**INTRODUCTION**

*This book introduces a distinctive Christian* philosophical approach to the question of the relationship between the polity and the plural institutions of “civil society.” This approach was developed by the twentieth-century Dutch Protestant thinker Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), a remarkable and original philosopher and the most influential intellectual successor to the nineteenth-century Calvinist theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Recent years have witnessed stirrings of a revival of Kuyper’s thought in North America, in particular, among social and political theorists investigating potential religious resources for a renewed appreciation of civil society.¹ The central principle of Kuyper’s social thought is the “sphere sovereignty” of many distinct social institutions, each expressing a certain facet of a dynamic order of divinely created possibilities and each fitted to make a unique contribution to the realization of justice and the public good. This principle is capturing attention as an illuminating way both to designate the distinctive identities of the institutions of civil society and to frame a conception of the role of the state capable of doing justice to those identities and their interrelationships.²

Whereas the Kuyporian origin of this principle is becoming better known today, the sophisticated elaboration of the principle in the writings of Dooyeweerd remains insufficiently appreciated. The principal aim of this book is to remedy that situation by critically expounding Dooyeweerd’s social and political thought and by exhibiting its pertinence to contemporary civil society debates. I seek to show how his work
amounts to a striking and characteristically Protestant philosophy of social pluralism and civil society, comparable in range and depth to contributions emerging from twentieth-century Catholic social thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and Heinrich Rommen and no less capable of speaking beyond the religious community from which it arose.

Dooyeweerd’s work remains largely unknown in English-speaking social and political theory, even among those interested in its Christian currents. There are several reasons for this state of affairs, but two stand out. Probably the most important is that Dooyeweerd is not only a very complex thinker but also a difficult and often obscure writer. He uses several concepts forged out of early-twentieth-century Continental philosophy, many of which are alien to those schooled in English-language social theory, but he also coins numerous novel terms bearing distinctive and sometimes quite idiosyncratic meanings. A second reason is that, by comparison to Catholic thinkers like Maritain or Rommen, he adopts a markedly “antithetical” stance toward his interlocutors (including his coreligionists). While his strategic goal—as I explain in chapter 3—is ultimately to promote dialogue across perspectival divides, his method is to penetrate to and expose the deepest differences between his own thought and that of his opponents rather than to search out existing or potential points of convergence with a view to maximizing consensus. He is a demanding interrogator of his putative dialogue partners.

If this book does no more than make Dooyeweerd’s thought intelligible to English-language social and political theorists it will have been worth the effort. Yet it also seeks to introduce this readership to a neglected Protestant contribution to the field. There are, of course, many towering twentieth-century Protestant theologians who have written extensively on social and political theory: Reinhold Niebuhr, John Luther Adams, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Emil Brunner, for example. Yet there seem remarkably few Protestant philosophers who have offered much of lasting value in this area. Dooyeweerd, I will show, is among the foremost. He left behind him an impressive canon of philosophical works (many of which are now translated) and generated a small but energetic scholarly community that has over several generations extended, critiqued, and applied his thought in many academic fields. His work spawned the establishment in the 1930s of a philosophical association and a philosophical journal based in the Netherlands, both still active,
and, later, centers of sympathetic scholarly activity in several locations around the world. Much of this work has been done in the areas of social, political, and legal theory.

Before beginning a detailed exposition of Dooyeweerd’s writings I seek to contextualize his thought, first in relation to contemporary civil society debates (chapter 1) and then in relation to the Kuyperian movement out of which it grew (chapter 2). Chapter 1 surveys and analyzes contemporary streams of theorizing about civil society, records the recent interest in identifying the connections between Christianity and civil society, and locates civil society theorizing against the larger background of earlier schools of what I shall call “normative institutional pluralism”—a family of social and political theories seeking to overcome mainstream neglect of the many intermediate institutions standing between the state and the individual. Chapter 2 presents salient details of Dooyeweerd’s biography, describes his aspirations as a philosopher, and sketches the particular historical and intellectual context in which his thought took shape. I introduce his social and political thought as a comprehensive philosophical articulation of the democratic pluralist Calvinian vision projected by Kuyper. I then offer an extended summary of the flow of the book’s themes, intended to assist readers—especially those unfamiliar with Dooyeweerd’s work—to navigate the sequence of complex systematic concepts unfolded in subsequent chapters.

