

Between the Cross and Power: Sphere Sovereignty, Liberty of Conscience, and the Public Presence of Faith in the Reformed Baptist Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between Christian faith, political authority, and religious freedom through a critical dialogue among John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and the Baptist tradition. Its central argument holds that the public presence of Christian faith can be affirmed and limited at the same time: affirmed, because religious conviction produces social, ethical, and political responsibilities; limited, because the Church must not convert its spiritual mission into dominion over the State, nor use civil coercion to produce religious adherence. The study adopts a bibliographical, historical-conceptual, and comparative methodology, distinguishing the contexts of the sixteenth-century Reformation, modern pluralization, and the formation of Baptist communities. It argues that the Calvinist doctrine of the two governments, Kuyper's sphere sovereignty, and the Baptist emphasis on liberty of conscience constitute distinct yet articulable theoretical resources for thinking about a non-dominating Christian presence in the public sphere. In conclusion, the article applies this synthesis to the Brazilian context, marked by religious pluralism, partisan polarization, and disputes over secularism, defending a Christian participation oriented by service, democratic responsibility, prophetic criticism of power, and the consistent defense of religious freedom for all.

Keywords: Political theology; John Calvin; Abraham Kuyper; Baptists; Religious freedom; Secularism.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and politics has once again taken a central place in contemporary public debate. The phenomenon cannot be explained solely by the growth of electoral participation among religious groups or by the presence of confessional leaders in representative institutions. It involves a broader question: how can religious convictions take part in common life without the State being captured by a church, and without religion being expelled, as a matter of principle, from the public space? The question acquires special relevance in pluralistic societies, in which citizens hold distinct conceptions of the human person, justice, freedom, and the common good.

Within the Christian field, the problem is usually presented in a polarized way. On one side stands the temptation to reduce faith to the private sphere, as if its public dimension were necessarily a threat to democracy. On the other, there are projects that identify Christianity with a partisan platform and understand the conquest of state power as a condition for the Church's faithfulness. Between the privatization of faith and its political instrumentalization, it becomes necessary to formulate a third possibility: responsible public presence, capable of bearing witness to convictions without claiming a monopoly over the conscience of citizens.

This article starts from a lecture on faith and politics in the Reformed Baptist context and turns it into a theological-political investigation. The lecture functions here as a thematic basis and an initial problem, not as a sufficient source or as a limit of extension. The aim is to reconstruct its main arguments in academic language, to broaden their historical and conceptual mediations, and to subject them to critical analysis. The scope privileges three

references: John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and the Baptist tradition, especially in their formulations concerning authority, the Church, the State, conscience, and religious freedom.

The guiding question is: in what way can the dialogue among the Calvinist distinction of the governments, Kuyper's sphere sovereignty, and the Baptist defense of religious freedom contribute to a non-dominating understanding of Christian public presence in Brazil? The hypothesis is that these traditions, although they cannot be fused without losing their historical differences, offer a grammar of reciprocal limits. Calvin makes it possible to distinguish spiritual from civil government; Kuyper prevents faith from being confined to the private sphere and, at the same time, limits the absorption of social institutions by the State; the Baptists radicalize the critique of religious coercion and turn liberty of conscience into a criterion of public legitimacy.

The thesis does not claim that these authors defended one and the same model of the State. Calvin wrote in a context of Christendom and cannot be retrospectively converted into a liberal theorist of modern separation. Kuyper developed his thought amid the expansion of the modern State, secularization, and the organization of confessional groups in Dutch society. The Baptists were born out of concrete disputes over religious imposition, but they also presented diverse positions throughout their history. The comparison will therefore be analogical and critical, not a simple harmonization.

The text is organized into six movements. First, it presents the historical problem of authority in the Reformation and in modernity. Next, it analyzes Calvin and Kuyper, before examining the Baptist contributions. Then it proposes a theological-political synthesis based on institutional distinction, liberty of conscience, social responsibility, and criticism of political idolatry. Finally, it discusses implications for democracy and secularism in Brazil.

