

Why Christian Democracy can succeed where other third ways and third parties have failed

The Birth of an American Christian Democratic Party

Hunter Baker

In the *Politics*, Aristotle considered the merits of a variety of constitutional models. Though it was common to divide them into the positive and negative forms of rule by the one, the few, and the many, he declared that most constitutions boiled down to either oligarchy or democracy. It would be natural to construe these as the rule of the few or the rule of the many, but Aristotle took pains to make it clear that he saw something else at issue: either the rich would rule or the poor would. One of his prescriptions for avoiding the abuses inherent in either of those outcomes was to seek a “middle” constitution. All states have three sections: the very rich, the very poor, and the ones in-between. The best state is one in which more people occupy the middle.

There is a political force in the modern world that finds its identity in navigating this middle ground. In a sense, this party represents the original third way between free-market liberalism and socialism. It

has sometimes steered its centrist course so effectively that it has been accused of having no real commitments other than to being in the middle, wherever that is. In response, the Dutch political scientist Kees van Kersbergen

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has pointed out that the party in question works in such a way not because of a lack of conviction but rather because of the convictions it does have. It is a party that seeks to reconcile the different parts of society and to govern so as to achieve concord.

This party is the largely European political phenomenon known under the broad heading of Christian Democracy. For examples, one might think back to a figure such as the Christian statesman Abraham Kuyper, who once led the Netherlands, or look to the present, where Christian Democrats have governed or been part of governing coalitions in several nations, including Germany. My contention in this essay is that U.S. politics would be edified by the development of a Christian Democracy movement on American soil. And despite daunting obstacles, it would be possible too.

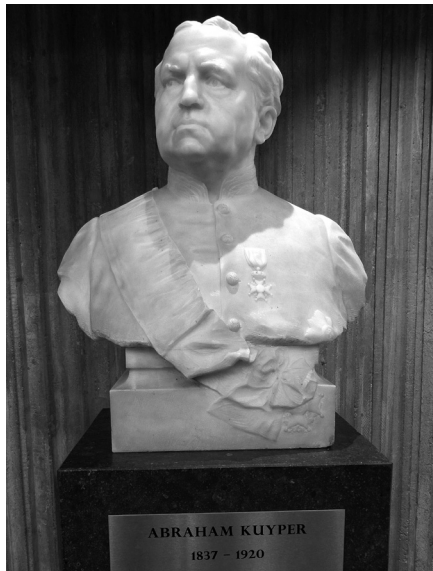
Assessing the American moment

In 2016, American politics took an unusual turn. New York real estate developer Donald Trump captured the Republican nomination for president with approximately 43 percent of the primary vote. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a self-identified socialist, lost in his primary battle against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton with a similarly high level of support from Democratic voters. Both men campaigned on policies to protect or empower individuals who felt left behind by the American economy of the past couple of decades. Trump, of course, captured the presidency by charting a course through the Electoral College that many observers believed to be inaccessible to a Republican. Thanks to Trump's economic nationalism and Nixonian emphasis on law and order, the "blue wall" consisting of such states as Michigan and Pennsylvania, previously believed to be safe for Democrats, proved to be about as effective as the old Maginot line.

The election took place in the wake of the apparently spontaneous emergence of several protest movements in the post-crash Obama era. These included the Tea Party, which focused on reducing government debt and the scope of regulation as keys to bringing back prosperity, and Occupy Wall Street, which looked to government to redistribute wealth. The economic context of the 2016 election was also foreshadowed by Mitt Romney's campaign against President Obama in 2012, a campaign remembered (perhaps unfairly) for Romney's remark that 47 percent of voters were deaf to his appeal because of their dependence on the federal government for financial assistance. The comment fed into a preexisting controversy over whether our system had evolved into one of constant conflict between "makers and takers."

Suddenly, America seems less like a nation where everyone considers himself or herself middle class and more like one in which there is a class divide. The old Ronald Reagan and Jack Kemp rhetoric about growing the pie rather than arguing about how to slice it up has lost some of its potency in a country where Sanders and Trump are able to appeal to so many millions, and Trump is able to prevail.

