

Last August professors Cramp (Cambridge University) and Goudzwaard (Free University, Amsterdam) conducted a seminar on politics and economics at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. We took the opportunity to elicit their views for Vanguard in order that a wider audience might benefit from them.

## Asking questions, making decisions

An interview with Bob Goudzwaard & Anthony Cramp

Interviewers: Gerald Vandezande, Kathleen Kennedy, Bonnie Greene

**Vanguard:** What kinds of questions about economic life do you believe citizens should be asking of their legislators to encourage them to ask themselves the most important questions in making public policy?

**Cramp:** Well,, that kinds of questions I find a rather difficult question to answer in the abstract, but I'll try to make it more concrete if you like. I think of the example of making decisions in the matter of providing roads. Each decision has all sorts of side-effects; not just side-effects, large effects in terms of public expenditure and effects on the environment and so on. This is one of the areas in which the public's participation in the planning process is becoming quite common. But it is also an area where such participation is often a sort of public relations exercise. The basic decisions appear to have been made ahead of time by the administrative or government machinery.

When we see how little openness there is in the decision-making process, we can easily become convinced that there's nothing effective that can be done. However, it's too easy a decision to simply wash our hands of it. In that kind of context, the kinds of questions one wants to see citizens asking are those which seek to open up the decision-making process to all the aspects involved - environmental, social, political, ethical, and so on.

The problem appears to be that the administrative machine sees problems in a certain fixed way. It sees its task in a democracy as responding, to individual desires and solving conflicts between interest groups. The result is a particular and really rather narrow view of the framework in which to consider basic issues. Therefore when the question of building roadways arises, economic advisors in particular will say, "What we've got to do is prepare some sort of cost-benefit calculation which will tell us when the motorway should be built and just where."

Now I would say we want to start from the sort of framework that would allow us to ask whether motorways should be built at all. That question raises all the other questions of our responsibility to the environment and the sort of life in society together that we want to build. In an opened-up framework one doesn't necessarily presume that the goal is for every family to have its own car. And so the kinds of questions I'd like to see christians asking would be questions that reflect that background and open the thing up.

**Goudzwaard:** I think I can add just this. If you as a citizen are asking questions of your elected member of parliament, you are speaking in a very special relationship. It is the relationship of democracy, which in my opinion involves the co-responsibility of the citizen for the direction of the state and its behavior. It is a relationship of responsibility, and so I think the citizens' questions should be directed to the politician's responsibility in a particular historical situation.

There are two things to remember.

First, you have to be concerned as a citizen that a politician you elect has the chance to come to independent decisions, not in the sense of autonomous, but in the sense that his decisions are not predetermined by promises he made in the past and by pressures in the present. Nor should he be forced to say something because of the dictates of the caucus. Such pressures simply bury the politician, keeping him from making responsible choices. Therefore I think he should be confronted in public. The citizen should ask the politician just how much opportunity he has to make responsible decisions or if someone else has already made them for him. I think this is a very hard question, but it has to be asked regularly, for it is a crucial one.

The second thing to remember about a democracy concerns the direction of the state. The citizen needs to ask what direction is being set in a political party or in the parliament? In our culture the member of parliament may simply be called on to follow the demands of the people, a direction I saw in the program of the Progressive Conservative Party. Now I'm saying that following men's desires commits men to following a materialistic and selfish life. For instance, as a politician I promise the laborer that I will fight for a high income for him. I promise the grocer that I will guarantee him an income. And so from the very start I am already closing up political mandates and deliberately developing what Tony here calls tunnel vision.

In the political sphere of life we are concerned with public stewardship, with the question of what is to be done with resources? Are Canadians using their resources to promote their own welfare to produce new commodities? Or are their resources being opened up in a kind of stewardship to help other people and give them justice while being a steward of nature? I think then that the citizen whose questions lack that element of "not-by-bread-alone" is only encouraging the member of parliament to go in the wrong direction, a closed one.

**Vanguard:** Assuming the politician accepts an opened-up life perspective, do you think that he should then follow the dictates of a christian community holding that view of life?