The next two chapters present an outline of Dooyeweerd’s fundamental philosophical framework, which amounts to a highly intricate, original, somewhat forbidding, and often problematic conceptual apparatus. Chapter 3 introduces his view of the relationship between religion and philosophy and the central content of his religious convictions. Three core conceptual girders of his substantive general philosophy—“modality,” “individuality,” “interlacement”—are presented in chapter 4.

These four opening chapters supply the necessary background for a more extended presentation of Dooyeweerd’s social philosophy in chapters 5 through 7. Chapter 5 outlines the distinctive theory of historical and cultural development that serves as an essential backdrop to his substantive social philosophy. Chapter 6 examines the foundations of his complex account of multiple social structures (centering on the notion of societal “structural principles”), tests one of the most telling criticisms leveled against it, and proposes a reformulation. Chapter 7 sets forth his
complex classification of particular types of social structures and their various interrelationships and brings to the fore the sense in which his social philosophy is pluralist in character.

The stage is then set for a detailed examination of his theory of the state, which occupies the next three chapters. Chapter 8 considers his account of the identity crisis of the modern state and introduces his own conception of that identity, residing in a unique combination of power and justice: power is the “foundation” of the state, yet only insofar as its “destination” is the promotion of justice. This irreducible identity determines the state’s sphere sovereignty over against that of other social institutions and points to its unique role in society.

Chapter 9 characterizes at greater length his conception of the definitive nature and role of the state. It opens by introducing his broad account of “spheres of justice,” which amounts to a distinctive version of legal pluralism. This prepares the ground for an account of the sphere of justice typical of the state: “public justice.” This central notion is elaborated in chapter 10, which offers an overview of the justice-promoting role of the state in a complex modern society and then examines his applications of public justice to four broad sectors of society: nation, family, church, and economy.

Chapter 11 returns to the contemporary discussions of civil society. I revisit three problems in civil society discourse identified in chapter 1 and consider to what extent Dooyeweerd’s version of Christian pluralism might help in addressing them. His contribution, I suggest, assists us in mapping more clearly and negotiating more successfully how state and civil society may be related in ways conducive to the realization of justice and the public good. A brief epilogue notes the challenges facing an overtly religious political theory in the context of a secular and pluralistic society.
The question of the relationship between the polity and what are now called the institutions of “civil society” has recurred in the Western tradition at different historical junctures under widely varying circumstances, as the character and claims of diverse social and political institutions evolved—at times imperceptibly, at times convulsively. Aristotle’s questioning of the Platonic prioritizing of unity over diversity within a self-sufficient Athenian political community was perhaps the earliest philosophical confrontation with the problem. As classical civilization unraveled, the appearance of a historically unprecedented institution asserting a transpolitical, transcendent origin and authorization—the church—decisively redefined the problem as one of the relationship between two independently constituted and mutually limiting communities. The “doctrine of the two,” as O’Donovan limpidly styles this revolutionary innovation, irrevocably recast the terms of the question. The ramifications of this radical relativization of the domain of the political over against the realm of the spiritual, and as a consequence over against the zones of personal and associational liberty secured in principle by that realm, were felt throughout Western society and politics not only during the Christendom era but also well beyond it. Notwithstanding the effect of other currents moving in opposite directions—notably absolutist doctrines of sovereignty—early modern political institutions can be seen as partial consolidations of the notion that only an arrangement of plural, reciprocally accountable authorities could honor
the conviction that absolute sovereignty belonged exclusively to God. Reformation political thought substantially advanced this consolidation. To a significant degree, this was achieved merely by drawing out bolder constitutional conclusions from ideas and practices of law, consent, and corporate representation generated within medieval Catholicism. Yet the Reformation also contributed insights of its own, appealing—in time—from a conviction of both the freedom of individual conscience and the spiritual equality of all “vocations” to the principle of the political equality of all, including rulers, under the rule of a system of law impregnated with divine justice and equity.

