meaning of the concept of sphere sovereignty will briefly be presented (2.1). The case will then be made that sphere sovereignty can be used to observe and assess restrictions on various dimensions of religious freedom and that restrictions on religious expression in any sphere of society can be interpreted as restrictions on religious freedom (2.2). The Kuyperian conceptualization of sphere sovereignty will be revisited in order to describe the

multidimensionality of religious freedom (2.3). Finally, a few methodological remarks will be made about the operationalization of the revisited concept (2.4).

### 2.1 *Sphere Sovereignty: The Original Concept*

The concept of sphere sovereignty, at the core of the reformed view of government and society, is one of Abraham Kuyper's (1898) greatest legacies. Building on the thought of reformed thinkers like Calvin ([1559], 1931), Althusius ([1603], 1995)<sup>1</sup> and Groen van Prinsterer ([1847], 2008), the concept of sphere sovereignty developed by Kuyper, which was further developed by Dooyeweerd (1935), is essentially an ordering principle of society. This Reformational line of thinking presupposes the existence of a creational order of society, i.e., a structure of social institutions (spheres), the possibilities for which are given in creation by the Creator, and which each have a distinct nature, purpose, and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Among these are institutions such as the family, the church, the school, the government, etc.

In Kuyper's perspective, sovereignty refers not to the absolute power of the person in authority in a particular sphere (such as the president in the government sphere or the minister in the church sphere). Instead, sovereignty refers to the source of the power of this person, which is God himself, the Absolute Sovereign. For Kuyper, authority always means authority *by the grace of God*. For this reason, Rouvoet (1992, 32) warns that sphere sovereignty should not be restrained to sphere autonomy, as this term fails to recognize the sovereignty of the Creator.

Key to the conceptualization of sphere sovereignty is the notion that while the societal spheres are interrelated, they are also separated. The concept implies the existence of normative boundaries between each sphere of society which must be observed. To Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, disrespecting these boundaries constitutes a violation of the creational order, i.e., of the intrinsic sovereignty of each sphere. This implies that the relation between the spheres of society is not hierarchical, but functional. In this vision, the government sphere is a sphere among others and must respect the autonomy of the other spheres. Each sphere (church, science, business, education, family, sports, etc.) has a specific internal organizational order and unique relations of authority and obedience. In Kuyper's thinking, the internal relations within each sphere derive their legitimacy from their own specific meaning and

1 Although Kuyper never quotes Althusius directly.

2 Sphere sovereignty as an ordering principle cannot be found directly in the Bible, but can be considered implicit in the cultural mandate enunciated in Genesis 1.

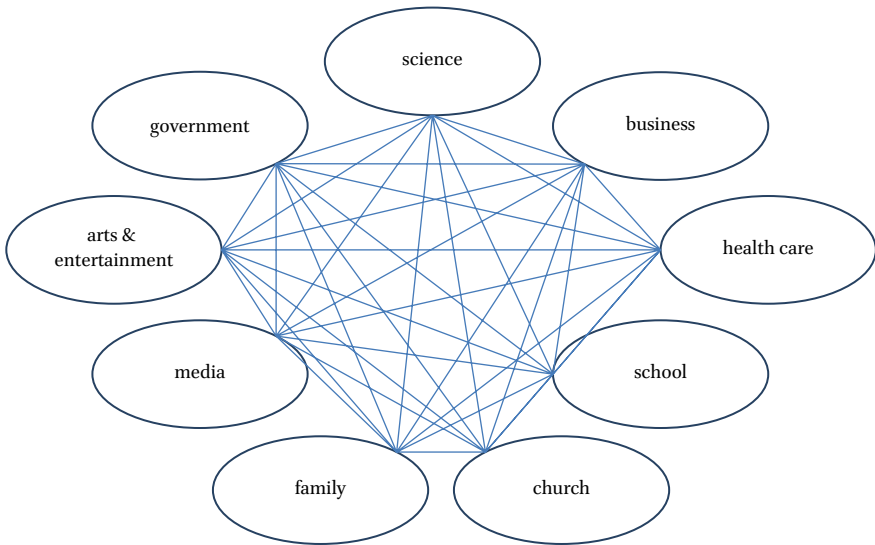


FIGURE 1 *Spheres of society*

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION BASED ON ROB NIJHOFF (PERSONAL COMMUNICATION).

purpose, and therefore spheres have no legitimacy to intervene in other spheres. For example, the government sphere must not intervene in the church sphere, nor must the business sphere seek to exert influence on, say, the government sphere.

Sphere sovereignty is essentially a normative concept. The normative character of sphere sovereignty can be seen in opposition to other visions of society, both pre-modern and modern, that are pyramidal and in which all spheres of society are subordinated to the state. In these perspectives of society, there may be some kind of separation between the public and the private sphere, but the distinct nature of different units in the private sphere is not recognized. A core feature of the reformed political vision is that it does not only separate the state from the church sphere, but also distinguishes other spheres that the state should not interfere in. Sphere sovereignty also separates the church sphere (or the mosque sphere) from other spheres of society. Also, in many modern political views the government is hierarchically above society (Colas 1997), which gives the government sphere greater margin to interfere in the various private spheres than in the vision of society inspired by sphere sovereignty (Barroche 2012). In the reformed political vision, sphere sovereignty can be considered a safeguard against tyranny as it limits the power of government and gives space to civil society. It also limits the power of religion to interfere in other spheres.