**Goudzwaard:** That's not the point, because we are not speaking about demands from a christian community, but about those which give the whole structure of political life. We are talking about things which point back to what all have in common as human beings created by God who has laid down an answer structure.

I am saying that the state has mandates for justice too. This created responsibility is not a demand from christian communities, but is crucial for the very existence of the state and for cultural life in the future. If the state does not make independent political decisions out of a sense of responsibility, it will destroy itself.

**Vanguard:** A lot of people would say we don't have much choice in the questions we ask because there are only two alternatives: either we believe in human technology to save us from our present economic problems or we predict the end of the world. Can you pinpoint how the christian gospel can avoid those alternatives?

**Cramp:** I find scope for a positive christian answer in expressing in the world the christian's spiritual hope. We can begin from the sort of opened-up framework that we were speaking of earlier. Then we can begin asking the right questions, not the narrow ones that limit our alternatives to continuous economic growth on the present pattern or collapse and no growth.

Instead, we want to ask what kind of growth and for what? Output for what? The christian sees that man's true purposes are not served by an unlimited increase in consumer goods for people who are already overburdened by them. And so we are able to ask fundamental questions about the direction of economic development, about adapting ourselves to a slower rate of expansion, about the distribution of income, wealth and capital, and about the meaning and significance that people find in their work. And so you see, there's a whole new area of questions opened up which some can't begin to ask because their basic position is simply closed-up by either unlimited faith in technology or by their lack of faith in technology.

**Vanguard:** Why have christians and christian churches shared in the alien faith in technology, progress and economic growth? And where do you think we could begin to make a radical break with that humanist idea?

**Cramp:** I have come to believe that at least as far as English culture is concerned, the problem really arose very slowly from the assumption that English culture was built on christian foundations, even if people had begun to depart from explicit christian belief in various ways. That assumption produced a very homogeneous culture and a cultural unity which made life in England very pleasant and free of conflicts. Because they accepted their culture as basically christian, they somewhere allowed themselves to be sold the notion that there were areas which could be dealt with in a neutral, non-evaluative, purely technical way.

And so even those in the church who were most faithful to the evangelical traditions - for want of a better word for the moment - found themselves increasingly and unconsciously operating in two separate compartments. The gospel was rele[vant] but from Monday to Saturday they were operating in the secular compartment. And I think it took a long time to realize quite what was happening and how little of the gospel it really expressed.

**Vanguard:** Is there a change taking place among evangelicals and other christians in Great Britain?

**Cramp:** Well, I think the background ideas for the change are beginning to germinate. The seed is there; it doesn't really seem to me to have grown as far in England as I've become conscious that it has in Canada, for example. I think that's partly because of the rather homogeneous culture and because of its assumed christian foundations. So far I see the change less in terms of concrete achievements than in an increasing longing to be able to say something of an effective witness in the world.

**Vanguard:** And what about in Holland?

**Goudzwaard:** There is a lot of discussion in Holland about the task of the church in a technological society. For instance, I am myself a member of a group that is working on the notion of sobriety. In the New Testament Paul writes that we have to be satisfied with simple means - this is a word not only for individuals but also for whole cultures. If we want to become rich, we will fall into many temptations, he says. Therefore we must seek the kingdom of God.

What does that mean today? We have committees working on that. Mine is a reformed committee, but the World Council of Christian Churches is also working on three-year programs on technology in modern society.

But I want to make two comments about such efforts. First, there is a danger in the kind of thing the World Council is trying to do that its work will become just reports written by a lot

of interesting people. It can become a very high and sophisticated witness from the church, standing there above our heads but having nothing to do with what ordinary people have to do in their lives. And so such a study can miss the point. I find it more useful to give outlines of what the average christian can do in relation to these things.

Second, there is a tendency also in the World Council to move in the opposite direction from the growth-obsessed and technology-obsessed society. I think that is indeed the point to their program. They are attempting to say, "Perhaps man is more a part of nature than we supposed him to be, and he ought to grow into a kind of unity with nature." In that case we would miss our mandate to be responsible human beings in nature.

**Vanguard:** When a church body suggests that we should slow growth or even have zero growth, people sometimes reply that such a plan would cause the capitalist economic system to stagnate or possibly to collapse altogether. Isn't that a serious problem?

