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The Radical Christian Facing Today's Political Malaise

By

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## Introduction

Though it is true that I am a professor--even a professor of philosophy, it is not as a professor of philosophy or as a professor at all, that I wish to speak to you this evening. Of course, I realize that it would be hard to conceal the fact that I have had the great privilege of being a professor of philosophy and of teaching students philosophy, particularly how to engage in the enterprise of philosophizing in a Christian manner, for a number of years, just as it would be hard for an electrician or plumber or a real-estate broker to conceal what he does with his life in a more specialized way. But tonight I want to talk to you as a simple Christian believer, simply as one who professes to be one of Christ's "little ones". In that sense, I hope you will receive me as a pro-fessor. In my daily work I attempt to carry out that central profession or calling in a specialized way, as everyone, else here also does, as a professor of philosophy. So tonight, though what I have to say may at times betray the fact that I spend my days reading, talking and teaching philosophy, it is as a pro-fessor of that one Name that is above every other name, that I wish to be listened to as I discuss our common responsibilities as a people of God in the world of American politics. I am no specialist in political science. I speak tonight as an aroused and concerned believer.

As you have heard, the organization which has arranged for this series of discussions to be held throughout the winter is a student organization. I do not wish to minimize that fact for one second. On the contrary, I wish to bring it in a lively way to your attention: for I am proud of these students. The fact that Spectra is an organization of students does not make this an academic occasion any more than the fact that I am a professor does. These students are young people and they are concerned as young Christian believers about what the stance of Christians ought to be in today's political arena. Things are happening in this world of ours--fundamental things, I believe. We have just been passing through years of great upset. We have been made aware of a counter-culture and subjected to many analyses and interpretations of it. Young people are closest to these significant reversals--from the individual to the communal, from the Gross National Product to a more comprehensive conception, or at least one less economically qualified, of human existence, from manipulation and conditioning to doing one's thing in personal freedom.

It is not surprising that Christian young people experience under these conditions of upheaval a heightened awareness of the root question: What is human life and how is it to be lived? They are questioning, in a more fundamental way than their parents were able to bring themselves to do, how Christians are to live witnessing lives in the midst of the world and of human history.

There are stirrings in a number of places. 1) As many of you know in the country to the north of us consideration has been given for some years now to developing a Christian political consciousness and, if possible, a Christian consensus. 2) To speak of just one more thing, I just returned a couple of days ago from a first effort at developing a Christian political awareness the United States. The meeting was organized by young people just out of college in the last year or two, at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Students from Grove City College and Allegheny College and from a Christian Coalition movement were present. Let me just say that though this was a first effort, very great enthusiasm was manifested, resting on the basis of a firm conviction that Christians have got to do something together. More than one hundred fifty such young people registered for this first conference. I know of other efforts that are to be made in the near future. In our own Calvin student paper, the Chimes, of just this past Friday (October 20), a guest essay appeared by Donald Ottenhof, which comes, I think, closer than almost anything I've read from Calvin students in the twenty-two years I've been at the school, to describing the most serious reflection that is going on in small but enlarging—sometimes rapidly enlarging—groups. Speaking of the need for Dutch immigrants of Calvinist extraction to “pull themselves out of the cocoon of their self-contained immigrant community to become an effective witnessing force” in twentieth century United States, he judges that:

"The impotence of the church's present witness stands as primary evidence of their failure to make the transition without compromising their identity as followers of God's Word. Past generations of the Christian Reformed community have been found guilty by their offspring of transforming the Christian Reformed Church into another manifestation of what has been called the American Culture Religion, thereby sacrificing not only the superfluous Dutchisms, but also the essence of the Reformed faith. Assuming the cloak of American culture, the Christian Reformed community, however unwittingly, also embraced the soul of that culture."

This Calvin graduate of last June ('72) goes on, most remarkably—here is where in my opinion his judgment stands out above many who just carp about their elders—to say this:

“Some (certainly not all) of us, recognizing such failures, have dissociated ourselves from the mainstream of the American Christian Reformed Community and become a part of a culture that is in many respects worlds apart from that of our elders. Finding it impossible or at least difficult to function as whole witnessing Christians in the culture of our parents, we have made a transition into a new and very different one.

“The question that presents itself most obviously is: Have those of us who have made the transition fallen prey to the same traps as our elders? It seems possible that in assuming the mantle of a new culture (counter-culture, for lack of a better term) we have also assumed the nature of a culture that is just as inimical to Christianity as is the American way.

“A slave-like devotion to the drug mystique and a licentious concept of freedom which results in a flaunting of authority may be our culture substitute for materialism

and racism. The same generation that accuses its elders of selling their souls lock, stock, and barrel to secularism seems to be in danger of signing a similar contract.”

“For both ourselves and our parents the problem is more serious than the co-optation of Christians by secularist environments. Perhaps our inability to establish our identity apart from the dictates of the cultures around us exists because we have distanced ourselves from the Word, which alone can give us our true identity.”

This is a remarkable and eloquent witness to a very fundamental reflection that we can begin to observe in quite a few places, and it causes us to raise our hearts in prayer to Almighty God that a renewal of the life of His children may take place in our time and that we may be a part of it, so that we ourselves, and our children, may be able to live much more meaningful lives in our society than is at present possible.

This gathering here tonight is more than a bit unusual I think. You have all honored us tonight to this extent that you have come here to share this evening with us. But am I not correct that many of us feel just a bit uncomfortable here? What kind of a spirit is going to appear out of this gathering? So, we come with our protective apparatus heavy about us. Some of us will be of a more Republican persuasion, and others may be enthusiastic Democrats, or at least supporters of the McGovern-Shriver ticket. We Christians know how very secretive we are about our deepest political convictions. We know that we are utterly divided in our political loyalties. You find Christians who involve themselves in political action in this country situated anywhere from the so-called left wing of the Democratic Party to the right wing of the Republican Party. Knowing these things; and having experienced time and time again the futility of really persuading one another, we feel a bit uncomfortable in being invited to a meeting of Christians together, just as Christians, as professors of Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives, to attempt common Christian reflection upon and common Christian discussion of our Christian stance relative to the present American world of political action. Perhaps some Christians simply feel secretly that they are not sufficiently knowledgeable about political life. For a long time politics in Christian families have been a dirty word and a dirty life to be avoided, to keep our children away from. Politics has belonged to that world “out there”, and religion and politics simply do not mix! Should we attempt a Christian consensus at all? Should we not leave the spectrum of political opinions among Christians alone?

