

## ***Democracy: Instrument for or Expression of a Christian Political Order?* by George Harinck and Hans-Martien ten Napel**

### **Abstract**

Is separation of the political and religious realms necessary for a democracy to flourish? This article argues that, whereas both the Catholic Church's social teaching and Protestant thinking, especially as developed in the Netherlands, recognize the relationship between religion and democracy, only Catholicism explicitly acknowledges that Christianity is vital for sustaining democracy. Compared with the Catholic Church's social teaching, Herman Dooyeweerd's views on values and democracy, for example, are relatively underdeveloped. Even after his death, Dooyeweerd's thought continues to influence one of the Dutch Protestant political parties, insofar as it still regards democracy as an instrument for a Christian political order, rather than as the expression of one.

### **Introduction**

The starting point of our article is the debate that took place in 2004 between philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas and theologian and churchman Joseph Ratzinger (elected Pope the following year) on the prepolitical moral foundations of the democratic order. We begin by examining the philosophical background of Ratzinger's position in this debate, i.e., the Catholic Church's social teaching. Next, largely on the basis of Jonathan Chaplin's recent study *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Society*, we argue that Dooyeweerd's views on values and democracy are relatively underdeveloped.

The article then goes on to explore the implications of this for the Christian Union (CU), a Dutch Christian political party that continues to be influenced by Dooyeweerd, even after his death. From 2007 to 2010, the CU was a coalition partner in the Balkenende IV cabinet, together with the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats; in 2010, the CU was vehemently opposed to the formation of the Rutte cabinet, a minority coalition of Liberals and Christian Democrats, which received parliamentary support from Geert Wilders' anti-Islam Freedom Party (PVV).<sup>1</sup> Yet a 2011 letter by the then Christian Democratic Minister of the Interior Piet Hein Donner to the House of Representatives on integration, engagement, and citizenship was more outspoken with respect to values and democracy than any other policy document in recent decades.

In what way then is religion or a prepolitical moral foundation defended as indispensable for the democratic order? It turns out that, although both Catholic and Protestant traditions recognize the relationship between religion and democracy, only the Catholic Church's social teaching views democracy as not just an instrument for a Christian political order but as the true expression of it.

### **The Habermas–Ratzinger Debate**

In January 2004, Habermas and Ratzinger met to debate the moral foundations of the constitutional state. According to Habermas, the democratic constitution of such a state provides legitimacy in and of itself, and its foundations can be considered entirely post-

metaphysical or secular.<sup>2</sup> Because this is very much the mainstream opinion today, there is no need to elaborate on it here.

Ratzinger, by contrast, questions whether legality equals legitimacy, and believes that the standard of justice should be found in the moral foundations of Western political culture, notably the Christian faith and Western secular rationality. He agrees that, because it ensures the participation of citizens in policy making, among other activities, democracy can be considered “the most appropriate form of political order.” Nevertheless, he identifies one crucial problem—that as history shows, majorities can reach utterly unjust decisions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was published after World War II and articulated basic human dignities that could not (in principle) be compromised by popular vote, is valuable in this respect but does not suffice.<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, the philosophical background from which Ratzinger develops this position is the Catholic Church’s social teaching. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, compiled in the 1990s by an editorial committee chaired by Ratzinger, emphasizes that the Bible provides “endless inspiration for Christian reflection on political power, recalling that it comes from God and is an integral part of the order that he created.”<sup>4</sup>

With respect to this created order, the *Compendium* affirms that “[t]he political community originates in the nature of persons, whose conscience ‘reveals to them and enjoins them to obey’ the order which God has imprinted in all his creatures.”<sup>5</sup> It is the task of humanity to discover and develop this order. No matter how much human creativity is required for that purpose, however, “[t]his order ‘has no existence except in God; cut off from God it must necessarily disintegrate.’”<sup>6</sup>

Like Ratzinger, the *Compendium* “values” democracy. It adds, however, that “an authentic democracy is not merely the result of a formal observation of a set of rules but is the fruit of a convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every human person, the respect of human rights, commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life. If there is no general consensus on these values, the deepest meaning of democracy is lost and its stability is compromised.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, such a consensus is exactly what is missing in modern-day democracies, because of ethical relativism. According to the *Compendium*, this constitutes a serious threat because “if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political action, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.”<sup>8</sup>