Religion, Authority, and the Formation of The Modern Problem

Christian reflection on power does not begin with modernity. Since the earliest centuries, the Church has had to discern its relationship with imperial authorities, legal orders, and distinct political cultures. The experience of initially minority Christian communities produced an ambivalent awareness: civil power could persecute the faith, but it could also preserve order; the Church ought to obey authorities in legitimate matters, but could not recognize in them an absolute sovereignty. The apostolic formula that one must obey God rather than men expresses precisely the tension between respect for authority and the limit of obedience.

The rapprochement between Christianity and empire, from the fourth century onward, profoundly altered this scenario. The religion once persecuted came to exercise a public function and to integrate the symbolic architecture of power. The process favored the creation of schools, hospitals, universities, and works of assistance, but it also made it possible to use religious confession as an instrument of social uniformity. Christendom should not be described only as a system of oppression; it was likewise a historical form of cultural organization. However, its proximity between faith and coercion created a problem that would remain decisive: when a belief is sustained by state authority, outward adherence can be mistaken for faith, and disagreement can be treated as a political threat.

The Protestant Reformation broke the religious unity of the Latin West and displaced the debate on authority. The centrality of the Scriptures, the critique of forms of ecclesiastical mediation, and confessional pluralization produced new questions about who could teach, govern, and discipline. The Reformation was not a single movement, nor did it lead automatically to modern religious freedom. In various Reformed territories, the break with Rome was accompanied by new forms of state confessionalization. The decisive point is that the fragmentation of religious unity made it increasingly difficult to presuppose that a single institution could legitimately speak on behalf of the whole of society.

The distinction between Church and State did not emerge ready-made. It was built through conflicts, experiences of persecution, legal agreements, and transformations in the understanding of conscience. For this reason, the history of religious freedom must be narrated without triumphalism. Groups that suffered coercion at a given moment might also wish to exercise it once they reached a majority position. The coherence of freedom is tested

when one accepts that the right of conscience also protects the dissenter, the non-religious person, and the one whose faith is considered mistaken by the dominant community.

Modernity added new elements. Political sovereignty came to be concentrated in the territorial State; citizenship ceased to depend formally on belonging to a confession; science, the economy, education, and the press developed relatively autonomous institutions. This differentiation did not eliminate religion, but it modified its modes of presence. Faith could no longer presume that the State would speak in its name. At the same time, no society is devoid of worldviews: political projects rest on conceptions of freedom, equality, person, community, and justice. The question, therefore, is not to build a public space without convictions, but to organize the coexistence of convictions without coercive privilege.

John Calvin: Two Governments, Civil Responsibility, And Historical Limits

John Calvin was born in Noyon, a province in northern France. He studied philosophy at the Collège de Montaigu and law at the University of Orléans. The theologian Franklin Ferreira comments that “with his father’s death, in 1531, he returned to Paris and devoted himself to classical literature, which was his main interest” (Ferreira, 2014, p. 216). In Calvin’s reflection, God’s sovereignty reaches the whole of reality. There is no sphere of life that escapes divine providence. This affirmation prevents a modern, rigid division between a purely interior religion and a totally autonomous politics. The Christian lives before God in the family, at work, in the community, and in the city. However, the unity of divine sovereignty does not eliminate the diversity of vocations and of the means by which God governs. It is at this point that the distinction between spiritual government and civil government appears.

Spiritual government concerns the preaching of the Word, the sacraments, ecclesiastical discipline, sanctification, and the communion of the Church. Civil government refers to public order, justice, protection against violence, and common administration. The distinction does not mean that the State stands outside God’s lordship or that the Church should be indifferent to society. It means that the means, the proximate goals, and the competencies are not identical. The Church does not possess the civil sword as an ordinary instrument of its mission; the State does not possess the spiritual means capable of creating faith, repentance, and communion.