We Americans come together as Republicans or as Democrats, as conservatives or as liberals, perhaps as Republicans for LBJ, or as Democrats for Nixon. We come together as supporters of legislation on busing, as supporters of this or that kind of legislation respecting specific issue, but we do not come together for serious and fundamental discussion of the nature and present stage of development and organization of political life, and we certainly do not do that as Christians.

In the past we have spoken of the Church as if it were one entity over against the world as a second entity. And when we have said ‘Church’ we have thought of our gathering for worship, especially on the Lord’s Day in the house of God, and of the ecclesiastical organizations with which the local church is associated or of which it is a part. About the only place these days where we professors of the Name of Christ come together for communal thought and action is in these congregations, where we gather for

the public worship of God. We have regarded these cultic bodies, organized for purposes of public worship, as the Church, and sometimes theologians have spoken of these worship assemblies as “the church gathered”. I suppose that means that outside these gatherings we are the “church dispersed”? That is, as ministers are wont to say at the close of the evening service, that when we leave what they sometimes speak of as the “sanctuary” we go merely as individuals, as individuals who belong to Christ’s Church, to be sure, but who, out there in that other entity, the world, only live their individual lives and make their individual witness (as an example from a recent sermon to our neighbor over the back fence.)

We are not accustomed any longer to thinking in the Scriptural way of the people with whom God has established a covenant in the earth, to think of a Kingdom of God in which all authority, that is, the concentration of all possible earthly authorities or offices, has been given to Jesus Christ, the Mediator of our Redemption, resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father. We are not accustomed to thinking of the Church of Christ as a body of human beings, involving all that is to be found in human beings, including the necessity of living in civic communities, establishing a rule of law, appointing judges, etc. —I say, we human beings being restored in the entire range of their life-activity to a life in subjection to the life-sustaining Word of God for His creation. This is what Kingdom and Church mean in the New Testament, and they are a continuation of what was known in the Old Testament as God’s Covenant with man and the earth, in other words, with the entire and integral creation,. This is the cosmic redemption of which we read in the New Testament. Life is religion, not worship. The Word of God—The Torah—is the guide for our life.

It is because we do not think of God’s People any longer in this way, and because we are so deeply involved in certain cultural developments of modern secular European civilization, that we feel an uneasiness about present day American political life. The Christian Church—Catholic and Protestant—has in the modern centuries passed through the terrible Wars of Religion, the hunger for peace and stability and unifications of the European states, the development of highly subjectiveistic forms of piety—Pietism and Quietism—which prepared the way for the major onslaught of rationalism with its substitute for the Directing Word for life from the Living God: the Light of Man’s own essential rational nature, common to men of all times and places. The churches, already weakened by introversive (mystical, subjectiveistic) forms of piety, bought this bill of goods from the rationalists, which allowed them to seek guidance for their private or secret inner lives from the Scriptures and to work commonly or publicly on building a new order in Europe on the basis of a common rationality. After this accommodation, so damaging to the proper role of the Word of God in human life, the new spokesmen of rationalism gradually took over the bastions of political power and the great university centers, and Christians came more and more to live private lives on the edges of where it was at. Then the Industrial Revolution further weakened Christians. This is the situation most of us have inherited. Having left the public order to the new forces of rationalism, seven demons rushed in: we find ourselves thoroughly imbedded in modernity and its tensions, its polarities. At a recent political rally one of my colleagues, accosted another with “Are you with us? I thought you were with the enemy.” It is as if the struggle between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness has been shifted to the struggle between the Republicans and the Democrats.

But, as we have said, the present generation appears to be determined to engage in a more fundamental inquiry of where we are and what we as Christians ought to be about.

And especially in the political arena events of sometime past have given rise to important questions.

## THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign which is now rapidly drawing to a close has several times been described as, "bizarre". And if that word means, as the dictionary says, 'odd', 'eccentric', 'whimsical' or 'irregular', this has most assuredly been a bizarre campaign ever since, even before the campaign proper began, the ITT question broke and the Republicans were forced to move their convention from San Diego to Miami. Surely I need not call up the various episodes: the so-called Watergate 'caper' (the very use of such a frolicking term!); the grain deal; the sudden interesting transfer of a government person to the grain company said to be expected to profit most from the deal; the sudden interesting transfer of a government that is being leveled that the Nixon administration has been the rhetoric increases in radicality from one speech to the next); the charge of gross immorality leveled against the president of the United States himself (who was compared to Adolf Hitler); the charge on the other side, that Mr. McGovern's bleeding-heart personality will strip the country of its defenses or that his position on amnesty, which has, like Nixon's, appeared to change from time to time and thus to be (also in Nixon's case) fuzzy, is, immoral. Particularly interesting in the light of all the preceding, was the frank revelation from the McGovern camp in the final weekend of the campaign that since one kind of rhetoric seemed not to stir the people, they would try the moralizing, ministerial approaches (which is what, we got in the ensuing days).

Young people whose interest in political campaigns is new think of these things as a strange and horrible deterioration. But the sorry fact is that although this campaign is especially bizarre, similar things have occurred in many previous campaigns.

This, you will remember, was to be a campaign of issues. Nixon was to take the high road. Well, Nixon has not taken to the road at all, but we did have his Vice President in our city just a few days ago. Many of you were probably there. The main thing about it was its circus-like atmosphere. One of my colleagues, who had seen the flier advertising our meeting here tonight which had spoken of the campaign as bizarre, surprised at seeing me present, asked me if I had come to participate in the bizarre campaign. "It's just a lot of monkeys running around," he said. I was terribly upset by his remark because I knew him as a staunch supporter of Mr. Agnew's party, and so I replied, "Yes, it is like a circus, but no these are not monkeys; they're men, and that's what makes this such a piteous spectacle." If you go to a circus to go to a circus, well, OK, but when you think that in the world's greatest experiment in democracy you're participating in a political campaign where the weal or woe of western man is on the line and you find yourself treated to a circus, and, even worse, find yourself handled (manipulated) by those in control (not: in authority) as though you intended to come to a circus and want a circus, then in my opinion, it's high time—and I mean high time—for the Christian citizen to protest.

The whole atmosphere at the Agnew "rally" drove thought far. When candidates for office tried to make a statement about some particular issue they got a bit of a hand, but when a couple of candidates with a

knowing political eye simply cried out when introduced, "Vote straight Republican you'll like it," there was a deafening roar in the gymnasium.

Agnew's words were so very much in conflict with the real situation. Against the hecklers he said that we were being treated to a campaign of issues, but nothing of any importance was brought up. His opening remark that Nixon stood for internationalism while McGovern recommended isolationism was supported only by his quoting the "Come home, America" lines from McGovern's acceptance speech, which obviously had meant something entirely different. The only word that I have been able to come up with which might characterize the whole experience of the Agnew rally is "mindless". It should have been utterly repulsive to any Christian.