There are facts available to help explain the changing landscape. While the economy has continued to grow, it has grown at a slower rate in the past decade, and the benefits of growth have not been as widely shared as they were in the middle and late twentieth century. And for the first time in modern history, the life expectancy of middle-aged white Americans recently declined. The big drivers of the decline were not heart disease and diabetes but rather suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Meanwhile, disability payments from the federal government have grown rapidly as the percentage of working-age recipients of such payouts has doubled. This outcome seems surprising in a country where work has



Abraham Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands beat back a purely secular statism

become safer and innovations in health care continue to improve treatment. But it is likely that disability rolls have expanded to serve as a kind of secondary welfare system for those who either can no longer find work or have lost the desire to try.

This depressing condition begs for some kind of diagnosis. What is its cause? The political left has tended to focus on capitalism as a perhaps necessary stage in human development but also a fundamentally predatory system that must evolve into some new order, likely one led by the best scientific minds. Their opponents who prefer *laissez-faire* argue that the economy must be unshackled so as to reach ever greater heights. One thing seems clear: free trade and more open markets (including the market in labor) benefit those best able to take advantage of them by dint of mind and mobility. Those who are less capable of playing an increasingly competitive economic game have begun to see nationalism or socialism as appropriate strategies for improving their odds.

There has also been a great splintering along religious lines recently. One of the fascinating features of the American Revo-

lution and founding of the United States is the way they brought together representatives of both the revived classical traditions of the Renaissance and the Christian worldview of the Reformation. A Thomas Jefferson and a Patrick Henry, or a Benjamin Franklin and a Benjamin Rush, were able to find common purpose in the American project despite substantial differences about religion. Today the fusion of Christian and classical alloys seems strained to the breaking point. The greatest fault line has occurred on the question of human sexuality. The Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision making same-sex marriage a constitutional right opened up the potential for massive social change within the nation's nonprofit and educational sectors. *Obergefell* also put the fundamental policy of the United States government at odds with Christian orthodoxy. While religious progressives have adjusted fairly easily, the same is not and will not be true of those who hold a more traditional and Scripture-bound faith. As a result, the stage is set for a series of confrontations. Traditional religious believers will want to continue to participate on an

equal basis in the nonprofit and educational worlds. Secularists, emboldened by the marriage of the sexual revolution to the logic of civil rights, are likely to attempt to force them out, as though adherents to millennia of Christian teaching are the equivalent of Jim Crow segregationists.

Donald Trump's presidency is largely an attempt to answer America's economic angst. He believes that appealing to economic patriotism, making more advantageous trade deals, and cracking down on illegal immigration will improve the prospects of millions of workers and reenergize the American dream. Whether those strategies will work remains to be seen. It seems likely that more orthodox conservative solutions such as implementing a less burdensome regulatory regime and passing a more competitive corporate tax will improve the economic outlook. Yet we cannot know whether such moves will counter the generational challenge workers face in terms not only of globalization but also of automation and radical improvements in artificial intelligence.

With regard to controversies over public religion, Trump is an unlikely champion of traditional Christians for a variety of reasons. But many religious conservatives who made their peace with him for defensive purposes (and even some who didn't) found themselves relieved that anything could momentarily delay the juggernaut of sexual progressivism headed their way. Nevertheless, any respite is temporary, as it is based on a change in institutional control that is reversible and not really rooted in an enduring philosophy.

We have arrived at a moment of increasing economic and social polarization. Can a fresh policy—fresh for us, anyway—offer a way to govern for concord by harmonizing the disparate elements of our society? Christian Democracy offers some hope in that regard.

What is Christian Democracy?

Abraham Kuyper led the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The revolution to which the name referred was the French Revolution, with its aggressive secular statism. The defense against expansive secularism is one of the first things to understand about the Christian Democracy movement that emerged from thinkers such as Kuyper and promoters of Catholic social thought with whom he found common cause on this front. On one level, opposing secularism is a matter of religious faith and of ideology, but in another sense it is an activity conducted with concrete interests in mind. Kuyper, for example, was eager to protect Christian schools and to prevent them from being shut out by a monolithic, secular state educational system.

