

HUMAN RIGHTS: A PROOF OF THE SCRIPTURE'S PRESENCE WITHIN THE SOVEREIGN SPHERES

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Abstract: The topic of human rights is one that is as debated as it is controversial.

Christianity, over time, has adopted both pro and against positions depending on the historical situation, the position of the state and, last but not least, according to the opinion adopted and promoted by the Church. In this research, I will examine the legislation on the protection of human rights in order to answer the question around which the entire work will be built: “Is the Word of God present in the sphere of the state and in the other sovereign spheres through legislation on the protection of human rights?”. The theory of sovereign spheres promoted by Abraham Kuyper is the starting point of the research, followed by an analytical study on the origin and the role of the state, as well as the origin of human rights, ending with an answer to the question already mentioned.

Keywords: *human rights, sphere sovereignty, Abraham Kuyper, Scripture, state.*

Introduction

Contemporary society and modern man are now being invaded by the multitude of codes of civil or juridical laws, the most resounding of which are the laws on the protection of human rights. They are sometimes viewed with a degree of suspicion by the Church and Christianity, due to the current tendency to change the centrality of God with that of man, thus man becoming the most important puzzle piece. But, in the present research, there will be no particular emphasis on this distortion of roles, although tangentially this topic will also be debated. The main objective is to outline a reasoned answer to the question that has arisen since I started the study of human rights from a Christian perspective: “*Is the Word of God present*

in the sphere of the state and in the other sovereign spheres through legislation on the protection of human rights?" In this sense, the first chapter is devoted to the study of the theory of sovereign spheres, promoted by the Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper, to outline the main characteristics of these spheres. The second chapter is focused on an analytical study of the origin of the state, of the role it plays inside the Kuyperian spheres, and to determine its relationship with human rights. Chapter three is a foray into the origins of human rights in order to determine if they have a biblical basis. Thus, we will be able to conclude if the legislation on the protection of human rights are carriers of the scriptural message and if their presence within the sovereign spheres can be considered a proof of the presence of the Word of God as well.

1. Abraham Kuyper and the spheres

A fierce promoter and supporter of the theory of sovereign spheres, Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch politician, but also the Christian man, stood out in both the political and theological environment, being a personality of his time, whose influence is still felt today. His political career has seen a rapid rise, from a mere member of Parliament to the position of Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Spiritually, Kuyper distinguished himself as a reformed pastor and theologian, but also as the founder of the Free University from Amsterdam.¹ At the university's opening ceremony, he gave a series of lectures, known as *Calvinism: Six Lectures delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton* or, shortly, *Lectures on Calvinism*.² These lectures are actually Kuyper's creed and theology that guided his life both spiritually and politically.

In the view of the reformed theologian, human life is structured or organized into a multitude of fields, which he called spheres. Amos Yong somewhat emphasizes the authenticity of the term 'spheres' assigned by Kuyper to domains or associations³, by renaming them as *Kuyperian*

1 See James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998.

2 Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism. Six Lectures Delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton*, Bellingham, Logos Research Systems, 2008.

3 The Calvinist Johannes Althusius is also one of the advocates of the theory of sovereign spheres, except that he uses the term associations to designate the same thing. For

spheres.⁴ Kuyper lists a number of important features of these spheres. Firstly, each sphere is sovereign or autonomous, it is governed by its own authority, valid only within the earthly framework, in the temporal sense because it is granted by God, the supreme authority. Secondly, being the product of Divinity, the sovereign spheres are in a relationship of total dependence on God in terms of their existence and continuity. Thirdly, Scripture is reflected by each individual sphere and, last but not least, God rules or reigns within the spheres through His *elected officials*, the *magistrates*, which are meant to represent Him.⁵

So, in Kuyper's view, the sovereign spheres have their own authority within the earthly framework, they are dependent on Sovereignty, the elected magistrates have the duty to represent God and His will, revealed through Scripture. It is in these circumstances that the following questions arise: what is the origin of the state? Is it a sovereign sphere or a representative of it? What role does the state play in the process of developing, promoting and defending human rights? Is God and His Word present in the state? Hereinafter, we aim to answer these questions for a clearer understanding of the theory of sovereign spheres, as well as to determine if human rights are carriers of God's Word.

