

Freedom of Education and the Other Spheres of Life

Address by H. Dooyeweerd to the Reformed School Association,
[1939], as reported in the journal of the Association¹

Reformed School Association.

After opening the afternoon meeting with psalm singing and prayer, the chairman reported that the meeting of the Reformed School Association was scheduled for February 14th at 15:40. If this date is later changed, it will, of course, be communicated.

After a few domestic matters were dealt with, the floor was given to the speaker, who had meanwhile arrived: Prof. Dr. H. Dooyeweerd from Amsterdam, who delivered a speech on "The Freedom of the School and Its Connection with Other Life Spheres."

Speech by Prof. Dooyeweerd.

The issue of school freedom, according to the speaker, is once again in the spotlight. The reasons for this are, firstly, the advance of totalitarian state ideologies, and secondly, the fear of a kind of state pedagogy, among others, stirred by the so-called Welling Plan.

In 1836, a detailed curriculum was sent to all schools in Belgium for discussion with the staff. This apparently had an influence on our northern inspectors. The reaction to the Welling Plan among us has been varied. Some appreciated it, while others spoke of an attack on our education.

The speaker will not delve into technical matters but will focus on the fundamental issues. In "Voices of the Times," an important article by Philip J. Idenburg, [Dr.Jur.] on the freedom of the school appeared. This article sparked a debate with *De Standaard*. The main question was whether the freedom of the school was an inviolable good or if whether it was something that had become historically relevant but could also disappear again.

Idenburg made a distinction between Lohman and Kuyper, aligning himself with Lohman. Was there a reason for making this distinction?

We now come to the actual topic of the debate: sovereignty in its own sphere, or "sphere sovereignty."

Kuyper placed this at the forefront. Groen van Prinsterer had already spoken about it, but he emphasized it slightly differently than Kuyper. Groen was strongly influenced by historical thinking. History showed him that state and society were organized "from below" in free communities. The French Revolution, however, built everything "from above," with the state absorbing everything.

No, says Groen, let us return to the Christian-historical perspective, connected to history.

¹ "De vrijheid der school en haar verbondenheid in de vervlechting met andere levenskringen."

[The freedom of the school (educational freedom) and its connection in the intertwining with other spheres of life.]
Translated by Steve Bishop and Harry Van Dyke.

And now Kuyper steps in. He also breaks with the view of the French Revolution, and speaks of sovereignty in one's own sphere, but does not base this on history, but on the ordinances that God established for human society.

Sovereignty in one's own sphere is grounded in the unique nature of the spheres: family, state, church, school. The world order is anchored in In God's ordinances for these spheres.

Thus, we see two lines here: a historical line from Groen, and what Dr. Idenburg called Kuyper's dogmatic line.

Are these two completely divergent lines?

According to the speaker, they are not. Both have their own justification. In fact, Groen and Kuyper did not mean the same thing when they spoke of sphere sovereignty.

For the school, we must distinguish sharply between two issues:

1. The ever-changing historical organization form of the school association historical form of organization of a school association.
2. The internal nature or sphere sovereignty of the school.

The speaker first wanted to address the first point, the issue of authority over schools, the organizational form.

There are three historical forms to distinguish here:

1. The school attached to the church.
2. The school attached to the state.
3. The school attached to the parents.

The first principle was realized in the so-called monastery schools, but it was also advocated by the German Lutheran anti-revolutionary Fr. J. Stahl.

The second form is found in the Christian government school in the Netherlands before the French Revolution. Groen, too, consistently sought a Christian state school, although for practical reasons he abandoned this ideal for a while. This idea is found in various forms even in non-Christian circles.

Kuyper primarily defended the idea of the school belonging to the parents, as did Lohman, though not on principle like Kuyper, but from utilitarian considerations.

Well, Kuyper said, the school to the parents is principally defended we defend "the school to the parents," based on the fact that parents have the first right to educate their children. However, life, with its ever-growing demands, would make it impossible for the parents to undertake the entire upbringing and education themselves. Hence, the school is a support, a necessary institution.

This view of things does not fully satisfy.

Is it true that the sovereignty of the family circle demands that the authority in the school belongs to the parents?

But then let us look at the practical implementation of this idea. Not the parents, but the school boards act as authorities. And they derive their authority not primarily from individual families but exercise it in relation to the internal structure of the larger school association.

In matters genuinely internal to the family, the head of the family would never subordinate himself to the opinion of an outsider. But as a member of the parent committee or school board, he must indeed conform to the majority. This already shows that the situation at the school is somewhat different.

It is conceivable, in very special social and political circumstances, that a state school or a church school, a public or a parochial school would not infringe on the freedom and [internal] sovereignty of the school, while in certain other cases, a school belonging to the parents would not always guarantee this freedom.

In this respect, we can agree with Dr. Idenburg: the organizational form of the school can vary.

But that certainly does not mean that the sphere sovereignty of the school can or may disappear.

However much the school may be or become intertwined with other life spheres, the principle of sphere sovereignty, which is not a historically variable principle, must be maintained for the school.

The intertwining of the school can be:

- a. with the state,
- b. with the church,
- c. with the family.

In the organizational form of the school, one of these three may be given a more or less significant role, depending on the closer or more distant contact that these spheres have with the school. But in doing so, even from the side of the family, sphere sovereignty may be endangered if the internal boundaries of these spheres are not respected.

The necessary contact between the school and the other spheres does not affect sphere sovereignty, but only the intertwining of the spheres with one another.