The agenda of Christian Democracy has been far larger than simply resisting the accumulation of power by secular socialists, however. The movement has also sought to offer something better for human flourishing than a laissez-faire liberalism that results in atomization and widening social distance between classes. Thus, Christian Democrats work to find a middle path that will protect Aristotle's two sides from each other via a strategy of concord. Kuyper's *Our Program* is helpful in understanding the vision of Christian Democrats for governing toward harmony:

The lower classes are weaker than the upper classes where capital and intelligence are concerned; but they might in turn prove the stronger when it comes to muscle power and shrewdness. From this it follows that the law must not only protect the people of modest means against the educated person's money and knowledge that he could bring into play at their expense. The law must also, in the same way and to the same degree,

protect the upper classes against the physical strength, shrewdness, and sheer numbers that the lower classes might employ at the expense of those better off.

Perhaps anticipating the objection of more libertarian thinkers, Kuyper carefully emphasized a distinction between “regulatory mania” and “legal protection.” The Christian Democrat of Kuyper’s type does not wish to see the state “recasting society according to an ideal model.” Government should not extend legislation further than specific abuses and should be careful not to create imbalances where it seeks to correct them. “Conflicting interests” help to establish the scope of government activity. Statesmanship will entail skill at writing and enforcing laws so as to manage conflicting interests. Kuyper noted that in “barbaric states...the absence of good laws and the abundance of bad laws” created “a woeful imbalance between the elements of society.”

His examples of imbalances are instructive. In the areas of civil and criminal law, Kuyper noted the tremendous advantage wealthy defendants have over common persons. Were Kuyper observing the modern American scene, he would likely have something to say about our heavy reliance on incarceration and the effect of felony records on drug offenders. Likewise, expensive regulations or taxes on property can make it too expensive for “the little man” to hold property, thus creating further opportunities for the rich. Kuyper also pointed to badly constructed welfare laws that leave the poor worse off and an educational system that allows “people of means” to rear their children according to their beliefs while leaving the poor to compulsory state schooling.

Based on these brief examples, the reader may begin to get a sense of the ways in which Christian Democracy crosses traditional boundaries. We see a desire for strong aid to the poor in the justice system, a concern that

some regulation actually tilts the playing field toward the wealthy, and a recognition of the ways in which state education can be oppressive. Christian Democracy is different from the programs offered by the Republicans or Democrats in the United States.

It is important to understand Christian Democracy as a response to something. It began as an attempt to provide an alternative to the materialism of both laissez-faire liberals and socialists. Christian Democrats hoped to combat the binaries of state/individual or individual/state with a mediating philosophy that could do justice to the different parts of society and its different ways of life as well.

Despite the efforts of Christian Democrats to cultivate a middle ground between state socialism and unbridled capitalism, Christian Democratic parties should be generally understood as having a bias for the market against state control. They have typically regarded communism as evil and do not see the state as having the authority to establish social justice by preempting other legitimate social entities such as church, family, and charities. Christian Democracy is not fundamentally statist. In the European Parliament, the Christian Democrats ally themselves with other center-right parties in the European People’s Party coalition. In countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain, Christian Democrats represent a center-right force in opposition to more secular, statist parties such as Germany’s Social Democrats.

Four principles that frame political activity are the keys to understanding the distinctiveness of Christian Democracy. These four principles, organized and presented in Michael Fogarty’s classic work *Christian Democracy in Western Europe, 1820–1953*, are personalism, solidarity, subsidiarity, and vertical pluralism.

Van Kersbergen offered the keen insight that by turning the angle of the kaleidoscope,

Christian Democracy attempts to transform liberal individualism into personalism. Personalism recognizes that man belongs neither to enterprise nor to the state. Instead of compelling persons to act according to a state program, personalists encourage the free human being with dignity and rights to use those gifts for the commonweal. There is both a social and a religious aspect to the person that cannot be dissolved and that maintains the fundamental dignity of the individual as an actor with rights and duties.