What we have largely been treated to in this campaign is dirt, slander, character assassination. It has, if that is good, appreciably raised the level of intensely felt hatred in a certain segment of our youth. But in this, except perhaps for the intensity of the feeling, which is related to the deep dividedness of our people over the Vietnam War and the cynicism and frustration which has accompanied the crumbling of much youthful idealism and ordinary respect for high authority, the present campaign is not something particularly new in the United States. After the two conventions the Christian Science Monitor ran an editorial (on Tuesday, August 29, 1972) entitled "And Now to Extravagance". Let me quote it.

"John Foster Dulles once defended intemperate remarks he had himself made during a political campaign on the grounds that the American people traditionally allow themselves a quadrennial descent into intemperate and "extravagant" expressions of opinions about each other.

"He was of the opinion that it was a useful, even salubrious venting of pressures, tensions, resentments, and hostilities. He seemed to feel that everyone was better off when it was all over and people got back to weighing their words with prudence and some concern for the facts.

"We have our doubts about how salubrious it is for grown men to throw reason and fairness to the four winds and indulge in two or three months of unrestrained slander and vituperation at each other's expense. In its defense it must be said that it is a tradition among the Anglo-Saxon peoples going back deep into these times in the United States.

"So, it may or may not be therapeutic but it certainly is customary—and Americans are right now neck deep in the mainstream of another such indulgence in verbal extravagance involving generous quantities of mutual, attempted, character assassination.

"Two examples are sufficient. George McGovern has likened President Nixon's Vietnam policies to the record of Adolf Hitler and Mr. Nixon has retaliated by implying, not very subtly, that a McGovern victory would mean the United States becoming a 'second-rate' country.

“The two presentations are equally unjust and unworthy. Mr. McGovern is a sincere and patriotic American just as devoted to the welfare and security of the country as is anyone else in this campaign. And it is a gross slander to suggest that there is the slightest possible equation between Mr. Nixon and the truly evil man which Hitler indeed was. Mr. Nixon is capable of political ruthlessness. He is not evil.

“We recognize that American political campaigns are seldom waged over real issues. The appeal is not to the mind but to the emotions. This, of course, should not be so. But at least, Americans do have a two-party system which works—no matter how abusive it is to reason in these periodic descents into extravagance.

“All we do say is that the individual citizen of these times by remembering that the man on the other side of the political fence is neither traitor, nor scoundrel, nor imbecile. The United States is not headed for ruin whichever side wins.”

With respect to this editorial, a couple of comments. First, as regards Anglo-Saxon tradition, we may not resign ourselves to or acquiesce in that which is evil, no matter with what claims to heary antiquity it may come to us. Second, why should we regard it as a matter beyond consideration that political ruthlessness is not evil? Third, it is utterly irrelevant to decide that neither man is a traitor, a scoundrel or an imbecile. The real question is: What dynamic, what (religious) direction is in the ‘mind’ the candidate gives expression to. It is not the man, but the principle that determines where we are moving.

But how very sick our functioning Americans society is can be sensed in a second editorial from the Christian Science Monitor about a month later, published on September 26, 1972, under the heading “Of Weapons and Politics”. The significant part reads as follows:

“Mel Laird..., who is probably the ablest political sloganeer in the administration, has nailed a ‘white flag of surrender’ slogan to the McGovern program. It’s a powerful political slogan. Of course it is also grossly unfair, but that is beside the point in politics...”

You can feel acceptance of the fact that our politicians will be sloganeering, not engaged in serious analysis of alternative political programs. You can also feel the deep cynicism about our political life in this country. As when the McGovern camp life announces a shift from on e kind of rhetoric, which isn’t winning votes, to another kind which hopefully will. No political situations are being analyzed; the voter is being manipulated, by the men around Nixon, but equally by the men around McGovern.

One last citation. William Shannon, in his syndicated column, wrote these words in connection with the campaign, on September 5, 1972:

“When I first started writing about Massachusetts politics, I interviewed Louis Lyons, then the head of the Nieman Foundation for newspapermen at Harvard. In my naiveté I asked him what had been the ‘guiding philosophy’ of a certain (Massachusetts) governor, Lyons, who had covered local politics for many years, chewed on his lower lip



for half a minute and then said in a matter-of-fact tone: You have to realize that he was like most of the other politicians at the state house. The only philosophy he had was what would look good on the front page of tomorrow's paper."

Turning to the '72 national election Shannon writes:

"The intellectual barrenness, the preoccupation with techniques rather than substance, the aching concern with tonight's television news show and tomorrow's newspaper front page, and the subordination of every value to vote-grabbing—these bleak realities are beyond the power of any outsider to depict convincingly and still refrain his credibility as a detached observer. Surely, one asks, the picture is over-drawn or the reporter biased?"

No wonder there is a widespread notable apathy among the voters. More and more the word 'malaise' or sickness is used to describe western political life in general and our American political life in particular. Nowhere can we see statesmen working to restore human society in its political aspect to a condition of health. Just 'malaise' —everywhere. Little politicians like jack rabbits, scurrying from one pressing political distress point to another scurrying from one pressing political distress point to another as the disaster shot is heard, i.e. as political events force them; hopping blindly, as rabbits do at the crack of the gun. Alienation between the political 'elite, working blindly, and the disenchanted, uninterested masses. Yet in a traditional democracy men are elected still by the popular vote. How to get the people interested enough to vote? Put a beautiful woman on TV favoring your candidate, or the wife of a famous athlete. In March, 1955 Fortune magazine announced as its conclusion from a poll it had taken that typical young business men of 25 years of age liked the middle-road philosophy of Eisenhower Republicanism not so much for its actual content as for the fact that it provides a logical cover for the absence of political opinion. Here is incipient nihilism in a very influential segment of our younger generation. This absence of conviction often allies itself with cross manipulation of public opinion.

