

The Role of Abraham Kuyper's Cultural Mandate in Christian Religious Education

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Abstract. This research aims to analyze the role of Abraham Kuyper's cultural mandate in the context of Christian Religious Education. Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and statesman, emphasized the importance of the cultural mandate as an integral part of the Christian faith, where believers are called to transform all aspects of life, including education, according to the principles of the Kingdom of God. This research uses a qualitative method with a theological-philosophical analysis approach to Kuyper's thought and its relevance to CRE. The research findings indicate that Kuyper's cultural mandate provides a strong theological foundation for CRE, emphasizing the integration of faith, science, and daily life. The concept of sphere sovereignty proposed by Kuyper also promotes a holistic approach in Christian Religious Education, where education focuses not only on spiritual aspects but also on the development of character, ethics, and social responsibility. Additionally, this study found that the implementation of the cultural mandate in CRE can strengthen Christian identity amidst pluralism and secularization. The implication of these findings is the importance of a CRE curriculum based on the Kuyperian vision, which emphasizes cultural transformation through education. This research contributes to the development of CRE that is relevant and contextual in addressing the challenges of the times.

Keywords: Abraham Kuyper, cultural mandate, Christian Religious Education.

1. Introduction

Christian Religious Education plays a central role in shaping the character, faith, and worldview of students. However, in the context of an increasingly pluralistic and secular society, Christian Religious Education (CRE) often faces the challenge of remaining relevant without losing its theological identity. One of the Christian thinkers who made significant contributions in defining the relationship between faith, culture, and education is Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), a theologian, politician, and educator from the Netherlands. (Anne, 2015) Kuyper developed the concept of the cultural mandate, rooted in the understanding that Christians are called to redeem and transform all aspects of life, including education, under the sovereignty of Christ. (Bishop, 2020) This research aims to explore the role of Abraham Kuyper's cultural mandate within the framework of CRE, focusing on how his thoughts can enrich theological and pedagogical approaches in faith education.

This paper aims to deeply analyze Abraham Kuyper's thoughts on the cultural mandate and its relevance to CRE. Specifically, this research aims to: examine the theological basis of the cultural mandate in Kuyper's thought, explore the implications of the cultural mandate for the CRE approach, and assess how Kuyper's concept of sphere sovereignty can strengthen the integration of faith and learning in the context of Christian education. Thus, this research is not only theoretical but also practical, providing recommendations for Christian educators in designing a holistic and transformative curriculum.

Abraham Kuyper was one of the most influential Reformed figures in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As the founder of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Free University of Amsterdam), he emphasized that all knowledge should be studied in the light of the Christian faith. (van der Braak, 2020) The concept of his cultural mandate is based on the interpretation of Genesis 1:28, where humans are given the responsibility to manage creation. For Kuyper, this mandate is not only individual but also collective, encompassing all fields of political, artistic, economic life, and of course, education.

One of Kuyper's greatest contributions is the doctrine of sphere sovereignty, which states that every sphere of life (family, church, state, arts, science) has its own authority under Christ. In the context of education, this means that Christian schools should operate based on biblical principles without excessive intervention from the state or secular institutions. This

Received: 19 March, 2025

Revised: 16 April, 2025

Accepted: 23 May, 2025

Online Available : 01 June, 2025

Curr. Ver.: 03 June, 2025



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thinking has become the foundation for many Christian educational institutions in Europe and North America.

Several researchers have explored Kuyper's thoughts in relation to education. For example, James Bratt in the biography *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* provides a comprehensive analysis of how Kuyper viewed education as a tool for shaping Christian society.(Bratt, 2013) Additionally, Richard Mouw in *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* highlights the relevance of Kuyper's thought for Christian higher education.(Mouw, 2011)

However, research specifically linking Kuyper's cultural mandate to Christian higher education is still limited. Most studies focus more on the political aspects or Kuyper's general theology, while its application in Christian pedagogy has not been extensively examined. Some exceptions include Graham Duncan's work that discusses Christian education from a Reformed perspective, but without an in-depth analysis of the cultural mandate's implications for religious teaching.(Duncan, 2018).

Although Kuyper's thoughts on education have been widely discussed, there is still an academic gap in the specific application of his cultural mandate in religious education. First, most of the literature focuses on higher education or Christian schools in general, but does not discuss how Kuyperian concepts can shape religious teaching methodologies. Second, previous research tends to be historical or theoretical in nature, without offering much in the way of practical frameworks for Christian religious educators amidst contemporary challenges such as secularization and pluralism.