If personalism primarily challenges collectivists and enthusiasts of state power, then the principle of solidarity is where Christian democracy tilts its critique toward liberal individualism. But to the degree that solidarity requires acting in concert, it does so differently from traditional collectivism. In solidarity the community exists to develop individuals more fully than they would be able to develop themselves on their own. The idea of solidarity means that we have duties to one another, but those duties are not realized predominantly in the state. The state is one actor among many. Life is full of different relationships and attachments that offer both benefit and responsibility.

Taken together, personalism and solidarity strike a nice balance (always the goal of Christian Democracy) between the rights of the individual and the ideal of brotherhood. Fogarty offered the insight that when paired, these principles help the different groups in society to see from the perspective of one another. And these ideals naturally lead to a tolerance for pluralism, especially given the refusal to repose monopolistic authority in the state, despite what the name “Christian Democracy” might imply about power structures.

Given the highly contested nature of American views on politics and community practices (especially concerning sexuality, but also the desirability of such lifestyle restrictions as a supersize-cola ban), we need

a way of dealing with high degrees of pluralism. Subsidiarity embraces pluralism, in the sense that it allows decision making to occur at the lowest levels possible. Through subsidiarity, communities not only have more ability to govern by their own visions but they also develop civic virtue and cultivate a multiplicity of leaders.

Christian Democracy favors separation of powers, decentralization, and local autonomy. These concepts embrace the Christian anthropology of man, which cautions against investing human beings with too much power to wield over one another. Localism is still tarred with the brush of Southern resistance to desegregation. But perhaps having a party continually explaining subsidiarity as one of its core values would help the country find a way back to a value that is well established in the U.S. Constitution.

Another type of pluralism appreciated by Christian Democrats has been described as “vertical pluralism” or “ideological pluralism,” which recognizes the “spiritual families” of society. As an example, one might think of something like Dutch “pillarization” of schools, a system in which religious schools qualify for public funding. According to the logic of pillarization, which would be just one way to respect vertical pluralism, the state acknowledges various “lanes” in terms of ways of life (such as religious lanes), so that all parents will be able to benefit from public support for education without having to suffer a sizable financial penalty when they opt for religious education consistent with their values. Such practices represent a recognition that there are various spheres of association that should be free from state control, apart from when there are conflicts between the spheres. This is Kuyper’s famed “sphere sovereignty.”

These four principles work together to sustain a form of politics that aims at harmony and concord. They have the potential to help citizens engage in a form of civic friendship.

Through personalism, solidarity, subsidiarity, and vertical pluralism, Christian Democrats respect the individual, give the state a role beyond that of policeman while keeping its boundaries in check, encourage citizens to respect the ways of life that their peers appreciate, and minimize the odds that certain persons or groups will see themselves as enemies of the state. Christian Democracy is a political philosophy for friends and allies seeking to mediate their differences rather than to triumph over them.

Model thinkers

Another way of understanding a political movement is to consider relevant thinkers. Consider two men whose thought may point the United States in the right direction: the German economist Wilhelm Röpke and the Austrian-turned-American management scholar Peter Drucker.

Röpke was a Christian economist who helped bring about a miraculous turnaround in the postwar West German economy. One notable story about him involves an encounter in Switzerland with his friend Ludwig von Mises, an Austrian-born Jewish economist who had been forced to flee his homeland. Bradley Birzer relates the story in *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*, the biography of another friend of Röpke's:

In Geneva at the beginning of WWII, the German-born Christian Röpke showed his friend and guest [Mises] the public space that had been divided into garden plots, allowing the citizens of Geneva a place to grow [produce] should the war deprive the city of food. Mises, the story runs, shook his head: "a very inefficient way of producing foodstuffs!" Ah, Röpke responded, "but perhaps a very efficient way of producing human happiness."

