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Dr. Jelle Zijlstra: Gesprekken en Geschriften (Book Review)

McKendree R. Langley

Dordt College

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

Dr. Jelle Zijlstra: Gesprekken en Geschriften, by George Puchinger. Naarden, The Netherlands: A.J.G. Strengtholt, 1978. 383 pages, 55 guilders (\$27). Reviewed by McKendree R. Langley, Associate Professor, Abraham Kuyper Chair, Dordt Lectureship Center.

This book concerns the public career of a contemporary Christian economist, Dr. Jelle Zijlstra. In an age of growing financial insecurity and scarcity of raw materials, reflection on questions of the relation of economics and politics to the Christian faith becomes increasingly important to believers. Thus George Puchinger, Director of the Protestant Documentation Center at the Free University of Amsterdam, has published this valuable book of conversations and documents on Dr. Zijlstra's serious attempt to integrate political economy with Christian norms. Puchinger has also provided valuable insights into the history of the Anti-Revolutionary Party of the Netherlands from 1952 to 1967.

I.

Zijlstra's career began at the top of the academic world as a full professor in a university and reached the highest positions in politics and banking. He was professor of theoretical economics from 1948 to 1952 at the Free University of Amsterdam. Because he was committed to Reformed scholarship, Zijlstra enjoyed discussions with G.C. Berkouwer and Herman Dooyeweerd, although he had some disagreements with the latter's closed philosophical system.

In 1952 the socialist Prime Minister Willem Drees, Sr., asked the Anti-Revolutionary Zijlstra to accept the cabinet post of Minister of Economic Affairs. This appointment was of historic importance since Zijlstra was the first member of his party to sit in a socialist-led cabinet. He served in that post under Drees until December, 1958, when he became Minister of Finances in the cabinets of two Catholic prime ministers, Dr. L.J.M. Beel

(1958-1959) and Dr. J.E. De Quay (1959-1963). During the election campaigns of 1956 and 1959 Zijlstra was also chairman of the Anti-Revolutionary parliamentary caucus in the Second Chamber and headed his party's election tickets. As Anti-Revolutionary parliamentary leader he had an important part in the negotiations concerning the formation of the Beel and De Quay governments. From 1963 to 1966 he was a special professor of public finance at the Free University while also serving as a member of the less demanding Senate which is the First Chamber of Parliament. In November, 1966, Queen Juliana asked Zijlstra to form an interim cabinet. He did this; he was Prime Minister and he also held the portfolios of General Affairs and Finances. Prime Minister Zijlstra went out of office in April, 1967. A month later he became the president of the Netherlands Central Bank. In June, 1967, he also became the president of the Bank for International Payments in Basel, Switzerland. Zijlstra still holds these two important bank presidencies.

In 1952 at the international conference, which ratified the European Coal and Steel Community, West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (age 76) urged Zijlstra (age 34) to assign highest importance to European integration. Zijlstra, carrying out Adenauer's request, became an ardent champion of the European Economic Community (pp. 105-106). In September, 1962, Zijlstra had lunch with President John F. Kennedy at the White House during a meeting of the International Monetary Fund. Kennedy had such an intensive discussion with him on Dutch economic policy, the independence of New Guinea, Dutch relations with Indonesia, and American nuclear policy that Zijlstra scarcely had time to eat (pp. 101-104). In

spite of his great success in public affairs Zijlstra often remarked that he was not a "political animal" (pp. 105, 202). He preferred the scholar's study to the campaign platform. As a cabinet minister he sometimes had difficulty with the Anti-Revolutionary leadership but not with the party rank-and-file.

Zijlstra was so loyal to the Anti-Revolutionary cause that he never voted for candidates of another party. Yet he willingly worked with apparent success with socialists and liberals in various governments. He is presently a strong supporter of the Christian Democratic Appeal, the new united party of Anti-Revolutionaries, Christian Historicals, and Catholics. He made it clear that in government he could work with socialist reformists like Willem Drees, Sr., but not with representatives of the militant New Left. But he felt a Christian party in Holland should never make a commitment in advance to form a government with only liberals or socialists (p. 205).

As president of the Netherlands Central Bank, Zijlstra's responsibilities are to regulate the Dutch guilder and the national credit and keep them on a sound basis. One of his greatest concerns in government and in banking has been to warn that inflation is one of the worst forms of social injustice, especially for the poor (pp. 88, 91, 92, 94, 208, 237). Zijlstra warned that Marxist economics of total centralization leads to the Gulag Archipelago (p. 298).

II.

The most important statements and documents by Zijlstra included in the book are the following: a major critique of socialist economics (1952), his first budget speech in parliament (1952), a speech on economic policy (1954), remarks on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Free University (1955), a speech to the Anti-Revolutionary Party on economics and politics (1962), the speech "Is Christian Party Formation a Danger for Democracy?" (1963), the Prime Minister's policy declaration (1966), a speech to the Anti-Revolutionary Party on the national economic situation (1967), and an important article on the social results of inflation (1975).

Zijlstra affirmed his belief in the validity of Christian politics with the following argument. Politics in a democratic state should be based upon principles and not just on pragmatic self-interest. Christian principles are preferred above humanist ones. Christian principles can best be worked out in a party of Christians rather than in a humanist party. While the Bible does not give us a blueprint for public affairs, it does give a general direction for politics based on the Ten Commandments and on the great command to love God

and neighbor as seen from a Gospel viewpoint. The Bible also shows us the divine authority for such institutions as the family and the state. Following the Heidelberg Catechism and Psalm 25, man must learn God's ways for all of life. Finally, a Christian party can be an instrument both for working out principles and dealing with concrete issues from a normative viewpoint (pp. 297-307).

On economics Zijlstra defended a mixed economy. Total socialization of the economy is totalitarian; therefore, nationalization can be used only in a limited sense as a corrective to deal with unresolved difficulties in the private sector. While the public sector must always be kept reasonably small, it is nevertheless essential. Private saving and investment are the most efficient (pp. 220, 222, 225, 259). Consumers, businessmen, and labor unionists have various life-views. Therefore, to function properly they require pluralist freedom. A Christian economic policy must be based on a love of God and must recognize that man is made in God's image. This principled basis for economic policy can make a contribution to a more humane life for citizens (pp. 228, 246, 249, 269). Zijlstra has been a strong advocate of European economic integration because it is in Holland's interest. The re-evaluation of the Dutch guilder to keep it in balance with the West German mark was deemed necessary to keep the guilder strong in order to help the poorest elements in Dutch society. With the increasing pressures on the private sector in mind, Zijlstra concluded after his many years of experience that "to govern is to subsidize" (pp. 267, 269, 282-283, 335).

This book provides an integration of a commitment to Biblical normativity with a concern to deal with the pressing economic and political problems of modern society. Zijlstra sees the wholeness of life but avoids the common humanist absolutization of economics. His sense of Christian social responsibility in public finance is refreshing.

Yet one possible criticism of Zijlstra's conversations is that he has a kind word for virtually everyone. The obvious reason for this general pleasantness is that it is too early for him to write frank memoirs about his public life. Nevertheless the book contains many important insights on European economic and political practice.

What emerges in this book is a good example of contemporary Christian Democratic centrism with a social consciousness in the career of the Anti-Revolutionary statesman, Jelle Zijlstra. The book is an instructive corrective to the publicity given in recent years to such European movements as the Red Brigades, Eurocommunism and socialism.