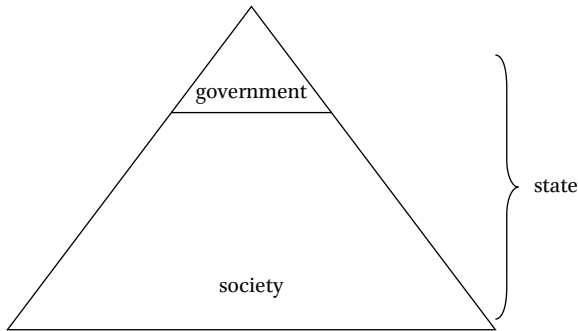


FIGURE 2 *Pyramidal view of the state*

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION BASED ON ROB NIJHOFF  
(PERSONAL COMMUNICATION).

The normativity of sphere sovereignty also applies to the scope of public policy. This refers to questions about the limits of the intervention of the state. Kuyper acknowledges that one sphere may intervene in another sphere under exceptional circumstances that justify or require such an intervention. For example, when children in a particular family are being abused, it is justified for the government sphere to intervene in the family sphere to ensure the protection of the children. However, these types of interventions must remain exceptional, and once this situation has been resolved, the authority structure that is specific to the concerned sphere must be restored.

Determining whether a sphere may intervene in another sphere may be easy in the case of child abuse, but there are numerous cases where this is much less clear. For example, under which circumstances can the government interfere in private businesses? How far can the government go in regulating school curricula and internal administrative affairs? Is it possible to prescribe how parents must raise their children? There are no easy answers to these questions, which are often subject to strong ideological considerations.

A way of overcoming the debate about the boundaries between the distinct spheres is the approach in terms of 'differentiated responsibility' proposed by James Skillen (1990; 1994). Instead of trying to define when a sphere may intervene in another sphere, this approach takes the responsibility of each sphere as a starting point.

These questions are also at the core of the reflection of this article as it is presented in the following sections. For now, it will simply be stated that sphere sovereignty considers that the intervention of a sphere in another sphere needs to be 'strictly necessary', temporary, and as limited as possible, in order to respect the sovereignty of each sphere (Rouvoet 1992).

## 2.2 *Sphere Sovereignty and Religious Freedom*

What does sphere sovereignty say about religious freedom? Three implications, which are mostly implicit in Kuyper's and Dooyeweerd's work, can be mentioned here. The first and perhaps most obvious implication of sphere sovereignty is the separation of the church and government spheres. This aspect is not specific to sphere sovereignty but is a commonly accepted notion in most theories about democracy.

Religious freedom, narrowly defined, consists of the separation between church and state, or in Kuyper's terms, between the 'church sphere' and the 'government sphere.' The separation of church and state can be seen as an answer to religious oppression and a constitutional safeguard of religious tolerance. Conceptualized and redefined by a broad group of intellectuals, ranging from John Locke to James Madison, the separation of church and state institutes a – healthy – distance between organized religion and the nation state: religious institutions should not be subordinated to nation states or vice versa. In practice this principle implies that governments no longer designate clergymen and churches do not have to be consulted for political decisions.

There is, however, a specific qualitative accent in Kuyper's perspective that is not present in many theories about democracy. This is the second implication of sphere sovereignty that can be highlighted: the existence of a boundary between the church and the government spheres does not mean that religion can play no role in politics. This statement does not imply that the state should be allowed to endorse a particular religion, or to favor it through funding or any other means. It does imply, however, that the separation of church and state should not be equated with the separation of faith and politics. Furthermore, as Kennedy (2009, 11–13) asserts, the existence of a public role of the church does not necessarily mean that it has or must have a public influence, but that churches are entitled, as much as any other civil society organization, to express their political views in public.

The possibility for religious expression in the public sphere may be contested by defendants of political secularism, particularly by defendants of laicism, 'which specifically declares that not only does the state not support any religion, it also restricts the presence of religion in the public sphere' (Fox 2013, 33). Other political secularists, however, adhere to 'separationism', endorsing 'the concept of state neutrality' regarding religion but also 'allowing the expression of religion in public life' (*ibid.*).

In the reformed tradition, Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper's intellectual mentor, considers the involvement of believers in politics, and more broadly in society, to be a direct consequence of their faith (religious convictions). Therefore, in his view, basing political positions on a religious worldview, or

any political ideology for that matter, is absolutely legitimate. In any case, basing a political preference on a religious conviction does not constitute an infringement upon the principle of separation of church and state.

This nuance of the separation of church and state principle is very often, deliberately or not, misunderstood. The principle of the separation of church and state has become one of the main arguments for (radical) secularist thinkers to advocate a total exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Section four of this article comes back to this point.

Sphere sovereignty can be taken one step further. Although this is not directly explicit in Kuyper's work, the notion of religious freedom encompasses much more than the separation of the church sphere and the government sphere. The third implication of sphere sovereignty is that religious freedom encompasses the autonomy to live according to one's religious perspective in each sphere of society. The reasoning is an extension of the existence of normative boundaries between the different spheres of society, which is at the core of the concept of sphere sovereignty: if religious expression should be considered legitimate in the government sphere, then it should also be accepted in any other sphere of society.

