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## **A New Era of Protestant Political Parties** A Book Review

By Lawren Sinnema<sup>©</sup>

In his new book, *Protestant Political Parties: A Global Survey* (Aldershot, Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate, 2004—<http://www.ashgate.com>), Paul Freston completes an exhaustive study of Protestant political engagement in over 40 countries. While examining the well-known Protestant parties of Northern Europe, his most important contribution may be his case studies on the recent rise of Protestant political involvement in the Third World. The reader may be surprised to find Protestant parties in such countries as Fiji, Indonesia, Pakistan, Zambia, Columbia, and Nicaragua. Freston, who served for many years as professor of sociology at the Federal University of Sao Carlos, Brazil, has been studying the relationship between Protestant Christianity and politics for a long time. In 2001, he published a book on a similar subject titled *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In 2003, he moved to Calvin College in Michigan to fill the Byker Chair in Christian Perspectives on Political, Social, and Economic Thought.

Freston clearly illuminates the diversity and complexity of Protestant parties around the world. While they all speak of deriving their policies from Christian principles, the parties range from "right-wing" to "left-wing," from Christian democratic to Christian fundamentalist, from anti-secular to pro-secular views of the state. There is no uniform idea of what a Christian party should stand for. This is partly due to the fact that Christian parties operate within different cultural contexts, which leads to different interpretations of the role of the state and the goals of Christian politics. Despite this lack of coherence, Freston manages to highlight common themes and trends that exist among the parties.

The recent global expansion of Protestant parties is directly linked to the global status of the Protestant faith. Protestantism has become a truly globalized religion, marked by growing secularization in the West and rapid expansion in the Third World. Especially in the Third World, the increase in the number of practicing believers, their sense of marginalization, and the growth of multiparty democracies have created an atmosphere that is ripe for the development of a large number of Protestant

parties. Since they are new, however, parties in the Third World tend to inexperienced and have funding and organizational problems.

The first half of the book deals with Protestant parties in Europe and the English-speaking world. It is appropriate that Freston begins his survey by examining the situation in the Netherlands, the home of well-established Protestant Parties and a long tradition of Christian political practice going back to the latter half of the 19th century. Freston's main focus is on the history of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which merged with another Protestant party and the Catholic People's Party in 1980 to become the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA). He also writes about the influence of Abraham Kuyper's ideas on the "Dutch model" of Christian politics. Kuyper's seemingly contradictory ideas of the antithesis and common grace reflect two approaches that Protestant parties can take. Kuyper's antithesis stresses the distinction between the believing and unbelieving world, and is a call for Christians to create their own organizations. His idea of common grace emphasizes God's grace to the whole world, and is a call for Christians to make alliances with unbelievers. Protestant parties are often faced with this decision: either expand their base by reaching out to unbelievers through the "translation" of their political platform or remain a small party that is distinctly Christian. These different paths are evident in the parties of the Netherlands. While the CDA has achieved great influence, it is now less distinctly Christian; the *ChristenUnie* (CU) and the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (SGP) remain small parties that are less willing to compromise their Christian distinctives. Freston makes no claim about which approach he thinks may be best suited for Protestant parties. But he does warn that "there is always a risk, in seeking to move beyond one's core support, that the demand for relevance and the conquest of new voters will water down those aspects which made the party attractive in the first place to its existing followers."

Besides the Netherlands, Protestant parties have been most successful in the Scandinavian countries. Originally formed as anti-secular parties, throughout the years they have evolved into mature parties with well-rounded political platforms. *The Kristelig Folkeparti* (KRF) of Norway, while founded with the goal of "protecting our Christian heritage," also now speaks about human rights, environmental stewardship, and anti-poverty programs. The *Kristdemokraterna* (KD) of Sweden, founded on concerns about promiscuity and decline in film censorship, now speaks about a third way between individualism and collectivism and promotes social and environmental justice.

