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Editor's Note: This article was presented by Dr. Egbert Schuurman as the annual Groen van Prinsterer Lecture for 2011, sponsored by the *ChristenUnie* or Christian Union, a political party in the Netherlands. The lecture series is named after Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876), the father of modern Dutch Christian politics. Egbert Schuurman, P.Eng., Ph.D., was senator for the Christian Union in the Dutch parliament from 1983 through 2011.

Courage in Politics: The Challenge for Christian Politicians



by Egbert Schuurman

To stimulate and support reflection about Christians in politics, not to speak of Christian politics as such, is not a luxury but a constant necessity. Every generation is called upon to articulate and assert first principles in a fresh way and to act upon them in response to the challenges of the day. On this occasion, as I retire from the Senate, I would like to share some of my thoughts on the challenges of our time, to follow up with what I believe is a promising perspective for a Christian approach to politics today. My guiding theme will

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be: What should be the main issue for a Christian in politics in a rapidly changing culture?

Our Time

A main characteristic of our time is materialism. It is a widespread worldview—a religion really, one that regards reality as self-sufficient and considers humanity, with its reason and cultural power, to be autonomous, capable of acting on its own authority. Not being dependent on God, man conceives himself to be in control.

Our universities exemplify this religious worldview very well. Most scholars have no room for a transcendent reality that man has to take into account, let alone one for which man is actually accountable to God. Through science, technology, economy, and organization, a secular mindset has gained control over many people, especially since this mindset has historically brought us enormous material wealth, which appears to suffice for most people. Our culture has become thoroughly materialistic and individualistic, blind to the spiritual dimensions of existence and with little or no consideration for the essential relationships in life. There was never a time when material wealth was as great as it is in our time, but also never a time when the spiritual void was so grave. And therefore there has never before been a time when we spoke, as we do today, of a great moral crisis. This crisis comes to expression especially in broken social relationships and in the enormous cultural crises of our age.

The materialistic culture, even as its worldwide influence continues to grow, is cracking at the seams.

The big problems of finance and economics, energy, food, water, climate, and natural resources have their flip side in individualization, the loss of secure relationships like marriage and family, abortion on demand, the blurring of moral standards, sexualization, increasing youth criminality, addiction, vulgarization, and, not to forget, the self-enrichment of *the fat cats*. These are all symptoms of a deeper malady; they are not themselves the disease. As a “doctor of culture,” the cultural philosopher Nietzsche di-

There is therefore only one dominant, all-encompassing religious dynamic at work in history: namely, Christ, the Lord of history.

agnosed this disease already toward the end of the nineteenth century, when he declared that “God is dead.” The highest values were declared worthless in a revalorization of all values that left even Nietzsche deeply unsatisfied. At the same time he wanted to raise mankind to a higher level—to the level of the *Übermensch*, who is driven by the will to power: the strong, mighty human being who transcends his own possibilities and empowers himself by building modern Towers of Babel.

It took until just after the Second World War—the process was gradual and crept in almost unnoticed—before this lawless and presumptuous conviction gained influence over many. It has put its stamp on what I shall call (1) the “small personal culture,” in which a sense of sin is no longer present, and (2) the “big material culture” of the interconnected complex of Science, Technology, Economy, and Organization, abetted by the management and bureaucracy that go with it. In this paper I shall differentiate between these two cultures. Even though they are obviously linked, we need to distinguish between them if we are to gain greater insight into the problems of our culture in general and the response to it by Christian politics in particular. We need a closer, in-depth analysis in an intellectual-spiritual sense if we are to understand how the “small personal culture” and the “big material culture” have developed over the course of time.

The Motor of History

For me personally, it was especially Professor Johan Mekkes (1898–1987), who as a philosopher and a biblical thinker shed much light on the dynamic nature of history. I shall be quoting him several times.¹ In his studies on Christian politics, Mekkes points to the biblical “ground-motive” of all of creation. That dynamic force is Christ. He is there at creation, He leads it through history, and He redeems the history of creation. In this way Christ has brought the new perspective of the consummation of everything in the Kingdom of God. This perspective is realized by way of the Cross—of deliverance from human apostasy. Hence the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world. But even as the creation sighs and groans, Christ’s Kingdom will triumph! No one can escape from this motor of history, which gives history an unstoppable dynamic. The whole of created reality is in His hand. In short, Christ is the meaning of history. All things are of Him and through Him and to Him. He has appointed the law of creation—later also called by Mekkes “the law of creation and redemption”—for the course of history. This law of creation is summarized in the law of love and righteousness and is focused on life, peace, and justice for all people and all things. Christ’s Kingdom will only come in its fullness beyond the horizon of earthly time.

There is therefore only one dominant, all-encompassing religious dynamic at work in history: namely, Christ, the Lord of history. All other (religious) dynamics, including that of the putative autonomy of the Western Enlightenment, live parasitically off this one. Resistance to this dynamic gives rise to all forms of dialectical tensions, struggles, and conflicts, whereby culture gets tangled in its own safety net, as it were, and people become disoriented in reality. Nevertheless, even as they resist, people remain bound by the law of creation and redemption. This law even subjects humanity to judgment. That is why the many problems, tensions, and crises of our time will not have the final say. Humanity’s overconfident pretentiousness must lose the battle against the superior power of Christ’s rule.

