

THE 2002 KUYPER LECTURE

Response

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**In Response to
Paul Freston's lecture**

**Christians Organizing for Public Service
In Global Context**

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Christians Organizing for Political Service—In Global Context: A Response to Professor Paul Freston

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I want to express my sincere appreciation of Paul Freston's stimulating address. My response is organized into three points, two of them questions: What attitude might we Christians of the developed world adopt toward what Paul Freston calls "ecclesiastical corporatism," the enlisting of state resources for the aggrandizement of churches? Evangelicals are so motivated especially in countries where the status of the Catholic Church appears unchallenged or unchallenge-able, and protestant sects would like to enjoy a heightened status. Second, I will address Professor Freston's three-fold recommendation for emerging Christian political parties: that Christians develop confessional parties in nonconfessional states; that they develop pragmatic as well as confessional reasons for people to joins such parties; and that they choose issues wisely. Finally, another question: How may Christians in the developed world respond to a revival in the southern hemisphere of an old and coherent nexus of Christian faith—poverty, powerlessness, and supernaturalism—when such a New Testament nexus is so foreign to our own experience?

No strangers to triumphalism in evangelical ranks, what attitude may we in the Center for Public Justice or with like sympathies take toward the ecclesiastical corporatism model Professor Freston finds so common in third world evangelicalism? I want to suggest, and this will be thematical for my entire response, that we recognize and respond to the inescapable localism of our universal faith. As Pope John Paul II expressed it on a visit to the United States in the middle 1990s, "As Christians, you know that all things human are the soil in which the Kingdom of God is meant to take root and mature!"¹ Christianity takes root, we must remind ourselves, in all *cultures* human, sometimes in ways that are recognizable across those cultures, at other times surprising and calling for patient understanding. For example, in much of the recent history of third world evangelical engagement with politics may be detected echoes of an older, European engagement. This does not necessarily mean that Brazil, Zambia, or East Timor must have its "break with Rome" or its "Elizabethan Settlement"—but it does appear that the instinct for domesticating the faith is one of those patterns which transcends historical eras, giving the lie to those who assume the necessarily superficial character of a religious perspective brought by foreign missionaries from colonial powers. These are words of warning both for those skeptical of religion and for first world evangelicals themselves who may imagine that third world churches remain dependent on their missionary organizations.

Giving adequate recognition to burgeoning third world evangelicalism as unique expressions of God's kingdom is important for another reason: it is a vital context for criticism, and criticize we must, for third world triumphalism, Christian nation-ism, and erastianism are no less reprehensible for being practiced south of the equator than north of it.

Professor Freston's appreciation of Christian political parties and their prospects lays a solid foundation for constructive criticism of emerging Christian political activity in the third world. His three-fold recommendation is that Christians develop parties upon confessional principles for a non-confessional state; that they develop pragmatic as well as confessional justifications for joining these parties; and that they choose the

issues around which they will organize and campaign wisely. Taking these in order, the first reflects what is to many evangelicals in my experience a logical impossibility. How can one develop Christian principles for politics without seeking to influence public policy accordingly? Call it, if you will, the theocracy-separatism trap, or as Jim Skillen termed it more elegantly a couple of years back, the fixation of evangelicals on either a drive for dominance or a flight to purity.² Here in the US, The theocratic impulse is heavily qualified by the sheer selectivity of Christians concerned above all with vitally important questions like abortion rights but little interested in other matters, like the economy or environmental health, and qualified, too, by the periodic retreats from the public square that are native to much evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity. But Professor Freston's address and his book³ paint a much more distressing picture in the third world. On the one hand are cases like Chiluba's Zambia, declared to be a Christian nation from whose governing those who worship other gods had to be rigorously excluded to maintain purity and God's blessing; on the other are the parade of Latin American parties bent on advancing their own narrow agendas which have at most some social relevance in altering the status of pentecostal churches, but are typically concerned with aggrandizement of church leaders. Paying homage to authoritarian rulers in return for official recognition (as was the case with Chile's Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal), many protestant groups have signalled both expediency and indifference to the nature and role of the state.

Protestants in the Kuyper tradition hold to an approach to politics that is confessional but not theocratic. And they can draw on a rich history in Europe and elsewhere to illustrate the achievements and note the pitfalls of the Christian Democracy that sought to practice this approach. The real challenge is to communicate with third world evangelicals whose first instinct might well be to question the very basis of a pluralistic approach to politics and whose apprehension of the role of government is rooted as much in the concept of spiritual warfare as in the idea of public justice.

