

**Liberalism:
A Hesitant Worldview ¹**

An Interview

by

Govert Buys and Herman Paul

With

Bert van den Brink

Translated by

Jan H. Boer

Editorial summary: Liberalism has difficulty with its role as referee or umpire among the various worldviews. Its tragedy is that it sometimes must be intolerant in order to be genuinely liberal.

Introduction: The Resilience of the Grand Narrative

The time of ideologies is past; the “Grand Narrative” has expired; and religions are finished. There is not a slogan that has been repeated more often during the past decades. But is it true?

¹*Beweging*, Summer, 2005, pp. 42-47. *Beweging* is a quarterly publication of the Dutch Institute for Reformational Philosophy. It is the predecessor of the journal *Sophie*. You will find translations of articles from both of these journals on this page. Original title of this article: “*Het liberalisme: de levensbeschouwing die geen levensbeschouwing wil zijn.*” In this translation there are two kinds of italicized materials. Those woven into the text are italicized by the translator to emphasize passages he thinks particularly relevant for his own situation. The indented italics are the questions of the interviewers. The footnotes come from the translator.

Currently on the stage of global politics religion is a factor not to be neglected. This is true also in The Netherlands, the global pioneer in secularization, where the coals of religiosity glow brightly. Religion is increasingly recognized by politicians as an important factor.

Does the cultural elite feel itself threatened? *Beweging* is researching the vitality of worldviews; in this edition, that of liberalism.²

The Status of Liberalism

In the Netherlands we usually associate Liberalism with the political party named “Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie” or “VVD.” However, that is giving too much credit to the VVD and not enough to liberalism. In many respects almost all the parties have been touched by a degree of liberalism. To put it stronger, our entire political system is largely based on liberal principles. Not only so in The Netherlands, but globally, wherever democratic nations with constitutionally guaranteed human rights for individuals function, we can speak of the heritage of liberalism. It has become one of the most successful political doctrines of all times. A few years ago, this situation led Francis Fukuyama to declare the end of history. The basic principles for the ordering of the society had been discovered once and for all.

In the above constellation it is no surprise that liberal thinkers and politicians operating out of liberal principles adopt such a self-assured attitude.³

For this reason it is remarkable that a few years back Bert van den Brink, political philosopher at the University of Utrecht, published a book with the

² Notes from the translator: (1) One basic problem with this article is the lack of adequate examples. That can sometimes make it seem a bit obscure. (2) The decision to translate and publish this article does not imply agreement with all of its claims in detail.

³ This self-assurance is not unique to liberal theologians. In my adopted country Canada it marks almost all liberals, politician or not.

title *The Tragedy of Liberalism*. Might this be the narrative that swallows all the grand narratives?

Interview with van den Brink

In this series of interviews we have so far spoken with representatives of various worldviews: Roman Catholic, Judaism, Buddhism, Islamic, etc. Does the category of Liberalism fit in this list? Is it really a worldview or is it rather a method by which worldviews relate to each other?

You are here hitting upon a central problem for and within liberalism. I see the relationship of liberalism to worldview function on three different levels. First of all, liberalism intends to provide a framework within which a great variety of worldviews can find a place. In so far, it is a political doctrine.

Secondly, even as political doctrine liberalism cannot avoid restricting the freedom for what people can or cannot do within that space. At the very least, it exerts an indirect influence on the manner by which worldviews function and are experienced.

Thirdly, there are people who consider their worldview as liberal, but often in combination with other worldviews, such as liberal Protestants and orthodox Protestants, liberal Catholics and orthodox Catholics. That tells you something about liberalism. It is often clearly seen as an emphasis that can fit in your own worldview. We are talking here mostly about values such as tolerance, justice, a feeling for a certain pluralism of values and of worldviews. In other words, this is liberalism as component of other worldviews. In America people speak of a "hyphenated identity:" a hyphenated liberalism.