The autonomy to live according to one's religious perspective in each sphere of society goes further than simply accepting that faith can play a role in politics, i.e., that believers can bring their motivations into political discussions. Indeed, this principle refers to the freedom of structuring each sphere of life in a way that is in agreement with one's religion. For example, in the business sphere this principle implies the possibility of believers to run their own businesses without interference for faith-related reasons (e.g., personnel policy, client admission policy). In the education sphere, this principle allows for freedom for confessional education.

Of course, the freedom to structure each sphere of life according to one's religion can never be absolute, but must be contained within a constitutional framework in which all religious groups are required to accept the rules of the game of a truly pluralist society and a democratic system. In other words, the right to religious expression can never be an argument for the discrimination or social exclusion of minorities.

Again, this implication of sphere sovereignty is not broadly accepted in the modern world. In particular, it is contested by the tenets of laicism, which rules out any form of religious expression in the public sphere, while sometimes broadening the term "public" to an extent which borders on the private, such as France's legal restrictions on the wearing of any overtly religious symbols (Fox 2013, 33). The reformed perspective, however, sees the various spheres as spheres of freedom from the state and hence as spheres in which religious

expression should not be restricted, as mentioned repeatedly in Groen van Prinsterer's work.

### 2.3 *Sphere Sovereignty Revisited: An Analytical Tool*

The previous sections presented the original meaning of sphere sovereignty and what it says, implicitly, about religious freedom. In this section, the concept of sphere sovereignty is revisited in order to be used as analytical tool to assess religious freedom. The first step to apply the concept of sphere sovereignty to the assessment of religious freedom is the use of sphere sovereignty as an analytical category, instead of a normative concept. In Kuyper's work, sphere sovereignty is mainly a normative concept, i.e., a description of an ideal society, "how it should be". Sphere sovereignty is used in this article as an analytical category to assess the degree to which religious expression is respected in each sphere of society.

It is necessary here to say a few words on the notion of "sovereignty" in relation to the notion of "autonomy". As stated earlier, the notion of "sphere sovereignty" should not be reduced to "sphere autonomy". However, the notion of "autonomy" can be used when referring to the relation of one sphere to the other spheres. Indeed, when revisiting Kuyper's work, one could conclude that sphere sovereignty means that each sphere is autonomous in relation to other spheres, but not autonomous in relation to the Creator. Mainstream concepts such as "church autonomy", "educational autonomy" or "family autonomy", when used in this article, should therefore be understood in these terms.

Approaching religious freedom in terms of sphere sovereignty unveils the multidimensionality of religious freedom. Often, the analysis of religious freedom is limited to its legal aspects or to the degree of freedom in the church sphere. The proposed framework to assess religious freedom using sphere sovereignty as a guiding principle is a way to overcome this reductionist perspective of religious freedom. Respecting sphere sovereignty implies not only the autonomy of the church sphere, but also issues such as respect for parental rights in the family sphere, including the right of parents to raise their children according to their own beliefs, or the right to confessional education in the school sphere.

An important contribution to this debate is the concept of "institutional religious freedom", which complements the traditional focus on individual religious freedom (Carlson-Thies 2013). This concept emphasizes the institutional dimension of religious freedom, i.e. the respect for 'the religious identity and faith-shaped standards and services of faith-based organizations' as promoted by the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Cf. the website of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance: <http://irfalliance.org/>.



In the following, religious freedom is considered as restricted whenever religious expression is restricted in a sphere of society. Based on what has been said above, we will define *restrictions on religious freedom* (or *religious persecution*) as “any unjustified restriction on religious expression in any sphere of society”.<sup>4</sup>

The approach of restrictions on religious freedom in terms of infringed sphere sovereignty should not be viewed in an exclusively constraining sense. In some cases, this principle does have a constraining implication as a safeguard against illegitimate interventions of a particular sphere in other spheres – interventions can be considered illegitimate when they lead to a restriction of religious expression. However, an intervention of a particular sphere in another sphere can be justified when the freedom of religious expression on other spheres of society needs to be protected.

Regarding the role of the government sphere specifically, the principle of sphere sovereignty does not mean that any government intervention is undesirable, nor that any state intervention is an infringement of religious freedom. On the contrary, sphere sovereignty certainly allows for proactive government intervention in other spheres of society, namely to ensure that religious and other rights within those spheres are respected maximally. Government intervention goes too far, however, when it imposes a particular worldview in favor of others.

We will interpret as “unjustified”, interventions of one sphere in another sphere aiming at influencing, regulating, or restricting religious expression as restrictions on religious freedom. Generally, restrictions of religious expression within any sphere will be considered as restrictions on religious freedom.

Assessing and interpreting religious persecution is complex, as many religious conflicts involve numerous variables. However, approaching religious conflicts in terms of “infringed sphere autonomy” may bring some clarity into the debate. In many cases, religious freedom is being infringed upon when one sphere illegitimately seeks to intervene in another sphere. For example, in authoritarian regimes, religious freedom is often restricted when the government sphere illegitimately interferes in other spheres of society to regulate religious expressions considered to be a threat, and when religious expression is restricted within specific spheres of society.

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4 This definition differs slightly from the corporate definition of “persecution of Christians” by Open Doors International: ‘Persecution is ‘any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians’

#### 2.4 *Operationalization*

The purpose of the following is to propose an innovative framework to assess religious freedom based on the revisiting of sphere sovereignty. Although theory-building is the main purpose, empirical data will be used to illustrate the application of this framework through real life examples.