Everywhere there is a loss of political meaning. Just over a year ago James MacGregor Burns, and historian, suggested that both major American parties are in a process of disintegration. Neither one can govern effectively, he argued; because they are both too broadly based to effect anything but compromise solutions. There is certainly truth in his suggestion, but it does not get down to the root truth in his suggestion, but it does not get down to the root of the 'malaise'. If our present parties do not offer the strict choice of "conservatism' and "liberalism really help us? It is to answer that question that I want to devote the rest of this lecture. In the entire western world the alignment of political parties offers such a choice. Yet everywhere there is the same 'malaise'. In discussing this interesting problem we shall also ask ourselves how our American politicians have come, in both parties, to be equally 'pragmatic', that is, 'realistic', or as both Nixon and McGovern have recently formulated it 'flexible', 'supply'. HOW LIBERALISM-CONSERVATISM BECOMES THE AWFUL CLOICE OF MANKIND. To me it is most lamentable, at a time when our inherited political system shows all the signs of decadence and near collapse, that the Christian community is not ready to offer, to witness to, a better way, not ready, in great part, because it is itself, since the seventeenth century when it decided to attempt a modus

Vivendi with the up surging new secularist movement (rationalistic humanism), now so deeply imbedded in our cultural patterns. In his Epistle to the Romans the apostle Paul admonished us not to be conformed to the present world-system (the cultural order man brings about out of his unbelief) but to be transformed by a turn-about of our minds. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. It is FOR this world, but it does not arise from the unbelief which controls the direction of this world.

But as soon as you bring up the possibility of developing a communal Christian political consciousness you get to hear—from Christians—that it is futile to attempt such a thing and makes no sense. In this connection the remark is frequently made that you're always going to have those who have an interest in preserving the status quo and those who have not yet come to enjoy any of the privileges of our democracy, and that you will have both of these types among Christians as well as elsewhere.

At this point it is important to note that according to the Word of the living God the task assigned mankind at the beginning was to dress and keep the Garden. To keep, --that is to conserve what God had created good; to dress,--that is to bring into being through our cultural forming of the creation-given what is not yet there, to innovate. This keeping and dressing are two facets of the one integral human Task. 'Conserve' is not the same as 'conservatism', and 'innovate' is not the same as 'innovationism'.

There is a danger that we Christians must be warned against; we must not allow ourselves to get involved with the immediacies of life. That is what happens when we try to live with the facts, the bare facts, we say, as they are there immediately confronting us. It is this occupation with immediacies which makes our politicians to be like rabbits, jumping at the shot of the gun, rolling with the punches. It gives rise to fads, overkill reactions, etc. We Christians are to be followers of Christ. But what is it to be was the Servant of God, Man-in-office, come to do the Father's will for man, that is, to walk, always and everywhere, not by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God for creation life. There is nothing that confronts us horizontally, no creational fact or situation that has meaning except as we see it, read it, in the light of the Word of God. For my students I take the example of Plato. Nineteenth century German scholars offer differing interpretations of Plato. If we try to get the truth about Plato by getting closer, say to his immediate disciples, interpretation. If, now, we concentrate on Plato himself, that is, on his writings—and we are fortunate in having apparently all that he wrote for publication, --if we go to Plato himself will we be able to get at the truth about Plato? The answer is no. Plato did not understand himself or the nature of his work. Plato thought of himself as essentially rational soul, capable of grasping intelligible essences (substances?), the ideas. Seen in Scriptural light we get quite a different insight into what kind of a being Plato (man) is, and what is involved in knowing the truth. Thus, in this example and everywhere, to judge by the light God's indispensable Word sheds on the creation is to be at a kind of distance. Christians, in the world, are not of it.

I am amazed when I hear—and I hear it very frequently among Christians—that there is no criticism of the Roman political situation in the New Testament. When Jesus was apparently being trapped with respect to tax monies for Rome he asked for a coin, and then asked whose image the coin bore. When the answer came, He said, render then the Caesar what is his due, and to God what is His. This verse is not marking off societal realms of State and Church. It is not the Pope—or a Synod—which is put over

against Caesar. It is God. In a world where the political order had been absolutized, nothing more radical could have been proposed than this. The political order is to have its due, but only within the Rule of God. The political order is to be an aspect of the Kingdom of God.

Christian politics has to do with the reorientation and renewal of political life as a constituent part of the Kingdom of Life. Christian politics has to do with the question of the proper nature of the State, with the real limits of its authority, etc.

But we Christians must be aware not only of what the Word of God drives us to do; we must also become culturally aware, by means of the light the Word of God sheds on our culture and our history, what the religious significance is of the political phenomena we encounter immediately before us. That is, we are called by God to judge the spirits that are in the world.

To understand what our stance ought to be in the present political world the very first requirement, it would seem to me, would be to understand what political parties are, where they came from, and what they have stood for. Especially it is important that we understand that systems of parties are cultural products formed by men out of certain fundamental convictions, and that they both can and ought to be re-formed if we do not share the fundamental conviction that gave rise to them in the first place, and also if these organizations of political conviction no longer correspond to the groupings of political conviction among the people.

Political parties as we understand them presuppose the modern democracy of the masses. The party is an element for the formation of political will. It represents in certain functions the people who cannot otherwise be a political factor. Edmund Burke spoke of the political party as “a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interests upon some particular principle on which they are all agreed, “to which we might wish to add that the party is such a united group following a leader or leaders who desire to gain and maintain control—that could be, have the people assign them control—over governmental power. The party is thus the necessary intermediary between the population and the public powers; the party permits voters to select public officers and to influence policy, and the party undertakes to operate the machinery of government. It stimulates voters to participate in politics and educates them.

It has been said that the Young Hegelians were the first political party in Germany, and there is much truth in the statement (Mc Clellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, p. 28). But they only became a political party gradually and their party was never exclusively political. They were admirers of Rousseau and the French Revolution, they compared themselves to the ‘mountain’ (la montagne) and it was D.F. Strauss’ theological book, *Das Leben Jesus* that brought out the real nature of the group and had the most influence on its development (McClellan, p. 3). Their focal point was the University of Berlin, and only when Frederick William IV succeeded to the throne of ‘Prussia in 1840 did the attendant relaxation of press censorship open the newspapers for a short time to the Young Hegelians’ propaganda.

But everywhere Rousseau, the freedom of the rational will, Kant’s doctrine of the autonomy of the moral person (which he confessed he learned from Rousseau), and the resulting French Revolution were the galvanizing factors in the formation of modern party-systems. Christians had withdrawn

intellectualistically into the abstract world of theological conceptualization and regarded faith as actual or implied assent to a certain internally more or less consistent system of propositions (the drive towards unity in theology as in any science, like logic or physics), or else had reacted against such theologism in movements like Pietism or, in Roman Catholic circles, Quietism. The world stage was emptied so that the new secular world view of rationalism could take over the driver's seat and give direction to human affairs.

