

Do Christians have a political future?*

Part 1 The Scope of politics

by *Bernard Zylstra*

In 1972 citizens in Canada and the United States will witness intense campaigns in which both Prime Minister Elliott Trudeau and President Richard Nixon stand for re-election. In these campaigns the citizenry does not have a Christian political option. Hence, the gospel's vision of justice is not structurally related to political decisions. It also means that the Christian citizens are in a political limbo. They have returned to the land of Egypt where the pharaohs rule assisted by their high-proests and their chariots. Christians today experience a Babylonian exile their voice is not heard loud and clear in the places where our lands are given direction. Do we hear the expected song of lament: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land". Hardly. Instead, we find God's people stumbling along on two opinions, trekking to Jerusalem and to the high places of Baal.

Do Christian citizens have to remain in a political limbo forever? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Today is still the day of repentance of salvation, and thus during the seventies Christians in both countries weld themselves together (on the basis of a new consciousness of the Word of God as the only rule for faith and life) into national Christian political movements. Further, I would propose that these movements become political action fronts first at the local and state/provincial levels, and then at the national political levels with their centres in Washington and Ottawa. Finally, I would propose that the existing feeble fledglings in Christian social action be used as stepping stones for wider and deeper involvement. Here I have in mind the Committee for Justice and Liberty (CJL), the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), the National Association for Christian Political Action (NACPA), the Christian Government Movement (CGM), and the Peoples Christian Coalition. The first two are Canadian organizations, the last three are American.

I will attempt to clarify this proposal in two articles. The first will deal with the scope of politics. The second will suggest concrete steps that can now be taken to move ahead in a practical program for the political emancipation of the Christian citizenry.

Why is it necessary to first focus on the scope of politics? Because the immensity of this scope in 1972 distinguishes Christian political action from action on other fronts. That vast scope also makes political action frightfully difficult. Christians, with sincere commitment, ingenuity, financial backing, and persistance, can set up a local church, an evangelism campaign, a foreign mission, a Christian school, or a Salvation Army philanthropic project without altogether too much ado. This is possible because the thrust of such actions is usually local. But that simply isn't the case with politics, even if politics also does have local dimensions.

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Whenever we properly use the word “politics” we refer to the action of states, of entities like the US, Canada and India. A state is the community of citizens responsible for the administration of justice within the state’s territory in cooperation with other states for the administration of justice in inter-state relations. Any movement that is concerned about political action must be aware of what is implied in the word “politics.” There are three distinct (though interrelated) aspects in the life of a state: (1) the internal components of a state, (2) relations between a state and the nonpolitical sectors of society, (3) and relations between states. In this article we will look at each aspect briefly so that from the beginning we can at least in principle avoid the danger of a one-issue political movement.

1. THE INTERNAL COMPONENTS OF A STATE

What are the minimal components of a state as a state? To answer the parallel question: What makes a family a family? isn’t too difficult. For one thing, we know the members of a family: a father, a mother, and children. We like to think of a family living together in a house, which we call a home, related to other families, which we call a neighborhood. A family has something unique about it by which we can distinguish it: we look for a special bond of love and respect between parents and children. We are convinced that parents should provide a home for the children; that they are responsible for bringing up the children to maturity so that they will be able to stand on their own feet in society. A family, we rightly feel, must have a certain identity of its own in society, a certain sovereignty in its own sphere of activities, so that it can ward off the many undue pressures from the outside that might endanger the realization of its God-given tasks.

“Passive Citizenship”

We can approach the state in a similar manner. To begin with, who are its members? In principle each permanent resident within a state’s territory has a right to be a member of the state. That right is recognized in the US and Canada, where each person born within these territories is a citizen by birth, and where immigrants, after certain conditions have been met, can acquire citizenship via naturalization. Citizens are the members of the state. Since the state is a community for the administration of public justice, the right to citizenship is exceedingly important. It is really the right to fair and equal treatment along with all the other members of the state, the entire citizenry. For this reason I will call this right “passive citizenship” to distinguish it from “active citizenship” which I will discuss later.

What is the foundation for this right to citizenship, for this right to be treated justly? Is its origin simply the good will of the state itself? Not really, for that would make the state the origin of rights to be enjoyed by its members. The comparison with the family is again illustrative. Johnny doesn’t become a member of the family because his parents like him. He is a member for the simple reason that he is the parents’ child. So with citizenship. I am or can become a citizen of the state within whose territory I live simply because I am a person. Citizenship is the state’s recognition of my person-hood. The origin and foundation of the right to citizenship is a person’s place in God’s redeemed creation where each man and woman has a right to be treated as a creature made in God’s image. This implies the right to just and fair treatment.