This gap is important to fill because Christian Religious Education not only aims to transfer doctrinal knowledge but also to shape students' thinking and living in all aspects of life consistent with Kuyper's vision of cultural transformation. Thus, this research seeks to provide a new perspective on how the cultural mandate can enrich CRE both theologically and pedagogically.

This study makes an original contribution in at least three aspects. First, this research explicitly connects Kuyper's cultural mandate and CRE, an approach that has not been extensively explored in the previous literature. Second, this research is not only theoretical but also offers practical implications, such as how the principle of sphere sovereignty can guide the development of a holistic CRE curriculum. Third, this research contextualizes Kuyper's thought within the challenges of modern education, including how CRE can respond to religious pluralism without sacrificing Christian identity.

Thus, this research is expected to enrich the academic discussion on CRE while also providing guidance for Christian educators who wish to integrate faith and learning more deeply. Through the lens of Kuyper's cultural mandate, CRE is not only seen as a formal subject but as part of the Christian community's calling to transform the world through education.

2. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method with a literature review approach as the main foundation in exploring and analyzing Abraham Kuyper's thoughts on the cultural mandate and its implications for Christian Religious Education (CRE). This approach was chosen because the main focus of the research is on understanding theological concepts and ideas in historical and contemporary contexts, rather than on the collection of empirical data.(Bergmann, 2017) The data sources consist of primary literature such as Kuyper's original works, as well as secondary literature including books, academic journals, theological articles, and Christian educational documents that discuss the application of the cultural mandate in the field of education.(Kuyper, 2019) The analysis process is conducted through content analysis techniques, which involve identifying key themes related to the cultural mandate, Christian worldview, and the role of education as a tool for cultural transformation. This research also compares Kuyper's thoughts with the current context of Christian education, particularly in facing the challenges of pluralism and secularization. With this approach, the

research aims to provide a conceptual contribution to the development of a more contextual, integrative, and relevant CRE model based on the Kuyperian paradigm.

3. Results and Discussion

A. The Theological Basis of the Cultural Mandate in the Thought of Abraham Kuyper

Genesis 1:28 says: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" This verse is widely known as the "cultural mandate," which emphasizes humanity's call to manage and steward God's creation. Kuyper interprets this mandate as the theological foundation for the active involvement of believers in social, political, economic, and cultural life.

For Kuyper, this mandate is not merely an ecological or biological task, but comprehensive encompassing the development of culture, science, art, education, and social institutions as forms of obedience to God.(Joustra & Joustra, 2022) He sees that humans, as the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*), are called to be representatives of God in creation, continuing the work of creation within the framework of stewardship and worship. Thus, all cultural activities have a spiritual dimension.

This interpretation is rooted in the Reformed understanding that the created world is good and that God not only redeems the human soul but also the entire creation. The cultural mandate in Kuyper's view is a universal task that continues to apply, even after the fall of man into sin. However, through Christ, this mandate is redeemed and guided towards cosmic restoration.

One of the main pillars of Kuyper's thought is the concept of God's sovereignty over all of life. In his famous speech at the Stone Lectures at Princeton, Kuyper asserted: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" This sovereignty encompasses every aspect of life, including education.(Wagenman, 2019) For Kuyper, education is not a neutral domain. It is an expression of faith and a means of cultural formation that is subject to the authority of God. Christian education, therefore, must have a clear theological foundation and not merely imitate secular systems. The goal is to shape a whole person in the light of divine truth, not just for worldly competence, but also for service to God and others.

In this context, education becomes a form of worship. Learning activities, teaching, character building, instilling values, and the development of knowledge are part of humanity's response to the cultural mandate. Kuyper rejected the sacred-secular dichotomy and emphasized that all human activities, if done in obedience to Christ, are a form of worship.(Kuyper, 2021) Furthermore, he introduced the concept of sphere sovereignty, which means that each sphere of life (family, church, state, school, art, etc.) has authority that comes directly from God and must be carried out according to the laws embedded in creation. Thus, education has structural and ethical autonomy, yet remains under God's sovereignty.