2. The origin of the State

The lecture Calvinism and Politics is the key element in the matter to elucidate Kuyper's vision of the state and its origin. The Calvinism promoted by the Reformed theologian was based on the principle that:

no political has ever become dominant, which was not founded in a specific religious or antireligious conception [...] in Calvinism lies the origin and guarantee of our constitutional liberties. [...] This dominating principle was not, soteriologically, justification by faith,

more details see Frederick S. Carney (editor and trans.), *Policy. An Abridged Translation of Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1995, p. 7.

4 Amos Yong, *În zilele cezarului. Penticostalism și teologie politică*, trad. Ciprian Gh. Luca, Oradea, Ed. Casa Cărții, 2020, p. 92.

5 Daniela Loghin, "Adolescentul și Scriptura: două sfere antagonice", in Maximilian-Bratu Caraman, Beniamin Mocan, Andrei-Daniel Pop (ed.), *Scriptura și spațiul public*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint, 2021.

but, in the widest sense cosmologically, *the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos*, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible. A *primordial Sovereignty* which radiates in mankind in a threefold deduced supremacy, *viz.*, 1. The Sovereignty in the *State*; 2. The Sovereignty in *Society*; and 3. The Sovereignty in the *Church*.⁶

As a result, the presence of the Triune God is also notable within the state, being declared as supreme sovereignty. More specifically, we cannot talk about the authority of the state or the government over man because it “cannot arise from men”⁷, but all governments throughout the earth have their authority rooted in the Sovereignty of Divinity.

In the previous section, we mentioned that each sovereign sphere has its own authority. The state, according to the Kuyperian vision, represents the authority of the political sphere and came into being as a consequence of the insight of sin into the world, having a mechanical development. The theologian differentiates between the organic development characteristic of man or family and the mechanical development specific to the state. The concept of the state is presented as being in opposition to the concept of *one humanity*, due to the fact that, once it appeared, it divided the earth into continents and countries, did not unite it, nor can it do it because sin is the force that divided humanity and destroyed the organic development of the human race.⁸ Even if the need had arisen to unite several families, in the absence of sin, they would have formed a higher unity, connected with the kingdom of God, which would have governed regularly, directly and harmoniously in the hearts of all people. In the end, this unity could have taken the form of a patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, there would have been no state, but only one organic world empire, with God as king; exactly what is prophesied for the future that awaits us, when all sin will disappear. Sin is seen as responsible for the non-existence of this form of organization, for, because of it, this unity does not exist and implicitly the government of God can no longer be asserted. The event at the Tower of Babel is considered to be the point where the form of organization has taken on a new connotation. The people present there formed nations and states and God

6 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 99.

7 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 99.

8 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 100.

put governments over these. Thus, the state came into being, through a mechanical process and not an organic one.⁹ Consequently, the authority and power of the state are also something unnatural, which can turn into a source of abuse of power or revolt if there are no laws to restrain them. In this sense, "God has instituted the magistrates, by reason of sin", this source of multiple problems. Sin not only forced the emergence of the state, but sketched in it two sides, the *shady-side* and the *light-side*. The first side is a negative one because there should not be a multitude of states, but a single world empire. The governance of the state by magistrates is a mechanical one, does not harmonize with human nature and is managed by people touched by sin, who under certain circumstances can make despotic decisions. The second side is a positive one because the magistrates facilitate the limitation of evil and the respect for human rights, without which life on earth would mean total chaos.¹⁰ Therefore, magistrates should be seen as "an instrument of «common grace», to thwart all license and outrage and to shield the good against the evil".¹¹ It is desirable to encourage the forms of government that give citizens the freedom to choose their magistrates and to which, Calvin said, "God gave the liberty to choose your own magistrates, see to it, that ye do not forfeit this favour, by electing to the positions of highest honour, rascals and enemies of God"¹².

