

The Problem of “Christian” Politics

Jan Hoogland¹

With an Introduction by the Translator

Note from Translator: Though this article basically deals with aspects of the political system in The Netherlands, I have decided to translate and thus share it with the wider world because it is kind of an example of Reformational thinking on the subject, just as did the article by Willem Ouweel on this same page: this one in the political realm; that one in science. This article speaks to the notion of “Christian politics,” a notion that is very confusing to most North Americans and looked upon with great suspicion in Canada. To be sure, it is equally confusing and suspect to many of Hoogland’s own compatriots.

There are quite a number of references to Dutch political parties and situations in the original article that will not be clear to most international readers. Hence, I have sought to gloss over or summarize such passages without losing the author’s point. In fact, I summarize the entire first lengthy paragraph, for it has far too many local references. I do try to retain an emphasis on Christian Democratic Party (CDA), for it contains a large number of Kuyperians, the orientation of this entire website. When those local references are generalized, I believe that especially North American readers will recognize their own major discussions, for the question about religion and politics remains a burning one almost everywhere, perhaps more so today than ever. It is an issue that has brought nations to the brink of civil war. My own 8-volume series on Christian-Muslim Relations is a case in point. (See the Islamica page on this website.) Right now as I write—March 29, 2016—, the issue has evoked the question of the viability of the European Union. The issue has not died as various academics prophesied—and advocated—during the latter half of the twentieth century. It is alive and well.

This article appears in a column “*Uit het hart*,” or “Out of the heart.” That is, it comes out of the heart of Professor Jan Hoogland, a mature philosopher who has for years struggled with and considered these issues. Though this article does not refer to sources, it comes out of years of experience with a turbulent interplay between religion and politics that has long been overshadowed by the spirit of Abraham

¹Jan Hoogland, “Zou Jezus op een ‘christelijke’ partij stemmen? With an Introduction by the Translator.” Transl. Jan H. Boer. *Sophie*, 3/2011, pp. 26-27. Hoogland is a Dutch Kuyperian/Reformational philosopher who was the first to be appointed by the Foundation for Christian Philosophy to the chair of Reformational Philosophy at the Dutch University of Twente. He is the chief editor of this magazine *Sophie*.

Kuyper (See the Kuyperiana page on this website.) that is characterized by a wholistic view of religion and a pluralistic framework that has been upheld by the UN as a unique example for the rest of the world to emulate. Now *that* is a recommendation I would never dare to make myself. But here it is, straight out of the heart of this deep philosopher.

In closing, I confess to wondering whether I really owe “my” international readers any explanation of this nature. When Americans write their articles, they tend to write for the entire world generally without bothering to explain the local references in them. Perhaps I am just a bit more modest, a characteristic, I hasten to admit also, for which we Dutch are not really known either! Well, whatever. Enjoy the read and ponder how these insights might be relevant to your situation.

Translator’s Summary of First Paragraph:

The last national and provincial elections left the Christian parties very disappointed. Two came out relatively unscathed, but the Christian Democratic Party (CDA), a combination of Abraham Kuyper’s original party and that of the Roman Catholics, lost dramatically. It was divided over whether it should join a minority cabinet that would include a party to which it was quite opposed. A feverish period of negotiations between the Christian and other parties called for various compromises that included the question as to their relationship to Geert Wilders, that internationally (in)famous opponent to anything Islam. Some opposed him strenuously, while at least one Christian party openly displayed its sympathy for him. It looked like all Christian parties—and there are several of them—had within them both a Christian-conservative and a Christian-social orientation. In the CDA, the latter had a slight majority.²

Translation of the rest of the document, but still with the same reserve:

Lack of Unity

²My guess is that the Catholic root of the party was oriented to the Christian-conservative, while the Kuyperian root was more inclined towards the social.

For some reason I, Hoogland, feel uneasy to see the word “Christian” so closely allied with the above disunity between these Christian parties and between the factions within them. It apparently is not so easy to determine the meaning of the adjective “Christian” in the context of politics. One may well ask whether this disunity does not devalue the use of this word.

I find myself at ease with the designation of “Christian-social.” That term became fashionable again around the centennial celebration of the Christian Social Congress of 1891. At that time (1991) the term stood for the “third way” that prominent Christians wanted to follow between the Liberals and Socialists. The year was the beginning of a period of unrestricted economic optimism (“new economy”) and an enormous pressure for privatization. It seemed that the market was the answer to expanding government and bureaucracy. Besides, the last decade of the twentieth century was marked by a coalition of rightist and leftist groups. The Christian Democrats found themselves for the first time in opposition since long and had to observe with weary eyes how the playing field was divided between state and market. In those years the middle field became the focus of the CDA’s vision.

Conservative

The term “conservatism” calls up very different associations within me. I find this a confusing term, even though I associate certain conservative concepts close to Christian political ideas that I hold dear. I am thinking, for example, about the “anti-revolutionary” stream in Christian politics.³ That term seriously relativizes the human attempt to improve the world. A radical reversion of existing societal relationships does not lead to an improved world, but, rather, it will show a strong tendency towards intolerance and absolutism. It is therefore better not to try to improve the world in radical steps but incrementally, step by step. One can identify more such conservative elements with the Christian legacy.