Kuyper's ideas on the cultural mandate and faith-culture integration stand on the great legacy of Reformed thought, especially from John Calvin and Herman Bavinck. However, there are nuances that distinguish their approaches. John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, emphasized that all of life is under the sovereignty of God.(Calvin, 1960) He developed the doctrine of providence, which states that God preserves and governs all things. Calvin acknowledged the value of culture and knowledge as common grace, but he had not yet developed a systematization like Kuyper's on cultural responsibility. Nevertheless, the seeds of the cultural mandate and the rejection of the faith-secular dualism are already very clear in Calvin's theology.

Herman Bavinck, as a contemporary of Kuyper and a great systematic theologian, supported the idea that the Christian faith must be integrated with all aspects of life. In *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck emphasizes that humans, as the image of God, are called to

develop cultural life as part of the divine calling.(Parker, 2022) However, Bavinck is more cautious in using the term cultural mandate and places greater emphasis on the importance of restoration in Christ as the way to fulfill the purpose of creation. He balanced the acknowledgment of cultural value with the awareness of the damage caused by sin. The important difference between Kuyper and Bavinck lies in their emphasis: Kuyper places more emphasis on cultural activism and the reform of worldly institutions through faith, while Bavinck places more emphasis on inner transformation and theological integrity. Although different, both share a unified vision that the Christian faith is relevant to all of life.

B. The Concept of Sphere Sovereignty and Its Implications for the Structure of Christian Education

In an increasingly fragmented modern world, one of the greatest challenges for Christian education is how to maintain the integrity of faith amidst the dominance of a secular system that separates knowledge from religious values. Abraham Kuyper, a 19th- century Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman, offered a principle that is highly relevant in addressing this challenge, namely sphere sovereignty. This idea emphasizes that each sphere of life has its own authority and responsibility directly derived from God, and therefore cannot be arbitrarily controlled by other spheres. This principle provides an important framework for Christian education, while also serving as a sharp critique of the secular education system.

The principle of sphere sovereignty emerges from Kuyper's theological view that God is the King over all of life, and that the world is created with an order containing divine laws that govern every aspect of reality.(Keene, 2016) In his famous speech at the Stone Lectures , Kuyper stated that "there is not a single inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

In this framework, Kuyper distinguishes several main spheres (or "domains") in society: family, church, state, and school. Each of these realms possesses organic and autonomous authority, not because it is granted by the state, but because it originates from God's own creation design. For example, the family is a sovereign realm in terms of child- rearing and basic moral formation; the church has authority in worship, sacraments, and spiritual teaching; the state has the authority to uphold civil justice and law; while the school is the realm of education, where knowledge and intellectual formation are developed responsibly.

Kuyper rejected the unlawful intervention of one sphere over another. The state, for example, should not take over the authority of parents in choosing their child's education. Similarly, the church should not fully control the state's public policy. With this principle, Kuyper supported structural pluralism, where institutions in society develop according to their respective divine character and mandate.(Moorlag, 2019)

One of the most evident implications of sphere sovereignty is the critique of the modern secular education system. For Kuyper, education that claims to be "neutral" is a myth. All education is based on values, beliefs about truth, the meaning of life, and human purpose. When religion is excluded from the curriculum, it does not mean that education becomes objective or value-free instead, it is filled with other ideological assumptions, often materialistic, relativistic, or secular humanistic.

In a secular system, religion is placed outside the realm of intellect and is limited to the private or emotional sphere.(Habermas, 2006) This creates a false dichotomy between faith and science, as if science is an objective fact, while faith is a personal opinion. Such education obscures the reality that knowledge is always viewed through the lens of a particular worldview. In this context, education no longer shapes a whole person, but merely produces individuals who are technically efficient yet spiritually dry.

Kuyper believes that when the state imposes a single secular education system, it has overstepped its authority and intruded into the realm of family and school. He advocated for the legal recognition of Christian schools (or other faith-based schools) that have the freedom to design their curriculum based on their faith beliefs, without state intervention in its moral or spiritual content. For Kuyper, educational freedom is part of justice in a pluralistic society.

The concept of sphere sovereignty is not just a critique of the existing system, but also a constructive offer to build a comprehensive Christian education. Christian schools, according to Kuyperianism, are not merely schools that add religious lessons amidst other subjects, but institutions that are thoroughly designed and run based on faith in Christ.

In practice, this is evident in how the curriculum is constructed. For example, in science lessons, students are invited to understand the laws of nature as expressions of the order of God's creation. Instead of viewing nature as a closed system that is spiritually neutral, students learn that investigating nature is a form of stewardship and admiration for God's creation.

