

# **THE 2002 KUYPER LECTURE**

## **Christians Organizing for Political Service In Global Context**

By  
Paul Freston (c)  
Federal University of Sao Carlos, Brazil

November 1, 2002  
Baltimore, MD

# Christians Organizing for Political Service In Global Context

Paul Freston

Since the title is broad, I shall speak mainly of what I know best: evangelical Protestantism in the Third World, which is big enough by itself, with only brief comments on Catholicism and Europe.

## Christian Politics Globally: Why Care?

There are many reasons why Christians anywhere should be interested in how their fellow-believers around the globe think and act politically. For one thing, the Bible has given us a flexible approach to politics. Its lack of a precise political recipe is what makes it globally useful politically, allowing it to speak to diverse circumstances. Claims to a definitive political reading of the Bible are dubious. We need the input of believers in situations very different from our own, to give us a more rounded perspective, and to show us that some positions we think are fine may be considered awful elsewhere, and may in fact be bad for our fellow-Christians abroad.

In a world shrinking through globalization, the transnational dimension of the Christian community needs to be highlighted. And for American Christians there is the additional factor of American geopolitical dominance. Many areas of US politics have global repercussions, so American believers should be the most globally-minded of all. Their responsibility is much greater than, say, the believers of Chad, because they really are politically responsible for much more.

Lack of understanding of global religious reality can be costly. If terrorism is one of the weapons of the weak, we need to know what the *religions* of the weak are, and what political options they authorize. Christianity is today a predominantly non-Western religion and probably the main religion in the Third World. More of the world's poor are now Christian than Muslim; so what are their political tendencies? For American Christians, this is an important question not just for "homeland safety" but for international justice.

Christianity is today a global religion, more and more distinct from the flows of worldly power and wealth. But on the Protestant side, greater awareness of this reality is hampered by the fact that Protestantism has no Rome and no Mecca. It is polycentric. Nevertheless, the Christian ideal remains of a universal body in which we only arrive at fullness by learning from each other.

Although Christian affiliation as a percentage of world population has scarcely altered in the past hundred years, its centre of gravity has shifted enormously. Christianity is now only 40% European and North American, as opposed to 80% in 1900. It is no longer acceptable to treat Christianity as the religion of the developed West. Christianity is once again deeply associated with poverty.

Catholicism grew impressively in the twentieth century, although it has declined as a percentage of world Christianity in the last 40 years. But it is still nearly 20% of world population, although this includes much nominal affiliation,

far more than with evangelical Protestantism which can be conservatively estimated at 6%, with major concentrations in places as diverse as the US, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Korea and the Philippines. Besides being heavily practising and often fast-growing, Third World evangelicalism is overwhelmingly pentecostalized, locally-run, divided into a myriad of denominations and usually over-represented amongst the poor of the poor countries. It is, in fact, a sort of globalization from below.

So Third World Christianity is important because it represents the future in numerical terms, and because it recovers aspects of early Christianity. But this is not to idealize Third World Christianity's politics. On the contrary, there is much to criticise.

This talk is inevitably influenced by the moment of speaking, above all by the "war on terror" and by the significant presidential elections we have just had in Brazil. Brazil, the fifth most populous country in the world, traditionally regarded as the largest Catholic country and which now probably has the world's second largest contingent of practising Protestants, is showing considerable desire for change. But global support is needed, both because some problems can only be tackled at the transnational level, and because some changes will be maligned internationally and will need support from sympathetic citizens of more powerful countries. Do not believe everything you will read about the new Brazilian government in your newspapers. Ask your Christian brothers and sisters down there for their view of events.

### **The Larger Christian World: Brief Comments**

I shall make some brief comments on Catholic and ecumenical Protestant trends at this point.

Catholicism is centralized and recently the papacy has become a key actor in global politics. In addition, most countries that have become democratic in the last 30 years are Catholic, but not a single major Catholic party has emerged. The era of Catholic parties, according to some authors, may be coming to an end.

However, the role of Christian Democratic parties has been crucial in the development of the European Union. Christian Democratic ideas have been less successful in Latin America. When speaking of politics and the Catholic Church in Latin America, what comes to most people's minds is liberation theology. But Catholic politics in the region is far more varied than that. For example, the man who has just been re-elected governor of the state where I live in Brazil is connected with Opus Dei.