Reformed impulses also contributed to the emergence, already under way, of the multiple differentiated institutions of modernity—notably state, church, business corporation, university, family, and voluntary association—each claiming autonomy within its own proper sphere. This process, together with the stretching of the bounds of personal liberty accompanying it, again fundamentally and irreversibly reconfigured the problem. No longer could social and political plurality be harmonized institutionally by a superior unifying ecclesial jurisdiction, or even, as Weber proposed, by a shared universe of moral norms. Each, it increasingly appeared, had to discern and follow its unique institutional requirements, making its own way in a world increasingly fashioned by the contending but ambiguously interdependent imperatives of centralizing nation-states and fragmenting commercial markets. These institutional requirements, many argued, did not fall within the purview of “theology” or even the sphere of “morality” as conventionally understood. But this argument flew in the face not only of Catholic but also of Reformed (especially Calvinist) injunctions regarding the sovereignty of God over the whole of social life, including the economic sphere, launching the still-unresolved debate over the contribution of the Reformation to the process of “secularization.”

In our own time, among the many processes now attendant on “globalization,” one is arguably a decisive—it is perhaps too early to say irreversible—rebalancing of institutional imperatives in favor of increasingly autonomous markets and against the independent capacities of both states and the institutions of civil society. The long-standing question of the just relationship between state and civil society, then, presses upon us again today, manifesting itself in the multilateral renegotiations
now under way—often conflictual and increasingly violent—between states and the diverse institutions of civil society, between the contending institutions of civil society themselves, and between nation-states, each struggling to come to grips with the institutional turbulence surging up from below and cascading down from above.

What resources might Christian political philosophy today have to assist in clarifying this perplexing and ever-shifting question? On the face of it, a tradition of political thought founded on the doctrine of the two, productive of copious theorizing on law and authority and transformed by Reformation and scholastic theories of institutional accountability, might be expected to yield resources capable of addressing it. And indeed it has. In order to provide a context for appreciating these resources, including those provided by Dooyeweerd, I briefly take stock of contemporary discussions of the concept of civil society and then make a short excursus into the history of the concept. I offer a twofold proposal regarding contemporary discussions of civil society, arguing that they need to be broadened to recognize the historical contributions of Christianity and that they can best be interpreted as a revival of interest in the problematics of a distinctive tendency in social thought that I shall call “normative institutional pluralism.”

**Bringing Civil Society Back In**

The concept of civil society has experienced a striking resurgence over the last twenty-five years. Extensive discussions of the concept and its cousins have been generated from sources situated across the ideological spectrum and located across the globe. North American observers will no doubt be most familiar with the voices gathered in Don Eberly’s *The Essential Civil Society Reader.* This volume represents an important “neo-Tocquevillian” strand of civil society theorizing, indicating that a principal concern of discussions in the United States is the perceived need to shore up certain institutions rendered especially fragile by the strains typical of an advanced capitalist and individualist liberal democracy, especially families, voluntary associations, churches, and neighborhoods. These institutions are held to play the primary role in generating the vital social capital on which social cohesion, active citizenship, and
political unity depend. Contributors to this American debate argue that civil society in the United States is not, as is sometimes complacently assumed in comparison with other, “closed” societies, a paradigm of good health. Individuals and institutions are, as a result, dangerously vulnerable to the predatory attentions of bureaucratic states.