Here we must linger a moment around the concept of justice since it is central to all of the state's activities as the bond of trust is central to the family. Justice is a Word of the Lord for mankind. It is one of the expressions of the encompassing Word of the Lord addressed to man: be my servant by loving Me above all and your neighbor as yourself. One of the many ways in which mankind can respond positively to God's encompassing Word is the path of justice which requires social space for the development of all of God's human creatures as peril. Since Christ has atoned for the sins of the world on the cross His disciples, as instruments of reconciliation are mandated to oppose all sin, including injustice, and positively work for the establishment of just social order. Within the political arena a just social order implies the state's recognition of men as citizens, as recipients of the good that governments as God's ministers are to bring about. That good is justice for every citizen irrespective of race, class, creed, income, ethnic background, etc. For this reason the state (with reference to its norm) must be a re-public, a *res publica*, a community of citizens responsible for the administration of public justice. No discrimination may take place in a state. As a matter of fact, it is especially the oppressed, the alien, the widow, the poor, the orphan, who should look to the state as his protector in time of need. The Bible provides ample evidence for this. The state is the Lord's instrument for the protection of the needy—His little ones.

The first task of a Christian political movement is to clarify exactly what constitutes public justice for our society. For a new political action movement can make a contribution to the well-being of the state only when it has a lucid conception of justice relevant to the needs of the entire citizenry. Such a conception of justice, based on the biblical view of man, has not been fully developed for the North American scene because we lack a mature Christian social consciousness and practice. So developing a lucid conception of justice is our first assignment.

“Active Citizenship”

Let's return to the internal components of the state. Who should be responsible for the administration of public justice? Here we move from passive citizenship to active citizenship. In earlier times this task was often executed by one person (monarchy) or by a few (oligarchy). Since the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation the notion has gained ground that in principle the entire politically mature citizenry is really responsible for the affairs of state. That notion is correct and in harmony with the Biblical conception of man as the doer of God's Word in this world. The normed development of states therefore not only calls for the passive right of citizenship — the right to receive justice — but also for the active participation of an ever-increasing body of persons co-responsible for the direction of the state. The criterion for this active participation is political maturity, or insight into the requirements of justice for the entire citizenry.

A state in which the entire citizenry —politically mature — is finally responsible for the direction of the body politic is often called a democracy. That is still a good word if it is employed in its originally limited sense: a state whose key officers are elected by the citizenry.

Government

This brings us to the next component of the state: government. It is not my plan here to discuss various conflicting theories of government, such as fascism (which

identifies the state with the government), anarchism (which denies the necessity of government), or behavioral systems analysis (which looks upon government as the body of institutions that make authoritative decisions allocating values for an entire society). The government is the total body of officers and entrusted with the execution of justice within the state or one of its parts. In the most fundamental sense of the word, the government is the civil service: the minister of God for the good (justice) of the entire state. The government is a body of officers, that is, of persons entrusted with an office, a divine assignment. This office requires a measure of power so that its task can indeed be realized. Only in this way can we speak of authority. Political authority is power to implement the divine norm of justice for the good of the entire citizenry. Nothing more: that would lead to totalitarianism. Nothing less: that would lead to anarchism.

So far we have detected three central components of the modern state: passive citizenship (right to be treated justly), active citizenship (right to co-determine the affairs of state), and government (servant of justice). There are many other elements that make up the internal chemistry of state-life: the relation between governmental organs and departments, between the nation as a whole and its parts (states' rights or provincial rights), taxation, fiscal policy, police, metropolitan politics, judiciary, etc. I won't dwell on these now. My point is: any Christian political movement in the US and Canada has to understand the process of political interplay between the three elements mentioned above. For a political movement is interested in influencing the political decision-making process at the governmental level. That influence can be brought to bear upon local government, state or provincial government, and the national government. There are indeed three inter locking levels here. This implies that one cannot use the Word "political" meaning fully unless the last circle of the national setting is taken into account.

But that is precisely where the real problems begin. For in Canada and the US there is a well-established machinery that relates the citizenry to government. The channels by means of which the citizens are allowed to influence government are there, mainly as a result of the Anglo-Saxon political experience of more than two hundred years.

Government Interplay

There are three main channels: (1) parliamentary bodies where representatives chosen by the citizenry can determine the standards for governmental action by legislation; (2) political parties which present candidates to the citizenry for representative functions; (3) geographic districts which serve as the electoral units within which the citizenry chooses its representatives for state/provincial and national legislative bodies.