Freston's second recommendation, that Christians find pragmatic reasons for supporting confessional parties, raises troublesome questions. On the face of it, nothing seems more reasonable than to ask Christian parties to explain the vision of stewardship, fruitfulness, human community, justice and reconciliation that lies behind an authentic Christian vision but may be obscured by 'in-house' terminology. But of course, the reality he describes in third world evangelical politics is one in which such a vision is remote to the Christians themselves, or is to be realized exclusively in the church, politics being a self-serving and expedient affair. Freston's recommendation becomes more complicated when one turns to the declining Christian Democratic tradition for ways to achieve such communication. On the positive side, of course, the history of Christian Democracy is a history of realizing principles in concrete form: government-supported confessional schools support the principle of confessional pluralism; proportional representation makes multiple parties a reality and reinforces the principle of inclusion of religious and ethnic points of view in societal deliberations; the European form of welfare state models a partnership between government and private, including faith-based, service providers in deference to subsidiarity; and the social capitalism practiced by Christian Democrats made its considerable impression on the free-market, controlled economy debate, again in keeping with Christian principles.

But Christian Democracy's relative success has also been its partial undoing. As secularization proceeds apace, and as the successes of earlier generations of Christian Democrats become settled matters exciting no policy debate, contemporary Christian Democrats have tended to make "trans-confessional" appeals, replacing confessional

commitments with broader statements of values. These values are clearly built on confessional foundations, as the European People's Party's *Union of Values* (2001) makes abundantly plain in its embrace of Catholic definitions of human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and justice. Indeed, Kees van Kersbergen (1994) has gone so far as to argue that "those who are ready to defend and to help expand human dignity, human rights, compassion, public justice and morality are ready to defend and express the Christian message. They are, in fact, Christian Democrats, even if they do not believe in God."⁴ Van Kersbergen makes an intriguing suggestion but it has to be greeted with skepticism, if not for the present generation then certainly two or three generations out, if the confessional roots of Christian Democracy do not receive some fresh infusion of faith. By Freston's account, third world evangelicals lack a well-formed conception of the role of and relations among state, citizen, and civil society to begin with; in their promotion of pragmatic reasons to belong to their political parties, might evangelicals not be quick to exchange principle for expediency without even the constraints of such values to hold them in check? One senses that this has already happened.

Choosing issues wisely, Paul Freston's third recommendation, will hardly occur without the "formation" of Christian principles for politics outlined above. The focus on abortion at the expense of environmental stewardship, one of his examples, illustrates the dilemma as well as any. But perhaps the example reflects the relative youth of evangelical politics in the third world. For some, if not all, American evangelicals drawn into politics by the *Roe v Wade* decision, that baptism was only the beginning of a political odyssey. The old complaint of single-issue politics levelled at prolife activists, while it always tended to downplay the pivotal importance of the principle of respect for life in shaping a political philosophy, also overlooked the educational properties of politics. Evangelical political agendas did broaden, not least because the Republican Party which courted evangelicals brought them into close contact with neo-conservative economic ideas. A similar educational process cannot be ruled out for third world evangelicals, although it will be subject to many qualifications, from instinctive and theological separatism to the nature of the political order in the nations in question.

Finally, how may Christians in the developed world respond, not only to emerging third world evangelical political initiatives but also to the foundation of these initiatives, namely an old, authentic, coherent, and for most western Christians, forgotten Christian nexus: poverty, powerlessness, and supernaturalism? Our worldviews, as Anglicans, Catholics, neo-Calvinists, evangelicals and the like, have been nurtured in settings of material wealth and security, coupled with political and economic power, which circumscribe our Christian supernaturalism. As an Anglican, for example, I am growing more and more familiar with the enthusiasm expressed at the most recent Lambeth conferences for our emerging identity as a black, African church—as I am with the danger that this reality will be employed to gain points for diversity without accompanying participation and power-sharing. But I wonder, how ready are we for demons, miracles, and healings, phenomena our brothers and sisters will insist on integrating into our social and political thinking as well as our ecclesiology and worship? As for those gathered here, who join organizations like the Center for Public Justice because we are convinced that Christian reflection on politics is not only possible but potentially fruitful for justice and peace, how will we communicate with those Sudanese believers Professor Freston cites who consider carefully and prayerfully martyrdom's capacity for purifying their church?

Well, humbly, I suggest. Rejecting as we do the "drive to dominance, flight to purity" polarities of American evangelicalism in favor of principled pluralism, we must

expect third world Christians to be even more suspicious of confessional pluralism than their American counterparts. For the Christians of whom Professors Freston and Philip Jenkins have written lately, the realities of spiritual warfare are as vivid as theories of the state are weakly articulated. Moreover, Christian pluralism is articulated against a background of rapid secularization in western cultures, a trend whose real speed is, if anything, masked by the vibrancy in western cities of churches full of immigrants from the southern hemisphere!