The earliest wave of recent civil society theorizing, however, emerged in Eastern Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. Like its practitioners in Latin America shortly afterward, East Europeans invoked the notion of civil society to refer to a sphere of autonomous and “self-limiting” popular deliberation and organization capable of operating beyond the reach of the state, defending human rights, and eventually mounting democratic resistance to (respectively) totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Later, in Western Europe and the United States, another group of theorists championed what have been typically termed “secondary associations.” These “new associationalists”—among them chastened socialists and social democrats—propose a model of a decentralized economy and polity that aspires to meet human needs by means of, rather than at the cost of, democratic participation. At the same time, a quite distinctive school of radical (or “agonistic”) democrats have powerfully voiced concerns for the political articulation of distinctive social and cultural identities experienced as marginalized or suppressed by liberal democracy. Some of the most recent contributions to civil society discourse have been occasioned by the radical antiglobalization movement, whose advocates are working for the creation of a “global civil society,” populated by, for example, community-sustaining social movements, to counter the supposedly pernicious effects of deregulated globalized markets.

In the United States, as Eberly’s volume shows, the debate has been mainly led by neoconservatives and communitarians. As early as the 1970s—though without using the term civil society—neoconservatives such as Berger and Neuhaus attacked bureaucratic “megastructures” like the state and urged a recovery of those “mediating structures” that shield individuals from their predatory power and supply a vital source of subjective meaning and social values. Such urgings have often also drawn upon libertarian critiques of the inefficiency and illiberality of the public sector, leading to a desire to shift responsibility for economic coordination and welfare provision onto private organizations. Communitarians such as Etzioni warn against the rapid depletion of community-sustaining
values and counsel a range of policies aimed at empowering those neglected institutions and practices, which alone can restore such values, though without invoking libertarian economics in support.14

The term civil society initially gained momentum in Western Europe a generation ago, and in North America more recently, because of its apparent capacity to pinpoint telling pressure points amid the baffling complexity of our contemporary social and political predicaments and to suggest novel proposals to relieve them.15 Yet, as I have already intimated, the cluster of problems that the term seeks to name, as well as the aspiration to theorize such problems, has a much longer history than many contemporary commentators recognize, and a further examination of aspects of this history will help set the stage for what follows. This is especially so because, as Beem has shown, the meanings invested in current usages depend wholly on what its protagonists want civil society to do.16 The term is not a neutral descriptor but is deployed within sharply contrasting theoretical paradigms, each with distinctive historical roots, apart from which its usages cannot be fully understood.17

As civil society discourse began to reenter the currency of political debate, historians of political thought reminded protagonists that the term goes back at least to the eighteenth century. Before then civil society characteristically referred to the whole of a politically organized society. By contrast, its modern usages presuppose the formulation of a distinction between state and society, making possible the identification of a sphere of social reality other than the state, though not necessarily wholly separate from or antagonistic to it. But how was that sphere to be characterized? Ehrenberg traces two contrasting emphases emerging in parallel during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:18 an individualist account oriented especially to a notion of spontaneously harmonizing economic activity among free individuals (e.g., Ferguson and Smith, and after them Marx and Hegel),19 and an associationist account viewing society as a network of associations or communities intermediate between individual and state (e.g., Montesquieu, Tocqueville). Both accounts, however, presuppose the appearance of a distinctively modern sphere of free interindividual and interinstitutional activity “liberated” from premodern customary, religious, and political constraints, ushering in hitherto unavailable possibilities for new forms of social interaction among emancipated individuals and differentiated institutions. Civil
society, then, was an integral element of the very foundations of political modernity.

Many of these originating civil society theorists were attentive to the evolving Christian assumptions, premodern and early modern, that had prepared the ground for the appearance of that modern reality and that continued, sometimes ambivalently, to operate within it. Of course, not all theorists of civil society viewed those Christian assumptions as salutary: for Marx, the role of religion in sustaining bourgeois civil society was a sign of its co-optation in capitalist exploitation; whereas for Ferguson and Tocqueville, religion furnished indispensable moral resources necessary to contain and channel the fragmenting forces unleashed by civil society. Many contemporary accounts, however, have tended to overlook the role of religious, and specifically Christian, influences in the emergence of modern civil society, and this deficiency needs to be remedied.