These three existing channels, which converge into a single stream, make the expression of a new political influence extremely difficult. The problem begins with the district system of elections. It is not necessary here to inquire into the origins of the system: whether it is a remnant of feudalism — linking man closely to the soil — or a consequence of the theory of popular sovereignty — in which just government was formally defined in terms of individual consent to governmental authority. This theory simply requires a majority vote of citizens in a local district as a basis for legitimate representation. It is important to know that: (1) the district system of elections nullifies the votes of those citizens whose candidates did not receive a

majority or plurality in their district or riding. (2) It tends to promote the development of a two-party system. (3) It tends to create an unjust imbalance between total votes cast for a particular party and that party's actual power in the legislature. Such an imbalance is often increased by the presence of third parties, as we see in the present Ontario provincial parliament. On the basis of 44% of the popular vote in last October's election the Progressive Conservative party holds 66% of the seats in the Ontario parliament. A goodly number of Ontario voters, 56% to be exact, are "under-represented." Their votes brought 34% of the representatives of their choice into the legislature. This example of an unfair imbalance between citizens' votes and the composition of legislative bodies — a composition which in Great Britain and Canada also determines who will be the chief executive — can be seen again and again.

The district electoral system is partly responsible for another problem as well. Since the results of national, state or provincial elections are decided by obtaining pluralities in *local* districts, election campaigns easily degenerate into popularity contests between local candidates that often have little to do with the broader issues at stake. Further, it often reduces campaigns to survival-of-the-fittest battles where the opportunistic and well-financed candidate reaches first-base before his opponent has a chance to grip the bat. In such battles money often counts more than principle and political acumen. The need for money to finance a campaign easily ties elected officials more to the suppliers of money than to the public welfare of the nation. The system invites corruption and opportunism, intensified by brainwashing of the voters via paid political commercials on radio and television. Finally, this system leads to the potential identification of the national welfare with the welfare of numerous local constituencies on whose support an incumbent relies in the next round. This is notably so with members of the US House of Representatives who are only given a two-year term in Washington. Hence they must coddle their constituencies if they hope to survive for the next round. In this setting pork barrel politics is often the rule rather than the exception, with public funds appropriated for local improvements secured on a political patronage basis to ingratiate legislators with their constituents.

This electoral machinery tends to favor a two-party system because pluralities in local districts are what count, not proportional percentages of votes cast within the entire relevant political unit: the nation, the state or province, and the city. We now see two things. First, because political parties depend on local victories for their very existence, it is almost impossible for them to achieve their true purpose: to act as channels between an entire citizenry and a government. Political parties should be the organized expressions of the different conceptions of justice and authority present in the citizenry. Such conceptions should be clearly articulated in the political platforms and programs of parties, related to the total national welfare for a distinct period of political action. Political parties in the US and Canada cannot afford to be organized expressions of different conceptions of justice and authority. They're really conglomerations of local, state and provincial units loosely federated around pragmatic aims of roughly distinct economic classes and organized to win elections in geographic parts largely devoid of principles and programs for the whole.

In this context it is not surprising that platforms accepted at national party conventions hardly play a role in the actual political campaigns, especially in the US. It is not surprising that different political parties are the umbrella for an immense variety of really similar political opinions — a phenomenon that, for instance, links

southern conservatives to northern liberals in the US Democratic Party. It is not surprising that millions of citizens have no party affiliation and party commitments since they do not trust these opportunistic vehicles. It is not surprising that many citizens do not know how to vote until the day of election: they cannot distinguish between the tweedledee and the tweedledum of the options offered. It is not surprising that millions of citizens don't bother to vote at all. What difference does it make, anyway?

Finally, this electoral machinery defeats its very purpose. For citizens whose political convictions fall outside either party are in effect disenfranchised. Two parties cannot possibly offer enough options to a citizenry divided among four or five basic political conceptions. Thus representative legislative bodies hardly represent the real alignment of political conviction at the grass-root level. And third-party movements face obstacles at every step of the way. Their partial success, as with the socialist New Democratic Party (NDP) in Canada, is generally based on a pragmatic adjustment to the struggle for power instead of principle that characterizes the entire party-system. Does this system really permit a principled option, whether that be socialist or Christian? The system effectively smothers the political witness of minority groups and thus makes "democracy" an empty word.