Another force within post-Vatican II Catholicism is the Charismatic Renewal. In Brazil, the Renewal has become extremely strong, and in recent years has presented candidates for parliament in a similar way to pentecostal churches: with official approval of the movement. The most successful Renewal politician has based his electoral appeal on his opposition to liberalization of abortion laws and to the civil union of homosexuals, and on his efforts to gain government concession of two television stations for the Renewal.

It was only in a few countries that Liberation Theology achieved anything like predominance in the Church, and even in those countries times have changed. The high-water mark was in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The reasons for the decline are manifold: changes in Vatican policy; the distance of the poor from the

language and concepts; redemocratization in most Latin American countries, causing the loss of a common enemy; and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

However, it is not true to say that liberation theology is dead. It lives on in smaller circles, and elements of it have been incorporated into mainstream church discourse.

Another context in which some churches (especially “mainline” ones) played a significant role in liberation struggles was South Africa. After the transition, there was a temptation to be uncritical towards the new regime, one of the standing temptations for triumphant revolutionaries, a Third World equivalent of the way many American Christians today sacralize the events of their own Revolution. Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu has confessed how easy it was to be seized by the Spirit and speak against apartheid, but how difficult it is to do the same against the ANC. There are many dimensions to this problem: the “gravy trains” that offer power, prestige and material rewards; the lack of a unifying post-apartheid agenda, exposing the church to all the divisions of “normal” political life. Tutu again: “it is a great deal easier to be against... It is not nearly so easy to say what we are for.” Thus, the sophisticated political theology developed in opposition to apartheid nevertheless left its proponents short-changed after the transition; and seems not to have prepared them for the inevitable disappointments of post-transitional reality, something which a knowledge of the history of revolutions and a healthily sceptical Biblical anthropology might have furnished.

Further north in Africa, many leaders of mainline churches (Catholic or Protestant) were prominent in the struggle against one-party or military dictatorships in the early 1990s. In several countries, bishops led national movements of resistance or supervised the transition. The mainline churches’ international connections now represented an advantage.

But this involvement was rather ad hoc, with little parish-level mobilization. Now the talk is more of the need to make democracy sustainable.

Mainline churches seem less relevant to this. Their hierarchical authority structures had given them great advantages in denouncing dictators, but were obstacles to a genuine manifestation of democratic practice. Decentralised evangelical congregations may be better at creating the values needed for democratic sustainability, providing practical training at the grassroots in attitudes and skills which are essential to democratic life.

Democratization has taken its toll of the diverse forms of liberationism prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s.

### **Christian Politics Globally: What is Out There?**

Politics around the world is much more religiously motivated than most Westerners imagine, and Christianity (not just Islam) is involved. There is great variety, of course, if only because Third World contexts are so varied. I shall give a taste of this variety with some quotes from Third World evangelicals.

*(1) The American one. What other one is there?*

The first phrase, from a Paraguayan, introduces us to the element of American global dominance. It can be read in two ways: as a resigned recognition of reality (“we have to do what American interests dictate, whether we like it or not”), or as an expression of faith in a certain type of “Biblical economics” (“the United States is the only truly Christian economy since Jeremiah”). It also introduces us to another element in Third World Protestant politics, Protestant political parties.

*(2) I am only in congress for one reason: to defend the interests of the church.*

The second phrase, from a pentecostal congressman in Brazil, introduces another tendency: corporate political involvement by denominations, with political projects based on the defence of institutional interests.

*(3) Imagine electing someone just to fight against gay marriage.  
We expect much more: government recognition of our social projects  
and equality [with Catholicism] in treatment of our institutions.*

Phrase three is similar, but concerned with rather more justifiable claims to equality of treatment with the dominant religion.

*(4) Pagans must not be voted for... The church must run this country.*

The fourth phrase, from Zambia, claims that the church (or “the people of God”) has a divine right to govern, based on comparisons with Old Testament Israel. This triumphalism usually combines ritualistic elements such as the declaration of a “Christian nation” and ceremonial expulsion of the demons of political life (phrase 5) and the placing of Christians in power. Blessings on the country will be the automatic result.

*(5) I submit the entire nation to the lordship of Jesus Christ...  
Because Zambia has entered this covenant, God is blessing [us]...  
we shall stop borrowing and shall lend instead.*

Also connected with this is the sixth phrase on prayer, related to “spiritual warfare” concepts.

*(6) The church directs history through intercession...  
They took the wealth of Brazil to European banks and if we break  
this spiritual curse... all this wealth will return.*

The effects of imperial exploitation can be reversed by the power of prayer. Whatever the limits of its perspective, this phrase introduces the element of geopolitical critique. Others prefer a more directly political critique of economic globalization.