Regarding the purpose for which the state was created, Kuyper states that it has a specific role drawn by God, namely the maintenance of order between the spheres of society by issuing laws in parallel with its activation as an arbiter between them. Let us not forget that its role and purpose are limited, the right to interfere within the social spheres being eradicated, in the desire to avoid turning the state into an octopus whose tentacles asphyxiates the entire system of life.¹³ However, throughout history, we have witnessed a state that has often been inclined to intervene with its mechanical authority and invade social life, subjugate it and even mechanically arrange it.¹⁴

9 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, pp. 116-117.

10 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 102.

11 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 104.

12 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 106.

13 Simon P. Kennedy, "Abraham Kuyper and his Political Thought: Calvinist and Pluralist", in *The Reformed Theological Review*, vol. 72, 2013, p. 81.

14 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 120.

Kuyper sees the Sovereignty of God, transmitted to man, separated into two main spheres. The first is the mechanical sphere of state authority, and the second is the organic sphere of authority of social circles. In both spheres, one's own authority is sovereign, above them being only the Sovereignty of God.¹⁵ In order to protect the sovereignty of the social spheres and, at the same time, to support the state in fulfilling its role, the governments formed by magistrates have established a multitude of laws, including those relating to human rights, thus ensuring a protection of both the social spheres and the state, whose authority is restricted and no more than an arbitrator can intervene. Consequently, these laws are intended to avoid the subjugation of the spheres with which the political sphere interacts with its authority – the state. The question arises below: to what extent do these laws of protection of man have a biblical basis and are an exponent of the Word of God within the spheres?

3. The origin of the human rights

In defining sovereign spheres, we have mentioned that in addition to their own authority, they also benefit from their own laws that people working in that field must respect. Below, we will not dwell on the particular laws, characteristic only to a certain type of sphere, but we intend to study the laws that govern within the political sphere and that facilitate the fulfillment of the role for which the state was constituted, the role of arbitrator, of maintaining order between spheres. In particular, these laws are common to all spheres, with the ultimate aim of protecting human rights, regardless of nationality, race, colour or hierarchical position.

The rights of protection of the person appeared as a consequence of the limitation of the power of the state, outlining the need for rules of conduct that ensure and, at the same time, protect the freedom of the individual. Throughout history, several codes of laws have been configured, among which we mention the Code of Hammurabi – the oldest, the Hebrew code attested by many historical sources, and among the most topical we mention the Charter of the United Nations, the Treaty of Lisbon, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, etc. In Romania, the Constitution is the document that harmonized the national with the international legislation on the protection of human rights. All these codes

15 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 121.

of laws highlight the desire of all states to protect human rights in all its aspects¹⁶, that is, to protect the freedom and authority of the social spheres and to limit the power of the state.

In order to streamline the process of understanding, as well as to analyse the origin of human rights laws, it is important to have a classification of them. The civil law and legal lawyers distinguish three types of laws: (1) natural law or the law of nature (*ius naturale, lex naturae*), (2) the law of nations or the common law (*ius commune, lex communis*) and (3) civil law or positive law (*ius civile, ius positivum*). Similarly, theologians and moralists distinguish three types in biblical law: (1) the moral law (*lex moralis*) – The Decalogue and the New Testament, (2) legal or forensic law (*lex juridicales*) – the rules and procedures by which ancient Israel and apostolic Christians governed religion and civil communities, (3) ceremonial law (*lex ceremonialis*) – the Mosaic law on personal diet, ritual sacrifices, life, etc.¹⁷ Johannes Althusius proposes a new grouping of codes of laws, overcoming the limitations imposed by lawyers and theologians. Thus, we are talking about natural law and positive law. If we consider the temporal criterion, rights are divided into four broad categories, namely, (1) first-generation rights, established during the fight against monarchical absolutism and refer to rights such as the right to life, liberty, the right not to be held as slave, etc.; (2) second-generation rights, the most important of which is the right to property, which is also a natural right; (3) third-generation rights refer to collective rights, such as the right to peace, the right to a healthy environment, etc. And, finally¹⁸, (4) fourth-generation rights, rights adopted quite recently due to advances in scientific research and genetic engineering and designed to protect the human body. An example of this is the prohibition of human cloning and genetic manipulation.¹⁹