Understandably, the *Compendium* then goes on to warn that further marginalization of Christianity in, for example, the West “would not bode well for the future of society or for consensus among peoples; indeed, it would threaten the very spiritual and cultural foundations of civilization.”<sup>9</sup>

In summary, then, the democratic order according to Ratzinger and Catholic social teaching is an expression of Judeo-Christian values. Therefore, a democracy that has been alienated from these values will sooner or later adopt totalitarian traits. Democracy is only safe in God—that is, in a society with God-fearing citizens. Or, as political scientist Hugh Heclo put it when discussing the relationship between Christianity and American democracy: “Non-believers

may not believe the Christians' answers, but a democratic society is surely better off for having to confront the Big Questions rather than pretending they do not exist. Without a strong, publicly engaged Christian presence, America will become a different and not a better place."<sup>10</sup>

*Dooyeweerd's Position*

Let us now turn to a Protestant position in the debate. Jonathan Chaplin's aim in his recent book on Dooyeweerd is to demonstrate "how his work amounts to a striking and characteristically Protestant philosophy of social pluralism and civil society, comparable in range and depth to contributions emerging from twentieth-century Catholic social thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and Heinrich Rommen."<sup>11</sup>

It is our contention, however, that "the contrast between the impressive legacy of Thomistic thought and the paucity of Calvinist philosophizing" by which Dooyeweerd was struck in 1925<sup>12</sup> still exists with respect to the pressing issues of values and democracy.

As in Catholic social teaching, Dooyeweerd's "creation motive" implies the notion that "[t]he design of the created cosmos is determined throughout by 'divine law,' which structures and sustains its existence."<sup>13</sup> More specifically with regard to the state, Dooyeweerd holds that its dominant features can be summarized as "power in service of justice."<sup>14</sup> According to Chaplin, Dooyeweerd favors "a form of constitutional democracy in which popular will is channeled through and limited by justice-embodiment constitutional structures. For him it is more important to limit the state's power and authority than to ensure that its actions reflect popular will."<sup>15</sup>

It can therefore be assumed that Dooyeweerd stands closer to Ratzinger than to Habermas, in the sense that both would probably agree that the democratic order is, as one author recently put it, "not culture-free." Instead, this order possesses distinctive cultural elements that "ought to be carefully investigated, specified, and acknowledged, if liberal democracies are to continue existing as such."<sup>16</sup>

Yet, as Chaplin points out, for Dooyeweerd, "[d]emocracy, it seems, is not given on the law side but is only a positive form, the appropriateness of which depends on historical conditions rather than on conformity to a structural norm."<sup>17</sup> Chaplin rightly observes that this view can be considered "problematic," if only because the "troubling implication" is that not even the question of whether the state should be organized internally in an autocratic or a democratic manner can be decided by referring to the state's structural principles.<sup>18</sup>

Chaplin believes it is possible to argue that the idea of the state as a public-legal community somehow implies political participation of its citizens. It is telling, however, that Dooyeweerd himself did not draw this conclusion and—as Chaplin admits—would possibly have resisted it. In addition, according to Chaplin, "[t]he passages in NC where Dooyeweerd discusses the concept of the nation are among the denser and more obscure in his account of the state."<sup>19</sup> All in all, Dooyeweerd's views on values and democracy seem less sophisticated and, as a result, less conclusive than those of Catholic social teaching, to say the least.

**CU and Democracy**

Dooyeweerd's weakly developed ideas on parliamentary democracy are still reflected in Dutch politics. The CU stands in the neo-Calvinist or antirevolutionary political tradition as

developed by the Dutch politician and theologian Abraham Kuyper in the late nineteenth century. The political branch of neo-Calvinism was called antirevolutionary. Its antagonism has to be understood as follows: it is opposed to the ideas of the French Revolution, especially the modeling of society according to the uniform rule of reason, and evacuating religion from the public sphere and banishing it to the private one. The antirevolutionaries defended a plural society, for example by promoting equal legal rights and public funding for religious and non-religious based schools.<sup>20</sup> Dooyeweerd belonged to this tradition and was active in the 1920s as President of the Scientific Institute of Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party. His work strengthened the theoretical basis of the antirevolutionary tradition and, after World War II, his philosophical work spurred the tradition's renewal when the key notions of authority and limitation of state power were exchanged for those such as responsibility and social justice.<sup>21</sup> The CU was founded in 2000, as a merger of two Christian political parties that had represented the antirevolutionary tradition in Dutch politics during the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> The CU may be regarded as the political expression of Dooyeweerd's philosophical school, and CU representatives in the Dutch Parliament, such as former party leader André Rouvoet and (former) senators Egbert Schuurman and Roel Kuiper, have been trained in this philosophical tradition. Schuurman and Kuiper are professors in Christian philosophy, as the Dooyeweerd school is called today.