*(7) There is a Satanic trinity in capitalism: the great “god” is the market,  
the great world religion is capitalism and the Holy Spirit is the IMF.*

This points to the presence in lower-class Third World pentecostal circles of the sort of theological critique of neoliberalism and economic globalization usually associated with ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches. In some cases this even leads, as in the eighth phrase, to explicit political commitments which would horrify some Western Christians

*(8) We used to think they would close the churches...  
But when we got to know Lula... we saw our fears were groundless...  
Often [his] struggle for a more just society... is the same as our religious struggle.*

Here we see the alliance of a leading Brazilian pentecostal church renowned for its prosperity gospel with the leader of the Brazilian left who has just been elected president.

Finally, in the ninth phrase, we see two more important elements in Third World Protestant politics: ethnic separatism and guerrilla warfare.

*(9) We stand for the salvation of mankind in Jesus Christ alone,  
that is "Nagaland for Christ"... Arms alone will save our nation.*

Most Third World national boundaries are the fruit of colonialism, and there is little reason why Third World Christians should accept them. And as for the mix of Christianity and armed struggle, these Protestants are but the most recent to implement the Cromwellian maxim to "trust in God and keep your powder dry."

### **Third World evangelical politics: an overview**

In recent years there have been several evangelical presidents of Third World countries: in Benin, Zambia, Kenya, Guatemala, Philippines and South Korea. In some other countries, evangelicals have achieved a significant presence in the legislature or lower executive levels, such as Brazil, Peru and Nigeria. In some countries, evangelical political parties have been formed. Evangelicals have been involved in ethnic separatist rebellions (Burma, North-East India, Sudan). Evangelical churchmen have been key in pro-democracy movements (Kenya). In some places, they still struggle for political legitimacy as Christians (Indonesia, Malaysia).

Evangelicalism is being put to a variety of political uses across the globe. Just to stress that point: the vice-president of a pentecostal denomination who is also director-general in the office of the presidency of his country, was arrested under the former regime as a subversive and tortured by a deacon of his own church.

Usually, Third World evangelicalism does not have strong institutions; it is often composed disproportionately of the poor in poor countries, so its cultural and educational resources are limited. It is divided into many churches, making it impossible to establish a normative "social doctrine." Churches often have no international contacts, cutting them off from the history of Christian reflection on politics. Having only recently arrived at social and political visibility, they are largely inexperienced in the public sphere.

Third World evangelical politics has been characterized by a good deal of conservatism, both on moral and social issues and on economic policy. But is also (and increasingly) nuanced by non-conservative positions on economic questions, as well as by the force of other motivations, especially ethnicity and ecclesiastical corporatism.

Third World evangelical politics is not usually dominated by a single issue, such as abortion in conservative American evangelicalism.

It is perhaps not surprising that these inexperienced and unprepared political actors show a tendency to acquire characteristics of the locally dominant religion in its traditional public role (Islam or Catholicism).

While universalist concerns such as human rights and democracy predominate among some evangelical political actors, the practice of many is reducible to an ecclesiastical corporatism which seeks to enlist state resources for church aggrandisement, to strengthen the churches as corporations, to reward some of their members individually (with employment, financing or prestige) and to strengthen their position vis-a-vis other faiths in "civil religion." This produces a tendency to opportunism and sometimes even corruption. This has been responsible for the poor public image of evangelicalism lately in some Third World countries. In the long run, of course, the attempt to place the state at the service of ecclesiastical expansion will create dependence, encourage hypocrisy and gag the prophetic voice.

The implications of this corporatist model are dubious. Tocqueville said that any osmosis between religion and politics is dangerous for religion; and by that he means especially clerical involvement. When a clergyman introduces politics into the sanctuary, he enters the terrain of political contingency, and his religious discourse also becomes affected by contingency. In 1830s America, the clergy in general distanced themselves voluntarily from political power and even showed a professional pride in so doing. They separated themselves from all political parties and fled from any suspicion of personal interest. In a democratic age, the religious leaders who dream of extending their power beyond the religious sphere run the risk of no longer being believed in any sphere.

Tocqueville says that the best way to promote Christian influence in politics is through pious and ethical lay politicians. Churches should not be politically privileged, nor should church leaders be given unofficial privileges.

Another tendency is "triumphalism." This is the Third World futurist equivalent of nostalgia for "Christian Europe" or "Protestant America," but goes beyond it. It is based on a reading of the Bible which is not common now in traditionally Protestant countries. Old and New Testaments are fused, in a transference of Israel's promised heritage to modern-day evangelicals, granting them a divine right to rule.

