

Religion and Political Thought in Alberta

by

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Abstract

Despite the vast academic attention paid to the political development of Alberta, the role of religion has been thoroughly under-analyzed. This project begins to rectify this gap by seeking to ascertain the manner by which the religious-based political thought of formative Alberta-based political leaders Henry Wise Wood, William Aberhart, Ernest Manning, and Preston Manning influenced the political development of Alberta. This is done by asking three broad questions. First, in what way were the personal conceptions of human nature, agency, justice, citizenship, democracy and the proper role of the state of these leaders shaped by religious belief and how, in turn, did this influence their political goals, strategies and discourse? Second, what pattern emerges with regard to religion and political thought and action when we consider these questions over nearly a century of Alberta's history? And third, to what extent can we trace this phenomenon of faith-driven politics back to specific American religious movements?

This study was completed by way of an "interpretive" approach that sought to demonstrate the relationship between an aspect of the subject's "framework of meaning" (their religious perspective) and their political thought and action. Drawing on substantial archival work and a small number of semi-structured interviews, this study argues that the political thought of each of these leaders was significantly influenced by their particular religious perspective and that Alberta's political development as a whole subsequently owes much to the broad American-based evangelical Protestant tradition from which these leaders drew much of their Christianity. More specifically, this study argues that the contours of Alberta politics have been shaped considerably by a particular "premillennial" Christian interpretation introduced by the Social Credit in 1935 and reinforced by the thought of Preston Manning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The influence of this perspective has helped to generate a strong freedom-infused anti-statist sentiment in the province that fueled both a more "populist" approach to its politics as well as a more fervent desire for a limited state and an unregulated market economy.

Preface

This dissertation was completed and written solely by the author, Clark S.E. Banack.

The in-person, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with research subjects that appear in Chapters 5 and 6 were conducted with the approval of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Office of Research Services, University of British Columbia. The Certificate of Approval number is: H10 02065. This certificate was approved on August 23, 2010 and renewed on July 12, 2011.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

The political history of the Canadian prairies is one of vigorous regional protest, non-traditional party formation, unprecedented policy experimentation, and a more general “populist” culture that has repeatedly emphasized the moral and practical worth of the “common man.” Of course, much scholarly ink has been spilled by social scientists in an attempt to analyze this unique tradition of thought and protest which saw the growth of a number of diverse political movements, each seeking to rectify real (and sometimes imagined) economic and political injustices.¹ Although such studies have added much to our understanding of the region’s identity and political culture by focusing on the political and economic factors which motivated such action, there has been surprisingly little sustained attention paid to the role that religious interpretation and discourse has played within this tradition of protest and experimentation. This is so despite the fact that a large number of prairie political leaders and their supporters were, from the earliest days of the agrarian revolt, through the periods of Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and Social Credit dominance, and into the relatively recent appearance of the Reform Party, devout practitioners of a Protestant Christian faith

¹ See, for example: Paul F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*, 2nd ed, (Regina: Canada Plains Research Centre, 1997), Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1950), W.L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), Nelson Wiseman, “The Pattern of Prairie Politics,” in *Queen’s Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2, (Summer 1981), 298-315, Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), David Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002), John W. Warnock, *Saskatchewan: The Roots of Discontent and Protest*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2004), and Jared J. Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011).

and many were quite comfortable clothing their political discourse in blatantly religious language. Indeed, as R. Douglas Francis has argued, within the prairies, “religious aspirations and beliefs have always formed a backdrop to revolt.”² However, this “backdrop” remains largely unexamined by students of Canadian prairie politics and populism, who have instead focused much more closely on the political or economic factors.

This is especially so for the province of Alberta, which has received an immense amount of academic attention over the past five decades from those eager to explain the province’s long running adherence to an anti-statist sentiment that has consistently encouraged both a populist and fiscally conservative approach to its politics that is largely unfamiliar to more central and eastern parts of Canada. Although a number of these studies have been quite insightful, they have been nearly unanimous with respect to their silence on the influence of religion. Surely the impact of political and economic conditions related to the province’s quasi-colonial status within confederation, its distinct immigration patterns, its early economic reliance on agriculture or its more recent dependence upon oil and gas production, so often pointed to in previous studies are critical to understanding Alberta’s political development. However, religious interpretation, I argue, remains an influential underlying factor that helps to explain the continual emphasis on both populist democracy and fiscal conservatism one finds throughout the province’s political history. Although almost all academic efforts aimed at analyzing segments of this political tradition mention religion, few, if any, have

² R. Douglas Francis, “In Search of a Prairie Myth: A Survey of the Intellectual and Cultural Historiography of Prairie Canada,” in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 24:3 (Fall 1989), 56.

actually attempted a systematic depiction and analysis of its impact. The result has been, in my opinion, the proliferation of a particular picture of Alberta's political development that is not entirely accurate. Not only does this impede our ability to better understand the early ideological roots of the province, it also interferes with our attempts to better understand the nature of contemporary Alberta conservatism which, given the recent success of the federal Conservative Party led by the Calgary-based MP Stephen Harper, who earned his political stripes within the Alberta-based Reform Party of Canada, is now influencing policy debates well beyond its provincial borders.

This project begins to rectify this shortcoming by exploring the influence of religion on the political thought of four influential political figures from Alberta whose contributions span nearly a century of the province's history. In doing so I admit to being quite sympathetic to prairie historian Nelson Wiseman's lament regarding the ascendancy of a science of politics that significantly downplays the importance of history. I follow Professor Wiseman in rejecting the notion that "the past is another country."³ Thus, the individuals studied include Henry Wise Wood, president of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) from 1916 until 1931, William "Bible Bill" Aberhart, founder of the Alberta Social Credit and premier from 1935 until 1943, Aberhart's protégé Ernest Manning, premier from 1943 until 1968, and Manning's son Preston, founder and leader of the Alberta-based federal Reform Party of Canada from 1987 until 2000. By focusing almost exclusively on the thought of four individuals as opposed to the broader population, this study is, first and foremost, a work in the area of Canadian Political Thought, although its conclusions reveal something quite important with respect to the

³ Nelson Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 2.

general political development of Alberta as well. In fact, I follow Jared Wesley in arguing that political parties, and especially their leaders, possess a significant degree of agency with respect to shaping the political cultures and directions of their communities.⁴

Specifically, this study seeks to ascertain the manner by which the religious-based political thought of the leaders mentioned above influenced the political development of Alberta by asking three broad questions. First, in what way were the personal conceptions of human nature, agency, justice, citizenship, democracy and the proper role of the state of these key Alberta political leaders shaped by religious belief and how, in turn, did this influence their political goals, strategies and discourse? Second, and more generally, what pattern emerges with regard to religion and political thought and action when we consider these questions over nearly a century of Alberta's history? And finally, given the well-documented influence of American populist traditions in Alberta, to what extent can one trace this phenomenon of faith-driven politics back to specific American religious movements?⁵

This study advances a number of important points but the three overarching arguments offered are as follows. First, religion has, in fact, played a significant role in the political thought and action of the political leaders studied and, by largely glossing over this influence, scholars have essentially painted an incomplete picture with respect to their political thought. In fact, it is fair to say that certain aspects of their thought have essentially been misunderstood because of this failure to properly grasp the religious interpretations that have motivated them. Second, this religious influence has helped to

⁴Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, 33.

⁵ See Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*, Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, and Wiseman, "The Pattern of Prairie Politics."

shape the actual pattern of Alberta's politics in important ways that have yet to be articulated. It is certainly not the only important factor that has influenced Alberta politics but it stands alone as the last significant factor that has been thoroughly under-analyzed by scholars. Third, each of the political leaders mentioned above drew from a Christian perspective that had important American evangelical Protestant roots thereby giving it a more "populist," as opposed to a British "tory," flavour.

Although the precise manner by which particular religious interpretations influenced the political thought of the political figures mentioned above will be expanded upon in greater detail in each of the three substantive chapters in this dissertation (chapters 4 - 6), this study argues that two distinct streams of religious-based political thought emerged in the province and significantly shaped the contours of Alberta politics at different points in its history. This is not to say these are the only streams of religious-based political thought to have existed in Alberta but rather that these were, by far, the most influential. The first stream was a liberal and "postmillennial" Christian religious and political outlook most clearly articulated by longtime UFA president Henry Wise Wood. The essence of this stream, which differed in important ways from the mainstream social gospel message espoused by prairie radicals Salem Bland, J.S. Woodsworth and William Irvine, was a belief in the capacity of individual citizens to work towards building the kingdom of God on earth by way of intense ground-level participation and co-operation. This message stood behind the optimistic and intensely deliberative approach to politics found within the UFA in the early twentieth century.

The second stream was a more conservative strand built upon a "premillennial" fundamentalist Christian interpretation most often expounded by Social Credit leaders

William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, although significant elements of it would reappear in the political thought of Reform leader Preston Manning. Rather than seeking to build the kingdom of God on earth, followers of this stream understood the coming “millennium” to be in God’s hands alone and therefore were most concerned with ensuring individual citizens were granted the freedom necessary to build a personal relationship with God. This stream generated a more conservative and less deliberative approach to politics than that of the UFA.

A third stream that has surfaced in contemporary Alberta politics, strongly related to the premillennial stream mentioned above, is a socially conservative sentiment that is most concerned with the declining influence of Christian morality in society. Although this particular stream tends to receive the most attention from contemporary academics and journalists, an important underlying argument that runs through this study is the fact that, despite its recent influence within the Alberta PC Party, who essentially waged a religiously-motivated 15-year battle against the advancement of homosexual rights in the 1990s and early 2000s, social conservatism has not influenced the overall direction of Alberta politics anywhere near to the same extent as has the second stream, focused almost entirely on protecting individual freedom.

Although each of these distinct streams of religious-based political thought ensured important differences between the individual political leaders who espoused them, this dissertation also argues that both the liberal postmillennial and the fundamentalist premillennial streams were directly imported from the broader American evangelical Protestant tradition. As will become more apparent as one proceeds through the chapters that follow, this shared heritage has ensured many points of continuity

between diverse political leaders over much of Alberta's history and has ultimately placed the province on a political trajectory much closer to the pattern of American political culture than the more "tory" stained political culture of much of the rest of Canada.

In essence, early political leaders imported an individualistic and democratic style of Christian-based thought from America that was at odds with the more communal and hierarchical version associated with European Christianity. The result, as will be spelled out in much greater detail, has been a preoccupation in Alberta political thought with the moral and intellectual capacity of the common individual and his or her corresponding right to be free. This has helped to generate a strong anti-statist sentiment which fuels both a more "populist" approach to its politics as well as a more fervent desire for a limited state and an unregulated market economy. Yet, given the strong emphasis on the moral authority of the Bible in the American-based religious tradition that early Alberta leaders were drawing from, a corresponding demand that the individual behave "responsibly" can clearly be detected alongside this emphasis on the capacity of the common citizen. This unique combination has produced, I argue, a "populist" conservatism that stands in opposition to the more hierarchical "tory" conservatism that has played such an important role in the ideological development of much of the rest of Canada. In other words, this study argues that Alberta's strong populist and pro-market leanings, which tend to distinguish it from most other Canadian provinces, have significant roots in the religious interpretations of its early political leaders. By overlooking religious influence, or simply associating it with socially conservative

politics, scholars have overlooked this vitally important impact religious-based thought has had on some of the central pillars of Alberta's political development.

While the arguments listed above promise to reveal an important aspect of Alberta's unique political development, it is probably useful to also briefly explain what this project is not. In short, this is not a history of Alberta, or of its politics, or even of its religious practices. Much good work on these topics already exists and the precise focus of this particular study is the political thought of a handful of key political figures from Alberta's history. Beyond providing a bit of historical context to properly situate each of these political figures, little room is dedicated to expanding on the vast number of important events that have influenced Alberta in important ways. Furthermore, this study is not a systematic dissection of the composition of each political party mentioned nor is it a detailed analysis of their respective rise and fall. Again, much good academic work has already been completed on such themes. Finally, this study is not intended as a complete explication of Alberta's particular political culture. Although the study refers to important foundations of the province's political culture, and offers to paint a more complete picture with respect to the development of aspects of this political culture by highlighting the influence of religion on the political thought of formative leaders, it does not utilize polling data to articulate the most widely-held political beliefs of Albertans, either historically or more recently. Similarly, because the study focuses on the political thought of only a few key political figures, this project does not attempt to identify any precise patterns with respect to the role of religion on the general public's political preferences.

Having outlined what this project is not, it is finally appropriate to offer a brief outline of the study itself, which proceeds as follows. Chapter two sets the stage by situating this project within the long list of academic literature that attempts to “explain” Alberta politics and the relatively short list of literature that considers the influence of religion on Canadian politics in general before outlining the methodological approach of inquiry utilized in this study, that of “interpretivism.” In an effort to fully unpack the philosophical tenets of this approach, a review of Charles Taylor’s “philosophical anthropology” of the human subject that stands at the foundation of the more concrete interpretive research methods used in this study, is provided. In short, the human subject is depicted as a “self-interpreting animal” whose actions are dependent upon their interpretations of meaning, one’s perception of their moral frameworks. The task of interpretive social inquiry is to understand and make clear these meanings and thus provide an accurate explanation as to what the subject is doing by grasping why he or she is doing it. With respect to this project in particular, the subject’s religious beliefs are taken at face value and understood to be a central component of their larger framework of meaning and therefore the study seeks to grasp the manner by which this aspect of their framework influences their thinking and acting in this world. Because interpretivism places a high value on the linguistic, ideological, social and cultural context of a particular subject when seeking to grasp his or her “framework of meaning,” a good deal of effort went in to understanding these surrounding elements, especially for those subjects who operated in a significantly different time period than myself.

Although far more detail is provided with regard to the precise interpretive methodological tools utilized in this study in Chapter two, I admit to being generally

sympathetic to the simple comments of one of Canada's most esteemed religious historians, the late G.A. Rawlyk, who wrote:

I remain convinced that if you want to know what people are doing in the religious realm and why they are doing it, you have to ask them. And you take them seriously, whether in the 1990's, when they actually respond – or in the eighteenth century, when you find their response. As Steve Bruce has perceptively observed, "They might not always know, or they might know and not tell you. But all other sources are inferior." It's a "small point," he emphasizes, "but one sadly often neglected by social scientists."⁶

Like Rawlyk, I approached this study with the general belief that, when it comes to religiously motivated individuals operating in the political realm, one must take their religious views, however bizarre they may seem, seriously. This simple truth was the guidepost in my research efforts that relied upon two distinct primary sources of information. First, substantial archival work was completed with a focus on the writings and speeches of the historical political figures in question. Second, two in-depth, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted by the author with Preston Manning, and six additional interviews were conducted with his contemporaries from the former Reform Party. Every effort was made to ensure the views of both historical and contemporary political figures are presented in a clear and accurate manner in this study.