This law of creation is focused on the great future, and man’s disobedient actions against it are turned around and corrected from time to time.

While this disobedience lasts, however, suffering in one form or another can be enormous. Nothing precise can be said about when and how a crisis reaches a tipping point where a reorientation sets in. God does not allow humans in their conceitedness to disrupt everything to the bitter end. In this there is something of the divine mystery in history. Sometimes disasters can put humans back on track. We then say, euphemistically, that the quay turns the ship: things will run their course, although in the meantime there will be a price to pay.

Surprising reversals happen in both the “small personal culture” and the “big material culture” of Science, Technology, Economy, and Organization. The unexpected fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the Arabic revolution in our time are examples of this. For that matter, after such upheavals we usually see actions in reverse, counter-developments that call forth new tensions in culture. In the midst of this history of constantly alternating tensions and sometimes of open despair, political and cultural activity remains meaningful, thanks to the dominance of Christ’s kingly rule. Seen in this light, Christian politics is always timely and topical, not as a fact but as a mandate²—even when the cultural context changes.

The Enlightenment

For example, at the dawn of the Modern Age in the history of the West, two movements, Renaissance and Reformation, breathed new life into the original cultural mandate for mankind. As a result, culture flourished enormously. The Reformation did so to the glory of God, the Renaissance for the glory of man. In the eighteenth century the movement of the Enlightenment linked up with the latter, radicalizing and popularizing it. The leading lights of that intellectual and deeply spiritual movement devoted much thought to cultural development but without any reference to God’s sovereignty. They called upon man to use his own mind and to map out his own future. Since then we have seen man’s growing insistence on autonomous freedom and an increase in his domination over nature and society.

The Enlightenment was characterized by two ideals: a *freedom ideal* that promoted personal autonomy, and a *science ideal* that aimed at controlling and dominating nature. These ideals have brought

many positive things into being. Just consider the many material developments in the area of health care, job creation, science and technology, and the advancement of material prosperity. Widespread participation in all kinds of education is also a fruit of the Enlightenment.

With the further radicalization of the Enlightenment in our own day, however, we seem to have gotten stuck. That is because humanity’s power—science, technology, economy, organization—and humanity’s freedom are increasingly being divorced from their life-giving origin and so made absolute. What we are up against is the derailment of both the ideal of science and the ideal of freedom. Both ideals lack a metaphysical connection and a transcendent origin: they are blind to the spiritual dimension of existence; they are modern idols.³ To probe the seriousness of the tensions in today’s culture, we need to pay more attention to the consequences of these two ideals of the Enlightenment.

The Freedom Ideal

Individual freedom, so extolled by the Enlightenment, has in its “unnormed” form inflicted much damage on a well-ordered society. In our culture, freedom is increasingly a kind of anarchistic freedom; it is a freedom pried loose from communal, societal freedom and cut adrift from its moral basis and its moral purpose. Freedom is increasingly seen as freedom detached from responsibility, such that it becomes freedom without substance and thus a freedom that is empty and menacing. The results of the 1960s, with their persistent resistance to tradition, authority, and values, have since brought our society into imbalance. Our society, we can say, is without life or soul. Respect for human persons has suffered. An unprecedented sell-out of our very own culture has taken place without our noticing it. The witches’ cauldron of relativism has seduced many. Some commentators even speak of the “dictatorship” of relativism. Freedom in the form of indifference and debauchery—extreme godlessness—is visible everywhere. Many no longer accept marriage and family as the firm foundations of a healthy society. In the meantime, many are disturbed by this trend, and politics has been saddled with many additional social problems because of it, problems that were unthinkable in the past.

The Science Ideal

As mentioned, we also have the Enlightenment to thank for the science ideal. This ideal is actually elicited by the freedom ideal, but at the same time it threatens that freedom.⁴ Under the influence of man's desire to control and so to subdue everything, modern technology, which is based on science, penetrates and directs all of culture. And it does so in alliance with economic forces, thereby rendering culture a "materialistic" culture. Technology and economy leave their mark on everything, and the organizational power and the bureaucracy linked to it produce an ever-growing tangle that cannot be unraveled.

The modern belief in progress is anything but dead. Humans think they can safeguard their culture through limitless development of science, technology, and economics, bound together by the power of organization. Yet at the same time there is the enormous threat that the very foundation of human life will be destroyed. The brutalizing nature of current cultural developments threatens the very sustainability of the natural environment and the biosphere. Towers of Babel are being built, but on quicksand.

The engine driving the complex tangle of science, technology, economy, and organization is *technical thinking*. Whatever does not fit into the technical model is either ignored or forgotten. Reality is viewed as a technical whole that we can go on to improve through technology. This exaggerated technical way of thinking is translated into a *technical worldview*, a human construct that functions as a cultural paradigm. The technical worldview has more and more put its stamp on the development of Western culture and is now also putting its stamp on the globalization process. All of us absorb this technical mentality with every breath we take. We all accommodate this thirst for power through the greed of consumerism.