At the same time, the term “conservative” also is associated with ideas that I find much more difficult to relate to a Christian conviction. One of the more

³The name of the Kuyperian party that joined with the Catholic party to form the CDA was “the Anti-Revolutionary Party,” revolution here referring to the rejection of God in the French Revolution.

acrimonious characteristics of conservative thought is, for example, its elitism. Conservatism focuses on the higher classes. Hence, conservatives tend to turn their backs on the “masses” and are inclined to look down on them.

The critique of people like John Gray and Hans Achterhuis on the neo-conservatives (who in many respects can hardly be distinguished from neo-liberals) makes me doubt the conservative profile. All too often do I hear the conservatives plead especially for privatization, market economics and limited government, without doing justice to the social side of the equation, namely giving space for the development of a powerful societal centre. Though ideologically speaking, there are great difference between liberals and conservatives, I hardly detect these differences in the social/political area.

The Christian-Social Movement

For the reasons given above, I prefer much more the label “Christian-social” to that of “Christian-conservative.” The distinguishing mark of Christian politics, as far as I am concerned, must be sought in the notion that everyone counts and participates. Everybody, without exception. Just as everyone counted with Jesus Christ, the one whose name has been adopted for Christian politics. Such a perspective does not exclude personal responsibility but includes it. “Everyone counts” does not mean that the government must force mutual solidarity upon the citizenry or must provide them with a well cared for existence from cradle to grave. It *does* mean that the government has a role to play with respect to issues of rights, justice, economic justice and sustainability. A plea for restricted or limited government may be typically liberal or conservative; it is not necessarily Christian.

Recently, the debate about the direction of Christian parties is conducted along the lines of the “left-right” contrast. That, as far as I can see, does little to clear things up. Christian politics seeks above all to follow the style of Christ in political and societal life. Traditionally, this has meant that Christian politicians have consistently broken through the left-right pattern. Somewhat analogous to the question popular among some Christians, “What would Jesus do?,” Maarten van Rossem once asked in a talk show whether

Jesus would vote for CDA. Obviously, this was meant to be sarcastic, but it did set us to thinking. Should you use the name “Christian” if you cannot imagine that Jesus, if He were to be a voter, would vote for your party?

Apart from the discussion about the direction, our posture vis a vis Muslims also tends to divide Christians. There are Christians who recognize themselves in Wilders’ sharp critique of what he considers a politically dangerous Islam. Others plead for a more tolerant and open posture towards Muslims. As I see it, this division is caused especially by Wilders’ confusing posture. His critique is classically secular in nature. It is based more on a misunderstanding of the nature of religion than on a substantive critique of Islam. My impression is that its appeal to Christians is based on the fact that Wilders combines his critique of Islam with a strong pro-Israeli position. Globally speaking, there is indeed a justifiable unrest over anti-Semitism among Muslims. The strong ties that many Christians feel to Israel and the Jewish people makes them particularly vulnerable to Wilders’ critique of Islam.

Over against the above, other Christians continue to emphasize the interest of the state and the maintenance of constitutional rights. They typically regard Islam primarily as a religion that may well abuse political ideology but has not lost its religious character. They maintain that the serious objections to Islam as a religion may not (yet) lead to the conclusion that freedom of religion needs to be restricted.⁴ To the contrary, going into that direction would mean the government would lose her neutrality and involve herself in assessing and judging the internal dynamics of faith convictions. In short, no matter how serious our objections to Islam as religion may be, the state’s defense of freedom of religion and conscience trumps it all. That, of course, does not negate the obligation of Muslims, like all other citizens, to respect the state.

The current political climate places people who are active in politics from a Christian perspective before the challenge to demonstrate that the label “Christian” produces a clearly recognizable profile. The determinative factor here is not the number of seats a party occupies but, rather, whether you have a viable perspective to offer in the actual political discussions.

⁴This is exactly the point of Jos Strenghold, “Two Chameleons - Christianity and Islam,” a “Guest Article” in www.SocialTheology.com/Islamica.

paars en rechtsstatelijk

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Dekker Aly

2:07 PM

To: Jan&Fran



Dag Jan Harm,

Voor ik je vragen beantwoord eerst een standje: Je hebt weer mijn oude e-mailadres gebruikt! Wil je dat alsjeblieft verwijderen uit je computer?

Nu je vraag naar aanleiding van de zin: "Bovendien was het laatste decennium van de vorige eeuw de tijd van 'Paars'."

Paars betekent hier "gewoon" de kleur paars. Paars is de mengkleur van het blauwe liberalisme en de rode sociaal-democratie.

Paarse kabinetten zijn samengesteld uit liberale partijen en sociaal-democratische partijen, zonder christen-democratische vertegenwoordigers.

Bijvoorbeeld kabinet Kok I (1994-1998) en Kok II (1998-2002). Het was in 1994 voor het eerst in tachtig jaar dat er geen christen-democraten in het kabinet zaten.

Dan *rechtstatelijk*. Dit woord wordt niet veel gebruikt, maar het is het bijvoeglijk naamwoord (adjectief) van het zelfstandig naamwoord (noun) rechtsstaat. Het betekent dus zo iets als "volgens de criteria van een rechtsstaat".

In de Nederlandse rechtsstaat hebben we vrijheid van godsdienst dus de verdediging daarvan is rechtstatelijk.

Ik hoop je hiermee van dienst te zijn geweest!

Groeten uit de rechtsstaat met ook nu een paars kabinet, namelijk Rutte II!

Aly