This new movement, after the makeshift settlement of 1648 (The Peace of Westphalia), which caused its provisions never to be widely enforced, was a radical departure from the past. In the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the unbelief of the Italian Renaissance had crossed the Alps into France, England, and returned, and with the Revolution broke out into the practical affairs of men's lives. Read, for example, chapter 13 of Ernst Cassirer's book *The Myth of the State*.

Now for the first time there breaks out into the practical life of Europe the view that men have no need of God or of any Word from Him that would give Direction—salutary Direction—to our life in this world.

In this rationalistic movement we men are thought of as being on our own, as having come of age. Self-determination (of the individual and of peoples) has been the parole ever since. In the Wars of Religion men still had largely thought of religion as the fundamental dynamic of life, but since there was no unanimity of conviction, no universal consensus could be achieved except that one (dogmatic) party or the other came to prevail. Thus the Wars of Religion and consensus was necessary for a stable society. Now, rationalists come on the scene denying that religion is the fundamental dynamic of human life. Rationality takes over, and the universal validity of the old orthodoxy (*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus credendum est*) gives way to the claim of the new men of the universal validity of a Reason common to all men. As one man put it, "La raison est de tous les climats".

This concept of Reason was in fact human concoction, and was in reality a substitute for the very Word of God itself. In the concept of Reason man was assuring himself with respect to two basic and related needs. First, his need for certainty. In his deepest self man is, now in this rationalist view, the Truth. And with the a priori of Reason he himself gives Order to the world of his experience. This role properly belongs to the Word of God, God's revealing of Himself to us men. But in the concept of Reason the hand of God is within man's own rational nature. As Tom Paine's book proclaimed, Reason the Only Oracle of God. Men's second need is for community, and in the concept of Reason the possibility of human community is not in conversion and a common obedience to the Word of Christ, but in a working out of a rationality commonly shared by all men believers and unbelievers alike. In the Revolution, for which this rationalism prepared the way, the Order of God becomes the Order of Man. Here we feel the religious significance of the Revolution. The Divine Order is turned upside down, not in reality, but in the minds of men. From now on political order is reducible to free individual acts, to a voluntary contractual submission of the governed in what they took to be their own interest. Here, instead of politics being a serving of God, an administration of His creation in His Name, it becomes a politics of self-interests and of group-interested (*belangenpolitiek*; pressure group politics). Think of the victory of Locke and the Whig (rationalist) views in the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, as over against the Tory-Stuart idea of the monarch's ruling by divine right.

This religious character of Rationalism in the French Revolution undoubtedly accounts for its strange fascination for all the men of the time, and indeed down to our own time. The Revolution has to do with a radical change in the religious direction of man's life on earth. As an overturning of the Order of Creation, established and preserved by the very Word of the living God into a man-produced Order, it reveals itself as Revolution in the religious sense, a revolution against the Law and Order of God, against the mediatorial Rule of Christ, against the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Word of God, in short, against God's revelation of the Truth of our creational situation.

In all the writing of the last century and a half, the constellation of events that goes by the name French Revolution stands out above everything else. English men of letters almost without exception greeted the revolutionary movement across the channel as the dawn of a new day of hope for all mankind. Wordsworth, referring to a love affair in France at the time, wrote later,

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very Heaven."

But Edmund Burke abhorred what he saw. All men, however they viewed it, had a kind of presentiment that they "had to do with" what was taking place there in France. Ever since, men have unceasingly been attempting to determine their positions with respect to the awesome event.

Edmund Burke already wrote in 1796 that it was a world revolution fundamentally affecting all humanity. He said, "It is not France extending a foreign empire over other nations; it is a sect aiming at universal empire, and beginning with the conquest of France."

But in our own time, after the positivist historiographers have had their day, there has been a strong return to the view that the French Revolution is perhaps the most fundamental event of modern times. Karl Jaspers, whose name you all recognize, writes of it that "it was an event without precedent in human history, and that since the French Revolution there is a specifically new awareness of the epoch-making significance of the time."

Hans Sedlmayer, art historian at the University of Munich, in a book published in 1955 writes:

In the years and decades before 1789 an inner revolution set in Europe, the range of which the mind could not discern: the events we group together under the name 'French Revolution' are themselves only a more visible aspect of this awful inner catastrophe. Up to the present we have not succeeded in getting a firm hold on the situation this event has created, neither in the spiritual nor in the practical realm. To understand what there took place is perhaps the most vital task assigned the historical sciences in general: in this turning point of history we are interested not only as historians but quite immediately as men. For with it our present begins, and from it we come to know our situation, come to know ourselves.

Rationalism, the new view of man, the ground of his certainty and the possibility of community, the view that man is the ultimate orderer of and bestower of meaning upon his experience, was a humanistic

substitute for the Christian religion. The traditional definition of orthodoxy, viz. “quod simper, quod obique, quod ab omnibus credendum est,” became the “la raison est de tous les climats.”

It was a revolt against whatever of divine revelation had guided men’s lives and actions in the past. It is this that makes the French Revolution such a fundamental turning point in human history. Edmund Burke used religious language to describe the Revolution as a sect aiming at universal empire. It was not just a change of dynasties. It was a new kind of political event. Since then we have had a succession of revolutions—1830, 1830, 1848, Latin American revolutions, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Revolution—and men have called the period of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the Age of Revolution. Men have spoken of the Permanent Revolution, and a famous article in Fortune magazine (Feb. 1951, p. 68), later separately reprinted, carries the pregnant title, “The American Proposition: A Permanent Revolution in the Affairs of Men.”

The Reign of Terror into which the Revolution so quickly turned, forced men to render an account of what had happened. Three distinct attitudes or stances emerged, and this is what we shall have to understand if we are to get to the bottom of our present system of political party organization

#### A. The Consistent Believers

There were, first, the consistent believers, the complete rationalists. Some men, beholding the blood bath in all its hideousness, continued on their course in a straight line, determined. They believed fully in their cause, which was that religion, and specifically the Christian religion, had been a bad superstition that had held men back from that complete scientific mastery of the conditions of their existence which would bring peace and blessedness on earth. They wanted to free themselves utterly from their past enslavement to such bonds and give themselves whole-hearted to the task of self redemption. They could do it in the power of Reason. Reason would show the way to humanity’s unbelievably glorious future. But, then, they had to follow its demands. Reason was the Law, the Law of Freedom. They would have to be consistent, no matter what. Those who had learned how best to apply their rational powers to the conquest of the environment were the ones who spoke with Reason’s own authority.