The conceptual contribution of this distinction can be seen in two directions. First, it prevents the sacralization of the State. Government is a legitimate authority, but it is not redemptive. It can punish crimes, organize services, protect rights, and promote peace, but it cannot transform the human heart. Second, the distinction prevents the Church from understanding itself as the total administration of society. The Church proclaims the gospel and forms consciences; it does not need to take on every civil function in order to fulfill its vocation.

Calvin’s position also recognizes the moral duties of the magistrate. Civil authority is not legitimized merely by the fact that it exists. It must serve justice, protect the vulnerable, and restrain violence. Christian obedience is not equivalent to blind obedience. When the State abandons the good and begins to promote oppression, the Church retains the responsibility to denounce it. Prophetic criticism does not dissolve civil authority, but it recalls that such authority is accountable and limited.

It is necessary, however, to recognize Calvin’s historical limits. In his time, the contemporary model of a secular State, legal pluralism, and equality among religions was not yet consolidated. Calvin admitted a public function of religion that does not coincide with the institutional separation later defended by many Baptists. It would be anachronistic to select Calvinist sentences and present them as a complete anticipation of modern religious freedom. A responsible reading must preserve the tension: Calvin provides an important distinction of competencies, but his historical solution cannot simply be transplanted to pluralistic societies.

Calvin’s relevance today lies less in offering a ready institutional program than in recalling three limits. The first is the soteriological limit: no government saves. The second is the ecclesial limit: the Church must not confuse the power of the Word with the power of coercion. The third is the moral limit: civil authority must be evaluated according to its responsibility before justice. These limits can dialogue with later forms of religious freedom without erasing the differences between contexts.

A conceptual bridge between Calvin and Kuyper can be found in common grace. According to Horton, Calvin did not need to classify cultural activity as holy or redemptive in order to recognize its importance, for God preserves the created order and grants gifts also to unbelievers.^[1] Thus Christians can welcome knowledge and goods produced outside the Church without confusing them with saving grace (Horton, 2017, p. 242-243). This distinction offers a link with the later development of the theme in Kuyper.

ABRAHAM KUYPER AND SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY

Abraham Kuyper was a pastor, theologian, journalist, educator, and politician. His trajectory questions the idea that Christian faithfulness requires withdrawal from culture. For Kuyper, Christ's lordship is not restricted to worship or private devotion. Science, art, education, the press, the economy, the family, and politics are included in the scope of life before God. This universality of lordship, however, does not authorize one institution to control all the others.

The doctrine of sphere sovereignty affirms that the various social institutions have vocations and competencies of their own. Absolute sovereignty belongs to God; human spheres receive limited responsibilities. Family, Church, State, school, university, associations, and economic activities are not departments of a single central organization. Each must develop its task without being absorbed by the State or by the Church.

Kuyper himself applies this differentiation, as an example, to science: because it arises from creation, it has received from the Creator a vocation independent of both the State and the Church. This independence does not mean autonomy before God, but institutional freedom so that science may fulfill its task without being absorbed by one of these spheres (Kuyper, 2015).

The principle has an anti-absolutist function. If the State intends to administer conscience, education, religion, the press, and associational life as extensions of its apparatus, it becomes totalizing. If a Church wishes to control government, the school, culture, and civil organizations, it reproduces the same logic of concentration. Sphere sovereignty is not a defense of absolute fragmentation, because all institutions remain subject to justice and the common good. It is a theory of institutional differentiation under God's sovereignty.

Kuyper makes it possible to correct the liberal reduction of religion to the private sphere. Citizens do not arrive at public debate without convictions. The very claim to neutrality can conceal unexamined values. A Christian person may defend policies to combat poverty because he understands that the neighbor must be loved and that human dignity does not depend on economic utility. Another person may defend the same policy with arguments of equality, efficiency, or social cohesion. The difference of foundations does not automatically make Christian participation illegitimate. The problem is the imposition of conviction through state privilege, not its responsible expression.