**Bringing Christianity Back into Civil Society**

The role of Christianity is beginning to be registered in a few of the most recent historical excavations of the concept of civil society. Ehrenberg’s comprehensive study includes a chapter devoted entirely to civil society and the Christian commonwealth. It turns out, however, that he can ultimately find in Christendom little more than a sacralized version of the classical vision of the all-inclusiveness of the polity. The subordination of the secular by the ecclesial realm within a unified Christian social order meant that, in spite of pervasive tendencies toward particularism, “independent institutions or ideals that could claim loyalty apart from or in opposition to the Church did not exist in sufficient strength to generate viable centers of autonomous theory or practice.” Consequently, “it was impossible to generate a theory of civil society that could stand outside the strictures of the Church.” Taylor is more discerning, suggesting that the medieval Christian sources of freedom enjoyed in the West “can be articulated with something like the conception of civil society.” The medieval insight that “society is not identical with its political organization,” sharpened by the assertion of the organizational independence of the church, indicated the depth of Christendom’s break with the classi-
cal heritage and gave rise to a “crucial differentiation, one of the origins of the later notion of civil society, and one of the roots of western liberalism.”

The emergence of the church as a rival, indeed superior, source of moral authority to the polity is also central to Banner’s account of Christian antecedents to the concept of civil society. Banner calls attention to two additional notions that turned out to be equally important: the universal Christian affirmation of the natural *sociability* of human beings and the emerging principle of *subsidiarity*, calling for a vertical distribution of plural social authorities. Banner’s piece appears in one of two collections devoted to cross-cultural comparisons of conceptions of civil society, including treatments of such conceptions, or their close parallels, in major world religions. Their appearance testifies to a recent rediscovery in the literature of mainstream political theory of the extent to which important strands of civil society theorizing have been generated by specific religious traditions. Coleman’s contribution, “A Limited State and a Vibrant Society: Christianity and Civil Society,” underlines Banner’s contention that Christian political philosophy has indeed contained substantive theorizing on civil society. Coleman’s focus is the rich and wide-ranging Catholic theory of civil society and the state founded in a family of interlocking notions, notably subsidiarity, solidarity, and the common good. These notions emerged from medieval origins, in which natural law theory and organic metaphors played a central role. They were substantially refashioned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and received official endorsement in the “social teaching” of Vatican II and in several papal social encyclicals since the conclusion of the council in 1965.

It bears mention that this Catholic model has been the principal inspiration for what has been the most electorally successful (if academically neglected) postwar European political movement, namely, Christian Democracy. In its early years this movement typically presented itself as a genuine “third way” between capitalism and socialism, and the distinctive place it accorded to civil society was central to this strategic political objective. While Christian democratic governments were equally prone to pragmatic drift as their rivals, with whom in any case they were normally in coalition, their characteristic political orientation is misconstrued if classified simply as another version of conservatism, liberalism,
or social democracy. The founders of the movements were inspired by Jacques Maritain’s vision of a “pluralistically organized body politic” in which the state would be “a topmost agency concerned only with the final supervision of the achievements of institutions born out of freedom.” Maritain called for recognition of “an organic heterogeneity in the very structure of civil society,” which is composed “not only of individuals, but of particular societies formed by them.” Thus “a pluralist body politic would allow to these societies the greatest autonomy possible and would diversify its own internal structure in keeping with what is typically required by their nature.” A properly formed state should accommodate itself to a plural society. It was the concern to sustain associational vitality as a counterweight to both individualism and statism that lay behind the 1931 papal social encyclical Quadragesimo Anno, in which Pius XI warned of a decomposition of plural social structures under the influence of individualism and issued the first official formulation of the principle of subsidiarity—or, more strictly, the “subsidiary function” of the state—which charges that it is a “grave injustice” for higher social bodies to usurp the proper functions of lower bodies wherever the latter can adequately fulfill them. This language indicates that in one important Christian tradition at least, the relationship between state and civil society is not merely a matter of pragmatic institutional arrangements but is indeed a vital question of justice.

