

The Religious Crisis of Our Time

Have our Gods Failed us?



“We shudder in apprehension at the smoke that fills our skies and mans’ thousand transgressions polluting our streams and lakes ... “

The nineteenth century revival of Christianity in The Netherlands led to several Christian cultural movements, including one in the political area. Last year VANGUARD focused on Groen Van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, who played key roles in this Christian political movement (see the issues of April and May/June 1971). This political renaissance, now nearly a century old, led to the establishment of three major political parties: the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), the Roman Catholic Peoples Party, and the Christian Historical Union. During the last decade these parties have conducted discussions about closer cooperation. At a recent meeting of the nation-wide Council of the ARP, Dr. Bob Goudzwaard presented the following evaluation of the basic issues in European politics. It will be evident to the perceptive that these are also fundamental questions in the current election campaigns in Canada and the USA, even though they will not often be discussed.

The Editors

For the crisis of our time - and I hope that by now I have made clear my convictions on this score - is a religious crisis, an upheaval of the central western vision of life. And when we face a crisis of this magnitude, then the determinative answer can only be a religious one, an answer that involves our deepest convictions about the meaning of life.

by **Bob Goudzwaard***

The *essential question is*: what is our calling as Christians over against the coming generation? Neither the continued existence of a specifically Christian political party nor the continued association of groups of Christians can by itself guarantee that this calling will be faithfully carried out. Let’s honestly admit that groups of Christians working together have often made a complete mess of things. And all of us are well aware that it is very easy for a Christian organization to become nothing more than an edifying ensign on a mud-scow.

The first question for us today, therefore, is not whether we want this or that particular party formation. First we must face another question, namely, which strategy or long-term political policy is demanded of us as Christians in the last quarter of this century? Only after we answer this question can we ask ourselves what party formation or combination of parties would be most suitable for carrying out this strategy. In other words, only by first confronting the basic question will we be able to faithfully discharge our historical responsibility.

* translated by Theodore Plantinga.

This question of a future strategy confronts us at a particularly difficult moment. In and of itself, such a question makes you feel as though you had lead in your shoes. But more importantly, it presents itself at a time when symptoms of a certain turn or change, of crumbling expectations, of a growing uncertainty, are appearing in various areas of the contemporary world. It is only natural that such developments will obstruct our long-range view of things: we will only be able to get a glimpse of the future through a veil of mist. Nevertheless, we should still venture a glance.

Perhaps I should begin with these changes - with the crumbling expectations themselves.

Ideals of progress

As we all know, for a long time western culture has strongly believed in progress. Particularly in recent decades, culture, science, and politics have been dominated by belief in progress. Not only has western man witnessed a rapid growth of technology, the applied sciences and human prosperity, but he has tied his ideals of progress to them. He has placed himself at the service of this kind of progress, this forward movement. And now we're discovering that these ideals of progress have run into obstacles. They no longer sail along undamaged and untarnished. Doubts arise in the minds of many people as to whether we are on the right track with the unbridled growth of the economy - afraid as we are of the dangers to the environment implied in continued economic growth. A stealthy decay grows in ditches, rivers and lakes, in the air, in plants, in animals, and perhaps even in our own bodies. And we shudder at the power of technology: in the future will all of us be reduced to a computer card, to a small wheel in a technologized, over-populated society?

What I would now like to ask is whether this doubt is only a passing tremor on the faulty ground of our western culture. Are we facing a number of minor reverses that we can effectively handle by changing the emphases in our political policies? I think we all know better than that; we know that we're going through an earthquake.

Western man will continue to build on "progress," but it is a progress that threatens to bring regression. He feels as though he's careening down a road between two parallel walls that threaten to hem him in for good. Because of the curse of our one-sided dogma of progress, the twentieth century may be the last. In other words, in the heart of western man the awful suspicion wells up that his gods have betrayed him.

I use the word "gods" intentionally. A man's god is whomever or whatever he depends on and on which he bases his happiness; a god is what determines the meaning of man's life and thus serves as its foundation. It is as his god that western man has for the most part viewed his science, his technology, and the growth in human prosperity and income. Building upon these things, western man has believed and expected that happiness would be his portion in the wake of a continually growing prosperity and an uninterrupted application of new technological and scientific discoveries. Inequitable income and power relationships - both national and international - would be righted over the long haul by these forces of progress. Yes, even East and West would eventually come together in this way. It is this religious trust that has irrevocably been called into question. It now appears that "humanity", i.e. the preservation of human dignity and the furtherance of human happiness, is not automatically protected by economic growth and the advance of science and technology.