There is a fourth possibility that I find difficult to conceive of, namely that liberalism itself is a complete worldview. I would not know what would make a person a pure liberal without the characteristics I have just described.

Thus you can never say without qualification that liberalism is a worldview. In my opinion, the core of liberalism is a social and political doctrine that

enables you to deal with a plurality of worldviews on your own individualistic terms.

That second element seems to be the decisive point. It seems to stand in full tension with the first. According to the first, liberalism is quite “neutral.” The second means definitely that liberalism puts pressure on other worldviews. How can these two co-exist?

From the perspective of worldview, liberalism must ultimately be regarded as an Enlightenment doctrine. Worldviews are traditions that provide orientation for guiding us through our behavioural practices. Liberalism claims that this guiding function must always be tested on an individual level. It will never allow a dogmatically imposed system. Consider Kant’s short essay over the Enlightenment. He posits there that all sorts of associations in the society, including church denominations, are free to determine what participants in these associations are allowed to think, say or do. But it is always up to the individual to determine whether or not she will challenge the association’s important perspectives or policies, or whether she will discontinue membership. If someone takes the latter course, her rights as citizen are in no manner violated. That is a typical liberal approach. Your humanity is not diminished, whether or not you function in any given association.

Of course, a break with any association can cause pain and disorientation. That is one of the tragic elements of liberalism: The emphasis on individual discretion and freedom can make it easier for people to be weaned loose from all sorts of social ties and practices. Liberals do not exult in this, but they do accept it as a consequence. In the final analysis a person must have the freedom to determine his choices autonomously, something that must trump all her social ties.

But can this perspective be considered neutral? The point here is a substantive worldview position, namely that people are primarily individuals. Is the critique of so-called communitarians not valid who hold that people are primarily social beings and point out that this is

often verbalized and practiced even in the various traditional worldviews?

The debate between liberals and communitarians is in my opinions in many important respects a non-debate. As if liberals go out of their way to wean people loose from their social associations. The real concern here is the principally normative point that in the final analysis the subject must be regarded as detached in his discretionary capacity from the authority of the tradition and social practices wherein he stands.

One of the effects of the debate has been that liberalism is forced to more sharply define just what it is precisely and what it is not. Specifically, *any notion that liberalism is purely neutral, fully universal and strictly rational is difficult to maintain in this debate.*

But does liberalism not regard itself increasingly as just one worldview amongst others?

A number of liberal thinkers have thought they could defend their system on a neutral worldview platform. You find that thought to a certain extent in John Locke, though, to be sure, mixed with a generous splash of theology. You find this even stronger in Kant and still stronger in the early John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* (1971).

Over against the above, a group has emerged of so-called “perfectionist” liberals, among them John Stuart Mill, who sings a hymn of praise to individualism. For him this is an attitude to life, an ethos, that provides you with an impulse to break through all the restrictions that a traditional worldview imposes on you. It gives you freedom. According to Mill, worldviews as well as popular democracy and the consumption society all tend to keep people clueless or mindless. This brings him to an almost Marxist analysis.

Then there currently is Joseph Ratz, who defends a perfectionist notion of liberalism in that he openly acknowledges that liberalism actually represents its own substantial life style and has its own idea of what constitutes the good life. For him this individualistic autonomous life style is

not just one choice among others of equal value. No, this is the correct life style; this is the way it's meant to be.

Around 1850, with John Stuard Mill the most important argument is a romantic view of man: Man as creative individual who must continually develop. Ratz is much more interested in functional requirements that modern society demands from us. The government may and, in fact, must develop people into autonomous individualists, because if you do not develop the appropriate capacities, you simply will not flourish in this society. Whoever today is not a competent individual, will have difficult going. According to Ratz, *liberals must simply admit that this is a neutral approach neither in its consequences nor in its point of departure*. A liberalism that acknowledges this frankly is in the best position to defend itself.

Does the above perspective not totally erase the primary goal of liberalism, namely to offer a neutral framework for everyone?