While presenting a fairly objective summary of the different parties, Freston leaves plenty of room for criticism. Apart from the Netherlands and the Scandinavia countries, Freston notes that there is a decline in the political relevance and maturity of Protestant parties. Many parties are defined by narrow interests and lack a developed Christian political worldview. In Germany, the *Partei Bibeltreuer Christen* (PBC) proposes mandatory prayer and Bible study in all schools and unconditional support of Israel. The *Christliche Mitte* is critical of Muslim immigration into Germany. The Christian Heritage Party of Canada speaks of restoring the Christian principles on which the nation was founded. These fundamentalist parties are defined more by what they stand against than by a positive vision for the future. Freston believes these fundamentalist parties are destined to remain on the fringe, incapable of winning many

votes due to lack of realism and views that are too extreme for even most Protestants. Of course, political parties never remain static and there is room for further reflection and change.

The second half of the book examines the situation in the Third World, where a rise in the number of practicing believers, among other things, has given birth to many new Protestant parties. Freston says there are reasons to be both optimistic and pessimistic about this recent growth. Since many of these parties are relatively new, they are often characterized by lack of experience, lack of political realism, and lack of developed Christian political thought. Despite these shortcomings, there are reasons to be hopeful for the future. These parties are claiming that Christianity and politics need to be intertwined and that the Bible should be the guide for political action. If these parties can evolve, they could become leading advocates of religious tolerance and public justice.

After years of dictatorships and apartheid, Africa has seen a rise in Protestant political involvement. In Zambia, the first multi-party election in 1991 brought forward evangelical Frederick Chiluba, who promptly declared Zambia a Christian nation. Although the statement was largely symbolic, Zambia has achieved many of the goals that its Protestant parties view as most important: abortion is illegal in most circumstances, the nation has been declared Christian, and there is a strong support for Israel. But Zambia is also marked by corruption, human right's abuses, and economic decline. The author acknowledges that confessing Christian principles does not make parties exempt from the sins of the prevailing culture. But Freston also sees positive aspects in what has happened in Zambia. While Zambia is a self-declared Christian nation, there is still religious freedom and no established church. There has been an attempt to combine faith and politics without resorting to theocracy.

Latin America has also seen a rapid expansion of Protestant parties, but these parties must overcome many obstacles before they can become politically relevant. Christian politicians in Latin America often fall victim to unrealistic expectations and self-centered ecclesiastical goals. These parties usually are formed with the idea that the existing Protestant voter base will support them, but that assumption usually turns out to be false. In Nicaragua, Protestant politician Guillermo Osorno claimed that God revealed to him that he would be elected president. When he finished a distant third, Osorno alleged fraud to justify his failed prophecy. This kind of triumphalism, often exhibited by Protestant politicians in Latin America, ignores political reality and usually results in lost legitimacy. Since there is a belief that they have a mandate from God, they do not see a need to build up a solid party or develop a political philosophy. Although the number of believers is on the rise in Latin America, often they do not feel obliged to vote for Protestant parties. Freston writes that the challenge for these parties is to "connect religious identity with electoral choice."

Since Freston offers case studies of parties in more than 40 countries, the reader may be overwhelmed by the number of political parties and leaders covered in the book. While his survey is comprehensive, the author could have gone into greater depth on the political and theological beliefs of the parties. Also, he does not much attention to what these parties have actually accomplished when they have gained

representation, but perhaps this is because most parties mentioned have had little political influence. More emphasis is placed on the formation and organizational structures of the parties. Despite its limitations, *Protestant Political Parties* is a valuable resource for understanding the diverse range of Protestant movements throughout the world. Freston writes in a non-academic fashion that makes the book accessible to the general reader. This book will be beneficial for Christian readers because most are not aware of the global scope of Protestant political engagement.

In his conclusion, Freston draws some comparisons between the various parties, and he urges that the more advanced parties, like those in the Netherlands, work with newly formed parties. "The varying and even conflicting agendas of these parties," he says, "point to the need for global interaction and dialogue, for mutual learning and humble assistance."

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