But what now? To simply cast aside economic growth and technological progress is not so easy. Can western man, can *we* live without this progress? I say `we' deliberately, for the

service of these gods is also in our blood. Protestants and Catholics aren't free from this bondage. There's more to it than meets the eye.

The Christian idea of responsibility

We as people of the west have allowed this heart choice, the service of these gods, to play an important role in the formation of our societal life. Our social order is built upon various attitudes toward life, and thus we still find in it some traces of the Christian idea of responsibility - which is indeed a blessing. But in the same western society we also find strong strains of belief in technology and in the panacea-effect of a continual extension of economic prosperity. Indeed, this extension of prosperity is the purpose of our undertakings.



These undertakings are instruments to further our economic growth. But they should be more than instruments, for they enable us to live out our responsibility as men. For example, we live in a society which is based on the principle that every new technological discovery must immediately be implemented in our socio-economic life, even if entire industries are wiped out in the process (thus destroying thousands of life-long jobs). We have cleared a path for the acceptance of

prosperity and the application of technology in our economy. Yes, for the sake of maintaining full employment and the growth of prosperity, we freely allow ourselves as consumers to be taken in by the advertising that forces itself upon us from all sides.

Is our real interest and basic concern only business and our own good fortune? If so, we must not be tiresome and complain about these very things. In my judgement, we have built our society on the basis of a one-sided idea of progress. And now we discover - to our horror - that we can no longer get outside or above it. Western man has shaped his society with his own hands - but this society now has him firmly in its grasp, and it presses man to find his happiness in the intoxication of ever new rounds of consumption.

I believe that here I have **reached the root of the increasing fragmentation of the western attitude toward life.** We are afraid of the consequences of a continued growth in economic prosperity, but nonetheless we continue to cling tightly to it. We see this, for example, in our **self-generated inflation.** What is such inflation if not the fever of a society obsessed with possessions? We also fear the advance of computers - think of the recent census - but we still expect the solution for today's environmental problems to issue from the computers in Boston. Western man distrusts scientific technology when it moves in the direction of experiments with the human body and soul, but yet he does not know how a better world is possible apart from his trust in science. He thus vacillates between a rejection of these gods and an even stronger attachment to them. In a recent issue of a radio-television guide, I read the following: "The chaotic and threatening picture of the present world is making millions of people anxious, paralyzing them with a feeling of uncertainty and powerlessness. Many ask despairingly; 'How can I find an attitude towards life today?' This is indeed the question. And now to find a stage manager who can conjure up this new attitude towards life!"

The heart of the matter



I have expressly brought up all these matters not because I want to play the preacher of morals but because I believe that only against the backdrop of these rapid developments can we map out a proper strategy for the future. The challenges to which a political answer must be given lie on this level. I am convinced that we cannot avoid these problems, for even such questions as the future of the developing countries and the sometimes overwhelming problem of national defence cannot be answered apart from the fundamental challenge.

Do you think that a developing cooperation between the nations of the world will ever be possible if we continue to regard it as a by-product of economic growth? And would an arms race not in the long run have to come to a halt because of the impossibility of providing for such elaborate expenditures within the limits of possible economic growth? The heart of the matter concerns the place we plan to give to science and economic expansion and technology developments in our future individual and societal activities? This is the central question that faces us today, that faces the R.C. Peoples Party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party, and the Christian Historical Union.

Religious crisis

If you're like me, you'll find this kind of question perplexing - and not because there are no fine theoretical answers to be given. We needn't have fears on that score, for politicians and theologians never disappoint us in the search for answers. No, the perplexity arises because each one of us must take up this question privately for himself. We have to decide what life - and thus politics - is all about for us, and what gives meaning to our own future. It is not enough to make clear what is most basic for us within this life. For the crisis of our time - and I hope that by now I have made clear my convictions on this score - is a religious crisis, an upheaval of the central western vision of life. And when we face a crisis of this magnitude, then the determinative answer can only be a religious one, an answer that involves our deepest convictions about the meaning of life.