Primacy of the Science Ideal

The undeniable fact that the ideal of scientific-technical domination constantly triumphs over the other pole of the cultural dialectic—the freedom ideal—is made possible by the exploitation of objective cultural forces, which manifest themselves in new scientific, technical, and organizational

possibilities. Among these are systems theory, information science, computer technology, genetic modification techniques, and, recently, nanotechnology. This whole development is reinforced by powerful economic forces. Even though criticism is on the rise, a cultural reversal seems virtually impossible. Why? Because of two factors: economic forces, which know of no moderation, and mass consumption, which people support because they count on getting even more blessings from science and technology.

The Gravity of the Current Malaise

It is important to emphasize that in this historical process, the cultural tensions and conflicts are taking on ever graver forms. Modern cultural forces are undergoing unheard-of growth and assuming a despotic character. The scientific-technical domination of the entire world, reinforced by one-sided economic development, not only restricts humans in their freedom but threatens to deplete natural resources, pollute the environment, and destroy nature. Of late, much attention has even been lavished on global warming and climate change. Indeed, today's unrestrained scientific-technical developments are challenging the outer limits of the environment, of energy resources, and of human

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society as such. They evoke clashes which, owing to a lack of adequate concrete solutions, can degenerate overnight into actual conflicts. Developing countries feel politically impotent in the face of global technological developments combined with economic subordination, and they commonly experience their plight as a direct form of humilia-

tion. This means that globalism in effect imposes Western materialism on other cultures. The dialectic all too easily manifests itself in conflicts between cultures, peoples, and nations. Cultural disasters can be unleashed, and not just ecological or technical but also political catastrophes may ensue.

Transformation of the “Technological Culture”

Thus, given the dominant cultural paradigm of the West, we face many new, daunting challenges. But our responses so far are in terms of the same means and methods that evoked them in the first place: the remedies turn out to be constituent elements of the very problems to be solved. And so we gradually come to see that this situation cannot go on. Is there a possibility, then, that in the current crisis we might be able to find our way to a new cultural phase in which the problems of our materialistic culture can actually be reversed? Can we come up with a different cultural paradigm that will lessen the tensions and limit—or even resolve—the existing problems and threats?

The representatives of the old cultural model will not give up easily. They will cling to the current paradigm with a certain grim determination. The powerful forces to overcome are economical, political, and cultural. Yet the more the existing development persists, the more clearly its weaknesses become apparent. The ominous global threats implicit in current thinking make this point abundantly clear. That is why many people—including politicians!—are searching for solutions that are real solutions.

Cultural Reversal

Given the looming problems in politics and the economy, we see that more and more leaders in society are becoming interested in cultural alternatives, sustainable development, and socially responsible enterprise. Unless I am mistaken, the socio-economic climate appears more amenable to drastic changes.

Concern about climate change, rising sea-levels, shifting climatic zones, disruption of ecological systems, loss of bio-diversity, new tropical diseases, etc., all cry out for change in the cultural ethos. People realize more and more that modern society, with its patterns of production, domination, and

consumption, is inherently and not accidentally unsustainable. This realization is slowly beginning to undermine the prevailing cultural paradigm.

It is therefore of the essence that post-industrial culture diminish and help solve the problems and threats of industrial culture. This will have to be a learning process of small and large steps. It will have to be a process in which what was forgotten, or what threatened to be forgotten, is again given a voice.

What we need is a quantum leap in our thinking. It is high time to turn around. We need not deny the many good things that Western culture has brought us in order to conclude that, generally speaking, unless the course of Western culture is fundamentally altered, we are heading for disaster. Think of the oil rig catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico: an event like that is a textbook illustration of what is creeping over the length and breadth of modern civilization. And again, although the cause of the nuclear debacle in Japan was a natural disaster, it is clear what caused the Fukushima power plant catastrophe: taking risks that were too high for such gigantic technical constructions that exceed human limitations. A turnabout in culture is required if we are to decrease tensions and threats.

Enlightenment of the Enlightenment

Still, many people continue to support the twin ideals of the Enlightenment. However, deep criticism of our materialistic culture will no longer ignore its effects. The growing criticism of our all too one-sided scientific-technical-economic way of dealing with nature and society reveals that we are no longer content to be held to the dilemma of absolute freedom and absolute domination.

We deprive ourselves of the proper criteria to achieve sound assessments and arrive at good decisions if in the spirit of the Enlightenment we set aside the spiritual sources of the Judeo-Christian tradition and limit ourselves to the two-hundred-year-old spiritual movement of the Enlightenment. I use the word “limit” advisedly. The idea, after all, is not to abandon the culture of the Enlightenment but to stop absolutizing it. Indeed, the Enlightenment is a critical component of Western civilization’s history of freedom. Yet it is living more and more off presumptions and principles that have

no connection to the West's older spiritual and intellectual history. Where thought is no longer given to that heritage, not only will a rich cultural history disappear, but the Enlightenment itself will be plunged into a disastrous crisis.