### **Forms of Political Organization in Third World Evangelical Christianity**

Sometimes, the ethnic group is the context for mobilisation, with churches exercising a leadership role. In others, it is basically the denomination; the denomination is the context for important decisions and for vote-gathering. In some countries, mobilisation is through evangelical political parties which claim a "natural right" to receive the evangelical vote. Another model is to help form a new party, such as Peruvian evangelicals did with Cambio 90; or to make a partial

takeover of an existing small party (UCKG in Brazil). Another model is evangelical nuclei within large parties, such as the “referente evangélico” in the Chilean Christian Democratic Party.

A mobilisational context in some countries is the pan-evangelical representative organ, which gives backing to an electoral project; this happens especially where there are still evangelical civil rights to conquer.

Finally, there are the specifically political (but non-party) organisations, such as the Evangelical Progressive Movement in Brazil (similar in form, though not at all in ideology, to American phenomena such as the Christian Coalition).

### **Civil Society, Ethnicity and Conversion**

An example of the politics of ethnic minority evangelicalism is Nagaland in North-East India. As I once heard a Naga claim, independent Nagaland would be the only Christian nation in Asia outside the Philippines. He could have added that it would be the only Baptist nation in the world!

Today, Christianity is a vital part of ethnic identity. It infuses all political expressions. But political theology is conspicuously absent from curricula of regional seminaries. The proportion of Nagas who claim to be “born-again” is one of the highest in the world. But it seems Christianity only served to create or preserve identities, but had little to say subsequently about political conflicts and the methods employed.

In China, with its very different politics, ethnic evangelical Christianity sets off some fascinating dynamics. When democratic elections for village and county leaders were introduced in the mid-1990s, Fugong elected a church elder as county governor. The Lisu ethnic group, which has become heavily Christianized, predominates in that region. In another ethnic minority situation, the local Communist Party leaders converted to a pentecostal church and promptly resigned from the Party. But the response from higher up in the Party was to ask them to stay on, since it would be difficult to find replacements!

### **The Problem of the State in Third World Evangelical Politics**

Triumphalism can be illustrated in the words of the head of one branch of the Brazilian Assemblies of God: “As spiritual beings, born again, we are the ‘cream of society’. The church has the answers the politicians seek... With the firm action of the church in politics, there will be a glorious future.”

The belief that “we are the solution to the country’s problems,” demanding the placing of believers in power, has fuelled the messianism of some evangelical leaders who dream of an “evangelical president” who would channel the “blessings of God” onto the country. This is often combined with the ritualistic approach to social blessing of newer concepts of spiritual warfare (exorcism of the “demon of corruption,” or of hereditary curses on the country).

Zambia illustrates many of these aspects. In 1991, Frederick Chiluba was elected president. Chiluba had been a trades union leader during the one-party regime, being imprisoned for his activities. When democracy was restored, he became president. But the people’s expectations were soon frustrated. He imitated many aspects of the old regime. He intimidated opponents, changed the

constitution, his human rights record was poor, he blatantly favoured his own ethnic group and wallowed in corruption.

All of this happened within a unique relationship to evangelical Christianity. While in prison Chiluba had had a conversion experience, and later received the gift of tongues. When he reached power, he had three rituals performed. Firstly, before moving into the presidential palace he summoned a group of evangelicals to carry out a purification ceremony, expelling the evil spirits of the previous government. Secondly, a virtual “anointing” ceremony was performed in the Anglican cathedral, modelled on that of King David. And lastly, he performed a ceremony declaring Zambia a “Christian nation.” Saying “a nation is blessed whenever it enters into a covenant with God,” he repented in the name of the people “of our wicked ways of idolatry, witchcraft, the occult, immorality, injustice and corruption... I declare that Zambia is a Christian nation that will seek to be governed by the righteous principles of the word of God.”

The declaration of a Christian nation did not establish any church. It seems Chiluba saw such symbolic acts as bringing automatic blessings. Later he said “because Zambia has entered into this covenant, we shall stop borrowing; we shall lend instead.”

The reaction of church leaders was mixed. Some said it would create second-class citizens, encourage hypocrisy and bring discredit on Christianity. Others were enthusiastic. Since we are a Christian nation, they said, pastors should have positions in government and the state should give land for churches to build on.