Yes and no. This is precisely one of the reasons I speak of the tragedy of liberalism. As soon as it surrenders itself (completely) to this perfectionist notion, it will lose its political attractiveness as a communal framework within which pluralism is possible. But when, to the contrary, it completely surrenders the aspiration of neutrality, it will degenerate into a drab umpire who would never be able to pound his fist on the table. That is the tension that is tragic in its consequences. Rawls may be the “godfather” of contemporary liberalism, but he says it straight forward in his later book *Political Liberalism* (1991). There are moments where we have no choice but to do what we have always sought to avoid, namely, to say *that some worldviews are simply better than others, because they can have political and social consequences that are not acceptable either politically or morally*.⁴ Liberalism will do all in its power to prevent the arrival of that moment. But still....

With that, liberalism removes its mask.

⁴This is a major point in the book by the Indian Christian philosopher Vishal Mangalwadi, *the Book that Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011.

It is definitely not a mask, but rather a real and tragic dilemma. Any tragic conflict will necessarily always have some unavoidable aspects. When Marco van Basten missed that football penalty in 1992, that was a pity but not a tragedy; it could have ended differently. Liberalism really wants unrestricted toleration, but that is impossible. Occasionally one must shove aside the autonomy of one's dialogue partner. Otherwise, one ceases to be liberal. That is the tragic element in all this. *It is unavoidable to defend oneself especially over against worldviews that do not respect human autonomy.*⁵ At the same time, liberals want as much as possible to allow different worldviews and directions to stand next to each other.⁶ That implies that one will always participate in the dialogue and acknowledge the autonomy of the dialogue partner.

However, whenever a life style emerges in a liberal-democratic society that does not measure up to liberal principles, that style will constantly be confronted with a certain social force imposed by liberalism. Christian groupings have learned to live with that.⁷ At this moment, as far as I can determine, Islam cannot tolerate that.

The issue here is not whether a particular Muslim is happy with what she is right now or what his background can mean for him from a cultural perspective. No, liberal morality will defend itself against certain threats to the integrity of the liberal-democratic system. That is absolutely necessary; liberalism must do that.

Does that mean there is a dent in it?

Absolutely not! At a certain point you come to realize that this dialogue does not lead to a shared vision that can be respected within the liberal-democratic culture, because it will sprout acts that simply are against the law. At this point the dialogue stops and liberalism can now impose the heavy hand of the law. But do not deduce from this that everyone must

⁵ Italics are by the translator.

⁶That may be true, but, like Islam, only on its own terms.

⁷ Boer note: Christians may have learned to live with that, but often under duress and compulsion. Especially the Reformed of Kuyperian stripe—see Kuyperiana page on this website—struggle against this liberal domination

become a convinced liberal. Cultural and religious factors can play a role in transgressions of the law, but that does not mean there would be no transgressions if these factors did not exist. This misconception is exactly the tragedy of all this: It trades off the good of diversity and pluralism for an exaggerated fear of its excesses.

If you observe the current demeanour of certain liberals in The Netherlands, you will see that this tragic dimension is swept under the carpet. Living with pluralism is a fearful thing. They fear social unrest. People like Hersi Ali, whom I greatly admire for her courage, Paul Cliteur and Afshin Ellian are therefore deeply involved in skirting secular liberalism by not imposing it but nevertheless strongly promote it as the only correct worldview. Others are seen as backward. This worldview almost becomes a condition for good citizenship. This is going too far.

Moreover, under such circumstances people totally fail to acknowledge the positive role that these worldview traditions have played in the past in the development of liberal democracy, often even against the liberals.⁸ It was not only the liberals that have participated in the social, cultural and political emancipation of The Netherlands. In some aspects they were not even at the forefront.

You cannot really exercise the role of umpire, as liberalism sees itself, in a half-hearted manner, can you? What is the alternative?