Broadly speaking, we can see that the cultural experiment based exclusively on the Enlightenment project has been unsuccessful. Signs of that failure are visible everywhere. Individualism has overshot the mark and has led to social disintegration; and boundless freedom threatens our environment and

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climate. These symptoms are the writing on the wall. Modernity, the culture of the Enlightenment, is stuck in a quagmire. Our culture, filthy rich materially but dirt poor spiritually, is exhibiting its metaphysical shallowness and its woeful lack of an inspirational ideal. Without such a spiritual ideal, the paradox grows ever greater between a society focused on consumerism and the need to foster sustainability. The "golden calf perspective" will disappoint more and more. Enlightenment threatens to reverse into blindness. What our times need is an enlightenment of the Enlightenment.

Toward a New Cultural Paradigm

What should the new cultural paradigm look like? What is its essence? It must be radically different from what has gone before, yet it must also somehow involve the old in the process of transformation. In the old cultural paradigm, nature is regarded as lifeless and exploited by endless manipu-

lation. Thus, while up till now nature, man, the environment, plants, and animals have been looked at from a technical point of view, as if they were machines, today the protection of *life* will have to become paramount. Science, technology, and economics should not be allowed to destroy life in all its variations and richness of form, but rather be at its service. It is from this perspective that technology and economics will be better able to answer to their meaning and purpose.

In the transition to a new cultural phase, we will not need to leave behind modern cultural possibilities as such. Nevertheless the latter will have to be made serviceable to life and to living together. A different vision is provided when *power over* is replaced by *respect for* living reality and *solidarity with* the global human community. Our objective should no longer be to harm reality through domination but instead to open it up and promote its flourishing in all its richness of color and kind. The preservation of life and well-being is far more important than mere growth in material welfare.⁵

What does the view of reality look like that has to *precede* science, technology, and economics, a view that can best help us understand how we are to arrive at a reorientation of our world? The cultural philosopher Hans Jonas can be of assistance here. Just imagine, he says, that we should find ourselves on the moon. We would be impressed by the immeasurable cosmos. From the moon we would be struck by the uniqueness of planet Earth in that gigantic cosmos. It is the only green planet in our solar system. Life exists there in a rich multiformity. If we want to survive as travelers to the moon, we shall need to return to Earth. But from the moon, says Jonas, we observe with a shock that our planet is in danger. The specialness of life is threatened by the existing technical-economical development. That will need to change. Technology and economics should not threaten life but serve it.⁶

The next step should be to better define sustainability. Sustainability concerns not only the needs of future generations but also the protection and preservation of the plant and animal kingdoms. That requires wisdom and careful stewardship. The Rathenau Institute in The Hague has recently made an eloquent plea for "bio-economics."

Another step would be to stop the procurement

of bio-fuels at the expense of food crops. Genuine sustainability is representative of the cycle of life. That does not stifle cultural progress but enhances it. It means that more thought is given to the ways of justice, in contrast to the injustices inherent in some trends in globalism.

A responsible approach to cultural development summons up a picture that reminds us of the earth as a garden, a garden that is run by people like a “community home,” where nature, technology, and culture are in harmony with each other and where all living persons and all living thing feel they belong. Most importantly, this picture encompasses everything in an inextricable relationship while at the same time preserving all things in their uniqueness. We need to respect the intrinsic worth of things before we involve them in our science-based technology. All human activity should treat things with consideration and respect. Creation and creature should be approached according to their kind; otherwise, they are emptied of life itself. That is not to make an idol of Nature. Rather, it is to acknowledge the caring work of the Creator, a work to which we humans must respond with awe. Science, technology, and economics should be focused on dwelling in the garden and maintaining and strengthening all that lives.

The metaphor of developing a garden in the direction of a “community home” also expresses our bond with the whole of creation. Reality is entrusted to us: we are not meant to be lords and masters but keepers and caregivers. It is our privilege as stewards under God to unveil and unfold creation. We should treat the gift of God’s earth in much the same way as we carefully unwrap a big present. This approach calls for real change in our attitude and behavior.

The picture thus sketched is clearly consistent with the original meaning of *oikonomos*. Caring for, nourishing, protecting, and preserving go hand in hand with cultivating, harvesting, and producing. In the cultural paradigm of the managed garden, economies of scale and the acceleration of culture are converted to a scale and pace that are beneficial to living in community and respectful of creation. In the image of the garden, nature’s limited capacity is honored. *Usufruct*—the right use of the harvest—suggests a way toward a more sustainable

development of culture. Sustainability is possible within the metaphor of the garden: that is to say, technology together with economics should not expand further in the direction of manipulation, exploitation, and pollution but, as the economist Herman Daly of the World Bank has put it, should maintain and if possible improve the fruit-bearing capacity of the earth; technology in conjunction with economics should limit extraction from the earth to what it produces and make this available to all people, now and in the future. Cultural development that is responsible lives off the interest of the capital given to us; it does not allow the capital itself to be drawn on or used up. This is, as it were, the central concept that fits human being as stewards. The concept is attractive to many, even apart from any idea of stewardship, because thanks to God’s preserving grace at work in the world, the majority of people entertain a certain enlightened self-interest.