The starting point for Christian philosophy—and for the CU's reflection on and appreciation of democracy—is that this world, including the state and politics, are subject to God as creator and redeemer. From this perspective, the CU diagnoses secularized Western culture, including democracy, as having abandoned the guiding principles of Christianity. However, despite its negative evaluation of the Western world, the CU is not abandoning this culture. This is still God's world, and Christians must serve culture and society with the Good News, in private and in public. This is in full accordance with the antirevolutionary tradition and its notions of the antithesis between the Christian faith and others and a common (nonsaving) grace for all, as proposed by Kuyper. Thus, the CU stands on two legs: passive acceptance of secular democracy and active striving for democracy with a Christian character.<sup>23</sup>

Given its religious premise and its sensitivity to antireligious trends in modern culture, the CU is receptive to a critique of Western culture not so much from an economic or political point of view, but from a moral point of view, whether from existentialist, neo-Marxist, or environmentalist ideologies. At present, Islam in particular is in vogue. The basis of the Islamic critique of Western culture is its alienation from Allah. The CU rejects any radical Islamic criticism of Western culture that includes use of violence, but appreciates reformist Islamic criticism—rejecting trends in modern culture, but not modern culture as such. In 2007, CU senator Egbert Schuurman proposed a “moral pact” between Islam and Christianity as a cultural counterforce against Enlightenment ideas and practices. He referred to Islamic philosophers like Mohammed Iqbal and Mohammad Abdus Salam who want to embed technology in such a way as to guarantee justice, equality, solidarity, harmony, and environmental care.<sup>24</sup>

Schuurman did not discuss the political aspects of a pact with Islam. However, one problem with Islam in Western societies is their relative unfamiliarity with Islam. The

incapability to cope with a different religion is the main reason why politicians in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom declared in 2011 ‘multiculturalism’ a complete failure.<sup>25</sup> According to these politicians, Muslim immigrants should not be met with multicultural tolerance but with secular strength. The example of the Netherlands—where two anti-Islamists, politician Pim Fortuyn and artist Theo van Gogh, were murdered—is often used to illustrate this problem.<sup>26</sup> In the context of this development towards secularism it is our contention that the liberal democratic system requires a reevaluation by religiously based political parties. How does Christianity relate to democracy? Religions may agree on the ontological existence of a prepolitical moral order, but epistemologically the antirevolutionary tradition “expects abiding disagreement about the content” of this order.<sup>27</sup> According to Catholic social teaching, the moral order implies democracy. In this sense, democracy is inextricably linked with Christianity or, even more specifically, with Calvinism (democracy was not accepted by the Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s).<sup>28</sup> As Heclo pointed out, Christianity is not the whole story of American democracy, and Christianity has had a dynamic rather than static relationship with democracy, but “the Christian affirmations of human equality, individuation, and ordinary life have been critically important grounding influences for thinking about democratic man.” It was Christianity, and not religion in general, that promoted American democracy.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between democracy and Islam is a matter of standing debate, at least in Europe. Schuurman’s pact therefore has the potential to cause problems when democracy is at stake, and, in line with Chaplin’s evaluation of Dooyeweerd’s thought, reveals a weakly developed Christian concept of democracy.

Democracy is indeed at stake: Islam challenges Western democracies to speak out on their character. Will Western democracies allow indigenous religions—Christianity and Judaism—only in the public domain, will they include Islam as well, or do they ban all religions from the public domain? What is the CU’s position on this issue? Traditionally, the CU focused on freedom of conscience as the litmus test for democracy. Democracy was essentially an instrument, a means to safeguard liberties for Christians and others. The CU takes religion as its criterion against which to evaluate political trends. Hence the CU’s negative judgment of the so-called purple coalitions of Liberals and Social Democrats (1994–2002)—these coalitions rejected an ethical approach to political issues, and therefore Dutch society quickly lost its Christian benchmark. Schuurman therefore proposed the pact with Islam: the West is threatened primarily not by antidemocratic ideologies, but by antireligious forces.