The data collected for the World Watch List 2014<sup>5</sup> is used as primary source of information in this article. The World Watch List is an annual index of persecution of Christians elaborated by the Research Department of Open Doors International, a Christian agency serving persecuted Christians worldwide. While developed by a faith-based organization, the World Watch List of Open Doors International can be considered a scholarly instrument, particularly since its methodological revision in 2012/2013 and its academic validation by the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

As the World Watch List focuses exclusively on Christians,<sup>6</sup> this article only takes this religious group into account. Similar information for other religious groups is not available to the authors of this article.

Input for the World Watch List is provided by qualitative questionnaires which are filled in by both staff in the field and a network of external experts. The questionnaire design seeks to give expression to the degree of pressure experienced by Christians in five spheres of life (private life, family life, community life, national life and church life). The questionnaire also includes a sixth block on physical violence which cuts across all five spheres of life.

The World Watch List questionnaire is structured by concentric circles expanding from Christians in their private sphere to the national sphere, and then adding the church sphere.<sup>7</sup> In this article, the questions of the questionnaire are used, but restructured according to spheres of society. The spheres of society that are observed are the following:

- Family sphere
- Church sphere
- School and health care sphere (combined)
- Business sphere (marketplace)
- Media and arts & entertainment sphere (combined)
- Government sphere

5 The reporting period for the World Watch List 2014 runs from 1 November 2012 to 31 October 2013.

6 Christians are broadly defined as 'anyone who self-identifies as a Christian and/or someone belonging to a Christian community as defined by the church's historic creeds'.

7 To a certain extent, this way of structuring the questionnaire is closer to Catholic Social Thought than to Reformed Political Thought (cf. Anderson 2008).

The restructured World Watch List questionnaire can be used as an empirical instrument to apply the revisited sphere sovereignty to the assessment of religious freedom. A total of 96 survey questions have been used for this instrument. The following table presents a few examples of the questions that are used:

TABLE 1 *Examples of questions used*

#	World Watch List question
<b>Family sphere</b>	
1.2	Has it been risky for Christians to conduct acts of Christian worship by themselves (e.g., prayer, Bible reading, etc.)?
2.2	Has registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians been hindered or made impossible?
2.7	Have parents been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs?
<b>Church sphere</b>	
5.2	Has it been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government?
5.3	Have activities of unregistered churches been monitored, obstructed or instructed to stop, and facilities closed?
5.8	Have churches been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings?
<b>School and health care sphere</b>	
3.5	Have Christians been hindered in sharing community? resources because of their faith (e.g. clean drinking water)?
3.9	Have Christians had less access to health care because of their faith?
3.11	Have Christians faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons?
<b>Business sphere (marketplace)</b>	
3.12	Have Christians been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons?
3.13	Have Christians been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts)?
4.9	Have Christians been hindered in running their own businesses without interference for faith-related reasons (e.g., personnel policy, client admission policy)?

TABLE 1 *Examples of questions used (cont.)*

#	World Watch List question
<b>Media and arts &amp; entertainment sphere</b>	
4.13	Have Christians been subject to smear campaigns, hate speech or other slanderous activities?
4.14	Have works of art or entertainment been disrespectful of Christian beliefs or the Christian worldview, and/or has this been easily tolerated?
5.19	Have churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g., via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones)?
<b>Government sphere</b>	
3.7	Have Christians been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc. for faith-related reasons?
4.10	Have Christians been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public?
5.22	Have churches been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting charitable, humanitarian, medical, social, or cultural institutions and associations?

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION BASED ON INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE WORLD WATCH UNIT OF OPEN DOORS INTERNATIONAL.

Scores for each question can range from 0 to 4 points. 0 is a “No” answer. Any answer above 0 implies that to some degree Christians experience pressure, with 4 being the maximum degree of pressure. It goes beyond the scope of this article to explain the scoring methodology of the questions (please refer to the World Watch List methodology<sup>8</sup>).

The actual number of questions in each sphere differs, but each of the six selected spheres of society has the same weight in the total score, which is reduced to 100 points. The reason that each sphere of society has the same

8 The scoring grid used for each question includes the following four variables: proportion of types of Christianity affected; proportion of inhabited territory of the country affected; intensity of persecution; and frequency of persecution. The methodological framework of the World Watch List can be accessed here: <http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/2925474>. For a critical discussion of the World Watch List methodology, cf. Sauer 2012.

weight is to allow for comparisons of the degree of pressure experienced in different spheres of society. Also, the block on physical violence in the original questionnaire is maintained. The maximum number of points a country can get in each sphere/block is 14,29 points (100/7).

Sections three and four of this article provide empirical examples of two global dynamics, to wit, “Islamic extremism” and “secular intolerance”, which in very distinct ways restrict sphere sovereignty, and specifically restrict religious expression in different spheres of society.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Islamic Extremism

The first global dynamic restricting sphere sovereignty presented here is “Islamic extremism.” This dynamic, or “persecution engine”, can be defined as a strategy, used by actors with an Islamic supremacist agenda, which tries to bring a country (or the world) under the “House of Islam” through violent and/or non-violent actions. Islamic extremism as a persecution engine is not limited to fanatical movements but also encompasses the cultural dimension of Islam and how this restricts free religious expression.