Politics of the Confessors of Christ

In contrast to the way culture has developed, we have pointed to a different direction for our materialistic culture. We now come to the question of the kind of politics that Christians should want to promote. In the political arena, too, Christians are confessors of Christ. They sit in the pew on Sundays, where the call for a Christian approach to politics should be heard from the pulpit. Christians in politics form a natural community grounded in faith in Christ, who is their strength and their redeemer. They share a vision based on God’s revelation concerning the task of the state and the calling of statesmen.

Christians are not out to exceed their humanity through ambitious ideals. Rather, precisely for the sake of their humanity, they orient themselves to Christ. Christ is the ground and mystery of their personhood. They want their life to be focused on the work He did and is still doing, and on the word He spoke and still speaks. They know they are dependent on His Spirit. And their many shortcomings keep reminding them that Christ must be their point of orientation. Their desire is to orient themselves in culture, and with that also in politics, according to the dynamic movement of creation, fall, and redemption, in the expectation of

the Kingdom of God. Mekkes would have referred to it as “the dynamics of history oriented to Christ.” Drawing a connection between the exalted name of Christ and our doings precludes taking our faith for granted. A constant regrounding of our faith is imperative.

Christ as our source and focus implies a certain view of the world and a certain outlook on life, on history, and on the future. Political activity shares in that. For Christians, people in culture are a people *coram Deo*, living before the face of God, called by Him and answerable to Him also in politics. We are accountable for what we support, for what we are busy with, and for what we have accomplished. Our guideline should be that it is our God-given mandate in politics to cooperate toward making the world a more livable, inhabitable home for everyone. The driving factor is that of the Kingdom that is coming and that now is already stimulating us to search for its direction: *Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness* (Matthew 6:33). In a time when human freedom has gone off track in a big way, and unprecedented powers of science, technology, economics, and organization appear to turn ever more against man and creation, Christian politics, as it promotes right and justice, must be ruled by love of God, love of neighbor, and love for God’s creation.

To accept the challenge of politics is to look for credible alternatives. A conscious program and a corresponding strategy must aim at making Christian politics believable. It means seeking political *power* in the state—though we are always mindful that the Bible knows of no rightful power other than that which is exercised through *service*. And when you use power in order to serve, you welcome constructive criticism because those ruled by such power are in an optimal position to indicate how the application of that power can best be of service to them.

But what (limited) power does the state have?

Sphere-Sovereignty

In Christian philosophy the fundamental themes discussed above also form the backdrop of a biblical vision for the state. Christ is sovereign over a rich variety of societal relationships or “life spheres,” and therefore He is also sovereign over the state.

It is in faith that we accept the sovereignty of the Creator and Redeemer over the state. We do so even if the state or political democracy does not itself accept this. The sovereignty I speak of comes to expression in the familiar principle of sphere-sovereignty.⁷ Here “sovereignty” means that God has the first and last word in every sphere, including the sphere of the state. The state exists under God’s power even if people do not acknowledge that to be so. When speaking of “political sovereignty,” people often think that “sovereignty” means the state is separate from God or neutral and has nothing to do with God. We therefore also speak in the same context of “sphere responsibility,” by which we draw attention to the human response that must follow acknowledgement that God also rules over the state—with or without human consent.

Among the many relationships in society, the state has, before the face of God, a limited place and a defined task. It is a constant temptation for the state to want to control the whole of its citizens’ lives. Christian politics, however, recognizes many forms of relationships in society that the state must recognize as having their own responsibility, such as the family, church, business firm, school, etc.

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They are not subordinate to the state but on a level with it. This view is based exclusively on acknowledging the origin and root of the great variety of relationships in creation—in God as the origin and Christ as the new root of the redeemed creation. The state has its own distinctive structure, with an important but limited, restricted authority or mandate. Politics is about God’s *public* justice for the preservation of a social world, which in the absence

of a state would murder itself (and certainly would do so under a state bereft of justice). The goal of public justice is the goal of the Kingdom. It does not lust after power or wealth. In the end, power and wealth—that is the lesson of our time—can bring the opposite of what they intended!

The past and the present, to quote Mekkes once more, are determined by the “future,” which is the “Kingdom of God.” The history of creation is therefore a history of an opening-up or unfolding process that is focused on the future. However, because of the resistance of people, this history is constantly in crisis. In that light, the task of the state is no more or less than to promote and administer public justice, and so also to serve the general, public interest. The state is not—and must never be allowed to turn into—a welfare state, a nanny state, or a power state; it is called to be a just state, a state under the rule of law. Politicians, and certainly Christians in politics, are to promote an equitable distribution of justice among all interests. Not the rival tensions and conflicts among men, but the dynamics of God’s creation is and must be decisive for the direction of the state’s special task and for that of the politicians who try to give it meaning.