What did Röpke mean? He and Mises were both accomplished economists who understood the gains to be achieved by specialization, automation, and economies of scale. But Röpke perceived that there are other considerations that should count, and it might be reasonable to think that the people of Geneva would be better off (considering the spiritual as well as the purely material dimension) by having the responsibility of tending garden plots instead of passively relying upon some effort efficiently organized without them. Having the food itself is good and important, but having the food and also the work that produces the food might be even better, especially in fearful times. Work with the goal of protecting against bad circumstances might actually strengthen the spirit and contribute to human flourishing.

Röpke's marvelous book *A Humane Economy* is a tour de force of scholarly analysis and moral exhortation, in which he passionately and wisely argues for a vision of man as something more than *homo economicus*. The economist shared the Christian Democratic insight into the dangers of materialism inherent in both capitalism and socialism. Both could simply focus on meeting material needs and wants without being concerned with the spiritual nature of human beings. The pure logic of economic efficiency tends to run past considerations that are meaningful for building a life, such as community, local affections, and personal contribution to one's own needs.

Röpke feared that our obsession with tending to material satisfaction would lead us to the boredom of the child who has his wishes immediately fulfilled. He asked, "Is there any more certain way of desiccating the soul of man than the habit of constantly thinking about money and what it can buy? Is there a more potent poison than our economic system's all-pervasive commercialism?" The key point is that we should not be too satisfied with a society that is extremely good at

delivering material well-being to people but contributes to the development of human beings who do not live good lives. Yes, material goods are much of what we want out of the economy, yet it is also the case that the work itself constitutes an important part of our reward. A useful Christian Democracy in the United States would attempt to continue the quest for a “humane economy” that avoids the twin evils of consumerism and deadening, corrupt state control.

Peter Drucker, probably the single most prominent management thinker of the twentieth century, identified the insufficiency of something like a master plan of income provision. He wrote that too many modern writers fail to realize that unemployment is a serious problem for reasons beyond a lack of money. Unemployment, in his view, leads to social disenfranchisement. The unemployed often don’t share a life with employed people. They don’t tend to interact with the employed socially or to marry them. Drucker saw that we have the technical wherewithal to provide essentials to all Americans. But what people really want out of employment is what Drucker called “social status and function.” He said that entitlement programs are like vitamins. They remedy deficiencies but don’t provide calories.

What did Drucker mean by “social status and function”? He was referring to the things that come with work beyond just the money. People tend to respect work as at least partially constitutive of a life. Status refers to the way others perceive you. Function is the contribution one makes by working. Yes, one earns money and takes care of oneself and loved ones with what is earned through work, but there is something else. By working, a person helps to create something of value that enters the economy of exchange. The worker has actually put something into the world that might not have been there but for his time and effort.

To the extent that people are being left out

of the world of work because of technological innovation, educational limitations, changes in the nature of occupations, disruption in various industries, and even because of government programs that provide incentives not to hold a job, both our society and the lives of the individuals involved lose something important. Without social status and function, Drucker wrote, human beings are “social atoms flying through space without aim or purpose.”

In his first book, *The End of Economic Man: The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Drucker concluded that the success of totalitarians such as the Soviet Communists and German National Socialists was derived from offering individuals a new social identity through party organizations. To those who lack status and function, society appears irrational, and these persons become a disintegrating force. Authority appears arbitrary to them, so they become vulnerable to calls from irrational forces. Demagoguery’s appeal grows.

Let us return to Röpke, who noted in *A Humane Economy* that the modern market system is not self-sustaining. It draws upon reserves it did not create.

Self-discipline, a sense of justice, honesty, fairness, chivalry, moderation, public spirit, respect for human dignity, firm ethical norms—all of these are things which people must possess before they go to market and compete with each other. These are the indispensable supports which preserve both market and competition from degeneration. Family, church, genuine communities, and tradition are their sources.... The market, competition, and the play of supply and demand do not create these ethical reserves; they presuppose them and consume them.

In other words, there are moral and spiritual conditions that need to exist in order for the market to function. When they are

lacking, the government will have to step in more frequently to try to rein in predatory behavior.