The chosen label is not meant to stigmatize Muslims, nor are we denying the fact that moderate Muslims are actually a majority amongst Muslims in the world. Islamic extremism is simply the name chosen for a context in which Christians and/or churches experience hostilities from people, groups or institutions that are inspired by Islam.<sup>10</sup> Islamic extremism includes, but is broader than, “radical Islam”, “political Islam”, or “Islamism”. Islamic extremism as a persecution engine may be just slightly or fully developed in a certain country. This can be confusing because the name of this persecution engine suggests its most radical expression. In the framework of our studies the fact that, for example, converts from Islam to Christianity experience serious pressure from their family or local community is a form of hostilities or persecution through Islamic extremism, even if there are no other hostile manifestations against Christians.

9 The World Watch List methodology distinguishes between eight “persecution engines”: ‘Islamic extremism’, ‘Religious nationalism’, ‘Tribal antagonism’, ‘Ecclesiastical arrogance’, ‘Communist oppression’, ‘Secular intolerance’, ‘Dictatorial paranoia’, and ‘Organized corruption’. This paper only looks at examples of Islamic extremism and secular intolerance. “Persecution engines” seek to give expression to the underlying forces behind persecution situations. By naming and defining specific persecution engines, shapes and configurations of religious persecution can more easily be observed.

10 Cf. Miller 2012.

Many expressions of Islam are characterized by a strong striving for supremacy. This aspiration does not limit itself to the national level, but can be supranational. Christians and their communities are often victimized by this aspiration, especially Christians with a Muslim background: someone who is not a Muslim is a second-class citizen or even worse, an infidel. Infidels are often outlawed, and very vulnerable to all sorts of hostilities. The international dimension of Islam's supremacy striving often adds to the severity of hostilities because "foreign fighters" or resources reinforce local persecution dynamics.

Radical Muslims or Islamists are the "public face" of Islamic extremism. In a study for Open Doors, Lorenzo Vidino (2013) makes a useful distinction between three categories of Islamists: (i) violent rejectionists (or jihadists), (ii) non-violent rejectionists, and (iii) participationists. All three have different strategies but the same agenda, which is to bring the world under the "House of Islam" (by violent and non-violent means). An example of a participationist is Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Muslim Brotherhood top ideologue in Europe, who outlined a political strategy in his *Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase* (2000) which bears striking similarity to the spheres of society approach. Basically, al-Qaradawi proposes specific interventions destined to "Islamize" each sphere of society.

Hostilities against Christians are not, however, linked to radical Islam alone. An Open Doors field researcher, commenting on the persecution of Christians in West and Central Africa, states that very much of this persecution stems from "normal" Islam; it is the application of notions like infidel (*kaffir*), second-class citizen (*dhimmi*), apostate (*murtad*), etc. and these originate from traditional concepts of Islam (Zenn 2014).

In which ways does Islamic extremism restrict sphere sovereignty (religious expression) in each sphere of life? We specifically look at three countries to answer this question: Libya, Egypt, and Nigeria. In each of these countries, Islamic extremism is a relevant dynamic, though it expresses itself in different ways. The dynamic is at different stages of its development and presents different patterns of persecution.

Also, the countries' religious compositions are very different: Libya is a Muslim-majority country where the Christian population is extremely small; Egypt is also a Muslim-majority country, but it has a relatively large Christian Coptic minority; in Nigeria, around half of the population is Christian while the other half is Muslim.

The application of our questionnaire to the three selected countries is summarized in table 2 and figure 3 below. As can be observed, the total scores for each of the countries are relatively close. However, the internal dynamics

TABLE 2 *Restrictions on sphere sovereignty in Libya, Egypt and Nigeria*

Spheres of society	Libya	Egypt	Nigeria
Family sphere	11,87	8,00	8,41
Church sphere	11,83	6,18	9,82
School and health care sphere	10,31	9,42	10,80
Business sphere	11,38	8,04	11,61
Media and arts & entertainment sphere	9,82	8,33	10,12
Government sphere	10,81	8,28	9,38
Average of spheres of society	11,00	8,04	10,02
Violence	3,65	13,17	13,33
<b>TOTAL (spheres of society + violence)</b>	<b>69,68</b>	<b>61,42</b>	<b>73,46</b>

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION.

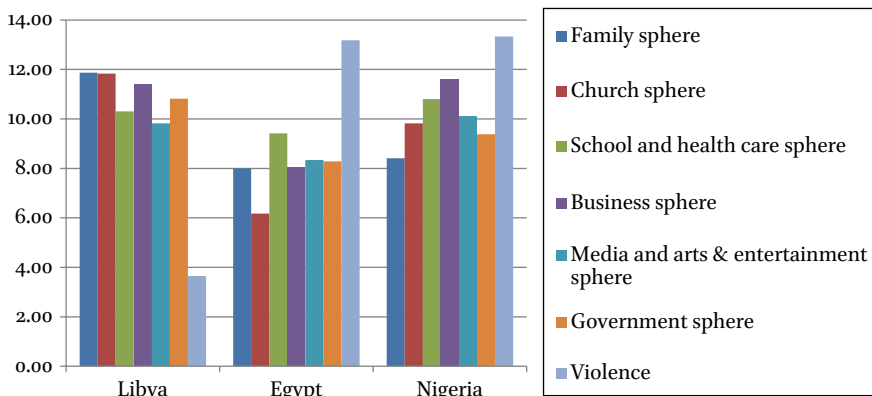


FIGURE 3 *Restrictions on sphere sovereignty in Libya, Egypt and Nigeria*

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION.

within each country are very distinct. Also, the levels of religious violence targeting Christians in Egypt and Nigeria are much higher than in Libya. At the same time, in Libya, the pressure on Christians throughout all spheres of society is higher than in the other two countries.