Reformational philosophy, the school to which Mekkes also belonged, has been reproached for equating Christian politics with the realization of the Kingdom of God, an allegation resting on a fundamental misunderstanding. Yet the school would certainly agree with the English theologian Oliver O’Donovan that the tension between Christian politics and our expectation of the Kingdom of God deserves unremitting emphasis.⁸

Policy for the “small personal culture” and the “big material culture”

Given the established task of the state, Christian politics focuses on what I earlier called the “small personal culture” and the “big material culture.” We tend to have much less trouble with the first than the second.

The first sector is about standing up for the life of each individual, protecting life, opposing abortion on demand and active euthanasia, strengthening marriage and family, and promoting quality health care and quality education. And of course we rightly stand up for the vulnerable—though

perhaps still too little on a global scale. We like to refer to Psalm 72 for that:

*He shall bring justice to the poor of the people;
He shall save the children of the needy,
And shall break in pieces the oppressor.
For he shall deliver the needy when he cries,
The poor also, and him who has no helper.
He shall redeem their soul from deceit
and violence,
And precious shall be their blood in His sight.*

(Psalm 72: 4, 12, 14)

The Book of Job is even more penetrating. The opening chapter testifies of Job that he was upright and blameless, that he feared God and shunned evil. The 29th chapter describes the work of the early Job as the work of a king—one could say, as the work of a political figure of his time. It expresses the abiding meaning of that work for politicians of all times:

*I took righteousness as my clothing,
justice was my robe and my turban.
I was eyes to the blind,
And feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy.
I took up the case of the stranger.*

(Job 29: 13–16)

Where the “small personal culture” is concerned, we are firmly opposed to the excesses of the Enlightenment’s freedom ideal. Much less clear are our political aims with respect to the “big material culture,” perhaps because our appreciation of material culture is so ambiguous. Perhaps Christians should to a greater degree practice forms of asceticism in order to bear fruit also in the “big material culture”: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). We shall have more to say about the “big material culture” below. But by way of intermezzo, let me first say something about conservatism.

One-sidedness of Conservatism

Naturally, conservatism’s call to return to the situation before the secularism of the Enlightenment is met by a good deal of sympathy even among Christians. In their critique of Enlightenment and Modernity, some conservatives want to return to the ancient virtues of the Greek world and the

Christian world that succeeded it. The best response to our time, according to many conservatives, is to offer resistance to the moral relativism that is inspired by the Enlightenment's ideal of freedom and that has opened the floodgates to the forces of chaos and disintegration. The Enlightenment simply accommodates humanity; it indulges the creature that is inclined to all manner of evil. The decline of Western civilization, conservatives complain, started with the Enlightenment. Politics must revive Natural Law as in the old Virtue Theory and offer

Given the established task of the state, Christian politics focuses on what I earlier called the "small personal culture" and the "big material culture."

resistance to the ever growing "pragmatization and juridification" of politics and society, which lead only to the disintegration of state and community. Thus the conservative movement calls for constant vigilance and effort in the face of growing moral decline. It hopes to achieve this through an appeal to conscience.⁹

Conservatism holds to certain basic premises. First, humans are inclined to all evil—to the seven cardinal sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, envy, sloth, and gluttony. Second, the task of the state is a limited one. These are premises that certainly merit permanent attention; they represent a position that is close to the standpoint of my own party, which I have represented in the Senate for 28 years. Instead of autonomous freedom, we need to press the case for a freedom that is in harmony with such values as order, discipline, authority, respect, trust, mutual helpfulness, human solidarity—in other words, for a freedom linked to responsibility and tied to God's law for life. As well, we need to champion that second premise: that the task of the state is delimited and defined by sphere-sovereignty. A strong point as well is conservatism's emphasis on history as a source of wisdom and insight.

Nevertheless, the conservative vision of society is static, and its criticism is either too shallow or

too narrow. Given their limited view of the state, conservatives, including many Christians among them, often vote for right-wing policies because the limited view of the state is favored by the "Right." In doing so, they appear to take into the bargain the shadow sides of unrestrained technological-economic power, exercised at the expense of what God has given us in His creation. At most, conservatism is critical of wrongheaded goals that indulge human evil, but the process as such and the means by which science, technology, organization, and economics function are accepted without criticism. Conservatism directs its criticism at one extreme of the Enlightenment—unrestrained freedom—but it leaves the dominance of science, technology, economics, and organization undisturbed. It levels no criticism at these forces at work in culture. That is because its criticism is based on an appeal to the human conscience rather than on a reference to God's dynamic law of life. From its very roots, conservatism denies the negative sides of the secularization of culture.

However much we may be able to appreciate its resistance against the moral crisis, the conservative movement in the eyes of Christians only does half the job and is not focused on the future.

