
Pro Rege

Volume 9 | Number 2

Article 6

December 1980

Christian Democratic Parties of Western Europe (Book Review)

McKendree R. Langley

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Langley, McKendree R. (1980) "Christian Democratic Parties of Western Europe (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 9: No. 2, 21 - 22.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol9/iss2/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

The Christian Democratic Parties of Western Europe, by Ronald E.M. Irving. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs and George Allen & Unwin, 1979. 338 pages, \$35.00. Reviewed by McKendree R. Langley, Associate Professor, Abraham Kuyper Chair, Lectureship Center.

The book under discussion is of great value to all those interested in a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of the major Christian Democratic parties in the European Common Market countries. Dr. Irving, a member of the Department of Politics at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, established his reputation as a major interpreter of Christian politics with his *Christian Democracy in France* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973). The present book enhances that reputation. The comprehensive character of the book makes it the sequel to Michael Fogarty's important *Christian Democracy in Western Europe, 1820-1953* (1957). Fogarty concentrated on ideological and sociological matters; Irving has emphasized party formation and political influence. In order to write the present book Irving engaged in intensive study and travel around Europe requiring a thorough knowledge of French, German, Italian, and Dutch. His understanding of the political development of the countries under study is demonstrated throughout the work. An important bibliography is at the end of the book. Because Irving has employed the approach of the political scientist, his historical discussion is necessarily abbreviated; this leaves much room for historians to fill in the gaps. The most amazing thing about the book is Irving's sympathy for Christian Democratic parties. This is quite unusual for a professor at a major public university in the English-speaking world. He correctly sees that Christian Democracy is a legitimate response by Catholics and Protestants to the secular impact of both the French Revolution and industrialization (p. 1). He emphasizes Christian Democracy's attempt to find a middle way between liberalism and collectivism (p. xviii). The book's emphasis is likewise admirable: to determine what the Christian Democratic parties are and to evaluate both their accomplishments and their continuing influence. Irving deals with the Christian Democratic Party (Italy); the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union (W. Germany); the Christian People's Party and the Social Christian Party (Belgium); the Christian Social Party (Luxembourg); the Popular Republican Movement and the Democratic Center Party (France); and the Anti-Revolutionary Party, Christian Historical Union, and the Catholic People's Party now in the federation of the Christian Democratic Appeal (The Netherlands). In addition the author deals with the federation of the Christian Democratic parties constituted in 1976 in the Common Market

countries as the European People's Party under the chairmanship of Belgian Prime Minister Leo Tindemans. This European People's Party and the recent strong showing of these parties at the polls and in the European Parliament are part of what the author terms the Christian Democratic "revival" begun in the mid-1970s (pp. xx, 254). These parties tend to be centrist in orientation—either Center-Right, as in France and The Netherlands, or Center-Left as in Italy and Belgium (p. 259). The author observes:

The record, then, of Western European Christian Democrats in the field of human rights and of the Christian values that underpin these rights, has been a creditable one. In practice, of course, there have been shortcomings over the years, and from the view of Christian Democratic theory, lacunae certainly exist in the constitutional theory and practice of France, Germany and Italy notably over economic and social rights. Nevertheless, it should always be remembered that the rule of law applies more widely in Western Europe of the 1970s than it did in that of the 1930s, and the Christian Democrats can justifiably claim to have contributed significantly towards this situation by their staunch defense of human rights and Christian values in politics. (p. 40)

Closer attention must now be given to the content of the "C" in Christian Democratic. Irving makes reference to the three sources of Christian Democratic principles: 1) the confessional (usually Catholic) parties of the pre-war period; 2) the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church especially in *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963); and 3) the reaction against both the inhumanity and paganism of Nazism and Fascism (pp. 33-34). The author also seems to refer favorably to the deconfessionalization of these parties since 1945. He apparently sees the term "confessional" as having negative sectarian and clerical overtones which must be overcome to appeal to an entire electorate. His concern to overcome the control of parties with a Catholic background by the Roman hierarchy is valid, but the resulting problem is often a vagueness as to the Christian basis of these parties. The author emphasizes that these parties should be open (non-confessional) but virtually

admits that this may make them hard to distinguish from humanist parties of the Right or Center (pp. xxii, 56, 259).

At the same time Irving is aware of the continuing importance of confessionalism in the Christian Democratic Party of Italy. This party strongly opposed divorce in a 1974 referendum, even though the law allowing divorce was retained by a vote of 19 million to 13 million (pp. 91-98). The vote of the 13 million was a vote for confessionalism. Irving is also very much aware that the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party has attempted to be more explicitly Christian than the other European Christian Democratic parties. This party has committed itself to implement "Biblical principles" and a public profession of faith by its parliamentarians. The Anti-Revolutionary membership is described as "orthodox" or "fundamentalist" (pp. 196-197, 211). I take these as terms of honor in this context. Irving also points out that the new Dutch federation, the Christian Democratic Appeal, seeks to base its activity on the Bible. He notes, "The Biblical references are, of course, due to the Calvinists, who are more interested in bringing their Christian principles into politics than are present-day Dutch Catholics" (p. 34). The formation of the Christian Democratic Appeal in the 1970s is seen by the author as a main indication of the revitalization of continental

Christian Democracy (p. xx). Unfortunately, Irving does not discuss the deeper Christian significance of the controversy concerning the normative basis of the Christian Democratic Appeal in 1975. This controversy was the clearest expression in all of Europe of the various views as to what makes a party Christian. The Catholic parliamentary leader, Frans Andriessen, argued for a party open to non-Christians with only a paper commitment to Gospel normativity. On the other hand the Anti-Revolutionary leader, Willem Aantjes, declared:

The question is not how good a Christian someone is but rather how seriously he takes the essential starting-point (i.e. the Gospel) for the political activities of the political persuasion he represents.

It is to be regretted that Irving does not reflect on this open party/Christian party debate in detail.

In general this excellent book provokes reflection on the nature of the relation between faith and politics today. It would also be a very informative text for use in the study of contemporary Europe, in college courses in history and political science, and in seminary courses in church history or social ethics. Evangelicals and Reformed Christians can profit greatly from a study of this important book.