Libya is one of the worst countries in North Africa in terms of religious freedom.<sup>11</sup> A high and relatively homogenous degree of pressure on Christians

11 Libya persecution profile, World Watch List 2014, Open Doors International.

throughout all spheres of society can be observed. Within a context of anarchy and absence of rule of law, Christians – both nationals and foreigners – find themselves squeezed between fanatical religious groups and criminal gangs. As in most Muslim countries, converting from Islam brings social pressure. Muslim background believers are always at risk from their families; there were some reported cases of beatings by family members. Most Libyan Christians are afraid to meet with other believers, as any kind of religious gathering (other than Islamic) for Libyans is forbidden. African migrant workers are allowed to have their own churches, but Libyans are not allowed to attend.

After the demise of Gadhafi's regime, the driver of persecution has changed, but Christians continue to experience high levels of pressure in all spheres of society. During Gadhafi's reign, the main drivers of persecution were the government and its secret services. Now, Islamist fanatical movements such as the Salafists are responsible for most of the persecution of and violent incidents against Christians, in a country where there is no central government and where rule of law is absent. Violence against Christians in Libya has increased in comparison to the previous year, with a number of violent incidents targeting both national and expat Christians. Salafists and other Islamist groups are responsible for most of the incidents.

In the case of Libya, infringed sphere autonomy is a central problem because religious expression is not allowed for Christians in any of the spheres of society. This is not so much caused by the government sphere intervening illegitimately in other spheres of society as it is a result of the situation of anarchy and absence of rule of law in which other drivers, particularly Salafists and other Islamist groups, can operate with impunity and try to take over the different spheres of society.

In Egypt, the overall degree of pressure on Christians throughout all spheres of society is considerably lower than in Libya, although the level of physical violence is much higher.<sup>12</sup> President Morsi's failure to adequately address the country's economic challenges was the main trigger for the massive protests in July 2013 which led to his ouster by the military. Shortly after this coup, there was an upsurge in sectarian violence on Coptic Christians. In August 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood was responsible for the burning of 38 churches and the damaging of 23 churches.<sup>13</sup>

Restrictions are present in the family and church spheres, but at a lower level than in Libya. A possible explanation for this difference is the fact that

12 Egypt persecution profile, World Watch List 2014, Open Doors International.

13 Recently, the military helped to rebuild churches and President al-Sisi celebrated Christmas together with the Coptic pope.



Egypt still has a large Christian minority (estimated at 10 million), which, while facing important difficulties, had been tolerated because of its historical presence and its demographic size. Nevertheless, Egyptian Christians face restrictions and various forms of discrimination, especially in the school, health care and business spheres.

In the church sphere, church autonomy is generally respected, although Copts do face administrative obstacles. As long as the political instability continues and the economic challenges are not addressed, social protests will not cease.

Although the restrictions in the different spheres of society are less intense in Egypt than in Libya, the position of Christians – not only Muslim background believers, but also more and more the large indigenous Coptic community – has become increasingly pressured in recent years. Just like in Libya, Muslim background believers face severe limitations within their homes and within their extended families.

Restrictions on sphere sovereignty due to Islamic extremism can also be observed in Nigeria, particularly in the Northern provinces where the fanatical movement Boko Haram is mostly active.<sup>14</sup> However, although Boko Haram is most often associated with persecution of Christians in Northern Nigeria, the pattern of persecution in Nigeria is much more complex than only the killing or wounding of Christians – as well as moderate Muslims – by an Islamic terrorist group. This is especially so in the 12 Northern Sharia states where local government and social groups leave hardly any space for Christians to live their own lives. Persecution is most pronounced in the Sharia states, but also extended into neighboring states belonging to the so-called “Middle Belt”, and played heavily upon Christians in various spheres of society.

Persecution is not only focused on Muslim background believers but on all types of Christians in many of the Northern states. Levels of violence in Nigeria are extremely high. Based on media research by the World Watch Research unit of Open Doors International, 612 Nigerian Christians were killed during this reporting period, hundreds of cases of physical aggression were recorded, and nearly 300 churches were destroyed. The emerging links between al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and Boko Haram and other Islamist terrorist groups in the region make it likely that the church will suffer more violent persecution in the near future.

A general pattern that can be observed in both Libya and Egypt (at least during the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood government) is that the “mosque” sphere takes over the government sphere as a means to intervene in other

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14 Nigeria persecution profile, World Watch List 2014, Open Doors International.

spheres of society, thereby restricting religious freedom. Also, in all three countries, the levels of religious violence effectively contribute to the pressurization of free religious expression in each sphere of society.