Stackhouse introduces parallel contributions from the Reformed tradition. In contrast to the Catholic “hierarchical-subsidiarity view,” Stackhouse presents a Reformed “federal-covenantal view,” first clearly articulated by the seventeenth-century jurist Johannes Althusius and represented in the modern period by Kuyper. In contrast to the “organic” Catholic view, the federal-covenantal view is, Stackhouse tells us, a “pluralist” model in which many kinds of institutions are “conceived as a matrix of potentially networked associations.” Stackhouse rightly observes that both models are equally intent on avoiding the dangers of libertarian individualism and political totalitarianism and affirm the indispensable, noninstrumental value of institutions intermediate between state and individual. As I expound Dooyeweerd’s version of the Reformed view, I shall explore this intriguing ecumenical convergence.

Stackhouse characterizes the two conceptions thus:
One view sees these [institutions] as comprehended by a natural moral solidarity made effective by compassionate but magisterial leadership that seeks to guide the whole of life to fulfill innate good ends. The other view sees various spheres of life, each populated by associative “artefacts,” each constructed on the basis of a common discernment of need and a calling to fulfill that need, a recognition of a pluralism of institutions with possibly conflicting ends, and an ongoing critical analysis of our interpretations of transcendent principles of right that may be used to assess the presumption of innate tendencies to virtue, magisterial leadership, and any singular view of the common good.  

This rendition of the federal-covenantal view does not accurately capture all of its variants (not even Kuyper’s), yet Stackhouse’s account certainly confirms the presence of a substantive Protestant theory worthy of attention. However, it omits to mention the far more sophisticated articulation of the Kuyperian notion of sphere sovereignty in Dooyeweerd. This is, perhaps, hardly surprising considering the relative inaccessibility—both physical and philosophical—of his writings. Yet it indicates that a study of his distinctively Calvinian philosophical approach to the question of state and civil society is overdue. Dooyeweerd’s approach displays impressive theoretical originality and scope while remaining productively engaged with concrete problems of a mature industrial society and an emerging pluralist democracy and welfare state, problems that continue to have salience today.

**Bringing Civil Society Back into Pluralism**

The second feature of the history of the concept of civil society to which I want to allude is the presence of certain historical strands of social and political theorizing that are pertinent to current debates about civil society and associations, as well as to an interpretation of Dooyeweerd, but that are only peripherally acknowledged in recent discussions. Such strands are often designated as “pluralism.” In adopting that designation I need to make clear that I am not referring primarily to two other types
of theory typically described as pluralist. I do not chiefly have in mind, first, explanatory theories of power and policy making associated with the early work of Dahl and other postwar students of the empirical functioning of liberal democracy, especially its American version. Nor, second, am I alluding to contemporary theories of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism as found in the works of Taylor, Kymlicka, and many others. Rather I have in mind normative institutional pluralism (normative pluralism, for short), a family of theories advancing a central normative claim that a vital feature of any just and well-ordered society is the presence of multiple kinds of mutually distinct social institutions whose integrity and autonomy it is a primary role of the state to safeguard and support. Of course, normative institutional pluralism is bound up in numerous ways with the other two types, and I advert to these linkages occasionally.

A brief, and necessarily schematic, survey of the history and diversity of normative pluralist theories will quickly disclose their significance for contemporary civil society discourse. A remarkable flowering of normative pluralist theorizing originated in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe, and the shared context of its leading contributors is instructive. All were motivated by an anxiety about two characteristic features of modernity: first, the social and economic atomization produced by industrialization and the consequent disintegration of traditional institutions such as estates, guilds, and kinship communities; and second, the political centralization characteristic of the modern nation-state, dramatically accentuated in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Their interest in plural institutions standing between state and individual thus sprang from a concern about both the isolation of individuals from the supportive bonds of precapitalist society and the exposure of these unprotected individuals to the encroachments of a dangerously overweening state.

What I am calling normative pluralism embraces a wide variety of modern theories, schools, and trends, but at least five identifiable strands had crystallized by the early twentieth century. First, liberal pluralists such as Tocqueville and J. S. Mill were impressed especially with the significance of voluntary associations and local government as guardians of political liberty and with their moral significance as training grounds for responsible self-government or (for Mill) as conduits for self-realization.
The influence of liberal pluralism, both as theory and as practice, is evident most of all in the American tradition, and as I indicated above, it is this perspective, now translated into the language of mediating structures, secondary associations, and civil society institutions, that defines the contours of current American debates.