They were rationalism’s leaders. E.G. members of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. This is a perversion of the scriptural idea of ‘office’. They, the elite of Reason, had by their rational analysis and technical planning to make the world safe for all its inhabitants. The uninformed and willful masses would have to be compelled to obey the clear dictates of Reason. After all, the *salus* (salvation) of all the people, even of all peoples, is at stake. And so these elite classes of Reason proceed to cut off heads. Out of a single-hearted devotion to their Principle. Mind you, out of a (somewhat abstract!) love for all mankind. Anyone who, without equal rational investigation and insight, proposes some other course makes himself guilty of opposing, not the opinion of a certain number of human voices, but the revelation of Reason itself. But Reason is the power that saves. Opposition, therefore, is like proposing genocide or race—suicide. Off with the heads of the opposition! Reason frees. Then the opposition must be compelled to be free! Repressive tolerance!

When we render an account of the horrible deeds of the men of the Terror we must not play this feature short. Dostoevshky has written a number of times about the destructive and even criminal

possibilities of reason. "In *The Possessed* a group of political intellectuals are shown as being possessed by devils, ready to scheme, lie, and even kill for the abstract ideals of Progress, Reason, and Socialism." It was not that they were extreme or ruthless; it was their whole hearted or pure commitment to principle, in this case a false and thus destructive principle (a deception of Satan), self-worship.

These radical believers in the cause of the Revolution were on their way (the modern idea of Progress). There was no law, except of their own making (the self-legislation of Reason). There was no revelational Law-Order of Creation to which they were created and of which they would have to take cognizance. The world for them was a thoroughly open world and endless experimentation was the free route to travel. There is no marriage structure anchored in the Word of God which in speaking gives the creation its structure. Try communes, state regulated cohabitations, free-love; God's Law-Word holds them in bonds. They seek freedom but find themselves everywhere in chains. Humiliated and defeated, they stand up again and struggle on. They want, above all, to be 'free'. Sometimes such 'believers' are not far from the Gospel of the Kingdom.

#### B. The 'Resigned' Believers

A second stance toward the awful events of the French Revolution was that of the 'resigned' believers. Their attitude comes down to something like this: The idea of the Revolution is OK but we simply cannot allow all that bloodshed. This group did not object the principles of the Revolution, but only to the speed and thoroughness with which the confident believers proceeded to carry them out. They wanted to travel in the same direction, but at a slower pace. They were less thoroughly abstract in their logic, and more ready to accommodate themselves to the requirements of the immediate situation. They might be called resigned believers. They were the petty bourgeoisie, the shop-keepers, who found it in the interest of their business to slow down the pace of events. Nevertheless, they were outspokenly for "freedom" and for them; too, freedom meant breaking the bonds that in the past had held them subject to traditional 'spiritual' and 'secular' authority. At heart, then, they were progressivists; they looked not to the bindings of the past but only to an entirely open future of new construction, of innovation of novelty. Only the Program was not to be so ruthlessly carried out; to ensure success, the leaders of the Revolution would have to reckon more concretely with the existing situation. These were the Moderates or Liberals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; now sometimes called Libertarians.

#### C. The Conservative Reaction

A third reaction to the violence of the Revolution criticized the fundamental ideas of the revolutionary movement, but it did not criticize them fundamentally enough. The men who shared this general point of view represented a number of traditions and held the common position for varying reasons. What they had in common was a fear of the abstract reasoning of the revolutionaries, of the leveling tendency of their ideas, of their radical rejection of the past in favor of innovation and the new. These men were opposed to innovationism, and to progressivism. They wished to conserve the values of the past, the traditional societal order, the established ways. Some were largely opportunistic conservatives, who desired above all to hold on to their inherited lands and wealth, their positions of privilege. But many really believed in an Order that is previous to our doing. A large part of the group was undoubtedly

made up of those who still, albeit vaguely, represented the old synthetic idea of medieval Christendom, passed down in England, e.g. in the influential writings of Richard Hooker. They speak of the finger of God in history, of Design, even of providential operation in the slow grinding out of the mill of history. But along with Christians who may by thinking of the God of the Scriptures there are the others who are thinking in terms of Aristotle's hierarchy of 'forms' of his immanent teleology or purposiveness of nature, and of the Stoic cosmic logos. It is this attitude of synthesis which precludes conservatism's ever becoming a genuinely Christian political movement that could prove so influential, even decisive, in our troubled time. For fundamentally, conservatism, like the rationalistic mind of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries which it professes on so many points to despise, shares with that mind the fear of a religiously divided cultural life. It therefore confuses the Creation Order established by the Word of God, a revelational Order capable of being grasped by the religious heart of man, with an intelligible world order, grasped by intellect. It must therefore make its appeal to reasonable men; men of reason, and thus does not get to the bottom of the crisis of our culture and see that rationality is only a type of functional process directed from out of a heart open or closed to the Word of God.

Here then we have the three basic attitudes that emerged clearly from the holocaust of the French Revolution: The confident believers, often called the Radicals, whose belief in Reason determined the direction of political life in the new revolutionary age; the moderate progressivists or liberals, who followed along in the same principal direction, but more slowly, more gradually, accommodating themselves more to existing circumstances; and finally the conservatives, who saw more in the past that ought to be conserved and accordingly reacted against the abstract innovationism of the revolutionaries.

After the first stage of the Revolution had run its course, the direction of western political life fell largely to the Liberals or Moderates, to whom the Radicals or confident believers appeared as extremists. These Liberals, though in agreement with the principal direction of the Revolution, hesitated, compromised, accommodated, adjusted their course of action, in their own—often quite material—interest. These Liberals have taught us, who live in a history they in general have molded, to believe the Revolution went wrong because of the excesses of the Radicals. We Christians must see that it was not any excess that constituted the fault, but the essential revolutionary direction of events; the religious dynamic that gave direction to affairs was a destructive one. The principium heralded by the revolutionaries, viz. the Light of Reason, Reason the only Oracle of Man, etc., is not the Principium of life, but is an antithetical distortion, and a no-thing (idol). And to follow it's leading, with whatever degree of commitment, in whatever tempo, can only lead to a sickening of society and its ultimate destruction, except for the intervention of God, who always maintains His Thesis (Word) and restrains the destruction which the wicked would bring about.

As Christians we should have respect for the Radicals of the Revolution to the extent that they were believers. They had seen something of the real structure of life. Their influence was destructive because they had put their faith in an idol, an on-diny, a no-thing.

The Liberals moved generally forward in the same revolutionary stress but their adjustments out of so-called practical and utilitarian considerations made them appear more "zakelijk" (realistic), view the



driving religious principle or dynamic that alone was yet operative to give direction to the course of events.