It could be argued that the drivers of Islamic extremism are in fact claiming their autonomy, in each sphere of life, to live according to their faith. The difference here, however, is that sphere sovereignty is not respected by these drivers within their own communities, nor outside of them. For example, within the family sphere, the drivers of Islamic extremism impose their views on how this sphere should be organized and disrespect the autonomy of individual families, both Muslim and non-Muslim. At the core of Islamic extremism is a strong drive for power which leads to this engine trying to take over all spheres of society.

#### 4 Secular Intolerance

Secular intolerance can be defined as a radical expression of secularism which seeks to exclude religion not only from the public domain but also from various private spheres. It is based on the indifference to, rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations based on the conviction that religion should not have a visible influence on society, particularly on education and politics. This view is becoming more and more common in the Western world and has already inspired a number of policies, laws and court rulings (Kiska 2012).

Martha Nussbaum (2013), while almost exclusively referring to cases of intolerance against Muslims, analyzes the sharp rise of anti-religious sentiments in the Western world, especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Others have made similar observations in other contexts.<sup>15</sup>

Secular intolerance is not a very obvious persecution engine, but it is creeping into and influencing different societies. According to what can be called radical secularists or strict laicists, every phenomenon and sign of Christianity, be it a cross worn at a necklace or a cross in a school or a courtroom, has to be banned from the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Christian convictions on

15 Cf. for example, 'Dr. Govert Buijs: Antireligieus sentiment in debat', *Reformatiorisch Dagblad*, 29-01-2013, [http://www.refdag.nl/kerkplein/kerknieuws/dr\\_govort\\_buijs\\_antireligieus\\_sentiment\\_in\\_debat\\_1\\_710790](http://www.refdag.nl/kerkplein/kerknieuws/dr_govort_buijs_antireligieus_sentiment_in_debat_1_710790).

16 Increasingly, limitations can be witnessed in the free expression of the Christian faith and its general acceptance in Western society. Examples hereof are the discussions about parental rights, the Lautsi case, the refusal to allow Dutch municipal employees to refrain from performing homosexual marriages, hate speech legislation and anti-discrimination

marriage, sexual relations, or other questions deviating from the general perception of morals are harshly condemned, let alone any action led by these convictions (Baskerville 2013). The existence of these disagreements in itself is not a form of persecution, but when these disagreements are translated into restrictions on religious expression in various spheres of life, they are. One of the main sources of secular intolerance is anti-discrimination legislation; another one is gender mainstreaming (Peeters 2012).

Two countries have been selected to empirically assess the restrictions that secular intolerance puts on sphere sovereignty, namely Colombia and Canada. These two countries might not be the most obvious examples, but they happen to be the only countries for which empirical data are available. The analysis may however be interesting, as the two countries present two degrees of advancement of secular intolerance: in Colombia, this dynamic is only present to a limited extent, whereas in Canada, the dynamic is more advanced.

The application of the World Watch List questionnaire to the two selected countries gives the following result:

TABLE 3 *Restrictions on sphere sovereignty in Colombia and Canada*

Spheres of society	Colombia	Canada
Family sphere	0,97	1,30
Church sphere	1,93	3,91
School and health care sphere	1,14	3,81
Business sphere	1,56	10,27
Media and arts & entertainment sphere	7,14	7,14
Government sphere	1,93	2,33
Average of spheres of society	2,45	4,79
Violence	0,00	0,95
<b>TOTAL (spheres of society + violence)</b>	<b>14,68</b>	<b>29,72</b>

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION.

laws. The various forms of denial of Christians to participate in public life is the scope of a declaration of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, issued on July 10th 2011, which urges the governments of European countries to combat intolerance and discrimination against Christians, recommending that a 'public debate on intolerance and discrimination against Christians be initiated and that the right of Christians to participate fully in public life be ensured.'

As a first observation, the degree of restrictions put on sphere sovereignty in these two cases is considerably lower for this persecution dynamic than for Islamic extremism. Indeed, it can be said that secular intolerance does not (yet) restrict Christian religious expression at a very high intensity in the two selected countries. Also, the level of violence caused by this persecution engine in both countries is very low or almost non-existent.

The main persecution engines in Colombia are ‘Organized corruption’ and ‘Tribal antagonism’.<sup>17</sup> However, secular intolerance in Colombia is, in a very mild form, present in roughly half of the country’s territory.<sup>18</sup> Signs of secular intolerance are repeated expressions of intolerance of the participation of Christians in the public sphere, particularly in public universities.

The paradox of religion in Latin America is that the vitality of the New Religious Movements stands in sharp contrast to the growing influence of secularist groups (gender lobby, gay lobby, humanists) who not only demand the elimination of references to the Christian faith from the public domain, but also aggressively promote liberal policies and legislation,