The purpose of Chapter three is to provide the appropriate religious and intellectual context necessary to properly interpret the religious-based political thought of Henry Wise Wood and William Aberhart, two historical figures who were strongly influenced by the American evangelical Protestant tradition. Thus, this chapter provides a significantly abridged history of this religious tradition, with a particular focus on its

⁶ G.A. Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990s*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 224. The Quote from Steve Bruce is taken from: Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster: The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

democratic tendencies and its persistent fascination with Christian “Millennial” ideas, two elements that would play hugely influential roles in the political thought of both Wood and Aberhart and subsequently place Alberta on a particular political path that it largely continues to follow today. This chapter also offers a brief comparison between this “American” religious tradition and the more “British” religious tradition that played such a significant role in the cultural and political development of much of central and eastern Canada, outside of Quebec.

Having established both the appropriate method of study and the necessary intellectual and religious context, Chapter Four represents the first of three consecutive chapters that focus on the role of religion on the political thought of influential political figures from the province’s history. Chapter Four explores the political thought of Henry Wise Wood, longtime president and unofficial philosopher of the UFA. It is here one finds the liberal, postmillennial stream of religious-based political thought mentioned above. Although Wood drew from his American evangelical Protestant background by lamenting the “fallen” nature of man and the need for individuals to seek “regeneration,” he harnessed this focus on individual piety to a belief in “social regeneration” wherein “reborn” citizens could build a perfectly democratic and just society, a true “Kingdom of Heaven on earth,” through meaningful political participation and co-operation.

Chapter Five turns to the Alberta Social Credit, which governed Alberta from 1935 until 1971, and the political thought of its two most important leaders, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning. It is within the thought of these two men that one finds the fundamentalist, premillennial stream of religious-based political thought that replaced the postmillennial strand of Wood in Alberta. By rejecting the notion of building a

“Kingdom of Heaven” on earth, Aberhart and Manning presented a dramatically different understanding of the state by focusing on the importance of ensuring individual freedom. Correspondingly, the intense pressure on citizens to participate politically in a meaningful and deliberative way that had been stressed by the UFA was abandoned and replaced by a call for citizens to state their “preferences” and allow benevolent politicians and their “experts” to install programs that would ensure individual freedom would be protected as far as possible. This shift, which grew out of the distinction between “post” and “pre” millennial religious interpretations, represented both the beginning of a blatant anti-statism and the end of a more radical and participatory politics in Alberta.

Chapter Six leaps ahead to the religious-based political thought of Preston Manning, founder and longtime leader of the federal Reform Party of Canada. Largely adhering to the religious interpretation espoused by his father Ernest, Preston understood the ills of contemporary society to have grown because of our distance from God and only an individual effort on the part of the citizen, perhaps aided by the church, to reestablish a relationship with God could make things better. The divine role of the state in this process was simply to guarantee the individual the personal freedom necessary to allow this relationship with God to flourish. Like his father, this focus on individual freedom encouraged in Preston a certain anti-statism that, in turn, generated an aversion to any state-led efforts to impose an economic collectivism on an unwilling public. Hence, the result was a clear preference for an unregulated market economy and a simultaneous reduction in the size and scope of the state, the dissemination of which in the late 1980s helped encourage the Alberta Progressive Conservatives to embark on a program of cutbacks aimed at substantially reducing the size and scope of the provincial

government under the leadership of Ralph Klein in the early 1990s. Thus, it is in this point of agreement between Ernest and Preston Manning that we find a vital, religious-based continuity with respect to the pro-market leanings that have defined Alberta politics for decades.

At the conclusion of each of these substantive chapters, a broad analysis is provided that points to the more general political implications of the religiously-inspired political thought of the individuals in question and the manner by which a good deal of continuity is found across Alberta's political history with respect to these implications. The study concludes with a chapter that recaps the central arguments of the dissertation. In general, I conclude that the influence of religion on the development of Alberta politics goes well beyond the oft-mentioned presence of social conservatism in the province. It is found, rather, in the continued persistence of the broader populist conservative sentiment within Alberta politics. It is this sentiment, which both celebrates the capacities of the individual and simultaneously places clear limits on his or her behavior, that helps to explain the individualistic, populist, anti-statist, pro-market, and conservative elements of the province's unique political culture.⁷ And, as I argue throughout, this sentiment is rooted largely in religious arguments that emerged out of the American evangelical tradition and were imported into Alberta provincial politics by Wood, Aberhart and Ernest and Preston Manning. Despite this common heritage, however, it is worth reiterating how important the defeat of Wood's "postmillennial"

⁷ The term "political culture" has obviously spurred extensive debate amongst academics eager to provide a definitive definition of a concept that is often applied rather loosely. For a recent overview of this discussion in the Canadian context see: Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*. Within this dissertation I use the term "Alberta's political culture" to refer to an ongoing set of political ideas and values that persist across political parties, modes of political discourse, and shifting economic circumstances which characterize Alberta more so than any other Canadian Province.

religious interpretation by Aberhart's "premillennial" version was with respect to the precise direction of Alberta politics. Since 1935, Alberta politics have been defined by an emphasis on individual freedom that both encourages an anti-statist and pro-market sentiment and questions the need for traditional deliberative politics. Surely the majority of men and women who today abide by this particular freedom-infused sentiment in Alberta have managed to disassociate it from its initial religious mooring, but to miss the fact that this religious foundation did exist is to miss a good deal of the story of Alberta's political development and contemporary political culture.

Chapter Two:

The Study of Religion and Political Thought in Alberta

It is widely known that Alberta's political history includes the long tenures of four political parties: The Liberals from 1905-1921, The United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) from 1921-1935, the Alberta Social Credit from 1935-1971 and the Progressive Conservatives (PC) from 1971 to the present. Despite holding astonishingly high legislative seat counts, the first three of these parties were respectively swept off the political map in rather dramatic fashion, losing to an upstart political party that seemingly came out of nowhere. This pattern of electing non-traditional parties with resounding majorities for unusually long periods before quickly tossing them aside seems to make Alberta unique among Canadian provinces. Add to this particular electoral pattern the penchant for Alberta political elites to repeatedly stress populist themes, demand more provincial autonomy and a less regulated market economy, and more recently, to disparage the much-loved Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the "progressive" social legislation it has encouraged, and you have the makings of a political curiosity. This is especially so for central and eastern Canadians, whose "tory-touched" political culture ensures a certain disconnect between themselves and the political behavior of Albertans. As a result, a good deal of academic attention has been devoted to an attempt to "explain" Alberta politics. This chapter attempts to set the stage for this broader study into the role of religion on Albertan political thought by exploring the notion that Alberta politics is, in fact, "unique" in some way before reviewing the long list of academic literature that attempts to explain this particular uniqueness. The chapter also explores the relatively short list of literature that considers the influence of religion on Canadian politics as well

as the broader theoretical issues involved in studying the political influence of religion. Finally, this chapter offers a theoretical and practical outline of the methodological approach of inquiry utilized in this study, that of “interpretivism.”

The “Uniqueness” of Alberta Politics

Although Alberta politics is often described as unique amongst Canadian provinces, the precise attributes that make this so are often incorrectly entangled with the unusually long tenures of governments in the province. As Peter McCormick has demonstrated, the single member plurality electoral system has severely distorted the legislative seat counts relative to popular vote in Alberta. Between 1905 and 1979, the party that won office received, on average, 51% of the vote, a proportion that places Alberta side-by-side other Canadian provinces.¹ Social Credit, who seemingly ruled nearly uncontested for thirty-six years, received at least 85% of the seats in the legislature in seven of nine elections while averaging only 52% of the popular vote.² In 2008, the PCs won 87% of the seats with roughly 53% of the popular vote. In other words, although specific seat counts give the impression of a single-minded electorate, just under half of Albertans have consistently voted *against* the governing party.

That being said, it remains true that, at least since 1921, a particular brand of political party tends to fare markedly better than its competitors in the province, even if one looks solely at popular vote counts. In general, the UFA, Social Credit and PC parties demonstrated a strong anti-central Canada/federal government bias, a commitment to ensuring the wishes of the “common people” are adhered to politically, and have, in

¹ Peter McCormick, “Voting Behaviour in Alberta: The Quasi-Party System Revisited,” in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Fall 1980), 88.

² Peter J. Smith, “Alberta: A Province like Any Other?” in Keith Brownsey and Michael Howlett ed., *The Provincial State: Politics in Canada’s Provinces and Territories*, (Mississauga: Copp Clark Pitman, 1992), 250.

rhetoric if not always in practice, praised the unregulated economic market as the key to economic development and social stability. At the same time, those parties that openly espoused economic collectivism (the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation or the New Democratic Party) or maintained strong symbolic links to more traditional political parties based in central Canada (the Liberals and, until 1971, the PCs) were unsuccessful. Indeed, Jared Wesley's insightful exploration of the political platforms of political parties in Alberta has revealed that the province's most successful political leaders have consistently preached a "freedom-based narrative" structured around populist or anti-establishment themes, western alienation, and a conservative individualism that emphasizes "personal responsibility, free enterprise, private-sector development, entrepreneurship, a strong work ethic, the evils of socialism, and the protection of individual rights and liberties."³ This clear pattern has led David Stewart and Keith Archer to argue that Alberta's political culture, or the common political values that underpin its political system, is defined by alienation, conservatism and populism.⁴ I am largely in agreement with such a definition and would argue that, in general, this particular combination of characteristics, rather than its seemingly bizarre electoral history, is in fact what makes Alberta unique among Canadian provinces. However, although the notion of "alienation" clearly refers to Alberta's long-held distrust of the federal government, important qualifications must be made to both the conservative and populist labels.

³ Jared J. Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 55-56.

⁴ David K. Stewart and Keith Archer, *Quasi-Democracy? Parties and Leadership Selection in Alberta*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 13-15.

With respect to conservatism, both the UFA and the Social Credit under William Aberhart were enamoured with approaches to the market economy that, although clearly not “socialist,” could only be described as radical. However, since the premiership of Ernest Manning in 1943, consecutive Alberta premiers have gained solid electoral support by embracing a far more conservative approach to economics, consistently stressing the importance of a free-enterprise system with limited government interference. In a remarkable testament to the popularity of fiscal conservatism in contemporary Alberta, Ralph Klein’s PC government was able to maintain, and perhaps even enhance, their support among the electorate after unleashing a significant “neo-liberal” attack on public spending in the early 1990s.⁵ Yet it would be a mistake to assume Alberta’s economic practices have always met the demands of the free-enterprise rhetoric. Despite harshly criticizing any and all forms of economic collectivism, it is hard to imagine the Manning government holding power for so long without the aid of substantial oil and gas royalties that allowed for spending on social programs and infrastructure well above the national average.⁶ Similarly, Peter Lougheed, a staunch supporter of the capitalist system, gained tremendous electoral support while utilizing resource royalties to pursue a strategy of government-led economic diversification that required extensive infrastructure improvements, state resources to assist Alberta-based businesses, and even government ownership, between 1971 and 1985. In other words, despite a great deal of “free enterprise” rhetoric, the notion that Albertans and their

⁵ Keith Archer and Roger Gibbins, “What Do Albertans Think? The Klein Agenda on the Public Opinion Landscape,” in Christopher J. Bruce, Ronald D. Kneebone and Kenneth J. McKenzie ed., *A Government Reinvented: A Study of Alberta’s Deficit Elimination Program*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 462-485.

⁶ This argument is made by Smith, “Alberta: A Province like Any Other?” 247-48.

governments have always been unapologetically right-wing when it comes to economics is somewhat of a misnomer.

Successful parties in Alberta also have a reputation for social conservatism. Religious-based angst around questionable moral behavior was obviously an issue for nearly all Canadian political leaders, including those from the UFA and Social Credit, in the first two thirds of the twentieth century. Yet, over the past two decades, the Alberta PCs have seemingly stood alone as the provincial government most committed to preserving the “traditional family” and resisting the advancement of homosexual rights.⁷ However, although polls tend to show Albertans in general as being some of the least friendly to gay rights in the country, the provincial government’s own research conducted at the height of the “Vriend” debate in the late 1990s revealed a polarized electorate with only a very slight majority in opposition to the advancement of the homosexual cause.⁸ A more recent poll demonstrates that opposition to the legal recognition of same-sex marriages in Alberta stands at 28% in 2011, down from 59% in 1996.⁹ Thus, the notion that Alberta’s political culture is defined by a stern social conservatism also requires

⁷ For a discussion on the Provincial Progressive Conservatives long history of reluctance with respect to legitimizing same-sex relationships see: David Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions: Public Recognition of Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), Julia Lloyd and Laura Bonnett, “The Arrested Development of Queer Rights in Alberta,” in Trevor Harrison ed., *The Return of the Trojan Horse: Alberta and the New World (Dis)Order*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005), 328-341, and Clark Banack, “Conservative Christianity, Anti-Statism and Alberta’s Public Sphere: The Curious Case of Bill 44,” in S. Lefebvre and L. Beaman ed., *Religion in the Public Sphere: Perspectives across the Canadian Provinces*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Forthcoming in 2012).

⁸ Alberta Justice, “Report of the Ministerial Task Force,” March 3, 1999, http://justice.alberta.ca/publications/Publications_Library/ReportoftheMinisterialTaskForce.aspx/DispForm.aspx?ID=36, (accessed on February 12, 2001). A full slide presentation containing all the statistical evidence from this research report is available at: http://justice.alberta.ca/publications/Documents/alberta_justice_issues_research/index.html.

⁹ See: Faron Ellis, *Traditional or Progressive: Albertans’ Opinion Structure on Six Policy Issues*, Citizen Society Research Lab, Lethbridge, AB, November, 2011, <http://www.lethbridgecollege.ca/about-us/applied-research-innovation/citizen-society-research-lab/alberta-opinion-studies>, (accessed November 7, 2011), and Chris Varcoe, “Is Alberta Shifting Left When it Comes to Hard-Line Issues Like Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage?” in Calgary Herald, November 6, 2011, A6.

some qualification. In fact, it is probably most appropriate to suggest that Alberta's political culture is informed heavily by the *rhetoric* of fiscal, and sometimes social, conservatism if not always the practice. However, it is clear that Alberta's politics are rooted in a strong populist tradition, yet the precise nature of Alberta's "populist" political culture also requires a bit more exploration.

The term populism has become somewhat of a contested concept among academics whose efforts to provide a comprehensive definition inevitably encounter the awkward array of distinct political movements that share little in common beyond the label "populist," either self-proclaimed or affixed by an outside observer. Rather than rehash this general definitional debate however, I want to work towards a definition of populism as a characteristic of political culture as opposed to a label for a specific political movement. As a point of departure, Peter Wiles has surely hit on a fundamental element of populist political thought and action with his assertion that populism is any creed or movement that is founded upon the belief that "virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions."¹⁰ Yet, such a definition fails to get to the heart of the overt *political* nature of populism. Following Francisco Panizza, I suggest a complete definition of populism must allude to "the constitution of the people as a political actor." This is necessary to understand populism as "an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between "the people" and its "*other*."¹¹ Thus, populism certainly begins from a fundamental belief in the "virtue of the simple people," but moreover, its

¹⁰ Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome, Not A Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism," in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner ed., *Populism; Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 166-179.