Second, organicist pluralists, influenced by romanticism and including thinkers as diverse as the benign nationalist J. G. Herder, the conservative romantic Adam Müller, and the legal historian Otto von Gierke, lamented the disintegration of traditional communities under the influence of industrial capitalism and—for some—political liberalism, and called either for their reinstatement or, as with Gierke, their replacement by new, morally and affectively meaningful organic communities. Organicists urged upon the atomized individuals of the modern world the need for profound allegiances to organically conceived social wholes such as family, class, or estate, church, nation, or state.

Third, many corporatist pluralists were also influenced by romantic organicism and shared much of its critical diagnosis of modern industrialized society. They are distinguishable, however, not primarily by the philosophical influences to which they were subject but by the characteristic institutional arrangements they prescribed. More appreciative than liberal organicists of the leading role of the state in countering the disintegrative tendencies of modernity, they proposed various schemes in which large-scale, publicly instituted industrial corporations would serve to both reconcile class antagonisms between worker and capitalist and, via corporatist parliamentary representation, integrate the interests of particular industrial or agricultural sectors into the requirements of the state as a whole. The foremost representative of this position is Hegel, whose proposal that corporations could function as mediators between the particularity of civil society and the universality of the state framed much subsequent corporatist reflection.

Socialist pluralists such as Proudhon, Gurvitch, Laski, and Cole accorded decisive priority to the workers’ group as the most promising new source of social identity and political power. They proposed a distinctive remedy for the atomizing effects of industrial capitalism, not through large-scale nationalization realized through centralized political democracy as advocated by their state-socialist colleagues, but rather by a radically decentralized economic system centering on autonomous producer cooperatives and, in some cases, by functional representation.
I want to suggest that the Catholic and Calvinist theories of civil society sketched above are principal contributors to what amounts to a distinctive fifth version of normative pluralism, Christian pluralism. Such theories embody novel conceptions of civil society grounded in distinctive understandings of the irreducibly diverse possibilities of created human nature.42

Some unifying concerns emerging from this seeming cacophony of historical voices can be summarized briefly.43 Normative pluralists typically advance versions of the following two central claims. The first is that a healthy, just, free, and stable civil society requires a multiplicity of relatively independent and qualitatively distinct associations, communities, institutions, and other social bodies, through which individual human capacities or interests can be realized and apart from which the fabric of social unity will wear thin. But unlike Aristotelians, republicans, nationalists, or collectivists of all stripes, they deny that membership in the polis is either morally prior to or more ennobling than membership in other communities or associations. The second is that the principal function of the state is to actively facilitate this realization by protecting or promoting the responsible independence of, and interactions between, these bodies. Unlike bureaucratic centralizers, they deny that the state has the capacity or the competence to manage and direct the whole of society, and unlike minimal statists, they deny that just and cohesive relations between social institutions arise spontaneously apart from active political coordination and regulation.

A wide range of social institutions have attracted the attention of different normative pluralists, including educational and welfare associations, business enterprises, trade unions, political parties and pressure groups, churches, kinship and ethnic communities, and cultural, national, or territorial communities. Pluralists draw upon a variety of diagnoses in order to support the unanimous claim that the modern state has overreached and thereby incapacitated itself and needs to be refashioned in a way that respects the independent contributions of a diversity of associations, communities, and institutions that have for too long either atrophied through neglect or collapsed under the impact of direct assaults from the state or indirect corrosion from unrestrained markets. As the British associationalist Paul Hirst puts it, pluralists propose that what
have been misleadingly downplayed as secondary associations should instead become the primary means of social governance.\textsuperscript{44}