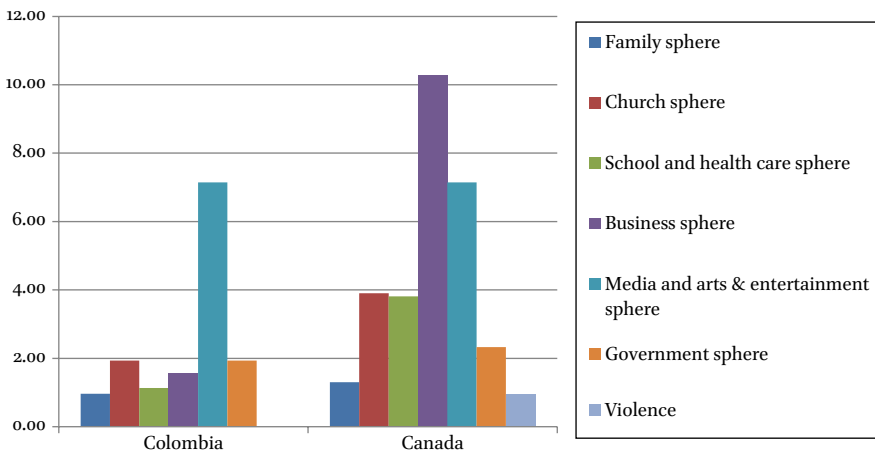


FIGURE 4 *Restrictions on sphere sovereignty in Colombia and Canada*

SOURCE: OWN ELABORATION.

17 Colombia persecution profile, World Watch List 2014, Open Doors International.

18 The two main persecution engines that are prevalent in Colombia have been labeled ‘Organized corruption’ and ‘Tribal antagonism.’

including reinterpretations of the traditional family and the dignity of human life.

Most restrictions on religious expression in Colombia can be observed in the media and arts & entertainment sphere. Specifically, the media rarely report on religious persecution and tend to ignore this type of phenomenon. Meanwhile, politicians who openly express their Christian faith are heavily criticized in the media, which creates a climate that restricts religious expression in the government sphere. Finally, many entertainment shows that are disrespectful of Christian beliefs are easily tolerated.

In Canada, secular intolerance is more advanced than in Colombia and has even led to isolated cases of violence.<sup>19</sup> In 2012, the Montreal Cathedral was desecrated. It faced an outrage by radical feminists who threw used tampons on the altar. Also, reports were received of cemeteries that had been defaced and Christian schools that had been graphitized.

While the family sphere is generally left alone, some restrictions can be observed in the church, social, and government spheres. For example, in Canada, security forces have been known to tap the phone lines of pro-life (anti-abortion) protestors. There is also an important struggle going on regarding the funding of Christian schools by the state. In general, free religious expression in schools and hospitals is on some issues restricted.

In the business sphere, restrictions are in place as well. Canada is facing an increasing number of cases of challenges to religious employers in relation to whether they may maintain “Religious Conduct Clauses” in the workplace or even have them at all. Recently, religious organizations have had to intervene to protect their right to run their businesses with a Christian ethos by hiring or preferring co-religionists. The law narrows the scope of such hire; full religious expression in the business sphere is thus restricted.

Although secular intolerance is not very visible in Colombia and Canada, this initial survey is symptomatic. The impact of secular intolerance is not to be exaggerated but it should not be ignored either. We need to objectively look at the degree in which this dynamic restricts the freedom for religious expression in each sphere of society. This initial empirical exploration also shows how the mainstream pyramidal vision of society, in which the government sphere regulates all other spheres of society, is potentially restrictive to religious expression in the various private spheres.

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19 Personal communication with Dr. Iain T. Benson, April 2012.

## 5 Sphere Sovereignty as a Safeguard of Religious Freedom

The primary aim of this article was not to open a debate over the advance and correct interpretation of the two presented persecution engines – Islamic extremism and secular intolerance – although this may be a side effect of it. Rather, the main purpose of this article was to present a new way to interpret religious freedom based on the revisiting of Abraham Kuyper's theorization of sphere sovereignty.

We did not intend to alter the concept of sphere sovereignty, but rather to take its application further than its original conceivers did, while respecting the spirit of the original concept. The application of sphere sovereignty to a new field only underlines its actuality.

We found the concept of sphere sovereignty to be a valuable analytical category to assess religious freedom in its full breadth and multidimensionality in a comparative perspective. It allows the identification of restrictions on religious expression in various spheres of society, going beyond the restrictive human rights perspective which in our opinion focuses excessively on the legal dimension of religious persecution.

The empirical data presented on the restrictions of sphere sovereignty under specific persecution dynamics is still limited; therefore, the above should be considered as an initial exploration. Some illustrations have been presented here, but the fieldwork and the exact methodology to observe restrictions of religious expression in the different spheres of society can be improved.

However, from a normative point of view, we hope to have made a strong case for the virtues of sphere sovereignty as a guarantee against tyranny, and therefore also as a safeguard against religious persecution. Sphere sovereignty can be used as a prescriptive tool to uphold religious freedom as a norm in all spheres of society. In a way, the best guarantee for religious freedom is ensuring not only the autonomy of each sphere of society, but specifically free religious expression in each sphere of society. In other words, true religious freedom requires not only a sovereign church sphere – the respect of church autonomy –, but also the freedom for religious expression in the family sphere, the school sphere, the government sphere, and in all other spheres.

The intolerance against the expression of religious world views in the public debate is all the more striking when one considers that the democratic rule of law, of which the separation of church and state is a central principle, is highly indebted to religion – more precisely, to Judeo-Christian legacy (cf. Witte 2006, 2008). Since religion – particularly Christianity – has so clearly passed on its legacy to modern democracy in the West, why do secularists insist on eliminating religious world views from the public sphere (Sampson 2009)? Shouldn't

religions, as Jose Casanova (1994, 214) suggests, be allowed to ‘play a positive role in the revitalization of the modern public sphere’ (cf. Habermas 2006)?

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