¹¹ Francisco Panizza, "Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy," in F. Panizza ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, (London: Verso, 2005), 3.

actualization requires the politicization of this belief which produces a tangible political movement that finds its inspiration in this constructed antagonism between themselves (the people) and a loosely defined power bloc (the other, or the “elites,” or the “plutocrats,” etc) who are seen as exploiting or oppressing the “people.”

David Laycock, a central authority on Canadian prairie populism, has noted that although explicit definitions of the “common people” and the “elites” of any given society have varied immensely among divergent communities, “the elements of each variant cohere around principles concerning redistribution of power among social classes and groups,” including extending the right to participate in areas of public life traditionally controlled by the privileged sectors of society.¹² The overarching goal of this actualized political movement becomes the radical alteration of the existing power structure in order to transfer significant decision-making power to such “people” at the expense of the “elites.” Importantly then, the essence of the populism that I am trying to articulate is a “pre-ideological” sentiment. Despite very real ideological divergence, all populist movements have been built upon an anti-establishmentarian sentiment that is fuelled by participant’s own self-confidence as capable decision-makers and their perceptions of being unfairly exploited by an outside force of “elites.” Laycock has since labeled this anti-establishment sentiment a “democratic morality according to which the stifling of the people’s will...is a normatively unacceptable political practice.”¹³ It is precisely this pre-ideological “democratic morality,” derived from a belief in the moral

¹² David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 4.

¹³ David Laycock, “Populism and the New Right in English Canada,” in F. Panizza ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, (London: Verso, 2005), 173.

and intellectual capacities of the “common people,” that operates at the foundation of much of Alberta’s politics.

A significant byproduct of this populist sentiment has been Alberta’s tradition of political nonpartisanship defined by Leslie Pal as the yearning “for leaders and governments that serve the people as a whole, that rise above their differences to serve fundamental needs.”¹⁴ Yet, as Laycock’s careful analysis has demonstrated, although always built upon a belief in the capacity of the “common people,” the practices encouraged by distinct populist movements on the prairies in general and in Alberta in particular have been quite different.¹⁵ Specifically, Laycock depicts the UFA as encouraging an authentic “grassroots” participatory and deliberative democracy built upon the existence of meaningful lines of communication between the “common people” debating the issues in their “Locals,” and the larger UFA political organization who were to act strictly as the “peoples” delegates. Following C.B. Macpherson, Laycock argues that Social Credit, under William Aberhart, encouraged a “plebiscitarian” style of populism that also adhered to the notion of the “people” as one, but rejected the UFA’s emphasis on meaningful local deliberation. Instead, Aberhart insisted that the role of the people was to simply “demand results,” and the role of the democratic leader was to respond to this general demand by enlisting the services of the necessary experts to “deliver the results.” The result was a technocratic and apolitical form of populism that attempted to meet the needs of the “people” but was devoid of the kind of deliberative

¹⁴ Leslie A. Pal, “The Political Executive and Political Leadership in Alberta,” in Allan Tupper and Roger Gibbins ed., *Government and Politics in Alberta*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 23.

¹⁵ Within *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, Laycock highlights four distinct prairie “populisms” based upon their classification of “the people” as well as their general ideological tendencies when articulating grievances and proposing solutions. They are: Crypto-Liberalism, Radical Democratic Populism, Social Democratic Populism and Plebiscitarian Populism.

citizen involvement stressed by the UFA. It is this seemingly paradoxical apolitical form of populism that now operates at the foundation of contemporary Alberta's political culture. In both the recent PC provincial government under Ralph Klein and the popular Alberta-based federal Reform Party under Preston Manning, rhetoric promising to steer government toward the interests of the "people" and away from the "elites" was a strong element of their appeal but attempts to engage average citizens in the process of governing at a local level have been questionable at best.¹⁶

In sum then, I agree with Steward and Archer that Alberta's political culture is best defined by the terms alienated, conservative and populist. Yet, as I have argued above and will develop in more detail below, Alberta's conservative and populist leanings require a certain amount of unpacking in order to fully appreciate the manner by which they define Alberta. Undoubtedly, the rhetoric of both fiscal and social conservatism has been an integral element of the platform offered by the dominant political parties of Alberta, at least since the premiership of Manning in 1943. However, to suggest that all Albertans are conservative, or even that each provincial government since 1943 has always acted in a fiscally or socially conservative manner would be incorrect. Similarly, the anti-establishmentarianism generated by a strong belief in the moral and intellectual capacities of the "common people" and the need to ensure their representation within the political system has been a bedrock of Alberta politics since at least 1921. However, the manifestation of this sentiment has since moved away from the deliberative structure of populist democracy envisioned by the UFA towards an apolitical

¹⁶ For a discussion on the "apolitical" nature of populism advocated by both the contemporary PC government and the federal Reform party see: David Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*, (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Trevor Harrison, "The Changing Face of Prairie Politics: Populism in Alberta," in *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 2000), 107-121.

populism that questions the need for meaningful citizen involvement so long as the governing party is taking seriously the interests of the “people.” Yet, as I will spell out in the remainder of this study, the similar emphasis on the moral and intellectual capacity of the “common people” that one finds underlying the different versions of populist democracy encouraged by the UFA and Social Credit has ensured that the dominant form of conservatism found in Alberta has a strong populist flavour and is therefore distinct from the more hierarchical “tory” conservatism found in central and eastern Canada. Having made these qualifications I now want to turn briefly to the scholarly efforts of those hoping to explain the origins of these political characteristics.

The Classic Attempts to “Explain” Alberta Politics

C.B. Macpherson’s well-known study sought to explain the province’s “quasi-party system” by pointing to two distinct characteristics that were unique to Alberta, its relatively homogeneous class composition and its quasi-colonial status.¹⁷ Although there is little doubt that Alberta’s quasi-colonial history has significantly influenced the direction of the province’s politics, the point regarding class composition is more problematic. A number of scholars have since demonstrated that Macpherson either miscalculated or misrepresented the class divisions that existed in Alberta.¹⁸ That said, Gurston Dacks has somewhat re-worked Macpherson’s original argument to suggest that it is a sense of alienation due to its quasi-colonial status in combination with Albertan’s historical identification with a single dominant commodity, as opposed to a single

¹⁷ C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 21.

¹⁸ See: John Richards and Larry Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West*, (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1979), 149-153 and Edward Bell, “Reconsidering Democracy in Alberta,” in Allan Tupper and Roger Gibbins ed., *Government and Politics in Alberta*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 85-108. For a more recent rejection of Macpherson’s class-based analysis see: Edward Bell, Harold Jansen and Lisa Young, “Sustaining a Dynasty in Alberta: The 2004 Provincial Election,” in *Canadian Political Science Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (December 2007), 27-49.

homogeneous class, that has led to one-party dominance and a conservative, anti-party political culture.¹⁹ Indeed, by replacing “class” with “commodity” Dacks seems to have tapped into a unique element of Alberta’s economic history by suggesting that the bulk of Albertans, whether they belong to a specific occupational group or not, seem to identify strongly with the commodity most clearly tied to the province’s fiscal well-being. This was originally an agriculture-based economy but is now obviously one heavily invested in the development of oil and natural gas, the protection of which from central Canadian intrusion certainly does much to unite Albertans politically around non-traditional, economically conservative parties.

Of course, Dacks’ assertion that the dominant commodity has significantly shaped Alberta politics is not necessarily unique. Economic, staples-based explanations obviously have an important place in historical Canadian scholarship thanks to the pioneering work of Harold Innis and W.A. Mackintosh. John Richards and Larry Pratt built upon this tradition by offering a concise history of the development of Alberta’s oil and gas industry and the conditions such an economic dependence instilled upon Alberta.²⁰ Yet their work also went beyond the standard staple thesis by analyzing the overt and purposeful role played by the provincial state in this development process. Although both Manning and Lougheed are portrayed as powerful agents in this history, Richards and Pratt are careful to demonstrate the unique challenges posed by this overwhelmingly dominant commodity that required significant capital and expertise to exploit, in addition to the incessant desire on the part of the premiers to move towards

¹⁹ Gurston Dacks, “From Consensus to Competition: Social Democracy and Political Culture in Alberta,” in Larry Pratt ed., *Essays in Honour of Grant Notley: Socialism and Democracy in Alberta*, (Edmonton: NeWest, 1986), 186-204.

²⁰ Richards and Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West*.

economic diversification. Pratt, along with Allan Tupper and Ian Urquhart, have further stressed the vital role Alberta's chronic economic instability, its reliance on primary resource production and its vulnerability to external economic and political forces have had on the goals of consecutive provincial governments.²¹

Another vital avenue traversed by scholars hoping to tackle the unique character of Alberta politics is that of immigration. At the forefront of this line of inquiry is Nelson Wiseman whose attempt to explain the political diversity found within the Canadian Prairies alludes to the importation of ideological tendencies carried into different regions by distinct "waves" of immigrant settlers. It was the "radical populist liberalism" carried north by the wave of "Great Plains" American farmers that "played an influential role in Alberta that was unparalleled in Canada."²² In fact, by 1911, American-born Albertans made up roughly 22 percent of the provincial population, a proportion much higher than in any other province in Canada. By the 1920s, nearly half of the farmers in the southern region of the province had come from America, mostly from the Midwest farming states.²³ The significant ideological influence of American farmers, Wiseman argued, was made possible not simply by the considerable number of American immigrants but also because they settled overwhelmingly in rural areas thereby giving them enhanced political clout in a province whose electoral representation was tilted heavily toward rural ridings. As W.L. Morton has noted, by 1918 the leadership of the UFA was made up of more American-born farmers than either Canadian or British leading to a "more radical

²¹ Allan Tupper, Larry Pratt and Ian Urquhart, "The Role of Government," in Allan Tupper and Roger Gibbins ed., *Government and Politics in Alberta*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 31-66.

²² Nelson Wiseman, "The Pattern of Prairie Politics," in *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2, (Summer 1981), 312.

²³ Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1990), 82.

spirit” developing in Alberta agrarian circles than in its eastern neighbours.²⁴ This meant agrarian politics in Alberta, which would dominate until at least 1935, was fundamentally grounded in an American classical liberalism that was devoid of the more communal-oriented “toryism” that had, according to Gad Horowitz, “touched” and thus stained the dominant liberalism of Ontario and, eventually Manitoba and Saskatchewan.²⁵

Of course, it would be inconceivable to offer any explanation of Alberta politics without alluding to such structural conditions as the province’s “quasi-colonial” history, or the conditions created by an economy dominated by a single valuable commodity, or its unique immigration patterns. Yet, it would also be a grave error to overlook the significant role played by Alberta’s long-standing political leaders. As McCormick has argued, the provincial electorate’s lack of stable, deep-seated partisan affiliation has meant that political parties cannot count on reliable partisan support. Thus, the leader rather than the party name becomes the focal point of the province’s politics.²⁶ Pal similarly stressed the importance of leadership by suggesting that the most successful parties were those whose leaders appreciated the political gains available to those willing to play-up the non-partisan, anti-Ottawa tendencies within Alberta’s political culture.²⁷ More recently, Stewart and Archer have updated Pal’s thesis by arguing that it was the folksy popularity of Ralph Klein as opposed to the PC brand or ideology that ensured the PCs present dynasty was kept alive in the mid 1990s. Thus, they conclude, “Alberta politics is leadership politics.”²⁸ Wesley has similarly argued that political parties, and

²⁴ W.L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 37-38.

²⁵ Gad Horowitz, “Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation,” in *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (1966): 143-171.

²⁶ McCormick, “Voting Behaviour in Alberta,” 93-96.

²⁷ Leslie A. Pal, “The Political Executive and Political Leadership in Alberta,” in Allan Tupper and Roger Gibbins ed., *Government and Politics in Alberta*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992).

²⁸ Stewart and Archer, *Quasi-Democracy*, 172.

especially their leaders, have possessed a significant degree of agency with respect to shaping and perpetuating the province's political culture.²⁹

Yet this line of argument speaks more to the role played by political leaders in *sustaining* Alberta's alienated, conservative and populist political culture throughout the past century as opposed to helping *create* it. It does not seem a stretch to suggest that certain leaders, especially formative ones like Henry Wise Wood, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, also played a role in setting the early direction of Alberta's political culture as well. Indeed, without delving deeply into the broad "structure vs. agency" debate, or the various theories of elite-driven politics, I agree with Robert Putnam's assertion that to know how influential politicians think politics ought to work is of vital importance to one hoping to understand the political culture of a community.³⁰ Surely the views of influential political leaders may be drawn from the broader political culture of the community, but it is also true that such leaders are in a position to significantly shape the political culture of the community, especially in its early years. This is a possibility that is certainly mentioned from time-to-time in a variety of academic literature on Alberta but has never been investigated more systematically.³¹ It is a goal of this project, which focuses specifically on the political thought and action of particularly influential Alberta leaders, to move towards a clearer understanding of how the ideas of such individuals helped to shape, as opposed to simply sustain, some significant political beliefs in the province.

²⁹ Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, 33.

³⁰ Robert D Putnam, "Studying Elite Political Culture: The Case of Ideology," in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, No. 3, (September, 1971), 651-681.

³¹ One important exception is the work of David Laycock who includes both cultural factors and social actors as important influences in shaping the distinct trajectories of various prairie populisms. See: Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, 7.

Of course, the various structural explanations presented above cannot really be taken as mutually exclusive possibilities. One must conclude that a proper understanding of the development and contemporary shape of Alberta politics requires a grasp of the province's initial demographic composition, its patterns of immigration, its historical relationship with the federal government, the basis of its economic development, and the particular efforts and ideas of its political leadership, in addition to the variety of peculiar accidents of history that are far too numerous to mention here. However, in spite of the unusually large amount of academic attention paid to Alberta's politics, the influence of religion remains neglected. The chief motivation behind this project is the sense that this oversight represents a rather substantial gap in our knowledge of Alberta politics. This is not to suggest that religion will and can explain everything that is significant about Alberta politics. Instead, it is my broad contention that religious interpretation has played a significant, although thoroughly under-analyzed, role in the development of Alberta's unique political trajectory. Although this study focuses solely on the role played by religious interpretation on the political thought of a handful of political elites throughout Alberta's history, and loosely builds upon previous work done in both the "immigration" and "leadership" strands of explanation mentioned above, it is my general argument that religion is an important factor that helps us better understand both the populist and conservative elements of Alberta's political culture. Without such a focus, our grasp of Alberta and its politics remains largely incomplete.