Nevertheless, the CU’s position is strengthening. In its 2010 and 2012 manifestos, the party placed more emphasis on the acceptance of democracy as essential for participation in Dutch society. It bases this stance on religious grounds, stating that constitutional democracy was developed within a Christian context. This last move is part of a longer development in Christian politics from an exclusive position—society must obey God’s commandments—toward an inclusive one: society must treat all opinions equally, especially those of religious minorities. The CU still resists any restriction on religious freedom, but has accepted a more inclusive definition of democracy. However, the party still lacks a positive, intrinsic definition of democracy as the political expression of Christianity.



In 2007, the CU, Christian Democrats, and Social Democrats formed a coalition government that remained in office until 2010. During this period, democracy was challenged by Islamic critics and populist parties such as the PVV. In reaction, this coalition—sometimes called the “Dooyeweerd cabinet” because then prime minister Jan Peter Balkenende and some other Christian Democratic ministers, like their CU colleagues,<sup>30</sup> were pupils of the Dooyeweerd school—stated that democracy should be driven by values. Perhaps this phrase reflected the CU’s conviction that government and society must obey God’s commandments, but the values by which democracy was to be driven were not explicated. In this political context, Schuurman’s pact with Islam sent out somewhat confusing signals. The pact reflected the classic notion of the CU that religion is fundamental to modern society, while simultaneously forming a coalition with a secular party and defending an inclusive position that did not explicitly state a relationship between Christianity and democracy. With whom would the CU ultimately side: with the religion-driven or the democracy-driven factions?

No answer was given, but the CU’s vehement opposition to the coalition formed in 2010 was based on the government’s apparent allowance of religious discrimination. PVV’s qualification of Islam as ‘ideology’ was not rejected initially by this coalition as an insult but neutralized as a ‘point of view.’ In reaction, the CU asked for reaffirming the core values of the Dutch constitutional state.<sup>31</sup> The CU was clearly motivated by religion on this occasion. Interestingly, this coalition has been clearer on the values-driven character of democracy than any other coalition in recent decades. Both coalition parties explicitly defended freedom for all religions and labeled Islam a religion, thus distancing themselves from the PVV. While defending religious freedom on the one hand, on the other hand they rejected the notion of a multicultural society without a *Leitkultur* that was popular in the Netherlands in the 1990s. There was something like a typical Dutch culture and the coalition stressed that Dutch society is not exchangeable for any other.

For the first time in decades, a cabinet dared to postulate a direct relationship between democracy and, specifically, Dutch historical or cultural features, such as language, monuments, architectural styles, or unwritten codes of conduct and behavior. The first Rutte cabinet (2010-2012) has admitted to prepolitical foundations of the democratic order or, in its own words, “a fundamental continuity of values, opinions, institutions and habits that define and mark the leading culture of Dutch society.”<sup>32</sup>

Although one may appreciate this vision of democracy and values, it is clear that the coalition did exactly what may have been expected from the CU—it rejected an inclusive definition of democracy, instead relating it to specific values. Christianity is not mentioned explicitly among these values, but it is clear that the historical and cultural values, as expressed in, for example, the country’s monuments and architectural styles monuments and architectural styles, are mainly those of this religion. This is more than the CU achieved in the preceding coalition or in its own political manifestos.

The antirevolutionary tradition has traditionally been characterized by a rather instrumental view of democracy, one that has never been linked directly to Christianity.<sup>33</sup> The rise of Islam and anti-Islamic sentiments in Dutch society led CU senator Schuurman to invite Islamic representatives into a moral coalition against secularism. Paradoxically, parties with a

less marked Christian profile than the CU had a different reaction to these sentiments. Thus, the Liberal–Christian Democratic cabinet stressed the moral foundations of Dutch democracy. In the absence of any metaphysical reference, the cabinet’s position may be characterized as Habermassian in the sense used above. However, the explicit reference to cultural expressions such as architecture and monuments was, without doubt, a hidden reference to Christianity.