16 Violeta Dana Viçoreanu, *Drepturile individuale și statul*, PhD thesis, Bucharest, 2014, https://www.univnt.ro/wp-content/uploads/doctorat/rezumat_doctorat/Vicoreanu_Dana_Violeta.pdf, accessed on August 19, 2021.

17 John Wite, Jr, "A Demonstrative Theory of Natural Law: The Original Contribution of Johannes Althusius (1557-1638)" in Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth, editors, *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eedermans, 2009, p. 5.

18 For more on this generation of rights, see Philip Alston, "A Third Generation of Solidarity Rights: Progressive Development or Obfuscation of International Human Rights Law?" in *Netherlands International Law Review*, XXXIX, 1982, pp. 307-322.

19 Viçoreanu, *Individual rights and the State...*, pp. 7-9.

As for the origin of human rights, Christendom has been divided into two groups throughout history. Thus, we have a first category that argues that biblical laws have played a fundamental role in the enunciation of human rights. For example, the author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, René Cassin, has stated that the ideological origin of this declaration is found in the Ten Commandments. In the opinion of professor and theologian John W. Montgomery, at the basis of the European system for the protection of human rights there are two important sources: the Christian Code of Justinian and the common law of biblical inspiration, with origins in the Holy Scripture, which contributed to the success of this European system.²⁰

An overview of the human rights groups, mentioned earlier, will highlight that all the classifications also refer to natural rights, which are engraved, innate in each individual person and actually represent "God's will for people". God wrote this law in the heart, soul, mind, and conscience of every person according to Romans 2:15. Self-preservation, self-defence, self-production are defined as natural inclinations that man learns from natural law. The same natural law teaches man what is right and what is wrong, namely God teaches and writes in human hearts the general principles of goodness, equity, malice and sin and, at the same time, instructs, induces and stimulates all people towards good behaviour and against what is wrong. Every choice, good or bad, has consequences. Therefore, the natural law gives each person a natural or innate knowledge of good and evil, called *synderesis*. By practicing rationality, individuals can come to understand the norms of this natural law and, by exercising their conscience, they can learn to apply these rules fairly to concrete circumstances.²¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff recalls those inherent rights as having their roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, but also in the Christian one, emphasizing the existence of a continuity in the New Testament, of the narrative, respectively of the rights contained in the Old Testament.²² He sees in Jesus the preacher

20 Lavinia Tec, *The Bible and Human Rights*, December 10, 2012, <https://ro.scribd.com/document/367542432/biblia-drepturile-omului-pdf>, accessed on 7 September 2021. See also John W. Montgomery, *Human rights and human dignity*, Ed. Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 2004.

21 Wite, *A Demonstrative Theory*, pp. 5-6.

22 Stanley Hauerwas, *Are Human Rights founded in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures?*, 30 January 2012, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/are-human-rights-founded-in-he>

who defended the rights of all walks of life according to Luke 4:17-21, a figure who identifies with the Messiah and the Servant of Yahweh.²³

Modern Christian theology promotes as fundamental biblical bases of human rights, two important ideas: the “*imago dei*” and the “*shalom*” from the Old Testament. Man, as God’s creation, exists because it is the choice of the Deity for him to exist, he has freedoms and equality of rights with other human beings because he has the same Creator. The Hebrew Bible presents man as God’s perfect creation, having the status of *imago dei* (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1, 3; 9:6; Ps. 8:6). This status, lost due to the intrusion of sin into human life, was recovered in the person of Jesus Christ through the revelatory act of salvation of all mankind. The justification has become valid for all people regardless of nationality or social status, without exception. A deeper look at other concepts such as freedom, personality etc. will highlight that the Scriptures of Jews and Christians actually have to do with human rights. Also, the idea of “*shalom*” from the Old Testament, as well as the teaching about man as a child of God, about freedom, equality must be seen as articulations of human rights. Even if the concept itself is not mentioned in the Bible, yet what has been mentioned so far is a support for a modern understanding of human rights.²⁴