The Study of Religion and Politics in Canada and Alberta

The standard account of religion's general impact on Canadian political culture remains Seymour Martin Lipset's comparison of the institutions and values of America

and Canada. Appealing to the indirect influence of religion on cultural and political values that occurs over time, Lipset suggests that Protestant sects have considerably influenced the values of Americans whereas the vast majority of Canadians adhere to the values encouraged by either the traditional, European-based Catholic or Anglican churches or the ecumenical and communitarian Protestant United Church.³² More specifically, the congregational and voluntary nature of America's sectarian religious history has encouraged an individual-based egalitarianism prone to protest when encountering traditional class hierarchy. Canada's religious history, on the other hand, has been dominated by established, and therefore, hierarchical church structures which have encouraged an attitude of deference to traditional sources of authority. Although I find this concise depiction of America's religious history and its connection to the populist current within American politics relatively accurate, Lipset's description of the religious, and subsequently political values, in Canada seems to focus overwhelmingly on central and eastern Canada, ignoring both the non-traditional religious history and blatant populist spirit of the Canadian prairies.

S.D. Clark, who utilized the sociological distinction between the established traditional church and the small, newly-formed religious sect to help explain Canadian political development, seems a bit closer to the mark. Clark attempted to unearth a link between the political protest movements of the prairies (that Lipset's account seems to ignore) and the popularity of non-traditional religious sects, many of which originated in

³²Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 88.

the United States.³³ With specific focus on the sects of Alberta around 1930, Clark suggests that such evangelical organizations took aim at both the traditional theological systems of mainstream churches as well as their broader social influence within prairie Canada.³⁴ Implicit within this protest was the same radically democratic spirit articulated by Lipset which invited ordinary Americans to challenge the position of the traditional church clergy and demand avenues for increased participation, first in religious services and eventually in social and political affairs. Although Clark suggests this emerging air of anti-establishmentarianism among sect members in Alberta is linked to the broader political radicalism that is present within the prairies, he is also careful to note that religious sectarianism may foster a general attitude of political indifference, especially with regard to specific policy questions. In fact, Clark concludes that such sectarianism has actually impeded the growth of sophisticated political thought and increased general disengagement from policy discussion in areas dominated by sects, an argument that seems to anticipate the latter findings of populist scholars who note the ironic existence of an apolitical yet radically populist/anti-establishment political culture prevalent in Alberta.³⁵

W.E. Mann followed Clark's distinction between church and sect on the prairies with a much more in-depth investigation into the structure and ideology of a number of religious sects within Alberta.³⁶ Suggesting that these fundamentalist evangelical sects

³³ S.D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948). See also: S.D. Clark, "The Religious Sect in Canadian Politics," in *The American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 51, No. 3, (November 1945), 207-216.

³⁴ Clark, "The Religious Sect in Canadian Politics."

³⁵ Laycock has labeled this particular type of anti-political populist political culture plebiscitarian populism and discusses its role within the Social Credit days of Alberta in chapter five of *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*. Similar findings are discussed with reference to the structure and support of the Reform Party of Canada in Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*.

³⁶ W.E. Mann, *Sect, Cult, and Church in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955).

were heirs of the original American religious “dissenters,” and a direct extension of the American fundamentalist religious movement which emerged in the late nineteenth century, Mann proceeds to draw important parallels between early Alberta religious culture and the American form of “populist” Christianity identified by Lipset. To make this point Mann highlights the Alberta sect’s protest against traditional theological formality and corresponding emphasis on equality and fraternity among members, including the preference for a “folksy” pastor, a “down-to-earth” sermon and avenues for congregational participation. The impact of this protest against traditional religious authority and practice was quite significant in the province not simply because there were a large number of sects but, more so, because these sects were very successful, relative to traditional churches, in setting up bible-schools and commandeering large audiences via radio broadcasting, two vitally important mediums through which the spirit of religious protest and anti-establishmentarianism could easily be spread.

Taken together, the contributions of Clark and Mann certainly hint at a link between sectarian religious protest in Alberta and the broader political and economic populist protest that led to the popularity of a number of non-traditional, populist political parties. The fact that they highlight the firmly sectarian nature of Alberta’s religious history seems, on its own, to strongly contradict Lipset’s portrayal of Canada as a land of deference to traditional European Christian theology and, subsequently, political and economic elites. Add to this sectarian religious history the specific American influence on Alberta that is mentioned in the scholarship of Wiseman and others and it is easy to see why one would expect to find a similar relationship between popular theology and populist political sentiment in Alberta as we find in America. Yet this is a broad

sociological point that remains rather speculative. Neither Clark nor Mann focus on the specific connections between the religious interpretation and the political thought of particular Alberta leaders.

Beyond the work of these sociologists, the role of religion has been an element that is often mentioned but rarely addressed in full within the lengthy collection of titles focusing on the politics of the Canadian prairies. There are many well-researched bibliographies of prairie political leaders that leave little doubt as to the significance of religious concerns within their personal, and often public, lives but these studies do not investigate systematically the nature of the particular religious interpretation in question nor are the philosophical or political implications considered in any detail. More recently, however, prairie historians have begun to narrow-in on this aspect of religion's potential influence by examining the religiously-inspired thought of influential prairies characters such as Louis Riel, J.S. Woodsworth and Salem Bland.³⁷ It is in the spirit of these works, which take seriously the religious beliefs of important political figures and suggest that a proper accounting of their actions is impossible without grasping this aspect of their character, that this project proceeds.

The fact that social scientists have thus far failed to fully consider Alberta's political culture and development from the standpoint of religion is not a simple instance of neglect by the handful of scholars focusing solely on one region. In fact, religious historian Mark Noll has argued that "the question of religion in relation to Canadian

³⁷ See: Thomas Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel: 'Prophet of the New World'* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), Allen Mills, *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-1928*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), and Richard Allen, "The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt," in George Melnyk ed., *Riel to Reform: A History of Protest in Western Canada*, (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992), 138-147.

society... [is] the most important understudied story in the religious history of twentieth-century North America.”³⁸ This Canada-wide oversight is most likely due to two interrelated factors. First, the intense devotion to explanations related to political economy within Canadian academia has seemingly suppressed the inclination to consider religious influence as a significant motivator. This suggestion is furthered by Noll who argues the “intellectual climate of Canadian higher education since World War II has been heavily influenced by materialist or neo-Marxist assumptions and so overwhelmingly biased against full treatment of religion as a prime mover of human action.”³⁹ Second, and more fundamentally, the overarching acceptance of the broader secularization thesis in academic circles, which predicted a decline in religious belief generally and the decoupling of religion from political allegiance specifically, has no doubt encouraged this general tendency to overlook or downplay religious influence on historical and contemporary political thought and action. Yet, as many of the central tenets of the secularization thesis begin to crumble in the face of evidence that suggests religious traditions are not in fact withering away in the face of modernity, the question of religious influence on political realities reemerges. The bulk of contemporary North American political scientists, however, remain skeptical about religion’s potential influence. A recent editorial by PhD graduates from two top-ranked American departments captures this sentiment well:

We, along with all of our Harvard- and Chicago-trained classmates, were rendered far worse than ignorant. It’s not just that religion was not on the syllabus. It is that we were trained to think that religion could not matter; our mental maps were wired to screen religion out as powerless, as something

³⁸ Mark Noll, “The End of Canadian History?” in *First Things*, April 1992, 33-34.

³⁹ Mark Noll, “Christianity in Canada: Good Books at Last,” in *Fides et Historia*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (1991), 84.

that would just roll over in the face of modernity, and therefore, as something that required no theoretical or practical attention.⁴⁰

Indeed, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that the reluctance on the part of contemporary academics to take religion seriously is part of the unnoticed background or “unthought” of social science. It is not that academics, whose penchant for atheism is far stronger than the average citizen, take an overt ideological stance by claiming religion and its political influence must be in decline because religious belief is “wrong.” Rather, Taylor suggests, religion tends to be overlooked as a serious factor because of “the more subtle way that one’s own framework beliefs and values can constrict one’s theoretical imagination.”⁴¹ Susan Harding’s discussion on the general treatment of Christian fundamentalism by academics speaks well to this tendency.⁴² In short, Harding suggests that Christian fundamentalists are largely constituted by a modern academic discourse that subconsciously treats them as a cultural “other,” a backward and bigoted collection of individuals subscribing to a dated system of belief that can only be explained by broader social, political or economic factors. Furthermore, any researcher who seeks to challenge this modern representation of fundamentalism risks the charge of “consorting with ‘them,’ the opponents of modernity, progress, enlightenment, truth, and reason.”⁴³ Such an attitude, however, grossly underestimates the significant explanatory power available to those who are willing to take the beliefs of the religious seriously. As religious historian George Marsden has noted, American fundamentalists:

⁴⁰ Timothy Shah, Daniel Philpott and Monica Toft, “God and Political Science,” in *The Public Discourse*, May 16, 2011, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2011/05/3297>, (accessed May 23, 2011).

⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 428-429.

⁴² Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” in *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer 1991), 373-393.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 375.

...were convinced that sincere acceptance of [The Gospel of Christ] was the key to virtue in this life and to eternal life in heaven; its rejection meant following the broad path that ended in with the tortures of hell. Unless we appreciate the immense implications of a deep religious commitment to such beliefs – implications for one's own life and for attitudes towards others – we cannot appreciate the dynamics of fundamentalist thought and action.⁴⁴

The challenge for the modern academic, whether or not one is a believer, is therefore to resist the urge to explain “why” someone happens to be religious and instead attempt to work through the uncritical modernist presuppositions that halt meaningful research into the thought and behaviour of this religious “other.” It is only by moving beyond this roadblock that one can fully embrace the “immense implications” the religious interpretations of the believer have for his or her thought and action. This requires one to take the self-understanding of this religious “other” seriously and attempt to bring this understanding into our own language and understanding as an observer. This hermeneutic approach to the study of religious “meaning,” and the implications it has for the believer, is more fully explored below.

Approaching Religion and Political Thought

Sociologist of Religion Steve Bruce has suggested that, in its most basic form, religion consists of “beliefs, actions, and institutions that assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose.”⁴⁵ More concretely, R. Scott Appleby has suggested that a religion is a confessional community built around a sacred creed that concerns the origin, meaning, and purpose of life. Furthermore, this group embraces certain rituals of worship that

⁴⁴ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3.

⁴⁵ Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.

express this creed while also following a particular moral code which emanates out of the same creed.⁴⁶ Well-known Anthropologist Clifford Geertz adds to this point by arguing:

A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁴⁷

Within his discussion Geertz makes an important distinction between *religion pure*, the individual's encounter with the supernatural or sacred, or what Geertz calls the "really real," and *religion applied*, "a viewing of ordinary experience in light of what that encounter seems to reveal."⁴⁸ The experience of the supernatural or the sacred is of immense importance but the parameters of this study are built around the notion of *religion applied*. I am seeking to understand how the experience of the "really real" influences the manner by which certain individuals understand the universe, their society, and their own place and role within each. Not only does this influence provide the individual in question with a certain moral orientation and overall purpose, it further provides a conception of proper communal life. To seek the manner by which religious interpretation influences an individual's thinking about politics is simply another way of asking how the experience of the "really real" colours one's thinking with respect to the appropriate way to structure life in common and how this, in turn, influences the specific public policy choices politicians make when engaged in the process of law-making.

Of course, within this project I can speak with even more specificity. The relationship between religious interpretation and political thought of those considered

⁴⁶ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 8-9.

⁴⁷ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 121.

within this study is guided not just by an abstract notion of the “really real,” but by their particular interpretation of the Christian faith. The “really real” in this case is represented by the character of Jesus Christ. For the subjects of this study, the message that Christ bestowed upon His followers was that of the one true God, the Creator of all, and therefore represents the ultimate purpose behind the universe and the guide to proper conduct for all of humanity. Thus, to say that someone is acting in a certain way based upon a genuine belief in the message of Christ, experienced in some personal way by the subject, is to say something quite serious with respect to both the subject’s own conception of the cosmos as well as the importance that they place on the action in question. Clearly, to be convinced that God prefers this action to that means that indifference on the part of the true believer with respect to the action in question is impossible. And this obviously has immense implications for the believer’s approach to politics.

Yet, in another way, to say simply that one is motivated by his or her Christian faith is to not say much at all. The Christian religion has obviously proven incredibly malleable. On the Canadian Prairies, to say nothing of the divisions between the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches, or the hundreds of denominations that have grown out of these broad traditions, a whole host of Christian interpretations abound. Even those political and historical texts that treat religious influence on the Canadian prairies in the most superficial of ways are quick to point out, for instance, the distinct interpretations of Christianity that stood at the foundation of the left-wing CCF and the more conservative Social Credit movement. Thus, any effort to understand the role played by Christianity on the political thought of particular individuals requires much

more than the deduction that they were moved by the message of Christ and a subsequent investigation into what this message might be. As Appleby has argued, there is a certain “ambivalence of the sacred” for followers who are, by their very nature, limited with respect to their apprehension of the sacred. Rather than understanding religiously motivated human action as a direct translation of God’s will, we must admit that the religious understanding of an individual is filtered through one’s faculties of perception and then interpreted through their own culturally and historically bounded conceptions of the sacred. Thus:

The unique dynamism of lived religion – its distinctive patterns of interaction not only with secular, nationalist, ethnic, and other elements of political or personal identity but also with its own sacred past – means, among other things, that religious behaviour cannot be confidently predicted merely on the basis of an individual’s or group’s affiliation with a specific religious tradition.⁴⁹

Therefore, it is not the political relevance of the message of Christ recorded in the New Testament that this study seeks to make clear but rather the *personal interpretation* of Christ’s message, and its subsequent political relevance, for the particular human subject in question. In fact, this is precisely why investigating the relationship between religious interpretation and political thought is interesting. Surely this is an obvious point but reflecting on it leads to a more fundamental truth about the nature of the human subject and, importantly, the proper method with respect to seeking an understanding of the motives behind his or her particular actions, to which I now turn.

Meaning and the Study of Human Action

This study begins from the foundation provided by the “philosophical anthropology” of the human subject offered by philosopher Charles Taylor, whose sketch

⁴⁹ Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, 56.

of “how humans really are” draws from the broad hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions. One of Taylor’s central academic contributions has been his refutation of what he labels the *disengaged self*, a modern conception of the human subject who is “capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act ‘rationally.’”⁵⁰ It is this conception that lies beneath the proliferation of “neutral” explanations of the self based upon a methodological individualism that follows the insistence of the natural sciences on getting beyond subjectivity. From Taylor’s perspective, the “disengaged” thesis “stands in the way of a richer and more adequate understanding of what the human sense of self is really like, and hence of a proper understanding of the real variety of human culture, and hence of a more appropriate knowledge of human beings.”⁵¹

In an effort to dispel the assumptions of the “disengaged” thesis Taylor draws on the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, all thinkers who “tried to get out of the cul-de-sac of monological consciousness... [because they viewed] the agent, not primarily as the locus of representations, but as engaged in practices, as beings who act in and on a world.”⁵² Fundamentally, Taylor seeks to stress the “embodied” nature of the human agent, a conception most fully articulated by the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty who argues, “the subject is in a world which is a field of meanings for him, and thus inseparably so, because these meanings are what make him

⁵⁰ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, “The Dialogical Self,” in D. Hiley, J. Bohman, and R. Shusterman, ed., *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 307.