A cold, sterile, and secular view of the economy ends up being a game between utility and profit maximizers. You look out for yourself; I'll look out for myself. I want to pay the absolute least I can. You want to work as little as possible to produce the goods I am buying. Somehow that situation is supposed to result in us doing good to one another, without the need for any overarching moral values that exist outside the system. But that is not quite right. People and organizations occupy many different positions of strength and sophistication in the broader economy. Without spiritual values, the game can be played ruthlessly and in such a way that trust is misplaced. And we may see a lot of rational loafing and technically permissible cheating. Employers, workers, and customers alike seek to be users of one another.

Is Christian Democracy practical?

When discussing any third force or party in the American context, two immediate objections arise. The first is that elections in the United States proceed on a “first past the post” or “winner takes all” basis that effectively ensures the dominance of two main parties. Christian Democrats in Europe have benefitted from proportional systems of representation that do not require them to win a true majority. Instead, Christian Democrats in a place such as Germany have often shared power with more *laissez-faire* partners or in a grand coalition with their opponents, the Social Democrats. And while it may be true that even if Germany had a system like ours the Christian Democrats would be one of the two major parties, such a party in the United States would have to gain influence with the Republicans and Democrats already firmly in possession of

the overwhelming preponderance of offices. How then could Christian Democrats ever be more politically significant in America than the Green Party or the Libertarians?

Yet in terms of ideology, we have already seen two presidential administrations adopt programs with Christian Democratic resonance. Bill Clinton's New Democrats proposed to be business-friendly, gave lip service to rationalizing the welfare system, embraced faith-friendly charitable choice, supported the Defense of Marriage Act, and employed rhetoric to suggest that abortion should be “rare.” George W. Bush made “compassionate conservatism” his 2000 campaign theme, promoted school choice, created a prescription benefit for the elderly, encouraged marriage and family formation among the poor, and had a high-profile office for faith-based initiatives. Both of these administrations won two terms. Clinton's second term was eventually consumed by his efforts to survive impeachment, while Bush's domestic program faded to insignificance next to the war on terror. But the point stands: there is apparently a significant base of voters who can be reached with a mediating political movement.

One strategy for addressing the disadvantage that third parties have in the U.S. is to overcome the interests already in control of an established party. The Goldwater movement took the Republican Party over from the so-called Rockefeller Republicans or Eastern Establishment. Donald Trump also managed something like a hostile takeover of the GOP. Bernie Sanders attempted his own version of such a takeover. It is not absurd to think that a determined group of Christian Democrats could make headway in a similar fashion.

On the other hand, it is true that Christian Democracy as an American political movement would be hampered by the legacy of either of the two major parties, even if it could seize control of one of them. One

suspects, for example, that a Christian Democratic party in the United States could hold significant appeal for many African-American voters, but not if it wore Republican clothing. So what might be the path of development for a Christian Democratic party in the United States that doesn't involve capture of an existing major party?

One way forward would be to develop a Christian Democratic identity that precedes a Christian Democratic party. This would involve developing a political program for Christian Democrats in America, holding conferences on the subject, starting a flagship

publication, and taking other steps to give flesh to the political identity. At that point, it would make sense to encourage people to think of themselves as Christian Democrats who happen to vote for one of the two major parties: "I'm a Christian Democrat who votes Republican" or "I tend to vote Democrat, but I'm really a Christian Democrat." As the political identity becomes real, then it would make sense to start building an actual distinct party, holding signature drives, and finding favorable places to contest elections. The path is open. †

The Wasp and the Snake

Fred Chappell

Did he perceive the Snake to be
 His enemy?
The Wasp, whose motive never was revealed,
 Lit on the Serpent's head and stung
 Repeatedly,
 His victim coiled, uncoiled, recoiled
 In agony.
Stabbing at the world his double tongue.

No longer willing to bear the pain, he thrust
His head beneath the wheel of a passing cart
 And crushed the Wasp into the dust
 And stilled his own unshriven heart.

Moral.

*They will not let us be, those episodes
We cannot unremember or deny;
They pierce like bitter knives, the words and deeds
That scar our souls until we die.*