### Conclusion

Ratzinger’s argument that democracy cannot do without Christianity is rooted in a broad tradition of Catholic social teaching on democracy and the common good, especially since the Second Vatican Council. In contrast, Protestant reflections on democracy are scarce in the Dutch case, and Dooyeweerd—or the tradition of Christian philosophy he founded—hardly addressed this burning issue. This paucity is reflected in the CU’s view of democracy. The party admits that values, in the form of religion, are needed to sustain democracy, but it lacks a sophisticated view of democracy. Now that democracy is at stake, the CU is alarmed by voices that want to exclude a religion such as Islam, but it is ignoring the underlying problem, which is the absence of a standard definition of Dutch democracy. It is therefore clear that, although both Catholic and Dutch Protestant traditions recognize the relationship between religion and democracy, only Catholic social teaching views democracy as not just an instrument for a Christian political order but as the true expression of it.

**George Harinck** is professor of history at the VU University Amsterdam and director of the Historical Documentation Center at the same university. He published widely on the Dutch and international history of Protestantism in the 19th and 20th century.

**Hans-Martien ten Napel** is an assistant professor of constitutional and administrative Law at Leiden University in the Netherlands, where he is also Research Fellow of the Leiden Law School. Since 2008, he has been also Senior Researcher at the School of Human Rights Research.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this article we will use the term ‘Islam’ in the general sense in which Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im uses it, i.e. ‘the monotheistic religion (*Din al-Tawhid*) that the Prophet Muhammed propagated between 610 and 632 CE, when he delivered the Qur’an and expounded its meaning and application through what came to be known as the Sunna of the Prophet’. See his *Islam and the Secular State. Negotiating the Future of Shari’a* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “Pre-Political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?” in: Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006) 19–52, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “That Which Holds the World Together. The Pre-Political Moral Foundations of a Free State”, in: Habermas and Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization*, 53–80, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html), par. 383.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 384.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., par. 396.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., par. 407.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., par. 572.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Hecló, *Christianity and American Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 239.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 1–2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>16</sup> Pablo C. Jiménez Lobeira, “Liberal Democracy: Culture Free? The Habermas–Ratzinger Debate and its Implications for Europe,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 2 (2011): 44–57, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd*, 213.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 235. “NC” refers to Dooyeweerd’s magnum opus, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.

<sup>20</sup> See: Wendy Fish Naylor, *Abraham Kuyper and the Emergence of Neo-Calvinist Pluralism in the Dutch School Struggle* (Ph.D. thesis University of Chicago, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> See: George Harinck, *Waar komt het VU-kabinet vandaan? Over de traditie van het neocalvinisme. Inaugurele rede* (Amstelveen: EON Pers, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> See Joop Hippe and Gerrit Voerman, eds., *Van de marge naar de macht. De ChristenUnie 2000–2010* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See George Harinck and Hugo Scherff, “Oude wijn in nieuwe zakken. Over de continuïteit in politieke visie en standpunten tussen GPV en RPF en ChristenUnie”, in: Hippe and Voerman, *Van de marge naar de macht*, 133–156.

<sup>24</sup> Egbert Schuurman, “Pact van christendom en islam helpt tegen cultuurspanningen,” *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 September 2007. See also his: *De uitdaging van de islamitische technologiekritiek* (Wageningen: Wageningen Universiteit, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> *The Daily Mail*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1355961/Nicolas-Sarkozy-joins-David-Cameron-Angela-Merkel-view-multiculturalism-failed.html#ixzz2EIGyndck>.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: Liberal Europe, Islam, and the Limits of Tolerance* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Abraham Kuyper’s Model of a Democratic Polity for Societies with a Religiously Diverse Citizenry,” in: *Kuyper Reconsidered. Aspects of his Life and Work*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999), 198.

<sup>28</sup> Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Hecló, *Christianity and American Democracy*, 49, 52, 212.

<sup>30</sup> See: Hans-Martien ten Napel, “Het Dooyeweerd-kabinet. De overheidsvisie van het kabinet-Balkenende IV,” *Beweging LXXI* (2007): 5–9.

<sup>31</sup> Roel Kuiper and Andre Rouvoet, ‘Maak kernwaarden rechtsstaat glashelder’, *De Volkskrant*, 1 maart 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Kamerstukken II 2010/11, 32824, nr. 1, 8. See also [www.government.nl/documents-and-publications/press-releases/2011/06/17/integration-policy-based-on-dutch-values.html](http://www.government.nl/documents-and-publications/press-releases/2011/06/17/integration-policy-based-on-dutch-values.html).