Conservative Influence —
of Which Religion?*

Summary

In their theoretical model, Felling et al., describe the influence of only a specific kind of religion, namely the traditional, supernaturally oriented kind. However, other reactions to modernization are also possible, e.g. adaptation or criticism. A possible influence of these religious reactions on other non-religious areas of society also deserve to be investigated. In the second part of this article some practical-theological considerations are put forward for discussion.

Introduction

With the help of their theoretical causal model, which has withstood empirical-statistical testing, A. Felling, J. Peters, and O. Schreuder have been able to substantiate their previously advanced hypothesis concerning a possible conservative influence of traditional religion on society (cf. Religion im Vergleich: Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Niederlande, 1987, esp. pp. 99-122, 133f.) As a result of this finding, in their opinion the theorem positing the irreconcilability of modernity and traditional religion, which is derived from the theory of modernization, must be further qualified; where traditional religion is viable and provides a normative reference scheme, it has a demonstrable effect on the collective conscious, even in a modern society like the Netherlands, and this influence tends towards the conservative.

This finding is not surprising illuminating, however, are the links which give rise to the causal connection between religion and politics. One can speak of a definite 'conservatism syndrome' which spans from a metaphysical world-view scheme over a high esteem for the family, a law-and-order mentality, combined with a social vision based on a premodern class model, to a corresponding political view. It is this potential, in prerevolutionary conditions, which is frequently

* This article is a practical-theological reflection on the preceding article by A. Felling, J. Peters & O. Schreuder. 'Religion and Politics in the Netherlands: A Causal Analysis'.

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molded into, or allows itself to be attracted by those movements which program-
matically inscribe on their banners the defense of 'the family and the fatherland' — not so much a civil religion as a manifest restoration ideology.

The comments which follow move in two directions. First, questions are
addressed to the theoretical model in order to stress certain qualifications. Then
some practical-theological considerations, which arise as a result of the finding of
A. Felling et al. are brought up for discussion.

1. The Theorem Positing the Irreconcilability of Modernity and Traditional Reli-
gion

1.1 The fact that A. Felling et al. think it necessary to come to the conclusion
that this theorem cannot be defended without qualifications, points also to funda-
mental flaws in the 'modernization theory' itself, to which they appeal (or, to the
way in which they accept it). Indeed, there is already much which calls attention
to its conceptual ambiguity — what exactly does 'modernization' mean? It appa-
nently occurs (for the following cf., A. Felling et al., pp. 13f.) in several different
fields — economics, politics, culture — one common feature is the advance of
instrumented, purpose-rational knowledge in these fields. It shows tendencies of
'an all-embracing, synchronized process' (ibid, p. 15). Anyone who believes it
possible or necessary to retain the irrational, the non-empirical, or the transcen-
dental becomes a pre-modern relic (cf., ibid, p. 16). Can one speak of a single uni-
form process of modernization in this sense in (North American and European)
society today? A. Felling et al. rightly have their doubts, and postulate a histori-
cizing of the theory of modernization (cf., ibid, p. 134). Do they, however, not also
fall prey to the same when they, for their part, explain religion as a refuge of tradi-
tional elements in modern society? It cannot and ought not be contested that in
the course of modern social change the traditional-conservative mentality has
settled precisely in the realm of established religious institutions, since they
appear to be the guarantors of the traditional order, and indeed, often are. Of
late, where such an alliance has been forged as a result of the proximity of traditio-
nalism, or conservatism (both words which have yet to be evaluated) and religion,
religion has not remained unaffected. In the process it becomes a 'traditional reli-
gion', as A. Felling et al. call it; that is to say, it also undergoes a change.

1.2 The fact that time-honored confessional differences hardly play a role
any longer in this 'traditional religion' speaks in favor of this thesis. It seems to be
a syncretism of many elements. That conventional beliefs also play a role is beside
the point; for, if one examines the items which make up its 'world-and-life view'
(cf., ibid, p. 139), it could more appropriately be called a vague,
illusively Christian theism. That such a theism exerts a conservative influence,
ortends to form alliances with other conservative or traditional institutions is not
an abnormal phenomenon in the history of religion.