This possibility of practical convergence among people with distinct foundations can be deepened by the doctrine of common grace. Kuyper observes that intellectual production outside Christian circles is not necessarily reduced to appearance or error: even thinkers deprived of the light of the Scriptures attained true knowledge, recognized and used by Christians themselves. Common grace, therefore, limits the effects of sin without eliminating divergences of foundation. The denial of neutrality thus does not require contempt for every non-Christian contribution (Kuyper, 2015).

At the same time, the Kuyperian formula requires caution. Sphere sovereignty can be used to protect communities, but it can also naturalize internal inequalities if it is not accompanied by criteria of justice. A family, a church, or a school must not invoke autonomy to cover up violence, discrimination, or violation of fundamental rights. Institutional autonomy is relative and must be articulated with the dignity of the person and public responsibility.

In the political field, Kuyper offers a notion of participation that is not reduced to holding office. Christian presence can occur through schools, newspapers, associations, social works, labor unions, universities, and cultural initiatives. Civil society becomes a space of mediation between the individual and the State. This mediation is particularly important in polarized environments, because it allows service to the common good without converting every Christian activity into an electoral campaign.

This form of public presence can be clarified by the Kuyperian distinction between the Church as institute and as organism. According to James K. A. Smith's exposition, the Church as institution forms and nourishes Christians, who then exercise their different vocations in society, including in politics. In this way, the distinction between Church and State does not lead to the privatization of faith, but prevents the ecclesiastical institution from assuming for itself the jurisdiction proper to civil power (Smith, 2015, p. 155).

The tension between the universality of faith and institutional plurality remains central. If Christ is Lord of all reality, this means that no area is morally neutral; it does not mean that one church should govern all areas. The theological affirmation of lordship can produce political humility when it recalls that the State, the party, and the denomination are not absolute. The same affirmation can produce domination when it is converted into authorization to speak in the name of God in every contingent dispute.

The Baptist Tradition: Conscience, The Local Church, And Religious Freedom

The Baptist tradition developed amid the disputes of the English Reformation and the controversies over the relationship between official religion and individual conscience. It is inadequate to describe it as a uniform block. Baptists diverged in doctrine, organization, relation to the State, and political participation. Even so, some emphases became especially relevant: the baptism of professing believers, church membership as a community of people who profess the faith, the autonomy of the local church, and the rejection of religious coercion.

It is worth distinguishing, however, the Baptist tradition from sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Amy Black observes that, although Anabaptist influences on the Baptist movement exist, many historians situate the emergence of modern Baptists in the environment of seventeenth-century English Puritanism and separatism. Moreover, the Baptist defense of the separation of Church and State did not generally imply the rejection of Christian participation in public institutions (Black, 2015, p. 9-10).

Thomas Helwys is remembered for formulating incisively the idea that the king must not govern the conscience of his subjects. Roger Williams, in a colonial context, defended liberty of conscience and criticized the union between civil authority and religious coercion. John Leland, later, took part in the North American environment that linked religious freedom and limits on state power. These authors must not be turned into a homogeneous line; their formulations belong to distinct contexts. What brings them together is the perception that faith, in order to be faith, cannot be produced by decree.

Religious freedom has a positive and a negative dimension. Positively, it includes professing, celebrating, organizing, teaching, evangelizing, and participating publicly. Negatively, it includes not being obliged to profess, not being punished for changing religion, and not being subjected to an official confession. It also includes the freedom not to believe, provided that the exercise of this freedom is not confused with authorization to violate the rights of others.

Liberty of conscience does not mean that all beliefs are considered true by Baptist theology. A church may affirm the exclusivity of its faith and invite people to conversion. What it cannot demand, without contradicting the very logic of freedom, is that the State turn its conviction into a civil obligation for all. The distinction between theological conviction and political coercion is essential. The first seeks to persuade; the second imposes outward obedience.

The institutional separation between Church and State likewise does not mean separation between faith and life. It does not prevent Christians from voting, holding office, taking part in councils, defending public policies, or criticizing rulers. Its meaning is another: the State must not belong to a specific church, and the Church must not depend on state power to carry out its spiritual mission. Separation protects the Church against government tutelage and protects the government against capture by a confession.