For U.S. Christians in the Kuyper and Catholic traditions this great, and I think it great, emphasis on subsidiarity and confessional pluralism that has animated neo-Calvinist and Catholic social teaching, may need to be developed to sharpen our practical wisdom in selecting issues and to give more visibility to the principle of solidarity. Our “problem” is that our political reflection lacks accompanying institutions like the Christian Democratic parties of Europe and Latin America. Political parties are naturally attuned to wise issue selection as they communicate with their supporters and would-be supporters. In a society like the United States, where Christians enjoy significant levels of wealth and civil liberty, the neo-Calvinist and Catholic traditions appeal especially in their capacity to criticize the liberal tradition—for its individualism, its paradoxical lurches into statism, its “thin” society, and its inadequate form of electoral representation. Rightly, in my opinion, we press for development of sphere sovereignty principles for civil society’s agencies and for forms of electoral representation that will do justice to the range of religious and non-religious confessions around which human life is organized. But we are not, I submit, as naturally attuned to practical questions or to how these principles might gain practical expression as we would be as members of parties with a representative stake in public policy-making, however small. We can compensate for this in various ways, of course, and membership in organizations like CPJ is one of these, but we have to work harder to capture the natural nexus of principle and policy that party membership can instill.

This is important for our grasp of the economic conditions of the third world and of attempts to implement Christian principles in those situations. In Christian Democracy’s other “home” continent, Latin America—we are apt to think first of the Europe of Leo XIII, Abraham Kuyper, Konrad Adenauer and Jean Monnet— Christian Democrats have been active in some eleven countries. According to Edward A. Lynch, however, almost all of these heavily Catholic parties have paid lip service to Catholic principles, moving between statism and the free market in typically modern form—itself a testimony to political reality, human frailties, and the temptations of short-term expediency. A stunning exception has been the Christian Democratic party in Chile. Under the government of Patricio Aylwin (1989-1993) the Christian Democrats (PDC) invigorated the private sector without cronyism in their small business loans program, gave the free market a cautious reception by welcoming, but raising taxes on, foreign investments, inaugurated a private citizen-government partnership to help Chileans become homeowners, and managed to move a million persons out of poverty.⁵ Lynch describes the Aylwin government and its successor as faithful to the principle of subsidiarity and as successful precisely because of such adherence. In Paul Freston’s terms, one might describe their success as a wise choice of issues coupled with a mature grasp of and commitment to, confessional principles.

Mention of the Chilean Christian Democrats quickly raises another practical problem, however, which takes us back to the localism of the universal Christian faith. It will not be easy to communicate in the language of Catholic social teaching to evangelical protestants jealous of the Catholic Church’s privileged position in their own country. On balance Lynch’s assessment of Catholic social thought in Latin America is

discouraging. The Chilean example stands essentially alone, the exception in some forty-two elections of a party that practiced after the election what it preached to the electorate beforehand.

I want to end on a point of scale. One cannot listen to Professor Freston, or read his or Philip Jenkins' recent books, without a renewed appreciation of the size differences that leap out of any comparison between developed and third world situations. In particular, Professor Jenkins' statistics on projected population growth situate the challenges facing the church in the southern hemisphere in stark relief. He writes of such cities as Tokyo, Mumbai, Lagos, Shanghai, Jakarta, Sao Paulo, and Karachi having populations between twenty and thirty million each by 2015. "Tens of millions of new urban dwellers will be living and working totally outside the legal economy or any effective relationship with officialdom."⁶ Contemplating such a challenge to the church to help, heal, build community, provide education, and pursue just governance, is more sobering than words can easily express. I have no simple answers for responding to this challenge. But we might approach an important symbolic beginning when the Kuyper lecture is held in Kampala or Mumbai or Dhakar or Sao Paulo.

1. Homily at Giants Stadium, New Jersey, October 5, 1995.

2. In the late 1990s, with the evangelical vote firmly in Republican hands and evangelical influence in politics maturing, and institutionalizing, several prominent leaders urged a reconsideration of political involvement, for the perennial evangelical reason that power is a temptation to corruption. The recommendation was for Christians to forsake political involvement for their own, presumably purer, institutions. See Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1999

3. *Evangelicals, and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America*. Cambridge University Press, 2001

4. Kees van Kersbergen, "The Distinctiveness of Christian Democracy," in David Hanley, ed. *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, London: Pinter, 1994, p. 45.

5. Edward A. Lynch, "Catholic Social Thought in Latin America," *Orbis*, Winter 1998, Vol 42 Issue 1, pp. 105-121.

6. *The Next Christendom: the Rise of Global Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.