⁵² Ibid, 308.

the subject he is.”⁵³ The human subject, who possesses agency within this world, grasps meaning through his or her capacity for perceiving what is meaningful in this world he or she is engaged in. Therefore “we perceive the world...through our capacities to act in it,” and these capacities to act are inseparable from our interpretation of their meaning.⁵⁴ It is from this distinct ontological foundation that Taylor, following Heidegger, claims that the human agent is a self-interpreting animal. In fact, “he is necessarily so, for there is no such thing as the structures of meanings for him independently of his interpretation of them; for one is woven into the other.”⁵⁵ That is, as agents engaged in this world, the interpretation of what is meaningful directly motivates our actions and therefore is constitutive of what we, in fact, are.

To speak more concretely, for a human subject to perceive, and thus interpret, meaning is to consciously or otherwise draw upon a background framework that each human subject operates within and which therefore influences their moral judgments. That is, all human subjects are guided in their thought and action by a standard outside of themselves that ranks competing ends or goods as higher or lower, as being more or less worthwhile. The existence of these frameworks are an inescapable condition of being human and our articulation of them, our interpretation of them, is what provides us a sense of orientation with respect to our moral intuitions and responses. But to suggest that one is “interpreting” the contours of these moral frameworks in one’s day-to-day life is to make a further point related to the situated nature of the human subject that takes us beyond the individual self.

⁵³ Charles Taylor, “Embodied Agency,” in H. Pieterse, ed., *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*, (Washington: University Press of America, 1989), 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in *Philosophy and the Human Science: Philosophical Papers 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 26.

The act of acquiring, grasping and communicating these moral frameworks is dependent upon our linguistic capacities as humans; thus, one's behaviour is necessarily related in an intimate way with language. As Hans-Georg Gadamer famously noted, "Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all embracing form of the constitution of the world."⁵⁶ However, as Taylor notes, "a language only exists and is maintained by a language community." In fact, "there is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language...[and] we first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up."⁵⁷ Thus, the social nature of language necessarily makes us *dialogical* rather than *disengaged* beings. Taylor writes, "The range of human desires, feelings, emotions, and hence meaning is bound up with the level and type of culture, which in turn is inseparable from the distinctions and categories marked by the language people speak."⁵⁸ Or, as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre acknowledges quite simply, "I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity."⁵⁹ Of course both Taylor and MacIntyre agree that the individual is capable of developing a moral outlook that is in sharp disagreement with one's family or background, but any innovation in this regard begins from one's grasp of the language of moral discernment acquired from their original community and only moves forward as one enters into conversation with those

⁵⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 3.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 35.

⁵⁸ Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 25.

⁵⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Edition, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 220.

coming from different backgrounds. One's moral framework may evolve in response to this encounter but the subject is never outside a "web of interlocation." Rather, they have entered in to a different linguistic, and thus moral, community.

Obviously, this depiction of the human agent stands in direct contrast to the modern conception of the "disengaged" subject who possesses the ability to think independently, rationally, and come to conclusions regarding what is worthy without outside interference. Rather, the human subject is embodied, is bound up in frameworks of meanings that, by way of our interpretive capacities that depend on the norms of our language community, guide our thoughts and actions and therefore constitute in some important sense who and what we are. Therefore, it is utterly impossible to understand the richness of the human subject when treating the self as disengaged, as an independent object appropriate to study like any other object within the natural world. But to acknowledge that humans are self-interpreting animals partly constituted by their particular language community is to reject the premise that all social and political life can be explained by utilizing those "objective" research methods which attempt to replicate the study of the natural, non-human world. Not only do such approaches attempt to compress the meaning that exists behind human action into easily quantifiable "preferences," they further encourage researchers to think of themselves as value-free judges capable to rendering an objective explanation of the actions of others. Indeed, to assert that humans are self-interpreting animals whose understandings and actions are bound up in a particular communal background is to say something about the subject of study as well as the researcher who is also a product of a particular background. Thus, by accepting the picture of human agency provided by Taylor one is committed to a distinct

mode of social inquiry, hermeneutics or “interpretivism,” that overtly grapples with both the meanings behind the actions of the subject being studied as well as the inescapable frameworks of the researcher that necessarily colour his or her interpretation of these meanings.

As a method of inquiry, interpretivism begins from the premise that humans are self-interpreting animals, embodied beings whose actions are dependent upon our interpretations of meaning, our perception of our moral frameworks. The task of interpretive social inquiry is to understand and make clear these meanings and thus provide an accurate explanation as to what the subject is doing by grasping why he or she is doing it. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, humans do what they do on purpose and understanding their actions demands:

[t]he retrieval of purpose, of intention, of the unique configuration of thoughts and feelings which preceded a social phenomena and found its only manifestation, imperfect and incomplete, in the observable consequences of action. To understand a human act, therefore, was to grasp the meaning with which the actor’s intention invested in it...⁶⁰

Taylor similarly states:

We make sense of action when there is a coherence between the actions of the agent and the meaning of his situation for him. We find his action puzzling until we find such a coherence. This coherence in no way implies that the action is rational: the meaning of the situation for an agent may be full of confusion and contradiction; but the adequate depiction of this contradiction makes sense of it.⁶¹

Because the “meaning” behind the actions of individuals is bound up in frameworks that are partly constituted by the community from which they come, the interpretive researcher is to pay particular attention to the communal or “intersubjective” meanings of

⁶⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science: Approaches to Understanding*, (Hampshire: Gregg Revivals, 1992), 12.

⁶¹ Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 24.

linguistically expressed concepts in order to “make sense” of the verbal or written description of the reasons or “meaning” behind the particular action of a particular subject. Our efforts to understand the actions of some individual within a particular culture, “cannot escape an ultimate appeal to a common understanding of the expressions, of the ‘language’ involved.”⁶²

But to acknowledge the importance of communally shared understandings is to admit that a proper accounting of a particular action requires a more culturally-bound answer than many modern researchers are prepared to allow. The interpretive inquirer accepts that those in the same situation can hold quite distinct reasons for doing the same action given their unique backgrounds, a notion that problematizes the explanatory power of large-n survey research that attempts to demonstrate correlations between certain personal attributes and particular behaviour. Correlation of this sort can certainly point to valuable connections with respect to understanding particular outcomes but it is not capable of uncovering the particular causes of individual actions and thus is likely to promote general causal theories that do not correspond to what is actually occurring for human beings in their day-to-day life. Because interpretivism seeks to unearth context-specific cause bound up in the common meanings present in any particular culture, its *practitioners* are highly suspicious of the quest for generalizable causal laws. As Clifford Geertz has noted, the interpretive researcher does not seek to correlate behavior but rather works like a detective trying to get “a meaning frame to provide an understanding of what is going on. You want to understand what it is that is motivating people...to do

⁶² Taylor, “Interpretations and the Sciences of Man,” 17.

these unaccountable things. “ And, he adds, “if you get interpretation right, I believe the causes will fall out.”⁶³

Of course, the interpretive “detective” is also a self-interpreting animal and any explanation offered by the researcher with respect to the actions of another is itself inescapably shaped to a certain degree by his or her own grasp of particular concepts or prejudgments or expectations with respect to the subject in question. The notion of complete objectivity on the part of the researcher in an attempt to simply replicate the subject’s point of view is not truly possible. Rather, as Andrew Davison gently explains, “The interpretive hope is that what I say will be something that we both agree is true about your life when it is expressed and explained by me.” Of course, this search for an agreement of some kind between researcher and subject with respect to the moral frameworks at work in the life of the subject is so bound up in the imperfect act of human interpretation, one’s explanations can never approach the levels of precision demanded by the natural sciences. They can, however, be better or worse, and you know you are *beginning* to get it right when “you get intelligible responses from your informants,” when you say things about the action in question that your subjects regard as reasonable.⁶⁴

Yet, this is not to say that the researcher is only seeking to grasp the subject’s self-understanding or hoping to provide an account of the subject’s actions solely in his or her own terms. Indeed, Taylor has written at length about the need to gain a certain amount of critical distance by going beyond the subject’s self-description and attempting to offer an account that makes the reasons behind the action in question even clearer than

⁶³ Clifford Geertz, “Interview with Clifford Geertz,” in *Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Fall 2003), 27.

⁶⁴ Geertz, “Interview with Clifford Geertz,” 26.

they originally were to the subject. This obviously corresponds to the goals of the vast majority of social science but what sets interpretive social science apart is the acknowledgement that, because we are self-interpreting animals whose behaviour is motivated by complex moral frameworks, the inquiry into particular outcomes must begin with a focus on the subject's own self-description of their perception of their moral framework. Thus, we make sense of a subject's action "if we grasp *both* how they see things *and* what is wrong, lacunary, contradictory in this."⁶⁵ Taylor has labeled this effort as the search for a "language of perspicuous contrast" which could "formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both" and allow for the articulation and comparison of conceptual meanings from both original languages.⁶⁶ This is strongly related to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," a conversation between interlocutors wherein the conceptual horizons of each participant are broadened relative to each other and an agreement is reached on a new common language of description that is neither "ours" or "theirs." It is in this language that a critique of the incoherence, for example, of the views and actions of the subject can be rendered that is not subject to the charge of ethnocentrism on the part of the researcher.⁶⁷ It is my hope that this study into the influence of religion on the political thought of the leaders in question will live up to this interpretive hope by providing insight into the relationship between their religious perspective and their political thought that goes beyond even their own self-understanding.

⁶⁵ Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," in *Philosophy and the Human Science: Philosophical Papers 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 117-118.

⁶⁶ Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," 125.

⁶⁷ Andrew Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 65.

However, the conversation aimed at such agreement will only succeed if the researcher has studied the historical, social and linguistic context from which the subject comes for this background necessarily conditions the framework of meaning he or she operates within, whether or not the subject is even fully aware of this. Thus, interpretivism requires an explicit awareness on the part of the researcher of the implicit negotiation that occurs in his or her own mind between their own personal background, the meanings certain concepts and actions have for them, the background of the research subject *and* the meanings certain concepts and actions have for the subject that he or she attempts to verbally explain to us in conversation (or in writing as the case may be). As Geertz has argued, interpretivism requires “a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local details and the most global of global structures in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view.”⁶⁸ It is only by way of this effort to incorporate the local and the broader context, in addition to our conceptual understandings and theirs, can one legitimately approach a level of understanding required to explain the actions of the other. This approach is often referred to as the “hermeneutic circle,” a continual shift in focus from the part and the whole and back in an effort to build toward fuller understanding.

Interpretivism and the Study of Religion and Political Thought in Alberta

Obviously, the above discussion has proceeded in a rather abstract and general manner. It is one thing to pontificate on the embodied nature of the self and the moral frameworks and linguistic communities that stand behind human action. It is quite another to actually design a research study and follow through in a practical way the

⁶⁸ Clifford Geertz, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” in Michael T. Gibbons ed., *Interpreting Politics*, (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 145.

attempt to capture and make clear these moral frameworks that help us to understand why a certain research subject acts in a particular way. Indeed, a common complaint about interpretive scholars is that they are better at offering philosophical arguments that question the validity of much contemporary social science methodology as opposed to offering much in the way of an alternative method of inquiry.⁶⁹ It is true that those scholars who have been most active in pushing the “interpretive” agenda within the social sciences tend to operate in the more philosophical, rather than empirical, fields of social inquiry and thus are rarely forced to articulate in a more concrete manner what interpretive methodology looks like. However, it is also true that the incessant demand for a clear and rigorous “step-by-step” research design does not necessarily fit well with the philosophical underpinnings of interpretivism. In fact, Gadamer has argued that it is a serious mistake to assume social inquiry can be wholly governed by method, suggesting that good sense, judgment and insight, rather than the systematic gathering of brute data and formal reasoning, are often the keys to social understanding.⁷⁰

Interpretivism then may be more properly described as an approach to, rather than a specific method of, social inquiry. Yet that does not imply there are no guidelines that are to be adhered to. Because the interpretive scholar seeks to understand some aspect of the subject’s framework of meaning, the actual research project is built around a “conversation” with that subject. Although the notion of a “conversation” sounds rather informal given the weight it is given in this form of inquiry, interpretivism pushes the scholar to be aware of the various problems associated with any attempt to understand the frameworks or meaning of another “dialogical” human being, whether they are historical

⁶⁹ John Gerring, “Interpretations of Interpretivism,” *Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Fall 2003), 3.

⁷⁰ This point is made in: Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey*, 52.

or contemporary. This begins with the acknowledgement that the researcher is already operating within a certain framework of meaning and comes to the research project, and the research subject in question, with a whole host of biases, prejudgments and conceptual understandings that will shape the manner by which we hear what the research subject tells us within this conversation, whether it be a verbal, in-person interview or the study of a historical document. One cannot hope to fully escape this framework but can engage in the practice of explicit reflectivity throughout the research project. This involves continually examining the ways in which one's own frameworks of meaning, their biases, expectations and conceptual understandings shape the way in which data is both gathered and analyzed.⁷¹ Although this is a task that does not necessarily appear in the final written research report, such awareness at various stages of the collection and analysis of the data is vital to the interpretive approach.

A second pillar of this approach is to acknowledge the importance of the broader language community of which the research subject is a part and the ways in which the intersubjective meanings drawn from this community inform the subject's framework of meaning we are seeking to articulate. This commits the researcher to a careful study of the historical, linguistic, cultural and political context within which the subject of study operates. It is only by way of identifying the intersubjective conceptual meanings of the cultural or linguistic or historical community from which the subject comes that one can hope to authentically understand the meaning that is expressed by the subject in our

⁷¹ Dvora Yanow, "Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences," in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea ed., *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods in the Interpretive Turn*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 17. See also: Samer Shehata, "Ethnography, Identity, and the Production of Knowledge," in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea ed., *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods in the Interpretive Turn*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 244-263.

interaction with them. That is not to say that the context wholly determines the meanings for the subject, but it does provide a backdrop against which we can begin to see how the subject is operating in agreement to, or opposition against, the prevailing norms of the society. As with the practice of explicit reflexivity, all aspects of the study into the subject's context will not necessarily appear in the final written report but it remains a vital step in the interpretive process. The specific method appropriate for studying the context of the subject is obviously depended upon the both the nature of the research question and the subject themselves.

Taken together, the emphasis on practicing an explicit reflexivity and the searching for communal intersubjective meanings by way of the subject's context ensures that the layout of an interpretive research study looks quite different than that of a study which follows the logic of the natural sciences. The interpretivism approach does not begin with independent or dependent variables nor does it propose a hypothesis that it hopes to test. This is because, as Dvora Yanow has noted, the researcher does not know what "meanings" will emerge in their interaction with the subject. Instead, they begin with a general "hunch" as to how this meaning will be communicated, and it is this suspicion that directs the researcher in one way or another with respect to their potential interactions with the subject in their search for understanding. It is by way of this interaction with the subject, as opposed to the correlation of variables, that understanding emerges.⁷² This difference in layout does not imply, however, that interpretivism avoids the issue of rigor. It is, however, rigor by a different standard. It does not borrow standards such as validity, reliability or generalizability from the natural science model.