In art, human creative expression is understood as part of the *imago Dei* that humans are created in the likeness of the Creator and are called to create in the light of goodness and truth. Art is not merely an aesthetic expression, but a means of cultivating moral sensitivity, spiritual reflection, and social critique. In social ethics, students are not only taught about human rights or positive law, but also about God's justice, compassion, social responsibility, and human dignity as God's creation. Thus, Christian education prepares individuals not only for economic success but also to become agents of transformation in society.

Furthermore, in the curriculum of Christian Religious Education (CRE), the principle of sphere sovereignty can be applied by emphasizing the integration of faith with all aspects of life. Christian Religious Education (CRE) is not only a lesson in dogmatic theology but also a forum for reflecting on faith in all areas of life: economy, politics, technology, and the environment. Students are encouraged to think critically and theologically about how their faith shapes the way they work, innovate, and relate to the world.

Some contemporary Christian schools, inspired by the Kuyperian approach in the Netherlands, Canada, and North America, have developed a curriculum based on Biblical worldview integration.(Teeuwssen, 2016) In this model, each subject is studied and taught from a Christian faith perspective, not just inserting Bible verses, but thoroughly integrated into the vision and mission of learning. Teachers are not only knowledge transmitters but also character builders and spiritual leaders.

C. Transformation of Christian Religious Education Pedagogy through the Kuyperian Approach

Christian Religious Education (CRE) is often practiced in a static and dogmatic manner. Many CRE curricula and methods are still trapped in a passive catechism approach emphasizing rote memorization of doctrines, one-way delivery, and repetition of faith principles without contextually relating them to the real lives of the students.(Ampem, 2023) As a result, students experience religious education as a subject detached from the cultural dynamics and scientific knowledge they encounter daily. This approach not only limits students' critical thinking and creativity but also weakens the relevance of Christianity in a plural and complex world.

The transformation of Christian Religious Education pedagogy demands a more active and contextual approach.(Anselmus Dami, Butarbutar, & Kusradi, 2023) One form of this is project-based learning or social service, where students not only learn about the love of Christ but also live it through real actions in the community such as designing environmental care campaigns, serving marginalized communities, or creating simple technology projects that contribute to the common good. In this context, faith is not only taught but also lived and tested in a tangible way.

Furthermore, the integration of faith with the fields of STEM and the arts becomes an important strategy in building the understanding that all knowledge is subject to the sovereignty of Christ.(Bear & Skorton, 2018) Science is understood not as a neutral domain, but as an effort to recognize the order of God's creation. Art is seen as an expression of *imago Dei* in creativity. When students conduct experiments, work on robotics projects, or paint murals themed around social justice, they are not just learning a discipline, but also developing a faith identity that is relevant to the times.

In this approach, CRE teachers are no longer just theology instructors, but agents of cultural transformation. They serve as spiritual mentors, facilitators of faith-culture dialogue, and guides in helping students discover their life calling. Teachers are required to have a deep understanding of worldview and sensitivity to contemporary issues, so they can guide students in navigating faith in a plural and dynamic world.

With the Kuyperian approach, CRE is no longer a sterile space from life, but a field of formation that involves intellect, emotions, actions, and calling. Faith education becomes an integral part of the cultural formation process, where the younger generation is prepared to live as witnesses of Christ in every aspect of life.

4. Conclusions

This research shows Abraham Kuyper's thoughts on the cultural mandate and sphere sovereignty offering a transformative framework for Christian Religious Education (CRE). First, the theological basis of the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28) expands the vision of Christian Religious Education (CRE) from mere faith education to a calling to influence culture. Second, the principle of sphere sovereignty provides the foundation for the autonomy of Christian education, allowing the integration of faith with knowledge without the pressure of secularization. Third, in the context of pluralism, the cultural mandate offers a dialogical approach that maintains firm beliefs while also respecting differences. Fourth, the Kuyperian approach encourages contextual teaching methods through project-based learning and the integration of faith with academic disciplines. Overall, Kuyper's thought is relevant for contemporary Christian Education. Its cultural mandate provides a holistic vision where CRE not only shapes pious individuals but also a society that actively redeems culture for the glory of God. Thus, CRE can become a strategic means to address the challenges of the times without losing its Christian identity.

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