The autonomy of the local church adds a dimension of decentralization. The local community, gathered under the authority of Christ and guided by the Scriptures, must not be treated as an administrative subdivision of a party, a government, or even a charismatic leader. Autonomy is not equivalent to independence without responsibility. It requires accountability, care against abuses, and recognition that pastoral authority is not personal sovereignty.

This limitation finds confessional formulation in chapter 21, paragraph 2, of the 1689 Baptist Confession. The document affirms that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” and that demanding “absolute and blind obedience” is equivalent to destroying liberty of conscience and reason itself (1689 Baptist Confession apud Waldron, 2021, p. 338). Commenting on this principle, Waldron clarifies that the existence of legitimate authorities does not transform their particular determinations into divine orders: “No human authority has the right to require that we treat its commandments as if they were the commandments of God” (Waldron, 2021, p. 348). The principle does not eliminate human authority, but prevents its absolutization.

This structure can offer an antidote to the personalization of religious politics. When an ecclesiastical leader presents his partisan preference as the only possible Christian position, he reduces the conscience of members and converts communion into a mechanism of electoral obedience. The Baptist tradition, in its best sense, makes it possible to sustain the unity of the church without partisan uniformity. Christians can confess the same faith and disagree about economic policies, security strategies, institutional design, and electoral choices.

Convergences, Differences, And A Proposed Synthesis

The dialogue among Calvin, Kuyper, and the Baptists requires avoiding two errors. The first is homogenization, as if all of them defended the same relationship between Church and State. The second is artificial separation, as if no conversation were possible among traditions that share divine sovereignty, the authority of the Scriptures, and Christian responsibility toward the neighbor. The most productive comparison identifies structural convergences and preserves historical divergences.

The first convergence is the critique of the absolute sovereignty of human institutions. Calvin limits the State by distinguishing civil and spiritual government. Kuyper distributes responsibilities among spheres. The Baptists limit power through liberty of conscience and ecclesial autonomy. In every case, although with different foundations and consequences, human authority cannot occupy God’s place.

The second convergence is the affirmation that faith has public relevance. Calvin does not reduce Christianity to the interior of the soul; Kuyper rejects the privatization of faith; the Baptists take part in social life while defending institutional separation. The divergence lies in the mode of presence. Public faith can take the form of service, education, care, denunciation, argumentation, and civic participation without taking the form of confessional dominion.

The third convergence is the distinction of functions. The Church preaches, disciples, celebrates, disciplines, and serves. The State legislates, administers, protects, and judges. The functions are related, because public justice matters to Christian ethics and religious freedom depends on civil institutions. However, relation is not fusion. The State cannot produce faith; the Church must not use the force of the State as an extension of its mission.

From these convergences, a synthesis in four principles is proposed. First, public presence without domination: the Church can form citizens, defend the vulnerable, and denounce injustices, but it does not need to conquer the state apparatus in order to be faithful. Second, secularism without hostility: the State does not establish an official religion and treats citizens with equality, but does not turn neutrality into persecution of religion. Third, conviction without coercion: Christians may publicly affirm their reasons, but must accept plural debate and the possibility that their argument will be contested. Fourth, freedom for all: religious freedom loses its coherence when it is claimed for the majority and denied to minorities, to the non-religious, or to critics of religion.

These principles do not automatically resolve political conflicts. They offer criteria for discernment. A church that denounces corruption only when its adversaries govern does not exercise prophetic criticism, but group defense. A party that mobilizes religious symbols to shield its leaders turns faith into political capital. A State that excludes any religious voice from debate is not necessarily neutral; it may be imposing an anti-religious view. The criterion is equality of rights, the absence of confessional coercion, and the public responsibility of arguments.