⁷² Dvora Yanow, "Neither Rigorous Nor Objective?" in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea ed., *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods in the Interpretive Turn*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 71.

Instead, it relies on logical argumentation, backed up by detailed, thick descriptions, and presented in a clear and convincing way. It offers, in other words, a new “interpretation” of why a certain subject acted in a particular way and it utilizes thick description to demonstrate why this interpretation “makes sense.” This new explanation is the result of appropriate data gathering techniques, which attend to both the researcher and the subject’s frameworks of meaning, and a prolonged engagement with the data. Yanow writes:

The most exacting descriptions of forms of interpretive analysis describe a kind of indwelling with one’s data...the process entails reading and rereading and rereading again – musing, in an abductive way – until, in the light of prior knowledge of the theoretical literature or the empirical data, or both, something makes sense in a new way. The experience feels like parts of a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle suddenly fitting together...⁷³

Given the goal of this particular project, attempting to understand the manner by which the religious beliefs of certain individuals influence their thinking about politics, an interpretive approach is particularly apt. The purpose is not to investigate the social or economic or cultural conditions that may help explain *why* these individuals are religious. Nor is it to explore how religious belief fulfills some psychological *function* in their lives. Rather, this project takes their religious belief at face value, or as its starting point, and understands this belief as a central component of their framework of meaning, and seeks to grasp the manner in which this aspect of their framework influences their thinking and acting in this world. Therefore, the precise “research methods” utilized in this study are drawn from the field of interpretive-based inquiry and are meant to elicit some aspect of the “meaning” of the religious beliefs of these individuals and their relationship to their political thought.

⁷³ Ibid, 72.

This required, first, a serious attempt at articulating my own background to ensure that the “baggage” I carry forward would interfere as little as possible in my interpretation of the religious aspects of the frameworks of meaning of the subjects studied. More specifically, this required a critical assessment of my own “situated” nature in a particular time and place, coming from a particular culture and religious background, and possessing certain beliefs about politics, morality, and the existence of God. This involved a constant reassessment of the meanings that certain concepts held for myself and a constant awareness of such meanings so as not to allow them to interfere with my efforts to grasp the meanings such concepts held for the research subjects in question. On one hand, the broad similarities between my own background and that of my research subjects (generally, white males from Alberta who were groomed in a Protestant Christian faith) ensured that coming to a mutual agreement over the meaning of a certain concept with the subject was not difficult. On the other hand, however, this general familiarity can easily seduce the researcher into assuming that such agreement exists when, in reality, it does not. Geertz has written about the absolute necessity of “de-familiarizing” yourself, accepting that you do not immediately understand and thus must somehow “artificially make it strange.”⁷⁴

Once committed to the practice of explicit reflexivity, the task shifts to the collection and analysis of appropriate data. Because this project comprises both a historical and a more contemporary focus, the data upon which my conclusions are based has been generated in two distinct ways. The historical section considers the religious beliefs of Henry Wise Wood, William Aberhart, and Ernest Manning, and the manner by which theses beliefs informed their political thought and, subsequently, their political

⁷⁴ Geertz, “Interview with Clifford Geertz,” 26.

actions. The primary research conducted for this section involved a careful examination of a significant collection of historical documents housed at the Glenbow-Alberta Museum archives, The Provincial Archives of Alberta, The University of Alberta Library, the University of Alberta Archives, and the University of Calgary archives. The goal was to find archived writings, speeches, letters and interviews that recorded each of these individuals' thoughts on their religious belief and their broader political implications.

The concrete “interpretive” approach utilized in the study of these archived documents was based upon that offered by Quentin Skinner who wrote much on the problems associated with the interpretation of historical texts. Skinner’s intention was to formulate an approach capable of identifying the *illocutionary meaning* of the textual passage in question, the intended force or purpose the subject or author had when making the particular utterance under investigation. Because the contemporary researcher is necessarily situated in a particular historical, cultural, and linguistic context that is different from that of the subject in question, specific techniques must be followed to ensure an accurate interpretation of the intended meaning of a written or recorded utterance by a historical “other.” The essential question in studying any given historical passage, Skinner notes, “is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance.” It follows, he continues, “that the essential aim, in any attempt to understand the utterances themselves, must be to recover this complex intention on the part of the author.”⁷⁵ To grasp this intention, the modern scholar must do

⁷⁵ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in James Tully ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 63.

as much as possible to bracket his or her own expectations and conceptual understandings throughout the process of interpretation. Thus, great care must be taken to properly explicate the intellectual and social context in which the author finds himself in order to ensure one's interpretation of what the subject intended to mean with their words is, in fact, something they *could have* meant given the historical and cultural period the author was situated in.

For Skinner, the key to ensuring that the modern scholar is not imposing his or her own modern biases on the process of textual interpretation is to make certain that, “however bizarre the beliefs we are studying may seem to be, we must try to make the agents who accepted them appear to be as rational as possible.”⁷⁶ In other words, Skinner continues:

We must seek to surround the particular statement of belief in which we are interested with an intellectual context that serves to lend adequate support to it.

The primary task is therefore that of trying to recover a particular context of presuppositions and other beliefs, a context that serves to exhibit the utterance in which we are interested as one that it was rational for that particular agent, in those particular circumstances, to have held to be true.⁷⁷

Andrew Davison, who has convincingly argued that Skinner's approach represents an excellent concrete example of Taylor's demand that interpretive scholars seek to articulate a “language of perspicuous contrast” when studying “the other,” has summarized three particular aspects of the “context” Skinner identifies as being crucial to grasping the potential intention of the author in question as follows:

⁷⁶ Quentin Skinner, “A Reply to my Critics,” in James Tully ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 246.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 247.

1. Intersubjective Context: The prevailing linguistic, ideological or intellectual assumptions, conventions or vocabulary that help to make the “best sense” of the speech act of the subject.
2. Social Context: The social and political context that the subject finds him or herself in.
3. Personal Biography: The subject’s personal history that reveals the potential framework of meaning they operate within and its relation to the intersubjective context.⁷⁸

It is by way of careful attention to each of these three aspects of the context that the author operates within that the scholar builds a “framework for helping to decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of *that* kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate.”⁷⁹ In this way, the context is treated as vitally important but not wholly determinant. The author in question retains an agency that must be respected but any hope to grasp the author’s intentions requires rigorous contextual study.

The work of Skinner on the interpretation of historical texts is particularly appropriate for this research project. Not only does an understanding of the political thought of Wood, Aberhart and Manning require the interpretation of historical documents, the focus on religious belief presents a unique challenge given the contemporary disdain for such belief, especially that related to the Christian fundamentalism of Aberhart and Manning, within the academy. As will become clear in later chapters, it is my contention that much of the contemporary misunderstanding with respect to the relationship between the religious belief and political thought of Aberhart is due to the tinge of anti-fundamentalism sentiment at work (consciously or otherwise) in

⁷⁸ Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey*, 73-74.

⁷⁹ Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” 64.

the minds of scholars who have studied Social Credit. Rather than offering an implicit judgment on the “correctness” of the religious belief of these historical figures, this project attempts to approach this belief with a seriousness that is not often granted by academics and, in the words of Skinner, “surround the particular statement of belief in which we are interested with an intellectual context that serves to lend adequate support to it.” Although many scholars have rightly alluded to the political or economic context surrounding the UFA and Social Credit governments in addition to the personal biographies of the political leaders in question in their attempts to make sense of their political thought, there has been a significant gap in our grasp of the broader intellectual and religious context within which such leaders found themselves. Thus, in an effort to provide an appropriate intellectual framework by which one can judge the nature of the religious belief of these leaders and make sense of their recorded pronouncements on such, this project includes an important prefatory chapter (chapter three) which chronicles the relevant intellectual development of various religious strands within American evangelical Protestantism. It is in understanding the conceptual meanings (or intersubjective meanings) present in this historical movement that, I argue, one is best positioned to interpret the utterances of the Alberta political leaders in question given their attachment (discussed later) to this movement.

The contemporary dimension of this project, which explores the influence of religion on the political thought of Preston Manning, relies much more heavily on one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews of both Manning and his contemporaries. Although the goal remains the same, attempting to articulate the meaning of terms or events or situations relevant to the individual politician’s religious belief and political

thought, the approach obviously differs from that of archival-based research. Rather than scanning through a significant pile of historical documents in order to find some relevant commentary on religious belief, the in-person interview allows for the direct questioning of the subject on the topic of interest. Yet, this may also present a greater temptation to simply accept the subject's initial response without ensuring you understand it fully. Just as one must take great care to ensure they are approaching the "meaning" of concepts and descriptions of those from a different historical period with the proper contextual awareness, the interpretive interviewer must seek to avoid overlooking the potential for substituting their own expectations and conceptual understandings upon the responses of the interview subject. Of course, grasping the self-understanding of the subject is not the end point of interpretive social science, but any eventual critique of the subject's actions can only proceed after the subject's self-descriptions are properly understood. In this spirit, Joe Soss has identified three central objectives around which the interpretive interviewer must structure his or her interview approach. First, the researcher must prioritize his or her skepticism about shared meaning. In other words, one should "place greater empirical pressure on [one's] assumptions that particular words, actions, objects, people, and events had self-evident or widely shared meanings." Second, the researcher must place the subject's understanding at the forefront of one's empirical investigation, and seek to clarify such understandings on terms and in a language that is plausible to the subject. Third, the researcher should attempt to ascertain the sources of these understandings as well as their consequences.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Joe Soss, "Talking our way to Meaningful Explanations: A Practice-Centred View of Interviewing for Interpretive Research," in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea ed., *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods in the Interpretive Turn*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 131-132.

Therefore, the interviews conducted for this study were flexible, slightly directed conversations wherein the subject was permitted space to explore and further reflect upon their ideas and responses. In addition, the interviewer also sought clarification about certain terms and descriptions by way of rephrasing the subject's response using a slightly different vocabulary in order to ensure the meanings were clear to both interviewer and subject. The specific nature of the questions posed during the interview was also informed by a careful study of the intellectual and cultural context of the subject and his or her religious background in question. Finally, an explicit reflexivity on the part of the researcher was continually adhered to during the interview as well as throughout the data-analysis stage. As a Christian who adheres to a more progressive and flexible interpretation of Christ's message than many of the key participants of this study, it was a challenge at times to ensure my personal response to certain religious-based social views offered by participants within the interview did not impede my ability to grasp the meaning that their religious interpretation had for them. The goal is always to overcome the potential for ascribing meaning to the thought or action of a subject from outside. One is to use the interview conversation as an opportunity to seek out a mutually agreeable understanding of the meaning (in this case religious meaning) behind a thought or action in question. Within the extended analysis that appears in the concluding section of each of the chapters that follow, I do go beyond this mutually agreeable understanding of the relationship between the subject's religious belief and their political thought and offer a fuller account of the consequences of this thinking on Alberta's broader political development, but this type of reasoning can only occur once I have demonstrated a strong grasp of their own frameworks of meaning in addition to my own.

Chapter Three:

Democracy and Millennialism in American Evangelical Protestantism: The Context of Religious Interpretation in Alberta

Seymour Martin Lipset, in his influential comparison of the institutions and values of America and Canada, begins with a simple yet compelling thesis:

Americans do not know but Canadians cannot forget that two nations, not one, came out of the American Revolution. The United States is the country of the revolution, Canada of the counterrevolution. These very different formative events set indelible marks on the two nations.¹

It is this revolution-counterrevolution dichotomy that, he argues, essentially explains the fundamental differences between the neighbouring countries. One of the most significant of these differences with respect to the development of social and political values has been that relating to the influence of religion. Following independence, American religion embarked on a more sectarian path, embracing a congregational and voluntary style that encouraged a participatory and egalitarian populist spirit prone to protest when encountering traditional class hierarchy. Canadians, on the other hand, remained loyal to the motherland and thus maintained stronger links with the European-based Catholic or Anglican churches and their hierarchical structures that encouraged, according to Lipset, an attitude of deference to traditional sources of authority among adherents. The Protestant Canadians who did break away from the Anglican Church tended to gravitate towards the homegrown United Church whose ecumenical and communitarian leanings clearly distinguished it from the dominant “individualistic” spirit of American Protestantism.

¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

Although the revolution-counterrevolution thesis, and the impact this difference had on the nature of religious practice in Canada and America, remains a rather helpful starting point for general comparison, there is little doubt that any attempt to generalize on a scale this grand is bound to overlook examples of diversity that do not quite fit with this simple interpretation. This is especially true with respect to Canada, whose “loyalist” tradition is much stronger in Eastern and central Canada (with the obvious exception of Quebec) than in the Prairie Provinces, most especially Alberta. Thus, I want to suggest that Lipset’s interpretation of Canadian religious development as essentially “counterrevolutionary” and therefore more oriented towards hierarchy and stability is much more applicable to the Protestant sections of Ontario and Atlantic Canada, and perhaps to a certain extent Manitoba and Saskatchewan, than it is to Alberta. In fact, I want to make the broad argument over the next three chapters that the particular religious perspectives that most influenced political thought in Alberta within both the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) and Social Credit movements respectively have much more in common with the American tradition of religious development than the Canadian one that I associate more accurately with the Protestantism of Eastern and Central Canada.

That is not to say that the UFA and Social Credit leaders interpreted Christianity in precisely the same way for they did not and their political ideology differed accordingly, a claim that will be substantiated in far more detail in the following two chapters. However, there are two broad yet fundamental aspects of the American Protestant tradition that became significant cornerstones underlying the religious perspectives that most influenced the UFA and Social Credit. In particular, I argue that a radically democratic evangelical ethos and a strong tendency toward Christian

Millennialism, two central dimensions of “American” more so than “Canadian” Protestantism, lie at the foundation of the religious perspectives that guided political thought in both the UFA and the Social Credit movements. Therefore, from the beginning, the interplay of religion and political ideology in the Province of Alberta has much more in common with the similar interaction that occurs in America rather than that of central or Eastern Canada. The remainder of this chapter will expand on the dichotomy identified by Lipset with a particular emphasis on the democratic and millennial elements within American Protestantism before concluding with some general thoughts on the migratory and ideological connections between America and Alberta. It is against this brief depiction of the evolution of American evangelical Protestantism that the more specific religious perspectives found in the UFA and Social Credit will make the most sense.

A Note on the American Protestant Tradition

To suggest that one can capture the whole of the long history of the American Protestant religious tradition in the matter of a few pages is, of course, ridiculous. My hope is rather to highlight some of the key intellectual and theological developments within this history that both capture something of the essence of this tradition and also help to frame the eventual religious and political pronouncements of influential leaders in Alberta who were well versed in certain aspects of this tradition. Although Lipset begins his analysis from the American Revolution, it is important to understand that many of the seeds of the “populist” religious tradition he identifies as quintessentially American were actually sown well before the Revolution took place. Thus, I want to replace the

“revolutionary” label and instead refer to this religious tradition as that of American evangelicalism. However, such a label requires a certain qualification.