The Liberals accused the Radicals of anarchism. The Radicals accused the Liberals of half-heartedness, of irresolution. But we must remember that the consistent form of an error is even worse than a half-hearted embrace of it. At the same time, those who embrace the principle of the revolution inconsistently—i.e. the Liberals—are actually preparing the way for that very end-result which they loathe.

Two great Christian statesmen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – Groen van Prinsterer in the Netherlands and Stahl in Germany – saw the real nature of the post-revolutionary political situation, when the modern organization of systems of parties was just emerging, and made the statement: “We are not afraid of the acute sickness of radicalism; we are afraid of the chronic sickness of liberalism. We do not fear radical revolution, but gradual dissolution.” I think we ought to ponder these words for a long time when we reflect on the history of political life in the USA. In what direction has our political life been slowly pulling us over the years? Can we speak of the radical danger of liberalism?

During most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century radicalism remained a peripheral movement—out on the side-lines. But the range of influence of the revolutionary ideas was considerably enlarged in the revolution in Switzerland in 1798, the revolutions of 1815, 1830, and 1848. The great masses of the uprooted workers (the Industrial Revolution with its inequities) were becoming involved. In all this there fell to those conservatives we talked about the extremely heavy task of attempting to stem the revolutionary tide. In this way the political landscape of the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to be dominated by the two figures of liberalism and conservatism.

So enthralled had western men become by this whole onrushing spectacle that the choice between the progressivism of the liberals on the one hand, and on the other the conservatives (originally) firm rejection of the shallow and abstract ‘Reason’ of the Enlightenment for the accumulated wisdom of the ages, fixed in prescription and prejudice, tradition and habit, could not but appear to be the most fundamental choice with which they would be confronted. It appeared that only conservatism offered resistance to the abstract reason and endless experimentation of this Liberals. This is the point of view the 20<sup>th</sup> century has inherited though in a somewhat modified form which I’ll explain in a moment. But the real choice in life, which is between keeping and reveling against the Word of God—see Psalm 1, esp. vs. 6 and Prov. 1--, has been mistakenly shifted. The political disjunction, the political alternative, the radical choice in political life is said to be liberalism versus conservatism.

In the cultural mandate given Adam; man is to dress and keep the garden. Conservation (of what was created good) and progress (its cultural unfolding or development) are not alternative choices, of a disjunction; they are in fact complementary aspects of the integral human task. This incidentally, is why the observation that we will always have cautious conservatives and audacious liberals among Christians cannot justify the Christian body’s being torn asunder in the two humanistic movements of conservatism and liberalism.

But we have seen how it came about that, when in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the possibility of sharing in the determination of the direction of the life of the state (political parties!) was opened up to the newly awakened masses of men, the organization of political life fell except for the more or less peripheral radical movements, into the two supposed directions of liberalism and conservatism. At a certain pregnant moment in the history of western men this choice appeared on the political horizon as the decisive and radical choice of mankind. This explains the feelings of high regard for the two-party system and its ideal desirability, a feeling that frequently comes close to acknowledging its sacrosanctity.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Radicalism has come to the forefront; small efforts at Christian action have arisen in a number of European countries; and we feel more insistently the need for a multi-party system and proportional representation.

II. WHY OUR POLITICIANS, BOTH LIBERALISTIC AND CONSERVATISTIC, HAVE BECOME PRAGMATIC, REALISTIC, FLEXIBLE, SUPPLE (Both Nixon and McGovern have used these terms to describe themselves in this campaign.)

The liberalism which generally gradually gained the upper hand in the direction of political life was not a radical or consistent application of the antithetical religious commitment represented by rationalism. The Liberals were not whole-hearted believers; they were compromisers. They had rightly seen the destruction that had followed upon a whole-hearted acceptance of the pseudo-revelational principle of Reason. If they had drawn the conclusion that this principle of rationalism was an idol, nothing at all but a distortion of the Truth, they would have been on the right path. But this is not the real significance of the liberalistic movement in modern political life. The Liberals offered no principal criticism of the faith of the Radicals; they merely criticized the ruthlessness of execution of what were taken to be Reason's demands. The Liberals wanted an orderly and quiet course of events, what someone has called the "silent revolution." These bourgeois capitalists, weaned from Christianity, had themselves imbibed the spirit of the Enlightenment. But they needed peace and rest for their business interests. They accommodated themselves to what they called the factual situation. They adjusted to the facts. Without distancing themselves from the principal direction of radicalism, they became skillful adjusters. They said that they allowed the immediate factual situation to guide them. For the Christian the facts are meaningless except and viewed in their subjection to the Law-Word of God for the creation. But this insight was lacking in liberalism. Recoiling from the evil consequences of living whole-heartedly by the light of the pseudo-principle or pseudo-Word of the radical revolutionaries, they found nothing to take the place of that principle. Or rather, they attempted to allow the 'facts' to take the place of a principle. At this point the liberals are without direction, blind, drifting with the immediate so-called facts of every day's concern for making a living. The liberals became opportunists. Supple, they like to call it. But it really means blind. That is why our politicians are like rabbits that scatter at the sound of the gunshot into whatever hole is close at hand.

Rejecting the guidance of the Word of God, liberalism can offer no resistance to the antithetical pseudo-principle of the revolution. Actually, to the extent that some guiding principle must be present, it is the principle of the modern rationalistic revolution. But at the same time its hideous revolutionary character

is obscured under its “supple” living with the “facts.” (This is what those 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian statesmen meant by fearing the chronic sickness of liberalism more than the acute sickness of radicalism.) Liberalism pulls us constantly to the Left, but without our becoming so very conscious of it.

Likewise, the conservative movement was no more able than liberalism to offer principial resistance to the gradual but constant revolutionary ‘drift to the Left. True, the conservatives were opposed to innovationism. But, as we saw, conservatism was unwilling to deal radically with the religious root of the Revolution. From the beginning the conservative political movement belongs to the modern world. Edmund Burke came out of a Whig background and had imbibed many notions of the prevalent humanism and ‘enlightenment.’ Conservatism appealed to rationality and an intelligible order, supposedly common to Christians and Platonists, Aristotelians and Stoics. It was not a specifically Christian movement. Really at issue was the question, what revelation-light gives us direction in our life: By confusing revelation, which is religiously appropriated, with intelligibility which is grasped by a common rationality, the conservatives avoided the question of a religiously divided European culture. They, with the Liberals, feared a religiously divided Europe, and were inclined to accept rationalism’s alternative. This explains the powerlessness of conservatism to turn the religious direction political life had taken.