The Church Before the State: Prophecy, Service, And Social Responsibility

Criticism of the partisan capture of the Church must not produce silence before injustice. The separation between Church and State is not an authorization for social indifference. The biblical tradition attributes to the community

of faith responsibilities regarding the poor, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed. Prophetic language confronts rulers and citizens when authority turns into violence or when laws and practices dehumanize people.

The prophetic role, however, is not synonymous with a partisan program. The Church can denounce lies, corruption, racism, violence, persecution, exploitation, and abuse of power without declaring that one party holds a monopoly on justice. Prophecy must be capable of confronting allies and adversaries. When the pulpit condemns the same practice in one group and justifies it in another, it loses its moral authority.

It is also necessary to distinguish the proclamation of the gospel from its social implications. Social action does not replace the Christian message of salvation, reconciliation, and discipleship; but the Christian message does not authorize indifference to suffering. Feeding, welcoming, educating, accompanying, and defending dignity are concrete expressions of love for the neighbor. Social responsibility must flow from faith without being confused with the cause of justification or reduced to a political ideology.

In the Brazilian debate, this distinction is relevant because religious identity is frequently associated with partisan positions. The Church can guide its members on honesty, justice, mercy, responsibility, and care for public life. It can promote political formation, encourage oversight, and support actions of assistance and defense of rights. It must, however, resist pressure to turn the community into an electoral committee. The pulpit must form conscience, not control votes.

Social responsibility also needs to be examined internally. It is not enough to speak of public justice while authoritarianism, spiritual abuse, silencing of women, racial discrimination, or economic exploitation are tolerated within one's own institutions. Sphere sovereignty cannot protect the church from all public evaluation, and local autonomy cannot be used to cover up crimes. Religious freedom coexists with legal accountability when rights are violated.

Secularism, Pluralism, And Democracy In Brazil

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 protects liberty of conscience and belief, ensures the free exercise of worship, and establishes that no one shall be deprived of rights on grounds of religious belief or of philosophical or political conviction, except when such condition is invoked to exempt oneself from a legal obligation imposed on all and one refuses an alternative service. It also prohibits the Union, the States, the Federal District, and the Municipalities from establishing religious cults or churches, subsidizing them, hindering their operation, or maintaining relations of dependency or alliance with them, except for collaboration in the public interest.

This constitutional design does not correspond to an anti-religious State. It seeks to combine freedom, equality, and institutional impartiality. Secularism prevents confessional favoritism, but does not require citizens to abandon their convictions upon entering the public sphere. The public agent, in exercising a state function, must obey the Constitution and fundamental rights; the religious citizen, in taking part in the debate, does not cease to be religious. The difference between the two is institutional responsibility, not the obligation to hold a conscience without faith.

Brazilian pluralism is more complex than the opposition between Christianity and secularism. It includes different Christian denominations, religions of African origin, Judaism, Islam, spiritism, indigenous traditions, new spiritualities, atheism, and agnosticism. Religious freedom is tested above all in asymmetric relations, when a social majority can turn its symbols into a presumed standard and treat the religion of others as superstition, threat, or deviation.

For Reformed Baptists, the consequence is twofold. They must defend the freedom of their churches and, by the same principle, the freedom of communities that do not share their confession. This does not imply theological relativism. It implies refusing the selective use of the State. Conviction can be firm and citizenship can be inclusive. The defense of others' freedom does not weaken the truth confessed; it demonstrates confidence that faith does not depend on coercive privilege.

Partisan polarization aggravates the problem. When the electoral choice is presented as an eschatological battle between absolute good and absolute evil, disagreement ceases to be political and comes to be treated as apostasy. This sacralization produces institutional effects: it hinders accountability, justifies verbal violence, weakens the capacity to recognize mistakes, and turns the religious community into an extension of external leaderships. A responsible political theology must de-idolatrise power.

The Christian contribution to democracy lies not in offering an anointed candidate, but in forming citizens capable of responsibility, self-control, and service. This includes respecting results and institutions, combating disinformation, rejecting violence, overseeing rulers, and recognizing the dignity of adversaries. Faith can inspire such attitudes without claiming that every public decision is a direct application of a verse or of an ecclesiastical authority.