But after a while even some fervent supporters became uneasy. Chiluba personally invited evangelists for crusades in Zambia, and he himself spoke at them as well. But many evangelical leaders refused to participate, saying the churches should do the inviting and not the government. Thus, an “evangelical” government ends up deepening divisions amongst the evangelicals themselves, because there is no agreement about what is the task of government and what is the task of the churches. And because there are never sufficient favours for everybody!

In Guatemala, proportionately the most Protestant nation in Latin America, there have been two evangelical presidents. The first one was an extremely repressive military president who would appear on television every Sunday and preach. Today he says that for him there is no difference between being head of state and being an elder in his church. As president, “I was simply ministering to a bigger church.” He saw the nation as a mega-church and the head of state as a master of spiritual truths! The second president was a civilian. At the same time as he was campaigning for president, he was also directing a spiritual warfare campaign aimed at freeing Guatemala from a curse supposedly laid on it 3,000 years ago because of pre-Christian religions. As president, he was a disaster:

The central question in all this is the role of the state. There are diverse postures in evangelical Third World, which mirror Coffey’s three classical positions of early Protestantism: apolitical rejection of the state; the idea of a “Christian nation” (the state helping to promote true religion and morals); and the idea of principled pluralism (religious freedom in a non-confessional state).

Coffey stresses that the principled pluralist position of the early Baptists and the Levellers was only possible because their understanding of (the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament) allowed them to overcome

any division of the political world between the godly and the ungodly. Their conception of toleration and a non-confessional state rested on theological conviction and not the lack of it.

Evangelicalism reached the Third World largely in this vein, often strengthened by the critique of Catholic or non-Christian “confusion” of religion and politics. However, acceptance of a non-confessional state still problematic for many evangelical leaders, as their power increases. All ideas of “rule of the people of God” or of “national missions” fall foul of the key “principled pluralist” notion that the situation of Old Testament Israel was entirely exceptional. All modern states are merely civil, and the idea of a holy commonwealth is abandoned.

Evangelicals must be bold defenders of pluralism, if only because their disadvantaged brethren in many countries need it urgently. On the other hand, they need to go beyond a secular utilitarian defence of the non-confessional state.

The question of power also needs reflection. As a minority traditionally marginalised but with a strong sense of destiny, the prospect of converting the ruler or of electing one’s own is often seen by Third World evangelicals as the pinnacle of political aspiration and a panacea for national ills. There is little understanding of politics as a *system*, and theologically there is a weak doctrine of sin in which the older Protestant understanding of the need for sinners to control each other in a system of mutual accountability is replaced by the “messianic” hope in a Christian president. If classical Protestant theology has stressed that power relations are *inevitable* but always *dangerous*, Third World evangelicalism has tended to stress one side or other of this equation according to its social situation: when impotent, it has stressed the danger of power and the desirability of its total avoidance; when power has beckoned, it has imagined the possibility of an unambiguous exercise of power by “the people of God.”

### **The Growing Evangelical Left on the Sharp End of Globalization**

Although the evangelical left in the Third World has always been a minority, it has been growing in recent years. Even some prosperity preachers, previously thought to be inately favourable to conservative economic policies, have changed their views. UCKG’s understanding that the growth of the church is harmed by the economic policies and the appalling income distribution resulting from them. The church encourages its members to become self-employed, “even if it is only selling popcorn on the street,” as they say. So it might be as well served by the left’s proposals for strengthening the domestic market and small-scale enterprise as by a recessive neoliberalism

So can Third World evangelicalism play a role in opposing existing market-driven globalisation. While militant Islam does so in its own way, can evangelicalism adopt a stance which is neither subordinate to neoliberalism nor hostile to the heritage of democracy and human rights?

But, of course, resistance to current trends in economic globalization cannot get very far if it just at the national level. Maybe there is a theological significance in the fact that Protestantism has become global precisely at this time. Resistance needs to be transnational, The worldwide Protestant community is one of the most globalized and profoundly rooted amongst those on the sharp end of current trends.

In Brazil, there has been a definite leftward move on the part of evangelicals in politics. In the elections which have just taken place, there was an evangelical candidate for president with the Socialist Party, and the winning candidate, Lula, of the main left-wing party, was allied with the Liberal Party which is strongly influenced by the UCKG. In the run-off election, an impressive range of evangelical leaders (from historical, pentecostal and neopentecostal churches) supported Lula. In the election for state governor of Rio de Janeiro, the two main candidates were evangelical women, one of the Socialist Party and one of Lula's Workers Party. It has become more and more common for left-wing militants to convert to evangelical churches and continue their political militancy.