Back to a Critique of Culture

By contrast, the Christian political vision connects self-criticism with a critique of society or a critique of culture and thus has an eye for the dynamics of cultural history. The dominating culture of the Enlightenment with its unrestrained technological-economical power and the cultural tensions and problems associated with it must—as we saw—be converted into a culture in which technology and economics are of service to the life of every person and to communal life, as well as to the plant and animal kingdoms and to nature and the environment. The change we have in mind will have to involve the whole of culture. Given its proper task, government can provide limited yet critical support. Politicians can encourage governments to take action through legislation that will avert developments going awry and will limit social disruptions and so forth. Christians in politics must take seriously the protection of the great variety of forms of life. Perhaps they ought consistently to take the

lead. Christian politicians must highlight their difference in cultural perspective by means of their own critique of culture and so champion distinctive alternatives.

Thus in my eyes, the hog and beef industries have gone horribly off track. They have come to be dominated by the technical spirit of philosophers like Descartes, regarding animals as “machines” and treating them accordingly. The biblical way is to do justice to the created nature of animals. Their nature is under attack if economic utility is made the end-all and be-all of their existence. The animal’s natural behavior, typical for its kind, will suffer. Not much will then be left of the biblical notion that “*the righteous man has regard for the life of his animals*” and that the covenant God made with Noah included the animals (Proverbs 12:10 and Genesis 9:10; see also Genesis 1:21,25). Agribusiness—industrial agriculture with its factory farms—likewise needs to be converted into farming practices ruled by the science of life, biology. The ecologization of agriculture, biological agriculture, with ample thought for the landscape and for social relationships, has the future on its side.

Within the framework of promoting public justice, also in the international context, Christians in politics can plead for the proper choice of priorities. For example, it is quite normal in science and technology to strive for extraordinary feats of invention and ingenuity. That mindset leads at times to violations of social justice because less attention is paid to techniques that could help many people in the struggle against hunger and disease. It is distressing to see, for example, that there is less money and attention for solving world hunger than there is for prestigious, money-guzzling space projects. I am not referring to the development of communication satellites but to space travel to distant planets. It is not that such enterprises are not interesting, but should we not first fulfill our ethical responsibilities before setting other priorities? To mention another example of injustice: Do the natural resources given us not require a more just distribution, so that the poor and needy residents of our “communal home” also receive their share? To set priorities like that would prove that there is enough for everyone. Hunger is caused by a one-sided technological-economic development: “There

is enough for every need, but not for every greed.”

And then it is high time to take a serious look at “unnormed” developments—that is, at developments that are not controlled by government’s normative “power of the sword.” I am alluding to the weapons industry and the global trade in armaments, activities that are carried on to the detriment of very large groups of people. The many civil wars on the African continent are a poignant example of this unrestrained, lawless development. It causes much suffering and costs many—mainly innocent—human lives.¹⁰

To conclude: I trust I have not given the impression that Christians can fully realize the perspective in culture and in politics that I have tried to sketch. “Thorns and thistles” will continue to accompany our work until one Day, through God’s intervention, the earth now marked by disruptive development will be turned into the divine garden city described in the final chapters of the Revelation of St. John, where people are revealed as those who are set free, as people delivered “*unto the freedom of the glory of the children of God*” (Romans 8). In a surprising way it will then be apparent that in spite of people themselves, the work in science, technology, economics and politics is involved in the re-creation. That perspective gives hope and creates responsibilities. The prophetic message in Amos 5:24 remains acutely relevant as a summons to political responsibility on a global scale: “*Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-ending stream!*”

Courage

Those are big words. Are they not too heavy for us? Because, let’s be honest, Christians are often marked by inner uncertainty, poor communication among themselves, and an obsessive attention to internal wrangles. They easily allow themselves to be dominated by a kind of paralysis that makes them afraid to be frank and honest in the small personal culture as well as in the big material culture—especially there! Materialism often has more control over them than they care to admit.

Christian politics should not be the politics of prize-fighters, nor of faint-hearted dawdlers, but of people with courage and grit!

The problems of a secularized culture can make us unsure and afraid. Fear of men can overpower

er us. We can learn from Kierkegaard that courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to act in the presence of fear. That ability preserves us from recklessness. At bottom, however, courage is based in the very positive message of Christ: as a mother prepares herself for the birth of a child, so we should prepare ourselves for the coming of the Kingdom. This Kingdom does not come because of anything we do, yet the expectation does create responsibilities. In the end, the power of a faith that is focused on Christ drives out fear and leads to creative and bold action.

To go against the mainstream and follow God's appointed way is not popular. Yet it can also be full of surprises: sometimes it turns out that others, too, support us—without necessarily sharing our religious presuppositions. We can also learn from unbelievers. About that, Mekkes says that we are all bound by the modes and structures of the creation. That is where we have our task, in solidarity with everyone. No one can step outside God's structures, even though men can resist them. Meanwhile, in solidarity with all people we have failed in our task and continue to do so. Christians should not be ashamed, either, to admit that their ideas about the solutions we need nowadays are often awakened by the actions of those who religiously are our opponents. Others are often better in their discernment, their consistency, and their good intentions. But they lack the certainty of faith and the Christian perspective.