Kuyper asserts that, when the State is declared the supreme authority and God is removed from the equation, all human rights that transcend into and out of God fail, the only one to remain standing being “the immanent right which is written down in the law. The law is right, not because its contents are in harmony with the eternal principles of right, but because it is law.”²⁵ The reformed theologian does not hesitate to defend Calvinism, which from his perspective, has positively influenced the legislation and, at the same time, has as its source the law on human rights and freedoms, the absolute sovereignty of God.²⁶ As a result, the origin in God’s Word of laws

brew-and-christian-scriptures/10100830, accessed on August 19, 2021. See also the book by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008 and Paul Weithman, “Nicholas Wolterstorff’s Justice: Rights and Wrongs: An Introduction”, in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 2009, pp. 179-192.

23 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, Ed. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978, p. 178.

24 Sunggu Yang, “Human Rights and the Bible”, in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 12, Berlin/ Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2016, pp. 529-530.

25 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 114.

26 Kuyper, *Calvinism...*, p. 126. For more details on civil liberties see Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: The Origin and Safeguard of Our Constitutional Liberties”, in *The Sacred*

protecting human rights remains valid as long as God's supreme authority is recognised. The intentional abandonment of divine authority entails the risk of distortion and dysfunctionality of the law, which will no longer work in harmony with biblical principles of rights and freedoms.

The second grouping is formed of Christians who argue that the Bible is not a source for human rights, which is the fruit of the Enlightenment, a development of the West. Human rights put the human being at the centre, actually replacing the centrality of God. Under various circumstances, the interpretation of human rights was at odds with the faith and life of the church, and it was often demonstrated that it was a bitter enemy of them.²⁷ Some theologians take a step forward arguing that, in an individual sense, the concept itself is not a biblical one, because the Bible strictly emphasizes man's relationship with God and the eschatological life, and not on civil or legal rights.²⁸ For the Orthodox Church, and not only, human rights "sound like «individual» or even «individualistic rights»"²⁹, which means that, in fact, the human being is autonomous, putting their own interests above the interests of other people, implicitly above the community. This goes against the Christian principle that man was created in the image of God to live in harmony with others and form a community. At the same time, there is a double risk: firstly, the abandonment of the interest for the common good due to the focus on oneself, which leads to the second risk, namely to legislating any selfish preference. So we can talk about the existence of a major risk of human rights distortion.³⁰

The Church has a duty to pray and contribute to the common good of humanity because "human rights are weak and insufficient as they are just a human invention; but God's rights are powerful and can ensure hu-

Bibliotheca, 1895, https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bsac/1895_385_kuyper.pdf, accessed on 8 September 2021.

27 Vassiliki Stathokosta, "Bible and Human Rights: Orthodox contribution to An Ecumenical Discourse" at *Churches Voice on Human Rights. Training on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights in the Euromediterranneine Region*, organised by Church and Society Commission of CEC & Federation of Protestant Church in Italy, Palermo, 30 Oct. – 1 Nov. 2013, p. 5.

28 Sunggu Yang, "Human Rights and the Bible", in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 12, Berlin/ Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2016, p. 528.