In view of all this, it should not come as a surprise that since the first world war parliamentary government in the western democracies has been subjected to penetrating critique. Legislative bodies, it is argued, seem to be out of touch both with the people and with the executive organs of government. There's a lot of truth in this critique. But I would reject the solution offered by both fascists and communists, viz. the elimination of parliamentary government. Indeed, there are extra-parliamentary avenues which can be used to influence the political process. It may well be that a Christian political movement can only use such avenues in the immediate future. Public opinion and governmental agencies can be influenced in a variety of ways. Nader's Raiders, the neo-Marxists, and the Christian Labour Association of Canada, have shown that. The very avenue of dissent, which belongs to the spiritual arsenal of Christians who have not identified the Kingdom of God with any political kingdom, is the first avenue of Christian political conviction. Nevertheless, a Christian political movement need not bypass the parliamentary system because it's part of the political scene in the US and Canada. Recognizing this makes talk of a new political movement utterly utopian for many. To me it is part of Christian realism. To me, it is also part of political honesty: the parliamentary system is part of politics, cannot be avoided and needs a drastic institutional overhaul to make it serve its authentic representative function for the entire citizenry.

2. THE STATE IN SOCIETY

So far I've focused on the internal operations of the state. We noticed how tough it is today for any group (especially for a new political voice) to influence the political decision-making process. The problem becomes even more complex when we turn from the internal structure of the modern state to its place in the entire societal scene. Society is the horizontal interdependent complex of the totality of human relationships. Within this broader context the state's administration of public justice concerns four main areas: (1) It must protect the individual civil rights of its subjects. (2) It must protect the beneficent development of the non-political spheres in society, such as

marriage, family, the church, schools, universities, industry and commerce, the media, and other voluntary activities, without interfering with their internal freedom of operation.

(3) It must prevent the violation of the internal freedom of one societal sphere by the activities of another sphere and the development of one sphere at the expense of another. (4) The state must, finally, advance the interests of its citizenry as a whole in national and international life, in the context of an international legal order. The basis for political action in these four directions must be legal, legitimate, that is, it must be a concrete outworking of a norm that the state itself does not establish but to which it must subject itself. That is the divine norm of justice. A state has no other ground for action. Without that ground it degenerates into nothing or blows itself up into everything — the all-absorptive totalitarian state.

I'll briefly illustrate what I mean by these four areas of state activity.

1. Civil rights.

Since membership in the state in principle is as broad as the entire population, the state is normatively bound to recognize, without discrimination, the civil rights of the entire population within its territory. For civil rights are the political expression of human rights, that is, of human personality. This entails the progressive elimination of discrimination in both passive citizenship (right to just treatment) and active citizenship (right to participate in the co-determination of the affairs of state). The state as a community of justice must work towards removing discriminatory obstacles due to race, religion, economic status, ethnic background, etc. If a state cannot politically integrate its entire population into a single community of citizens equal before the law, then that state either disintegrates or maintains itself as a fascist institution, favoring one segment of the population at the expense of the other. This is the problem in the US race question, the place of Quebec in Canada, the position of the blacks in South Africa, the relation between Hindu and Muslim in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), limitation of citizenship to Jews in Israel, the tensions between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and the one party system in communist countries. In the measure that governments in these political communities are not actively engaged in a program of equalizing civil rights, in that measure these governments pursue a path of injustice preparatory to the modern equivalent of the religious wars of the post-Reformation period.

2. Sphere sovereignty.

The very notion of justice implies the state's protection — instead of absorption — of the internal freedom of the non-political sectors in society. It is the conception of social pluralism or — in Abraham Kuyper's words — sphere sovereignty. Its foundation lies in the biblical teaching of the Lordship of Christ, allegiance to Whom makes impossible total allegiance to any human institution, whether that be church or state or industry. The state-school problem clearly illustrates what is implied in the principle of sphere sovereignty. Allowing for a few (at times notable) exceptions, the US and Canada pursue a policy of educational socialism, that is, a policy in which the spiritual direction and the curriculum content of education from kindergarten through university are determined by the state. Through educational socialism the state can best guarantee assent to the realization of its political ideals. In this way the modern state has effectively eliminated political dissent to the religion of the "democratic way

of life" which, in violation of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, is established in the hearts and minds of the great majority of citizens. Contrary to this form of socialism, the principle of sphere sovereignty affirms two basic points: (a) parents have the right to determine the religio-spiritual direction of the education of their children; (b) schools, colleges and universities must be free of state control if they are to perform their tasks meaningfully. Most of us pay lip-service to these basic points. But their realization would, of course, radically restructure what we now know as the public school system in the US and Canada.