In the light of this overview of some important strands of modern political thought, I propose that much of what today sails under the banner of civil society theorizing can most illuminatingly be seen as the latest flowering of normative pluralism. I have noted that recent historical studies of the concept of civil society have disclosed successive and contrasting usages of the term in major phases of modern (and premodern) political thought. Such studies, I am suggesting, need to be complemented by attention to the diverse schools of normative institutional pluralism, each of which represents bodies of reflection, anticipating many of the central problematics of current civil society discourse. The revival of interest in civil society, secondary associations, and mediating structures and related notions in this contemporary discourse reveals the operation, albeit in radically altered circumstances, of instincts comparable to those that first gave birth to normative pluralist theories two centuries ago: on the one hand, an anti-statist instinct arising,\textsuperscript{45} in Eastern Europe, from the trauma of totalitarianism; in Latin America and elsewhere, from the persistence of authoritarianism; and in Western Europe and North America, from the failed promises of centralized state welfare and overambitious macroeconomic management; and, on the other, a pro-community instinct arising in reaction to the momentous evidence of the radically atomizing tendencies of (late) modernity such as those generated by economic globalization—and of which “bowling alone” is but one Western suburban manifestation.

Both these concerns powerfully animate the social and political theorizing of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd. As with Kuyper before him, a consistent emphasis in Dooyeweerd’s thought is the danger of the totalizing tendencies at work in modern theories of the state and the propensity of such theories to lapse into various forms of “universalism.” And a recurring theme in his social thought is the atomizing tendencies at work in many modern theories of social institutions, their propensity to fall victim to various forms of “individualism.”\textsuperscript{46} His alternative thus occupies ground similar to that taken up by recent theorists of civil society. Dooyeweerd can be seen as elaborating a modern Calvinian version of normative pluralism containing an original philosophy of the relationships
between state, civil society, and other social institutions.\footnote{This extensive rearticulation of the notion of sphere sovereignty renders him an outstanding representative of what I have termed Christian pluralism.} I propose to show how Dooyeweerd’s Christian pluralism can contribute to a clarification of three problems that have taken shape in recent civil society discourse. The first concerns the \textit{definition and scope of the concept} of civil society. Most civil society theorists place the so-called third sector of independent voluntary associations at the center of their definitions, contrasting these with the realms of state and market. Yet there continues to be considerable disagreement, for example, over whether the family or household should be included in civil society; whether business corporations should be included in the market and so excluded from civil society; whether only voluntary associations capable of oppositional stances toward the state, or only those inclined to supportive political postures, should be included; whether religious associations should be accorded a central or peripheral role in civil society; and so on. Significant differences of scope not only indicate contrasting ideological starting points but also point toward quite divergent prescriptions for reconstruction.

The second problem concerns the \textit{relationship between the state and civil society}. The modern concept was born out of a desire to distinguish the realm of civil society sharply from the state and to recognize its autonomous sphere of operation, and many contemporary civil society theorists, on both left and right, proceed from an attitude of suspicion toward the intrusive or oppressive tendencies at work in the modern state. But can civil society theory generate an adequate account of the constructive role of the state in regulating and integrating civil society institutions? Can it account for what Beem calls “the necessity of politics”? If so, what model of political integration and regulation seems to follow from a robust affirmation of civil society?

The third problem concerns the \textit{utility of civil society for social critique}. Recent theorists have entered forceful reminders that what are often classified as civil society institutions are not wholly beneficial either to the flourishing of individuals or to the functioning of liberal democracy. The pervasive presence of so-called illiberal associations seems to challenge the assumption, widespread among neo-Tocquevillian theorists, that civil society needs to be reinvigorated and compels an acknowledg-
edgment that “bad civil society” will need to be contained or marginalized. Some commentators seem naively to applaud the capacities of civil society institutions to produce social cohesion and democratic initiative. But civil libertarians, on the one hand, warn of the illegitimate constraints autonomous associations sometimes impose on their members, and theorists indebted to the Marxist tradition (such as Ehrenberg), on the other, question the transformative potentials of civil society and continue to insist on a dominant role for the state in securing economic and social justice. Dooyeweerd’s potential contribution to these discussions is explored in the final chapter.