In spite of the above, it will be necessary to emphasize that tragic dimension in the debate. That will make liberalism reflective and self-critical. The current dominant rightist liberal stream in intellectual and political Netherlands is illustrative of the extremely painful side of the tragedy of liberalism, namely that its doctrinal tolerance has its limits and, in the process of guarding that limit, becomes extremely intolerant. Anyone who acknowledges that, simultaneously creates the mental and political space to also acknowledge that in this context everything depends on how it is carried out, not merely on the clinical application of abstract principles.

⁸A case in point here is the crusade launched by Abraham Kuyper against the oppressive liberal establishment in 19th-century The Netherlands, a crusade that eventually birthed the movement for Reformational Philosophy, the publishers of this magazine.

Many of the problems around liberalism are created because both some of its radical proponents and radical opponents try to turn this in a clinical framework that is not historically rooted.

Rightist liberalism currently suggests that if all of us were liberal we would be free from all these conflicts. However, I don't see a single reason for us to believe that. Go ahead and present it as such and you will see that liberalism suffers from very deep problems.

For example, if you were to proclaim that it would be good for humanity to be autonomous, someone would automatically raise the question as to why that would be good. Don't just think that only a Muslim would ask such a question. Communitarians who critique that autonomy as a central value are all Westerners. We must acknowledge that this is not a debate between us and the "others," but that it has always been waged within the liberal tradition.

As far as I am concerned, these rightist liberals are currently too intolerant and perhaps destroy more through their frequent extreme generalizing declarations than is necessary or desirable. Sometimes the question is raised whether one can still consider these folk as real liberals. I do so consider them. But within the VVD you can notice that conflict between those of the Hans Dijkstal stripe and those of Hursi Ali. Both represent one side of this tragic conflict that is so inherent in liberalism. It is constantly caught in the tension between these two poles.

But once more: An umpire who displays his awareness of tragedy cannot achieve much.

Not exactly true. An umpire who has a good feel of the competition together with a good awareness of the practical side of things, can achieve. Two perspectives of liberalism play a role here in the background, an epistemological and a more historical one. According to the former, liberalism has been constructed more or less logically on basis of human reason. This side often presents it as a set of universal and timeless principles. The latter tradition is more interested in a practical solution that has been developed in a specific historical situation in order to prevent the

development of a political problem of coordination between different worldviews. As such, it has been exceptionally successful. On this track, we must encourage the further development of this solution, but constantly with a sensitivity for concrete social relationships. In this context you can without difficulties approach and include religious traditions as well.

Within the epistemological tradition, you constantly run into the same problems. Constantly the question arises whether the issue under discussion has indeed universal validity. Or whether it has a genuine foundation in reason.

But these questions are not all that important in a political or social context. Charles Taylor once wrote a fascinating essay with the title "Overcoming Epistemology." You should not look for an epistemological model, but, rather you should look at the assumptions that make us prefer one epistemological model over against another one. Then you will automatically recognize that such a model is historically and culturally embedded locally.

The important questions that confront us in politics is how we must relate concretely with each other in a situation of conflicting worldviews. Taylor plaeds for a "presumption of equal value." The point of departure here is that the "other" also has valuable insights, even though we may not be familiar with them. Why should this be our point of departure? Not because we have read Kant, but because we have learned during the course of four or five centuries' worth of development that this is a good way to associate with each other.

Then we will automatically arrive at points where we recognize borders. This is not because the "other" is backwards, but either because we do not understand each other or because the "other" has transgressed the law. Now what do we do?

There are still many options. For example, we can settle on a really low level of tolerance; at the very least, not attack either other physically. Or the majority group decides consciously not to restrict the rights of the minority. In other words, it tolerates. In my opinion, liberalism is at its strongest when

it continues to emphasize that we do not need a prior consensus but, rather, a procedural framework that emerges and is approved along the way.