Many factors have encouraged this leftward shift. But one important factor has been the work of the Evangelical Progressive Movement (MEP). The MEP was founded in 1990 and currently three members of congress are associated with it. But it is not a party, nor is it affiliated to a particular party. It is a non-party organization, but with a clearly defined left-wing ideological option.

The MEP declares itself to be evangelical (affirmative of emphases on the Bible, prayer and conversion). Its theological basis is the idea of wholistic mission developed by the Lausanne Covenant. The MEP seeks to educate the evangelical community politically and to carry out political activities with politically like-minded organizations of all religions or none. It accepts political pluralism within the evangelical community but seeks to create a favourable climate for economic, social and political life to reflect Biblical values more closely.

The MEP attempts to educate the left-wing parties regarding the importance of the evangelical community with theoretical and practical contributions to make to the transformation of the country. It also attempts to show that the strengthening of the family (of which the churches talk so much) must include support for economic policies which do not undermine the very foundations of stable family life.

Another interesting model of evangelical political action can be found in Peru. The National Evangelical Council. When Peru was going through a savage war between the brutal Maoist guerrilla group Shining Path and the almost equally brutal Peruvian military, CONEP started a human rights organization called the Peace and Hope Commission, modelled in many respects on Catholic Justice and Peace Commissions.

### **Evangelicals and Political Violence in the Third World**

Peru also exemplifies an evangelical option for the use of political violence in an extreme situation. During the guerrilla emergency in the Andes pentecostal churches grew very fast, filled the Peasant Patrols to defend the local community from the guerrillas. In their armed action, these pentecostals saw themselves as fighting against the anti-Christ himself.

Another example of evangelical political violence, this time on the guerrilla side, comes from the Indian state of Nagaland. The main guerrilla group, is so influenced by evangelical Christianity that it has an evangelistic music group. We thus find a group of Asian socialist guerrillas spreading the evangelical message!

Another case is that of southern Sudan, victim of a brutal civil war. The south is becoming more and more Christianized. In one fascinating incident, a commander of the southern rebel army, was approached by civilians wishing to

convert to Christianity but without a minister to baptise them. He then summoned a pastor by military order. After a month, the pastor asked to return home for the planting season, but the commander ordered him to continue baptising while his soldiers did the planting instead.

### **Christian Political Parties amongst Protestants Worldwide**

There is a large and growing contingent of Protestant political parties around the world. The first Protestant parties were founded in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth century. Later, the model spread to Scandinavia. In the last 20 years, the model has been extended to the developed English-speaking world, to Latin America and to southern Africa. Currently there are somewhere around 40 Protestant political parties in the world. Most are small, but a few have been in government,

Parties tend to be founded where: ii) the electoral system favours (especially with proportional representation); iii) the political culture is dissatisfied with the traditional parties; and iv) Protestants cannot find sufficient space in existing parties. Where there is no exclusion of evangelicals from the party system, such as South Korea and Brazil, there is intense political activity but no evangelical parties.

In Latin America, more than 20 parties have been founded, often several in the same country. The parties have not done very well. None of them has managed to obtain more than a fraction of the evangelical vote, and none has managed to appeal electorally to non-evangelicals.

The focus of many evangelical parties has been to obtain privileges and advantages for the churches. personal vehicles for ambitious ecclesiastics. internal procedures are often not democratic, and the interests defended are particularistic rather than universalistic.

Another problem with many of these parties is that there seems to be the assumption that church leaders should have political leadership as well. Although Latin American evangelical churches stress lay activism, especially in evangelization, that does not mean lay autonomy to organize themselves as believers in the “temporal” sphere.

In Latin America, evangelical parties are probably harmful to the growth of the churches since they equate conversion with a particular political option. Since the region does not have old-established and stagnant churches, but rather new and fast-expanding ones, this sort of freezing of interests is not useful.

The Latin American country where a Protestant party has achieved the most (modest) success is Nicaragua. In 1996, presidential elections. One of them came third, a pentecostal radio preacher with no previous political experience. His third place was actually an amazing feat. But since he had prophesied that he would become president, he felt he had to allege electoral fraud. The election of deputies through an evangelical party “created an expectation that they would encourage changes in the political culture. This hope was soon dashed... It was soon realised that being an evangelical was no antidote to corruption.” Evangelical parties easily succumb to the illusion that “believers” are incorruptible, that good intentions are all that is needed, and that political power can be safely placed at the service of the church.