The bulwarks of this age

I have spoken about a strategy for the future. I hope that after what I have said above, you yourselves can perceive some of the contours of such a strategy. What we need is a political policy or program that recognizes that man cannot live by prosperity alone and that will therefore award a proper but limited place to economic expansion, technological progress, and the application of science. It is a policy in which we take up arms against the gods, the bulwarks of this age - that is to say, not against economic life, technology and science as such, but against giving them first priority, against over-estimating their importance, against being persuaded in advance of the justification of their further application. It is a political policy that testifies to our controlled rage about the way that nature, i.e. the creation of our Lord, is being managed; we treat it like men who are kicking the paint off the doors in another man's house. It is a political program in which we (in the words of George Picht) must learn anew how to decipher the code of need in order to re-discover authentic humanity, the humanity not of the standardized "success" models of the advertisers but the humanity of the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, the sick, and those who are locked into the suburban, prefabricated living pattern of our time.

Luxury battles

Do you want me to make it still more concrete? I can't really do it without warning you that I am only giving you examples, provisional proposals. I believe that we must adopt a policy - international if possible - whereby certain scientific experiments are definitively forbidden. I think not only of the scientists who are perfecting ever more effective methods of killing but also of those who are tampering with human hereditary traits and those who are nursing human life outside the womb - only to kill it again when the experiment is finished. I believe that nationally, and as soon as possible, internationally, the application and implementation of important technological breakthroughs as well as the introduction of new products into the marketplace will have to be regulated by some system of licensing.

Moreover, we will have to fight for the establishment of a world order that can force richer nations to do right by those poorer peoples that in effect enjoy no rights. We must also fight for a worldwide division of labour which will take account both of the needs of the developing countries and of global need for cleansing the environment.

We must throw everything we have into the struggle against the growing interference with human life in our increasingly technicized and commercialized world. And I simply do not see how we will escape the introduction of detailed, specific legislation governing the claims made by advertisers. Such legislation will be just as essential as a further extension of employee responsibility by business and industry in their mergers. Further, it is my conviction that a government incomes policy directed toward the slowing down and reorientation of our economic production will be unavoidable in the long run. For that matter, such a policy will have a chance of succeeding only if we are indeed prepared not to make the drive for greater prosperity our first priority. If this readiness does not exist when we choose to go through with our luxury battles about the moderation and limiting of incomes, then not only does every incomes policy become senseless, but we may well go under eventually as the result of our own progress. Finally, our population policy must also be reviewed. It is not necessary, for example, to continue to give a children's allowance or baby bonus for every new child to newly formed and still growing families. Yet every population policy - and I hope that you will understand this in the light of what I have said earlier - will have to find its limits in a respect for the family and a deep reverence for human life as such.

Answers on a different religious basis

The strategy that I have tried to sketch is not in finished form. It is fragmentary and limited; it needs filling out, and on some points it may be in need of revision. But I hope - and this is what concerns me now - that you have been able to discern some coherence within it, a leitmotiv that begins with the watch-word "the well-being of all" and also highlights the watchword "not by bread alone." In other words, in this instable time I am looking for answers on a different religious basis than the one which in many respects still dominates western society.

Thus when we face this awesome challenge it isn't enough to appeal to general principles like that of human dignity. The question is: how do we build a society that respects human dignity? In answering this question we are again immediately caught up in our fundamental problem, namely, what place in life we are ultimately willing to give to our growing economic prosperity, to our ever advancing technology, and to developing science. Our decisions for the future will be largely determined by our answer now.

Conclusion

My conclusion? I don't see how we can meet the challenges ahead without a deep faith in our living Lord. It's on the faith level that the root and origin of our contemporary western fragmentation must be sought out. Further, not only is there every reason not to trust in a strongly sustained economic growth and an ever developing technology, but there is even less reason to trust in the one-sided reactions born of hate and rejection that some derive from their distrust of economic and technological progress. I think, for example, of the many who react to all the evils of the western world by seeking their salvation in the liberating power of new societal structures, and who, therefore are predisposed to welcome every violent revolution, not realizing that they have only exchanged one false faith ("*economitis*") for another ("*structuritis*").

We must also be forewarned that many, out of fear of the future and the threat to mankind, will propose laws and regulations which in their turn threaten the welfare of the mankind they aim to save. Does the politics of population not leave room for this sort of thing? Without a living faith, we would be caught up before we knew it in the tension of unacceptable extremes. We can only rise above such dilemmas if our deepest foundation and ultimate certainty is not in ourselves or in mankind but in a source transcending this world.

Bob Goudzwaard has had extensive experience in practical politics, most recently as an ARP member of the Dutch parliament. Presently he's professor of economic theory at the Free University of Amsterdam.