29 Stathokosta, *Bible and Human Rights...*, p.6.

30 Stathokosta, *Bible and Human Rights...*, p.6.

man's life and salvation. So, keeping God's rights we ensure our rights as human beings".³¹

Even though this category of Christians sees more the differences between biblical laws in Scripture and human rights, they still articulate some ideas favourable to the protection of human rights. Firstly, the two – biblical laws and human rights – are seen as two sides of the same coin, with a bridge of communication between them. Even though Scripture uses the language of the commandments because it expresses religious conscience, yet this fact does not change the normative content of the two discourses. Secondly, the fundamental principles of Scripture are accepted as the basis for human rights, and religious humanism in the Bible is seen as the foundation for Western liberalism and also for the Declaration of Human Rights.³² Thirdly, the supremacy of God's Word over human desires is recognized and, at the same time, the need to implement strict laws that protect every human being from the others because we live in a secular society where sin is present. Finally, as long as these rights do not inspire a selfish spirit but focus on preventing the violation of the rights and freedoms left by God, this category of Christians are willing to support the efforts of the competent institutions in order to prevent and protect human rights. They accept the concept of human rights, but also state that "the human rights are not the way for human being to live. [...] Giving the world to understand the word of Holy Scripture is a great milestone to the struggle of human being to be free, to live in love, justice and peace as God the Creator desired".³³

In conclusion, the presence of the Word of God in human rights legislation cannot be disputed. Firstly, man as God's creation is innate with natural laws, which are inscribed in the heart and conscience. Thus, man is the recipient of rights and freedoms equally because he has the same Creator. Secondly, even if this concept does not actually appear in the Bible, yet the idea of *imago dei*, of *shalom*, as well as the concepts of freedom, equality, personality etc. in the New and Old Testaments are articulations of human rights. Thirdly, human rights retain their origin in the Word of God as long as God's supreme authority is recognised. Last but not least, even those who have expressed themselves against this, accept that Scripture is a

31 Stathokosta, *Bible and Human Rights...*, p. 9.

32 Yang, *Human Rights and the Bible...*, pp. 525-527.

33 Stathokosta, *Bible and Human Rights...*, p. 11.

source of certain codes of laws, see the importance and necessity of human rights in secular society, being willing to support their promotion as long as they do not put selfishness above the supremacy of God.

Conclusions

In the endeavour of answering the question “*Is the Word of God present in the sphere of the state and in the other spheres through legislation on the protection of human rights?*”, we started from the definition that Abraham Kuyper gives to the sovereign spheres, continuing with an analysis of the origins of the state and human rights, during the research the following conclusions were drawn. Firstly, in the sense of the reformed theologian, the spheres are endowed with their own authority, are in a relationship of dependence on God, and the *virtuous chosen*, in the case of the State, the *elected magistrates* have a duty to represent the will of God, the Scripture being present in every sphere.

Secondly, looking to the origins of the state, which is the earthly authority for the political sphere, we argued that it came into being as a consequence of sin and experienced a mechanical development, and not an organic one like man or family. The role of the state is a limited one, drawn by God, respectively to arbitrate the relationship between the spheres and to intervene in order to defend the weakest, when appropriate. In order to ensure the limitation of the power of the state, which has not infrequently exceeded its powers, but also to protect the human being, various codes of laws on human rights have been adopted. At the same time, the magistrates who govern the state should be chosen from among those who respect the supreme authority of God and should be seen as an instrument of “common grace”, which are meant to counter any indignation and protect the good from evil.

Thirdly, the vast majority of human rights are based on both biblical principles, such as the Ten Commandments, as well as biblical concepts such as *imago dei* or the *shalom* provided in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Even Christian theologians who are not followers of this theory accept the principle of human rights as a beneficial one for a secular society as long as man is not elevated above the supremacy of God.

In conclusion, it can be said that human rights have a threefold role: firstly, to limit the power of the state and to help it maintain fair arbitration

between sovereign spheres; secondly, they prevent and protect the person from any form of abuse both by the state and by other human beings and, last but not least, having a mainly biblical basis, it can be said that they are carriers of the Scriptural message within the sovereign spheres. So, and if only human rights were carriers of the Word of God, they confirm the presence of Scripture within each sphere. However, the contemporary reality is a promising one, the divine message being present in multiple forms in each field or sphere, this subject being exploited in other specialised works.

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