Conservatism fell into an identification of the Law Word of God for historical development with what has developed in history (which is, in fact, a creature response to God’s Word). Over against the abstract rationalistic thought-constructions of the rationalists Burke put the organic growth of English constitutional law and institutions. The conservative movement became allied with the Historic Right School of jurisprudence. This school, Ernst Cassirer tells us (in *The Myth of the State*), “declared that history was the source, the very origin of right. There is no authority above history.” (p. 228) The rights of man are not abstractly conceived ‘natural rights’ sectioned by a prior Reason; for the conservative sees the sanction for the rights of men and of institutions in the hoary antiquity of those rights. The Law-Word of God, which alone declares what is good and right and just is drawn down into the history of process and identified with the ‘finger of God’, the gradual working out of the right in the development of history. Thus, the scriptural view of reality has been reduced in this conservatism to a form of historical relativism. Whatever establishes itself and gains recognition in the slow ‘growth’ of history is right. Here we see a fundamental kinship to the ‘enlightened’ view of the positive rightness of all that is. There is no divine law other than and above historical development, no disobedience of man in his working out his life in history, no need of religious reformation. Is all historical change ‘organic growth’? Are there no irreconcilable conflicts in history?

Once having taken his position within historical development, the conservative is lost. For history presents us with a continuous flux. At first, the conservatives, true to their criterion of historically acquired rights, defended the traditional orders and classes of European society and attempted to maintain against the innovations of the new “purely rationally” conceived society, the old patriarchal conditions. But very soon their real problem began to press them. If rights are historically acquired, what about the ‘rights’ of the new revolutionary movement? This movement was gaining wide support among the rising industrial classes. How far would this historical development have to go, and how long would it have to prevail before it too became integrated into the slow ‘growth’ of history? How happy would

the Christians with their conservative 'ideology' in an Asiatic or African country where the Christian Church say, had no historically acquired rights, but cannibalism did?

Caught in this historical relativism, the conservative could either fall back into a reactionary defense of the past, of already vested interests, and thus lose all genuine relevancy and have no significant view about the dynamic,, the novel, in history; or he could find himself in the most unhappy position of following along after the more progressive or innovative accomplishments of the liberals (or more radical spirits), serving chiefly as a brake upon the dynamic movement of innovation. As the power of the Christian faith waned in a quickly secularizing Europe and the belief in metaphysics approached collapse, the position of conservatism came to be more and more that of a middle-road 'take it easy' correction of the more vital course developed by liberals. You can see why the charge has been leveled that "conservatism as an ideology lacks what might be termed a substantial ideal", i.e. a norm or principle of its own by which it can develop a distinctive standpoint; that the tag conservatism has been used to justify any existing order, at any stage of history; that one does not find in conservative circles any indication of the character of the political institutions and way of life that conservatism as an ideology would be interested in defending.

The collapse of faith in metaphysical constructions which characterized the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cooled whatever convictions men still held as to the capacity of 'Reason' to direct their lives. Men were becoming aware that men have not reasoned in the same way in all ages and places. Anthropological and ethnological investigations taught Europeans the relativity of rational insight. Enlightenment belief in a common reason began to fade. But with it, the religious strength of the revolutionary movement. It didn't take long to draw the conclusion that if men's reasoning is different in different situations it may not be an authoritative Director or Principle out in front (a priori) to a higher instrument of adaptation to a contingent physical environment. Where such a conclusion was drawn; men were left without a guiding Principle (their faith had been in an idol, a no-thing) in a swirling world of changing factual states. This development brought the liberal movement too to a position of blind movement within factual situations that supposedly "said something about how to act. And conservatism, which had in a similar fashion found itself without any substantive ideal, more and more tended to drag along behind the liberals.

Now both conservatives and liberals find themselves immersed in a "common factuality", which either speaks commonly to men or can be mastered by the application of a common technology, the traditionally liberal movement more progressively experimenting towards a new and enlarged freedom, the traditionally conservative group serving as a brake upon innovation and seeking to maintain the established order.

We can begin to understand the charge that has been made of the tweedledum-tweedledee character of conservatism and liberalism. We can begin to understand the widespread political apathy which characterized the student world of the 50's and now once again, in a modified form, after the wild uninformed plunge into activism of the 60's seems to be found in large areas of the student world.

Everywhere in the world of modern political life we encounter this liberal-conservative polarity. There two movements have in reality lost their original sense of providing mankind with its great choice of direction in life. There is in human life a divergence of ways—a way of life and a way of death, and this central religious direction ought to find its way out into political articulation, so that political life may share in the real meaning of human life before and under the Word of God. But such a meaning cannot be given as long as we cling to an organization of political parties which, since the French Revolution, has become traditional. Today some see the writing on the wall and speak of the complementarity of the two parties. We must remember, then, the completely humanistic orientation of both. Liberalism tears ‘freedom’ and ‘progress’ out of their connection with man’s responsible position in office, where he is called to give new form to reality in the freedom of a whole-hearted subjection to the life-sustaining Law of God, and thus it proclaims a destructive doctrine of ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’. Conservatism drags the religious Office of man down to orders and establishments which have arisen in the course of history, and therefore present us with a distorted and dangerous view of authority (from which because of man’s injustice, violent reaction can be expected). Moreover, conservatism cannot account for the dynamic unfolding of the Kingdom of God. Neither of these two modern political movements can in any conceivable way be acceptable homes for Christian political life. It follows that the organization of the political life of a people within a national territory into this kind of bipolar structure is just as little acceptable. For the implied disjunction is not a proper one; neither of the alternatives is correctly formulated, and there is another political position possible, viz. a vigorous political articulation of the central religious knowledge that Christians have in Christ; a scripturally directed view of freedom and progress, of authority, of societal order and the proper limits of political authority etc. If Christians do not allow their principial protest to be heard against the present structuration of political life and do not make an attempt to articulate their own political faith, they can scarcely be said to be witnessing in a scriptural manner in their time and place. And if they do not thus witness, they can scarcely complain when they no longer find it possible to express themselves within the cultural forms of their times and thus find themselves squeezed out of the public life of the nation as Christians.

No radically Christian movement ought ever to lose itself in reformism, that is, in advocating piecemeal reforms and superficial adjustments (band-aid measures) which merely make a bankrupt system work more efficiently. This is to fail to live at a distance, i.e. by the light of the Word. Christian political action must never become a kind of Christian front organization for the American way of life. Groen van Prinsterer put it this way: To get rid of an evil it is not sufficient to combat its symptoms, but the germ has to be removed. The only antidote to systematic unbelief is belief, radical and comprehensive faith in the Word of God that liberates all of life from the Evil One, and bestows upon us God’s own order and peace, His abiding Shalom.