In practice, this happens all the time. There is no one who comes from a region where she does not associate in a normal way with people that have very different worldviews than she does. This was very visible after the murder of Van Gogh. You would repeatedly hear things like “Of course, there are also good people amongst all those Muslims.” Those were often their very neighbours.

That is precisely our point. This is about those 95% who participate like everyone else. That works very well, in spite of their profound differences. People constantly disagree with each other, but they still cooperate widely. That should be researched, but you should not try to find the answer under categories like “values and norms” or of “the state” that assume that we should really agree with each other. Have you ever met philosophers or anthropologists or social scientists that all agree with each other in detail about the question what provides unity in society? No. If scholars do not agree with each other, why should we expect that from others?

Therefore I find especially those liberal thinkers interesting who do not lose themselves in that epistemological debate about the status of liberal principles, but who simply ask what it takes to be a good liberal citizen and what it means that you have problems of intercultural communication and power. Those are the interesting questions.

On this point, do you detect a shift within contemporary liberalism towards, indeed, such a more practical liberalism?

Very much so if you take into consideration the international debate. I think here especially about a group of people who increasingly emphasize the old value of freedom as the most important value of liberalism and who are moving away from justice as the core idea. What does it mean to be a free individual? What are the cultural or economic prerequisites for that? Which power relations restrict freedom? Which competencies and virtues are required for a society to function? The trend is towards reduced

normativity, and certainly less prescriptive in the formation of theories. It is somewhat of an empirical shift in contemporary liberalism.

These are thinkers who often, in addition to their liberalism, also feel themselves at home in communitarianism and multiculturalism. Names? For example, James Tully, David Owen, Anthony Laden. In Germany, Rainer Forst, a Kantian who is at the same time sensitive with respect to the effects of power relations.

How does the transfer of liberal principles to the succeeding generations take place? There are pedagogues who speak of a democratic nurturing ideal. But liberalism does appear at this point to be at a disadvantage in comparison to more comprehensive worldviews.

This is indeed a difficult issue. Many worldviews are transferred in the context of families. Liberalism has something like that mostly in what I indicated as its second form, namely in Jewish and Catholic liberalism. But this will never be as strong there as it is in orthodox Judaism or orthodox Catholicism. I have friends with a strict Catholic or Protestant background. They carry with them a deep identity, whether or not they still have a strong adherence or not.⁹ In contrast, liberalism does not tend to be anchored at the deepest level as does a religious conviction.

The question is, however, whether that transfer is all that important. Why is liberalism so astoundingly influential? Wherever you plant its seeds, it takes root. There exists a very deep impulse for individual freedom in people. I could well create an anthropological thesis on this subject. It's just part of us. Freedom is in accord with a very deep human aspiration. There really is no need for a separate transfer. It is not a set of facts from which you can deduce all sorts of duties and principles. I like the idea of a parallel with nature: If you push against something; it will as it were push back. That's what's happening here as well. If you push me as if a mass, I will push back with spiritual and intellectual mass. That mass will say, "I am

⁹ Similarly, I have a close friend who could be described as a lapsed Catholic but, by his own admission, continues to experience life as a Catholic and cannot escape it.

me; you are you.” This is buried deep in the character of the human animal. Liberalism latches on to that.

For this reason as a liberal I am not a relativist but, rather, a perfectionist. Why should we be obliged to avoid believing in what we regard as a sort of fulfillment of being fully human? But you do need to restrain yourself in your association with others and not become too paternalistic or domineering.

But is liberalism not anchored very deeply in the schools and universities? Are they not especially the carriers of the liberal tradition?

Yes, but liberalism functions there as little more than a facilitator. It makes the debate possible. As soon as people regard this as an achievement, they in fact participate in the transfer of liberalism, even if they should have very different points of view. Probably a most interesting phenomenon is this: Liberalism is constantly refreshed or renewed by a variety of people who do not themselves claim to be liberal.¹⁰

¹⁰Translator: An example here would have been helpful.