Scope and limitations of the Brazilian application

The Brazilian section is an application of the conceptual framework, not an empirical study of voter behavior, church leadership, or partisan identification. The constitutional discussion establishes the legal parameters, while the IBGE and IPEA data provide limited contextual indicators of religious pluralism and institutional presence. They do not authorize generalizations about all evangelicals, all Baptists, or the political preferences of religious citizens. Claims about polarization should therefore be understood as a problem for theological and democratic discernment, to be complemented in future research by survey data, electoral studies, interviews, and regional analysis.

Practical Implications For A Reformed Baptist Public Presence

The proposed synthesis can be translated into institutional practices. In the sphere of the local church, it is possible to promote political education without partisanship: presenting principles of citizenship, discussing the Constitution, explaining fundamental rights, encouraging informed voting, and teaching members to evaluate public policies. The community can invite people with different positions, provided that the debate respects the dignity of the participants and does not turn the liturgy into propaganda.

In the social sphere, churches can develop actions of welcoming, recovery of addicts, support for families, professional training, assistance to people living on the streets, and defense of victims of violence. These initiatives do not replace public policies, but they can cooperate with the State and with civil organizations without losing autonomy. Collaboration in the public interest must not be confused with political dependency or with an exchange of favors.

In the sphere of public discourse, leaders must apply symmetrical criteria. A lie is condemnable whether practiced by allies or adversaries; abuse of power does not become acceptable because of a seemingly favorable agenda; religious freedom cannot mean only freedom of worship for the majority. Coherence is a form of witness. Without it, religious language becomes a rhetorical instrument of particular interests.

In the sphere of relations with the State, the Church must claim its rights without demanding privileges. It may ask for protection against religious violence, equal access to public policies, recognition of its legal personality, and freedom to educate and serve according to its identity, provided that it respects the constitutional order. It must not ask for censorship of other religions, control of consciences, or funding conditioned on doctrinal submission.

In the sphere of theology, it is necessary to recover the language of vocation. The Christian can serve in politics, in the judiciary, in education, in science, in communication, and in the economy. Politics is a possible vocation, not the center of salvation nor the measure of spiritual maturity. The church that sends members into different areas of society avoids concentrating hope in a single arena and recognizes that the common good is built by multiple responsibilities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The problem of the relationship between faith and politics will not be resolved by the choice between domination and isolation. Domination confuses the gospel with coercive power; isolation abandons the public responsibility of love for the neighbor. The path proposed in this article seeks to articulate conviction and humility, participation and limit, criticism and service.

Calvin recalls that God governs the totality of life by distinct means and that the State possesses legitimate yet limited authority. Kuyper shows that Christ's lordship prevents the reduction of faith to the private sphere, but also requires recognizing the diversity of spheres and competencies. The Baptist tradition insists that conscience does not belong to the State and that true faith does not need coercion. These contributions are not identical, but together they help to formulate a political theology of non-dominating public presence.

In Brazil, this perspective means defending a secular and non-anti-religious State, capable of guaranteeing equality among citizens and freedom of religious expression. It means admitting that Christians take part in the debate from their convictions, without demanding that the State speak as a church. It also means defending the freedom of others when it does not favor one's own community. Religious freedom, in order to be Christianly coherent, must be desired for all.

The Church can denounce injustices, form citizens, care for the vulnerable, and dialogue with authorities. It can take part in building the common good without controlling the State. It can support policies and candidates without turning contingent preferences into dogmas. It can be publicly relevant without being captured by a party.

The question that remains is not whether faith will have public consequences, but what kind of presence it will produce. A presence marked by anxiety for power will reproduce the logic of domination. A presence marked by service, truth, freedom, and responsibility will be able to bear witness that no human authority is absolute. The faithfulness of the Church does not depend on conquering the State; it depends on proclaiming, serving, discerning, and defending the dignity of the neighbor in a plural society.

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