In the Third World, the most interesting example so far is from post-apartheid South Africa. The African Christian Democratic Party is led by a charismatic pastor Kenneth Meshoe. The party claims to be based on biblical principles; it claims to be in favour of religious freedom, a market economy, "family values" It is very concerned to be tough on crime. The head of the Evangelical Alliance has criticized it for its lack of political acumen, crass identification of its political agenda with the values of the gospel, and its narrow concerns around "the sins of sex." But it has the best racial spread of any South African party (in its MPs and in its electorate). and that may end up being the ACDP's greatest contribution.

Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand all have such new parties, the dynamics are very different from Latin America. The parties are largely Protestant but also include Catholics.

The Christian Heritage Party of Canada, for example, seeks to justify its involvement as a defence of religious liberty for everyone against a militant secularism that seeks to exclude all faiths from the public square. But its mode of thinking is characterized by a manicheistic and conspiratorial view of the world, a simplistic view of their opponents and a limited perspective of "Christian heritage."

The party talks of restoring Biblical Judeo-Christian principles to "the place of primacy they held when this nation was established." Amongst the party principles are the inerrantist doctrine regarding the Bible According to party leaflets, "biblical churches are against contraception," a very surprising position. In their evaluation of other parties, they make no distinction between moral positions and legislative positions, i.e. those who would not prohibit something legislatively are described as "for" it. All legislation, they say, makes a moral statement, so the only question is: "whose morality is to be legislated?" The question "how much morality should be legislated?" does not seem to occur to them.

In short, the new Protestant parties in the English-speaking world seem to be broadly "New Christian Right," truncating the richness of the Christian Democratic heritage. the Scandinavian parties' strong support of Third World aid and of environmental protection; the Swedish party's emphasis on a social and ecological market economy, and membership of the European Union with abstention from any military alliances It is replaced by implausible views of the way the world works, and by the fetish of minimal government, regardless of the consequences. idealize a mythical past and anathematize a corrupt present; make undifferentiated appeals for moral recovery, without thinking about the specific role of the state in this; and tend to think they restore the "righteous nation" if only they can dislodge the secularist elite.

There is nothing wrong with the idea of a Christian party in the abstract; it all depends on the circumstances and way organized and what it stands for. Depending on the context, a Christian party may be the only viable option... or it may be an unmitigated disaster politically and ecclesiastically.

Parties based on the search for privileges for the church, or on the idea that believers have a divine right to rule, are the worst type. Those that limit themselves basically to the attempt to legislate certain moral values, are scarcely preferable. The ideal is a party with ample proposals covering the whole range of political questions, with broad internal party democracy, solidly rooted in Christian organizations in civil society but appealing also to non-believers

Parties should also adopt an essentially pragmatic justification for their existence, rather than a dogmatic one. Most Christian parties say that non-Christians can vote for them and even be members; which means that, they could even think up those ideals, and may in fact already have created parties. So there is no absolute necessity for a party of Christian inspiration, unless one also argues that only Christians can be members and only Christians will identify with it. In reality, the idea of a Christian party is usually defended on grounds that no current party satisfies.

In Third World conditions Protestant parties face severe obstacles and limitations. They tend to further divide the already divided evangelical community, and the variety in social composition makes it difficult to find a common platform (even on abortion there is no unanimity as to legislative policy, much less with regard to the role of the state, economic policy etc). A party must have a position on a broad range of questions, something which is usually beyond the evangelical community's limited educational resources.

Another problem is issue-selection. Even European Christian parties have not dealt deeply with the issue of inequality, and this is a serious weakness for parties in the Third World.

In conclusion, we can say that Christian parties have an important role in Christian politics, but do not exhaust its possibilities and are not necessarily the "most Christian" option. The full-orbed and integrated nature of Christian pols (as stemming from a worldview) can perhaps be shown more in the good Christian party. The bad one, of course, is a disaster, and even the best attempt at a Christian party suffers inherent limitations. Biblical lack of any timeless political recipe. length of the bridge between the Bible and today's the "law" of unintended consequences. Politics belongs to the realm of uncertainty and relativity. in the last analysis, politics is much more than having a "correct" worldview.

## Conclusions

Form and content are equally important in Christian politics, Unhealthy organizational models, unworthy motivations and inappropriate or limited objectives have plagued evangelical politics in many countries,

The great challenge today in Third World evangelicalism is the ethical challenge. Now, our deficiencies are projected onto a giant screen. deficiencies of teaching and of models of leadership.