The term “evangelicalism” is one that can often mean different things to different people, so much so that some have wondered aloud about the contemporary usefulness of employing the term at all.² Much recent scholarship, and nearly all contemporary journalism, tends to equate evangelicalism with conservative Protestant sects that operate outside of traditionally mainstream Christian avenues and espouse a strict literal interpretation of the Bible, often centered around prophetic themes involving the “second coming” or the Rapture. The popularity of this definition of evangelicalism has grown in step with the reemergence of the “religious right” in the public sphere of America and, most especially, the demands from certain sectors of this movement that America’s domestic and foreign policy be structured around the goal of hastening this “second coming.”³ In fact, this group of Christians have literally appropriated the term “evangelical” as their own, referring to themselves as “evangelical Christians” as a way to distinguish themselves from more “liberal Christians.” However, within this chapter I want to retrieve a much broader definition of evangelicalism of which this conservative Christianity is only a part.

Following Canadian religious historian John G. Stackhouse, I use the term evangelicalism to identify a broad historical stream of Christianity that begins with the Protestant Reformation and carries on through the creation of the Methodist Church in England and the popular evangelical revivals of the American “Great Awakenings” and,

² See, for example, Donald W. Dayton, “Some Doubts About the Usefulness of the Category ‘Evangelical’,” in D. Dayton and R. Johnston ed., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 245-251.

³ For an excellent recent commentary on the role of this strain of Christian religion within the contemporary American public sphere see: Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy*, (New York: Viking, 2006).

at all points, places special emphasis on the individual believer's personal relationship with God.⁴ Importantly, no one Protestant denomination can claim ownership of this stream for evangelicalism has infiltrated a number of churches, both mainstream and unorthodox, and has influenced, and been influenced by, the specific theological commitments and cultural traditions of various churches for a very long time. In fact, the particular patterns of thought and practice of evangelicals often differ substantially from one denomination to another for this stream of Christian practice has shown itself to be quite flexible in terms of intermingling with distinct traditions.⁵ However, it is still possible to identify certain foundational characteristics that bind these various denominational groups together under the banner of "evangelical" and distinguish them from other currents within Christianity.

Stackhouse, who follows David Bebbington's influential work, suggests these basic characteristics are fourfold. First, evangelicals affirm the good news of God's salvation in Jesus. Second, they believe this good news is expressed most authoritatively in scripture. Third, evangelicals believe personal salvation requires an individual transformation or conversion and fourth, they are active in proclaiming this good news.⁶ Mark A. Noll has condensed this core down further by suggesting the central characteristics of evangelicalism include both an acknowledgement of the bible as a fundamental bedrock of authority as well as the conviction that true religion requires the

⁴ John G Stackhouse Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 7.

⁵ Two valuable collections which demonstrate this variation in both Canada and America respectively are: G. A. Rawlyk ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) and D. Dayton and R. Johnston ed., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

⁶ John G. Stackhouse Jr., "Who Whom? Evangelicalism and Canadian Society," in G. A. Rawlyk ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 56. See also: David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

active personal experience of God.⁷ It is the broad, trans-denominational grouping of Protestant Christians that practice their faith within this “biblical experientialist” tradition that I deem evangelical. Such practice often takes place in a “low church” congregational structure which parallels the evangelical emphasis on egalitarianism and anti-elitism for it was clearly understood that all members stand as equals under God and must approach and experience His saving power directly as individuals. The active pursuit of this personal experience was often encouraged within a mass revival led by a pastor who delivered unsophisticated sermons in a manner that excited the emotions rather than the intellects of participants. No doubt such a loose definition of evangelicalism ensures significant theological and organizational deviation between evangelical practitioners within divergent denominations but this shared emphasis on the need for a personal experience of God is, overall, that which holds “evangelicals” together as a useful historical category. Any use of the term “evangelical” in this project, unless otherwise noted, refers to this broad definition as opposed to the more contemporary “conservative Protestant” definition often employed by present-day journalists and scholars.

The Democratic Theology of American Evangelical Protestantism

Implicit within Lipset’s comparison of mainstream religious practice in Canada and the United States is the influence social conditions have on religious development. For Lipset, it is the act of political revolution, not a theological breakthrough on the part of a secluded monk, which sets American religion on its distinct path. Although I will argue shortly that the seeds of American Protestantism were sown well before the

⁷ Mark A. Noll, “Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical Social Influence in North Atlantic Societies,” in M. Noll, D. Bebbington and G. Rawlyk ed., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 129.

Revolution, it is worth remembering that Christianity has never been a “pure” set of doctrines operating in a vacuum untouched by historical happenings. Theological breakthroughs such as those by Paul or Augustine or Luther have influenced the course of world events but the progression of history and broad social changes that accompany it have similarly impacted the direction of Christian theology. Indeed, the story of American religious development that this chapter will briefly tell is one of a constant interplay between traditional religious ideas and broader social developments. The initial social conditions that have most impacted the direction of American Christianity are not simply those related to the late eighteenth century Revolution but rather those that stretch back to the conditions of colonial settlement. America was perceived to be a New World, a blank slate, *tabula rasa*, a stretch of land open to those eager to experience the power or wealth available on a new continent but also to those who took issue with the conditions of life in the Old World. The Old World religion surely accompanied the settlers but so too did a spirit of freedom from Old World conventions and constraints. The vast spaces free of traditional denominational control offered the opportunity to those with such a spirit to propose and develop new interpretations of the Christian religion.⁸

This desire for a “new start” was encapsulated most clearly by the Puritans, a group of religious dissenters who arrived from England in the 1630’s eager to build an authentic Christian nation free of the corruption they sensed in the Church of England. It was the influence of this group that planted the first seeds of a religion that would grow to be a distinctly American version of what historian George Marsden labels a “dissenter

⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of this point see: Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 12-14.

Protestantism.”⁹ Dissent in this context refers to the initial challenge posed to the Church of Rome by Martin Luther whose ruminations set off the Protestant Reformation. The events generated by the Reformation surely touched all Christian denominations but a proper understanding of American religious development requires an acknowledgment of the importance with which early American Christians believed they were “completing the Protestant Reformation” on American soil, something the Europeans, stuck in their hierarchical class structures and traditions, had left unfinished.¹⁰ Central to his act of “completion” was a rededication by the Puritans to two key Protestant tenets: the sole authority of the Bible as a guide to proper Christian living and the principle of justification by faith rather than works, the idea that God’s righteousness, and thus salvation, is not earned by humans but given freely by God. The two foundational theologians of the Reformation, Luther and John Calvin agreed on these basic ideas but only Calvin envisioned justification (becoming righteous before God) as predestined and a permanent feature of being connected to Christ following a spiritual re-birth. Importantly, the dissenting Puritans were Calvinist and thus popularized a strong emphasis on the authority of the Bible and a personal relationship with God built upon a “once-in-a-lifetime” personal conversion or re-birth. It is upon these two tenets that American evangelicalism would thereafter grow.

Although the origins of American “dissenter” Protestantism stretch back to the Puritans, it was the revivalism associated with the First Great Awakening in the first half of the 18th century that was the central stimulant in the shift from an English-based

⁹ George M Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jonavich, 1990), 45.

¹⁰ Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 17.

Puritanism to an indigenous American evangelicalism.¹¹ An important consequence of Calvin's doctrine of predestination was the presence of anxiety among followers who were eager to assure themselves they had been "predestined" to receive God's salvation. According to Calvin, only those called by God to experience a spiritual re-birth or personal conversion would be saved. Believers thus went through life anxiously awaiting their own personal conversion. The introduction of the evangelical mass-revival meeting in the first half of the eighteenth century encouraged a permanent shift in style of religious worship in America because they helped to ease this angst. Revivals were often led by talented orators, gifted in both biblical knowledge and the ability to speak in an unsophisticated yet emotional manner to common people, and were generally understood to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit. By promising to assist with the "conversion experience," and thus the salvation anxious believers were seeking, revivals exploded in popularity. The result was a sudden upsurge in religious activity that built upon the Puritan/Calvin premise which emphasized the ultimate authority of the Bible and the need for personal conversion but moved in a new direction by encouraging a more active and emotional Protestantism as local and national preachers took to the open-air pulpits and delivered the Word of God in plain language to the plain people of colonial America. Implicit within this popular religious movement was a rejection of the Puritan desire for an established national church complete with formally trained ministers and a new emphasis on the layman's ability to interpret scripture and experience a personal conversion in an emotional revival setting rather than in the formal church. This line of

¹¹ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 100-105.

thought opened the door for a variety of non-Puritan denominations to grow and the religious pluralism that blossomed has been a feature of American life ever since.

It was the Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Baptist denominations, the latter being the most numerous and thus influential in 18th century America, which gained the most adherents from this sudden upsurge in religious activity.¹² Each of these denominations embraced the tradition of religious dissent introduced to America by the Puritans but it was the Baptists who further popularized the Calvinist doctrine of personal conversion. However, they did so in a manner that explicitly emphasized the spiritual equality of all individuals who committed themselves to a Christian life. Such a notion implied that a church was not meant to be a hierarchical organization but rather a gathering of individuals who stood equally before God. It is difficult to overstate the significance of such a class-leveling notion for a society that was still quite familiar with the hierarchical structures of both traditional religious organizations and the general societal order of the Old World. In fact, Marsden suggests that the popularization of such ideas related to individual equality and capacity and the right to challenge established forms of power within popular religious circles intensified the sentiment of dissent in America to such a degree that the Great Awakening can be understood as a significant factor in the eventual Revolution which took place in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹³

If the development of an American-based Protestant theology before the Revolution assisted in laying the necessary groundwork for the broader acceptance of

¹² Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 20, 29.

¹³ Ibid, 29-30. See also Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967).

basic democratic principles such as individualism, egalitarianism, and the right to challenge authority, it was the explosion of ground-level religious activity in the period immediately following the Revolution that not only fortified the righteousness of democracy in the minds of practitioners but further permanently legitimated a populist dimension in religious practice. This was essentially the completion of the shift towards evangelical Christianity initiated by the revivalism of the First Great Awakening. In the course of documenting religiosity in post-Revolution America, Nathan Hatch has argued that it was ordinary people, “aided by a powerful new vocabulary, a rhetoric of liberty that would not have occurred to them were it not for the Revolution,” that turned their sights on the church and effectively reshaped the practice of Christianity in America.¹⁴ Building upon this rhetoric of liberty, and the accompanying sense of individual capacity, American “populist” evangelicalism took off, driven by “increasingly assertive common people [who] wanted their leaders unpretentious, their doctrines self-evident and down-to-earth, their music lively and sing-able, and their churches in local hands.”¹⁵ The result was the emergence of a wildly popular evangelical movement in the early nineteenth century (the Second Great Awakening), complete with the formation of many new religious sects led by “folksy” pastors who relied on unsophisticated sermons and urged much congregational participation. As Donald Matthews has argued, by encouraging the multiplication of religious units, or sects, the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening

¹⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 9

facilitated American democracy by encouraging the creation of local religious organizations that provided important avenues for lay participation.¹⁶

Such ground-level action was supported by similar shifts within theological and intellectual circles in America. Although the promise of “conversion experiences” made by revivalists during the First Great Awakening seemed to imply a degree of human agency in the quest for Christian salvation, it was not until Charles Finney, a leading post-Revolution revivalist from 1825-35, began explicitly promoting the notion of conversion as an act of choice by a free individual rather than one initiated by God that American evangelical theology shifted from a purely Calvinist foundation to one fused with the Methodism of John Wesley. This *Arminian* notion that conversion, and thus salvation, was now an act of free individual choice had little trouble gaining support for it coalesced rather neatly with the broader Republican ideals that were prominent in post-Revolution America.¹⁷ Indeed, William McLoughlin has argued that the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening provided American Protestants with the reassurance that God approved of the principles espoused by the Revolution.¹⁸ This fusion of republican and religious ideals even extended toward the approval of commercialism according to Noll who points to a correlation between early American evangelicals and their preference for a free market.¹⁹

¹⁶ Donald G. Matthews, “The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis,” in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1, (Spring 1969), 39.

¹⁷ Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 52-54.

¹⁸ William G. McLoughlin, “Revivalism,” in Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 138.

¹⁹ Mark A. Noll, “Protestant Reasoning about Money and the Economy, 1790-1860: A Preliminary Probe,” in Mark A. Noll ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money and the Market, 1790-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 265-294.

In addition, the religious and political empowerment of the “plain people” in this period was aided by the popularity, in American post-Revolutionary intellectual and theological circles, of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense which emphasized the capabilities of the “common man” to interpret reality by way of his “common sense” and thus think and act in an intellectually and morally sound manner, regardless of social classification and without assistance from a mediator.²⁰ This emphasis on individual capacity was essential for it provided a philosophical foundation for the evangelical Christian to personally experience God and freely choose to accept his Grace by way of conversion thus fulfilling a fundamental requirement for salvation. Of course, the flip side of this coin has been, according to Richard Hofstadter, a tendency toward anti-intellectualism, “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and those who are considered to represent it,” in American life.²¹ Nevertheless, the Baptists, and now the growing contingent of Methodists, stormed the American frontier with this evangelical message of individual capacity and emotional, personal religious worship and American Protestantism has maintained this tendency towards individualistic, emotional and participatory behaviour ever since. There is even a branch of scholarship that has successfully connected this democratic evangelical spirit to the populist political movements that stormed across America in the late nineteenth century.²²

²⁰ For a more in-depth consideration of the relationship between “common sense” philosophy and Evangelicalism see: Mark A. Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer, 1985), 216-238. For a more in-depth demonstration of this relationship “on the ground” see: Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 22-27.

²¹ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 7 and Chapters 3-5.

²² See, for example, Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander, “Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 33, no. 1, (1994), 1-15, and Creech, *Righteous Indignation*.

Certainly a great deal more could be said about the long and varied development of Protestant theology and practice in America but the very brief overview provided should be enough to give the reader a sense of the intensely democratic nature of American evangelical Protestantism. The revolutionary social nature of this American evangelical spirit can best be grasped, according to Michael Gauvreau, by contrasting it with medieval or early modern religious practices “which subsumed the individual in a web of divinely sanctioned hierarchies...buttressed by established churches, which claimed...to mediate between the individual and God.”²³ American evangelicalism radically challenged such hierarchical relationships by interpreting the condition of the individual as one of impressive moral and intellectual capacity. Because a personal and unmediated experience of the divine was necessary for salvation (and made possible by the moral and intellectual capacities of the individual), evangelicals placed extreme importance on the notion of freedom of individual conscience. Unsurprisingly, such an outlook produced a strong democratic ethic among followers who, by way of their quest for personal religious experience, sought political structures that allow for the individual freedom required to live their faith. Of course, the social consequences of an influential faith that empowered the individual at the expense of the elite within religious establishments in this way are such that traditional hierarchies of a non-religious nature were eventually met with the same dissenting spirit from individuals who may no longer abide by the original Protestant faith.