**Goudzwaard:** But to slow growth is too narrow a conception of your mandate. I think it is a selectivity of growth. Perhaps I could say it another way. We start from our responsibility as individuals and as mankind to preserve the life possibilities for plants and animals and things like that. We also start from our responsibility to secure access to resources for developing countries. Then we can have the possibility of some growth in our own country.

What growth we would have would occur in selected areas so that it would offer well-being to both developed and developing nations. For instance, some kinds of economic growth have a heavy impact on the borders of our earth, others have a lighter impact. Space programs have a heavy impact. Developing nuclear energy is not a good form of growth either because it is too big a threat to the environment. However, developing solar energy is a better form of growth because it gives us a greater chance of gaining more than we lose.

Usually economic growth is defined as growth of all goods and services which have a market price. Therefore, we conclude that growth is measurable. This view is too narrow because it leaves out factors like damage to the health of workers or the possibility of real depletion of resources through pollution. It would be better to ask whether the growth we are considering is life-oriented or life-destroying. But to speak of simply slowing growth or stopping it altogether in such a context oversimplifies the issues; it is a mechanical answer to the real question.

**Vanguard:** Selectivity of growth would require a conversion to a different religious commitment. Given the pressures of dwindling resources and growing populations, do you foresee that kind of conversion coming about before massive economic collapse overtakes us?

**Goudzwaard:** I do not believe that predictions of possibilities can give us a platform for christian witness. I must simply look at the immediate situation to see that civilization is staggering because of its basic belief. I agree totally with Tony that the present situation already challenges christians to speak of alternatives.

It's not a question of a high-brow study, but just perhaps of little signposts in our lives. We can then say, "Indeed here again there is a fork in the path of our civilization and on the point of that fork stands the cross of Christ. Somehow in relation to that cross we must make our decision." It is vital in this cultural choice that I am not overly concerned for the outcome of my witness - that is God's work. If I take the first responsible step, I am not responsible for the entire future -just the steps I am taking now.

**Vanguard:** In America there has been a rise in consumer groups as people have tried to make their voices heard in the decision-making processes. Do you think there is any effective way that this kind of populist organization can bring about either long-term or short-term change in our public economic life?

**Goudzwaard:** I would say yes, if the bases of these groups are not too narrow - for instance, merely trying to buy good quality goods as cheap as possible. If consumer groups are speaking of the responsibility of an enterprise for the other things it is producing - what it is doing in relation to the environment, for instance - then they can produce a reaction among producers because nothing is to be cared for as carefully in an enterprise as a good name, a good public image. And so I could just point to that name and the other aspects that are attached to it in production.

I am not inclined to say such groups can convert the economy, but they are already making a signpost. They are bringing what Francis Schaeffer calls a substantial healing, not total healing. Substantial healing is the promise of the gospel in relation to all really christian actions.

**Vanguard:** In addition to such public witness in broadly based consumer groups, what would you conceive of as the consumer's role in the society where he is neither king nor victim?

**Goudzwaard:** A chooser.

**Vanguard:** A chooser? On what basis?

**Goudzwaard:** Let me say it this way. One economist said that market behavior is ethically neutral. In market relationships, he said, you have only the price and the quality of the goods to deal with. I believe that view flattens down what is really going on in a relationship. I think it is an I-you relationship between the consumer and the producer. If you buy the product, you are telling the producer, "I am buying this product because I have no objection at all if you continue producing the same product in the same way." When you buy any product and encourage the manufacturer to continue making it, you become co-responsible for what is going on in the production side of that product.

As a consumer you need to remember that you are voting on economic possibilities when you buy, just as much as you vote in a political system. Therefore, consumers need to bring other factors to bear on their family purchasing decisions. For instance, they need to ask what the purchased good represents in terms of the laborers, the environment, the resources and so on that were invested in the product being purchased.

Just in consuming goods, you need information to be able to steer economic possibilities. That is why I spoke of the tunnel view of a lot of consumer organizations. With a broader base for choosing, consumption may be something joyful. I can use the possibilities to motivate another direction in the process of production. I like that. It adds to the beauty of life rather than to the worry.