A community which goes from apoliticism to political involvement without teaching on Biblical-political ethics, will be very susceptible to the prevailing political culture.

Like many minority groups with a strong sense of mission, we are fascinated with the idea of converting the political power. Power is understood as a person, not a system. We have a weak theology of sin - we dream of converting the person in power, or of putting one of ours there, rather than the traditional Protestant doctrine of sinners controlling each other in a system of mutual accountability. That is why democracy is so important. Awareness of the dark side of power will prevent us from imagining we can exercise power *in the name of God*.

Linked to this is the question of the specificity of politics. One evangelical deputy in Brazil said: "everything that is praised in the Bible should be prescribed, everything that is condemned should be proscribed." Really? Not even in Israel

were there laws for everything God ordered or condemned. The Bible does not exist to substitute the creative elaboration of forms of social organization. It is not enough to know that certain behaviour is wrong; we need to know whether it constitutes a matter for legislation (political work) or for evangelism and teaching (cultural work).

Many non-evangelicals used to think it would be a good thing for Brazil when the evangelicals were sufficiently numerous to make an impact in politics. They don't think that any longer. We have lost the full-orbed "Protestant ethic": the vision that Biblical revelation has to do with all of life; that structures, and not only people, are corrupt and need reform; that the Word of God, and not the institutional church, has authority in the public sphere; and that the Biblical worldview is that the world is open to our creative and responsible action.

But in many Third World evangelical circles today, instead of the ethic of social transformation we have the triumphalism which dreams of taking power. And instead of the biblical worldview, we have the current concept of spiritual warfare which is a return to a pagan view of the world, preaching ritualistic solutions for problems which should be faced ethically.

Once I attended a congress organized by some evangelical politicians. It was peppered with phrases such as "we are the salt of the earth," "we have the answer to Brazil's problems"; I spent two days waiting eagerly to hear what that answer consisted of, but there was not even five minutes discussion of national problems. Theologically, we confuse the imperative with the indicative. We *should be* the salt of the earth, but are we? We need to think about society biblically, in terms of values and not in terms of groups which have this or that label. Just because we are Christians, it does not mean we have privileged understanding of social problems and their solutions.

The danger is that the label on the bottle may change, but the liquid inside will be the same. We need to invest in the long haul of changing evangelical political culture.

This involves training for lay people. Many churches in the Third World are reaching social visibility and discovering the need for theoretical and practical expertise in areas which previously seemed irrelevant. Perhaps even more than conventional pastoral training, the churches need people who can interact with their societies in diverse ways.

For Christians from the developed world, there are two challenges in this. Firstly, to act as a lobby which makes a difference with regard to the policies (commercial, environmental, diplomatic, military, etc) which have an impact on the poorer countries. And secondly, to place the resources of the church (cultural, organizational, financial, etc) at the disposal of efforts to organize the global Christian community for greater impact around the world. Christians are carriers of the original globalization project and should never limit their concerns to their own nation-state. Few things in the world would help to make the gospel universally attractive as much as a radically different approach by Western Christians to the use of Western global power.

Catholicism's size and centralised structure make possible some global roles. But a key challenge for global Protestantism will be to combine its institutional plurality and flexibility with some viable means of organisation for social and political impact at national and global levels.

Lobbying by Christians in the developed world, after listening to the perspectives and concerns of their brethren from the Third World, could become a significant transnational force in coming decades. One immediate example that comes to mind is that US Christians could listen to and relay Latin American Christians' fears concerning the proposed Free Trade Zone of the Americas (something which few people in the US seem aware of).

Today, Protestant Christianity is located principally in the Third World, and amongst the poorest of the Third World. It has become a religion of those who have been excluded from globalization. Globalization is currently both "global village" and "global pillage." Dealing with this requires not only local initiatives, but also action by networks and communities which are on both sides of the divide. Not in the name of some fundamentalist anti-globalization, but in the name of a different vision of what globalized society could be, acting as amplifiers, bringing into key places the voice of their less privileged brethren from far away. This could be the specific contribution of the global evangelical community: a more integrated vision, the fusion of structural concerns (expressed before local and global fora) with the practical work which changes individual and community behaviour. Transforming lives through the Holy Spirit and biblical ethics, and thus bringing positive social and economic consequences; creating communities which give meaning to the localities abandoned to their own fate by globalization; creating citizens, by virtue of being one of the few organized structures still working amongst the poor masses; and acting as a lobby in relation to national and international decision-makers... in these ways the worldwide evangelical community could turn into one of the key political forces of the coming decades.