Cross-bearing remains a part of Christian politics. That is one of the reasons that Christian politics is opposed to the intemperance of Enlightenment thought. Christian politics is neither right nor left, nor is it a politics of the center. Because of its vertical dimension or dependence, it transcends the various polarities in order to approach political reality with a vision of its own: the Christian politician, too, “*shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4). Seeking social peace, righteousness, and justice must remain the hallmark of Christian politics. Again, Christian politics is neither conservative nor progressive, but it is focused on the coming of the Kingdom of God. And Christian politics is neither pessimistic, given the Christian expectation of the future, nor optimistic, given the

weak, sinful people who work in politics. Finally, Christian politics is opposed to the utopianism of the “Left.” That is why it also distances itself from the ideal of perfection, from the notion that politics can solve all problems. Yet in the midst of all this, we should keep the main goal before our eyes: to seek the righteousness of the Kingdom of God in strongly changing circumstances that affect both the “small personal culture” and the “big material culture” of science, technology, economics and organization—and all of this in a global perspective.

Speaking about the meaningfulness of being active in politics, Mekkes once observed, “For the Master, who placed Himself over against the world by the opposition of His cross, has raised this creation to be a seed of the Kingdom for which the creation was destined from the beginning. Therefore the disciple must witness to this, bearing the cross.”¹¹ To that I should like to add: The Light of the world will never be extinguished! After all, the Master himself has said, “*Take heart! I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).

Endnotes

1. Among his many publications on the temper of our times, see J. P. A. Mekkes, *Creation, Revelation, and Philosophy*, trans. Chris van Haeften (Sioux Centre, IA: Dordt College Press, 2010).
2. See the elaboration of Mekkes' thoughts in E. Schuurman, *Technology and the Future – A philosophical Challenge*, trans. H. D. Morton, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Paideia, 2009), 378–380.
3. See Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, ch. 9, “The Gods of Our Age,” *The Transforming Vision* (InterVarsity Press, 1984), 131–46. See also my forthcoming book: *Outside the Box: Against the grain thinking about technology* (Paideia Press, 2016/2017), ch. 5.
4. Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 3rd impr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia, 2012), chaps. 6, 7.
5. See E. Schuurman, *Faith and Hope in Technology* (Toronto: Clements Publishing, 2003), 155–168.
6. Cf. Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
7. See Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism and Politics,” *Lectures on Calvinism* (Eerdmans, 1931).
8. Oliver O'Donovan, *Principles in the Public Realm* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

9. Cf. A. A. M. Kinneging, *Geografie van goed and kwaad* [Geography of good and evil] (Utrecht, 2006); and idem, "Het Conservatisme; kritiek van verlichting en moderniteit" [Conservatism: A Critique of Enlightenment and Modernity], *Philosophia Reformata* 65 (2000): 126–153.
10. See Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen and David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises*, with a foreword by Desmond Tutu (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 133–136, 178–179.
11. J. P. A. Mekkes, "Heeft 'christelijke politiek' een zin?" *Antirevolutionaire Staatskunde* 31 (1961): 166.

Appendix

Johannes Petrus Albertus Mekkes (1898–1987) followed a military training, was commissioned at the age of 22, and by the age of 33 had graduated from the Military Academy of The Hague. While still serving as aide-de-camp to General W. Roell, commander-in-chief of the Dutch armed forces, he enrolled in the law faculty of the University of Nymegen. His interest in the task and limits of the state brought him into contact with the school of reformational philosophy. In 1940 he earned a doctorate under Professor Herman Dooyeweerd by defending a dissertation in critique of developments in humanist theories of the constitutional state: *Proeve eener Critische Beschouwing van de Ontwikkeling der Humanische Rechtsstaattheorieën*.

Appointed to the endowed chairs for reformational philosophy in Rotterdam, Leiden and

Eindhoven, Mekkes assimilated Dooyeweerd's conceptions into his own style of philosophizing. He exerted considerable influence on the further development of reformational philosophy. During his twenty-two years as a professor, Mekkes wrote four books and more than six hundred articles, the last of which appeared in 1975.

From 1942 until 1945 Mekkes was held in the German P.O.W. camp at Stanislaw. There, fellow prisoners asked him to lecture on philosophical topics. One listener, Hans Rookmaaker, became a Christian partly as a consequence of Mekkes' work. Mekkes felt a strong tie with the nineteenth-century statesman and publicist Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer because both men felt called to fight a spiritual battle. While Groen combated the anti-Christian consequences of the French Revolution, Mekkes fought against the upcoming materialism of his day and the secularization of culture that accompanies it.

In politics Mekkes made himself useful to the Antirevolutionary Party until it became part of the Christian Democratic Appeal. Then, together with others, he formed a succession of alternative organizations for Christian politics which culminated in 1999, after his death, in the founding of the Christian Union, a small but active Dutch political party in which his political and philosophical legacy lives on and which has won representation in both houses of parliament and in provincial and local governments.