3. Justice and capitalism.

The principle of sphere sovereignty implies industrial freedom, but it rejects capitalism. Society can be characterized as capitalistic when the industrial sector, especially of the larger corporate production conglomerates, is (a) given a special status in distinction from other cultural sectors, (b) is advantageously protected by political power at the expense of other cultural sectors, and (c) is given free reign in determining the society's values for its own benefit by means of a co-opted state-dominated education system and through excessive advertising. A capitalist society defines justice (and thus the task of the state) in its own light: it will induce the use of the state's immense power for the protection of productive forces and it will discourage the use of the state's power for "nonproductive" elements in society such as the poor, the alien, the widow, and the orphan — and whatever else belongs to the category of these biblically loaded words in today's world. A redirection of the state's administration of justice is necessary in the industrial sector.

4. Metropolis.

A fourth area of the state's presence in society concerns the interests of the citizenry as a whole in national and international life. One can point to numerous examples: cultural development, medical care, education, ecological sanity, etc. One major facet of future politics concerns the growth of cities as the habitat of the greater majority of people during the next one hundred years. Metropoles must be human, not subhuman as, they presently often are — especially in the US. Keeping or making them human implies a just interplay between numerous factors: residence, industry, leisure, transportation, mobility, psychical and social health, architecture, cultural facilities, etc. The metropolis, like society itself of which it is a microcosm, is a horizontal complex weaving together nearly all of the human relations. In this complex the political bond of municipality is often the only bond which people have in common. One does not have to argue therefore that the predominant conception of justice and political power within a society will color the contours of future city life. Will the future metropolis be a City of Man, a survival-of-the-fittest habitat, or will it reflect something of the City of God, where men can live as God's creatures?

3. THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The third major fact of politics deals with the relations between states, generally referred to as international relations. I will only mention it here, though I consider it to be the most important area of future politics. For in this realm of politics the issues of war or peace are to be decided. Whatever I have said above about the internal components of the state and about the state's activity in society depends upon the question of whether peace between states can be achieved. The history of politics since the middle ages has been largely the history of sovereign states doing sovereignly

what their power permitted them to do in the international setting. Sovereignty did not belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator and Recreator of the universe.

Sovereignty instead was the supreme characteristic of autonomous states. Hence the tragic history of political life in the West, the bosom of Christendom, with its wars, its conquests, its colonial regimes, its political imperialism, its economic exploitation, its world wars, its atom bombs. And alongside of this history haunts us with the failure of alliances for peace, of the failure of the League of Nations, of the weakness of the United Nations, of arms races and cold wars. Yes, all this too belongs to the stuff of politics.

Conclusion

My reason for spending so much space on the scope of politics is clear. We must at all costs avoid a narrow conception of what is involved in politics. For that might from the outset imply a basic irrelevance by a confinement of action and reflection to some emergency actions or to some kind of neighborhood social evangelism. Political movements that arose out of concern for some single issue, no matter how important, never lasted long. Such movements, if they are to be of lasting value, must orient themselves to the very structure of state life.

The immensity of the task to be accomplished in the political arena is further complicated by the absence of unity, catholicity, apostolicity and holiness in the Christian Church in Canada and the USA. There is no general biblically-directed social and political consciousness on which one might rely.

What can we say today when we face these two polar realities: the bigness of the job to be done and the utter weakness of true-to-the-Bible Christianity as a cultural force? A few answers suggest themselves. We could say: The world of politics is neutral with respect to the claims of Christ; it can run its own affairs. Or: The world of politics belongs to the devil; let's stay away from it as far as possible. Finally: Let's join up with the best elements of humanism, either in its capitalistic or socialistic form, and see if we can't make this world a bit of a better place to live in. In 1972 most Christians, evangelicals included, give one of these three answers to our question.

These three answers, I think, are not worthy of the gospel of Christ, and for this reason I would propose an alternative,: A genuine alternative demands the organization of a Christian political movement in both Canada and the United States. In each country the purpose of the organization would be twofold: (1) the establishment of a center for Christian political reflection where the building blocks for a practical political option would be developed; and (2) the establishment of an action division responsible for the implementation of a political program first in those states and provinces where sufficient support can be found among Christian citizens, and subsequently at the national level in Ottawa and Washington.

This proposed alternative must be interpreted in an utterly realistic manner. It is not a utopian proposal. The full development and fruits of a Christian political option will not be seen in one generation. Further, the practical realization of such an option at the action front, even in a beginning way, will take considerably more than one generation even if the Lord revives His People. Patience, perseverance, proper priorities, and pain will be the watchwords of a movement for a new Christian politics. But we must start now. The parting words of Joey Smallwood, the former

Premier of Newfoundland, are relevant to the position of Christians in politics: "It's not where you are. It's where you're headed that matters."

Dr. Bernard Zylstra is author of From Pluralism to Collectivism: The Development of Harold Laski's Political Thought (Humanities Press, New York), and is assistant professor of political theory at Toronto's graduate Institute for Christian Studies.