²³ Michael Gauvreau, “The Empire of Evangelicalism: Varieties of Common Sense in Scotland, Canada, and the United States,” in M. Noll, D. Bebbington and G. Rawlyk ed., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 219.

That said, it is not my intention to trace the history of the “secularization” of this spirit of dissent. Rather, I simply want to reiterate that a radically democratic theology that emphasized the freedom and capacity of the common individual to shape society according to the dictates of God, as they, rather than established clergy, understood Him, is a central component of American evangelical Protestantism and its individualistic conception of faith. Of course, the connection between theological interpretation and religious practice in America and its distinct form of democracy has been a topic of study ever since Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the intermingling of religion and liberty in the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁴ However, as McLoughlin has argued, this religious tradition contains an inherent tension between this radically democratic and anti-establishment sentiment and a broader conservatism associated with the belief in a universal moral code established by God that governs the conduct of individuals.²⁵

From the Puritans, through the sects that emerged out of the First and Second Great Awakenings, and into the fundamentalist sects of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, the absolute authority of the Christian Bible has remained paramount. This continuity has ensured a long-running adherence to a particular moral code derived from the Word of God that places Divine restrictions on the conduct of individuals. Beyond specific biblical commandments, American Protestantism emphasized the need for an “orderly life” built upon sobriety, discipline and hard-work upon which a proper family could be raised.²⁶ Given the fallen nature of humanity described in scripture, the societal stability and order necessary for the further spreading of God’s word required the constant

²⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, G. Lawrence trans., J.P. Mayer ed., (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), 286-295.

²⁵ McLoughlin, “Revivalism,” 125-130.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 451-452.

protection and maintenance of institutions that could both educate and police individuals with respect to God's laws. It is in this spirit that one finds religious groups from nearly any period of American history praising the church and family as the central pillars of society due to their function as moral/religious educators, while occasionally demanding the state enact legislation that can assist with such guidance. To recognize this internal tension between these conservative and radical tendencies is to see the significant gulf that exists between the radically individualistic and democratic ethos of American Protestantism and the individualism of secular liberalism or even post-modernism. As Phillip Hammond has argued, American evangelicalism "saturated America with the idea that people should be free to do pretty much as they like, as long as they look out for themselves...and, of course, behave."²⁷ Exuding both radical and conservative tendencies such as those identified by Hammond, this American evangelical tradition helps to explain the parallel tensions that exist in American public life. In fact, these same tensions between radicalism and conservatism will appear again as a major theme in our examination of political thought in Alberta in the following chapters where I will argue that this broad American evangelical perspective was a critically important influence.

The suggestion that there is something quite distinct about the evolution of American evangelical Protestantism becomes all the more apparent when compared to religious development in Canada. Historians now agree that evangelicalism was an important cultural/religious force in late eighteenth and early nineteenth English-speaking Canada as well, counteracting the conservative tendencies present within traditional

²⁷ Phillip E. Hammond, *The Protestant Presence in Twentieth-Century America: Religion and Political Culture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 45.

Anglican circles. In fact, the strong evangelical current in Atlantic Canada in the late eighteenth century may have been even more radical than its counterpart in America.²⁸ Evangelicals in Upper Canada, primarily Methodists associated with the American Methodist movement, were also embracing the very same radical democratic ethos that swept through post-Revolution America. Nancy Christie has convincingly argued that this strand of evangelicalism was one of the central mechanisms responsible for implanting anti-establishment and reformist notions in the minds of the common people of Upper Canada who stood outside the Tory Anglican elite.²⁹ This anti-elitism was shared by Upper Canadian Baptists who, with the Methodists, offered a critique of traditional and hierarchical religious and political institutions by way of their emphasis on spiritual egalitarianism and the necessity for individuals to develop an unmediated connection with God.³⁰ This radicalism came to a sudden halt, however, in the wake of the War of 1812 and the anti-Americanism that followed, after which Upper Canadian evangelicalism became much more British in character and would, over the next century, adopt a Victorian worldview that stressed order and theology over the popular emotionalism of “republican” evangelicalism.³¹ The notion of personal conversion so

²⁸ George Rawlyk, *Canada Fire: Radical Evangelicalism in British North America*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1994).

²⁹ Nancy Christie, “In These Times of Democratic Rage and Delusion: Popular Religion and the Challenge to the Established Order, 1760-1815,” in G. Rawlyk ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760-1990*, (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1990), 22-24.

³⁰ Ibid, 36.

³¹ For further discussion on this shift, and the evolution of this more conservative “British” evangelicalism see: Goldwin French, “The Evangelical Creed in Canada,” in W.L. Morton ed., *The Shield of Achilles*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 15-35, William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 1989), Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1991), Marguerite Van Die, “The Double Vision: Evangelical Piety as Derivative and Indigenous in Victorian English Canada,” in M. Noll, D. Bebbington and G. Rawlyk ed., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 253-274, and G.A. Rawlyk, “Introduction,” in G. A. Rawlyk ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), xiii-xxv.

critical to American evangelicalism was present within this strand of evangelicalism but, as Noll has argued, “that conversion had to be joined to public responsibility in the construction of a civilization.” Noll continues with a succinct summary of the essence of Canadian Protestantism:

Ontario’s Protestants were evangelical but...not quite as democratically or individualistically evangelical as those in the States.

Canada’s dominant Protestant theology...was uniquely Canadian in balancing an American openness to innovation, optimism, and personal liberty with a British commitment to order, stability, and tradition.³²

If the above synthesis of American religious development was remarkably brief, this overview of Canadian Protestantism is no doubt absurdly so. However, it is not my intention to provide a detailed comparison but rather to demonstrate that Lipset was largely correct to suggest that there is a distinct democratic and individualistic essence within the American evangelical tradition that is not as prominent in its (central) Canadian counterpart. However, I want to also suggest that it is wrong to simply assume the “Canadian” tradition is equally applicable to all parts of Protestant Canada. This second point will become much clearer in the following two chapters when we examine the religious perspectives that most influenced political thought in Alberta. For now it is enough to have provided this general comparison as well as a bit more detail with respect to the American tradition, against which the dominant strands of religious interpretation in Alberta will make the most sense.

³² Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 268, 275-276.

Millennialism and American Evangelical Protestantism

The notion that America was God's chosen nation, a new land comprised of unusually devout followers that were destined to escape the corruption of Old World Christianity and develop a proper relationship with God by building *the* authentic Christian state in accordance with His will has been one of the most important elements of America's broad self-understanding. This belief stretches back to the Puritans, was prominent in the revivals of both Great Awakenings, and remains close to the heart of a number of contemporary American Christians. A central consequence of this belief is the parallel notion that America has a special responsibility to ensure the coming of the kingdom of God promised by Christ in the New Testament. In fact, prominent American theologian Richard Niebuhr has argued that American Christianity "is a movement that finds its center in the faith in the kingdom of God...indeed [it has] been the dominant idea in American Christianity."³³ Although the concept of the kingdom of God has been interpreted quite differently at various points in American history it is the interpretation related to Christian Millennialism and the "end of days" that is most applicable to this project.

American religious historian Timothy Weber has defined Christian Millennialism, as "the belief that there will be a long period of unprecedented peace and righteousness closely associated with the second coming of Christ."³⁴ This "long period" is usually interpreted as a reference to a one thousand year period, or *millennium*, which either is, or is the preface to, the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. This is a Christian notion that originates in Chapter twenty of the Book of Revelations wherein an angel is

³³ Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1937), ix, xii.

³⁴ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9.

witnessed depositing and locking Satan into the Abyss for one thousand years while the souls of those who resisted the temptations of Satan during their lifetime return to life to reign with Christ for the same thousand year period. Weber notes that Christians have interpreted this biblical verse in one of three general ways. Amillennialists understand this reference in a symbolic manner and contend that Christ's reign will occur in the hearts of His followers. Postmillennialists believe Christ's second coming will occur on earth *after* the millennium has been established by the work of the church.

Premillennialists contend that Christ will return to earth *before* the thousand-year period begins and will use His powers to establish it.³⁵ It is the latter two of these eschatological views that have been most influential in American Protestantism that, in the nineteenth century, "was drunk on the millennium."³⁶ On the surface, post and premillennialism are distinguished from each other simply by the question of timing: will Christ return before or after the thousand-year period of peace and righteousness? At a deeper level, they presuppose very different conceptions of divine and human agency with respect to the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. It is the implications of each of these different eschatological viewpoints that have had a significant impact on the direction of the political thought espoused by various groups of Christians in America and a similar influence will reappear when we look at religion and political thought in Alberta.

Christian Millennial thought in America stretches back to the Puritans, who advocated a premillennial position, and into the thought of Jonathan Edwards, theologian

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 42.

of the First Great Awakening, who was America's first prominent postmillennialist.³⁷ Since the time of Edwards, through the American Revolution and Second Great Awakening (including the preaching of Finney) and up until the American Civil War, the revivalism that dominated American Protestantism was full of an optimistic spirit that tended towards postmillennial thought and the implicit understanding that the church was doing its part to usher in the kingdom of God. At its foundation, American postmillennialism understood history as being shaped by a cosmic struggle between the forces of God and Satan. The upsurge in outward and emotional religious activity combined with the success of the Revolution convinced Christians that things were in fact getting progressively better and it was their own piety, undertaken by their own free will, in combination with God's Grace, that was moving them toward God's final victory. In fact, early nineteenth century postmillennialists were convinced that the spiritual and cultural progress of America had grown so substantially that the defeat of Satan and the beginning of the Millennium was imminent.³⁸

This optimism, combined with the belief that both individual humans and the collective church possessed significant efficacy with respect to establishing the Millennium, encouraged a whole host of social reform movements.³⁹ In fact, certain elements of this postmillennial stream of Protestant thought underlie the emergence of the American "social gospel" movement that formed largely in the urban centres of the Northeast in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Responding to the social

³⁷ Donald W. Dayton, "Millennial Views and Social Reform in Nineteenth Century America," in M. Darrol Bryant and Donald W. Dayton ed., *The Coming Kingdom: Essays in American Millennialism and Eschatology*, (New York: New Era Books, 1983), 134-135. For a much more comprehensive history of Millennial thought in Britain and America see: Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*.

³⁸ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49.

³⁹ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

problems associated with rapid industrial expansion in American cities, a collection of progressive pastors and academics sought to apply Christ's "Golden Rule" to industrial organization in the hope of constructing a literal "kingdom of God" on earth. Although policy prescriptions meant to hasten the building of this kingdom varied from a call for a more "co-operative" approach to economics to the more radical demand that capitalism be abolished and replaced with socialism, the overall progressive influence of the movement was strongly felt in both the political and religious circles of America.⁴⁰ However, the degree to which America's evangelical Protestant tradition influenced this particular strand of Christian theology is a point of contention.

Richard Goode and Paul Harvey have both argued that a more authentic "evangelical" version of a "social gospel" message is to be found in the agrarian populist movement of the American South and Midwest in the late nineteenth century. This was a "rural social gospel" that was distinct from, and less sophisticated than, the northern, urban, and largely academic social gospel espoused by the likes of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. This rural social gospel drew heavily from the evangelical values of individual autonomy and piety but shared with the northern social gospel a social condemnation, based on the "Golden Rule" of Christ, of the political and economic conditions imposed upon the plain people by an ever-industrializing economy.⁴¹ Joe

⁴⁰ More detailed commentaries on the American Social Gospel movement are available in: Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1949), Paul A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940*, (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1956), and R.C. White, Jr. and C.H. Hopkins ed., *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976).

⁴¹ See: Richard C. Goode, "The Godly Insurrection in Limestone County: Social Gospel, Populism, and Southern Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Summer 1993), 155-169 and Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the*

Creech also distinguishes the evangelical “social Christianity” that motivated the American populist agrarians from the more sophisticated combination of theological liberalism and progressive economic theories that emerged from the oft-cited northern social gospel movement. This “common-folk,” evangelical-based social Christianity combined evangelical conceptions of benevolence and anti-elitism with Jeffersonian rural ideals related to agrarian purity, self-sufficiency, and small-scale commerce to produce “the simple yet powerful idea that economic relationships should be guided by the law of love.”⁴² As will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, although the ideas of Gladden and Rauschenbusch were known by Alberta agrarian leader Henry Wise Wood, his political thinking was influenced more significantly by this rural and evangelical version of social Christianity.

Yet, as important as the American social gospel movement was, it is worth reminding the reader that the dominance of postmillennial thought within the halls of American Protestantism ended much before the height of the social gospel movement. This was largely due to the arrival of the American Civil War as well as the introduction of both the theory of evolution and the rise of scholastic higher criticism, which applied new methods of historical research to the Bible, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the challenges posed to the biblical literalism central to American evangelicalism, let alone Christian belief itself, by Darwin’s theory of evolution and the introduction of higher criticism in America represented the beginning of a monumental shift with respect to the unity of American Protestantism. The theological reaction these challenges stimulated would eventually blossom into the full-blown fundamentalist-

South From the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 47-53.

⁴² Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, 30.

modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Decades before that controversy erupted, liberal theologians who felt an outright rejection of Darwin's theory was, in the end, untenable, were eager to adopt a notion of evolution within which God's design was firmly encapsulated. Drawing heavily upon the work of English philosopher Herbert Spencer, a conception of theistic evolution was worked out which accepted the empirical findings of Darwin but insisted such progress was the work of the Christian God who set such events in motion.⁴³ However, the overt supernaturalism of God, the notion that He may again intervene at any point in history to alter its course, began to give way to an evolution-friendly conception of gradual social change driven largely by human action in accordance with the growing presence of a "Christian spirit" on earth. Liberal postmillennialists who adopted this evolutionary framework retained the traditional confidence in the coming of the kingdom of God, as well as a commitment to the basic moral teachings of the bible, but understood this coming kingdom in a much more secular fashion. The perfection of social institutions in America came to represent the "millennium" or kingdom of God for many progressive Christians and the actual physical return of Christ to earth following this period of righteousness seemed to slowly vanish from their theology.⁴⁴ The result was a view that remained quite optimistic, and continued to motivate social reform, but provided only vague promises of progress that would be realized over long periods of time and was, in the end, quite susceptible to transforming into a secular humanist rather than traditional Christian outlook.

Although American postmillennialism tended toward this liberal, evolutionary framework in the late nineteenth century, its decline in popularity was more immediately

⁴³ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 1-15.

⁴⁴ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 49-51.

attributable to the arrival of the Civil War in 1861. In short, conditions seemed to be getting worse rather than better and the optimism of the liberal postmillennialists seemed misplaced.⁴⁵ Around the same time, a premillennial eschatological outlook dubbed “dispensationalism” was gaining followers in certain segments of evangelical America. This was a strand of theology that originated with John Nelson Darby, founder of the British Plymouth Brethren sect, and was eventually popularized in America by C.I. Scofield.⁴⁶ The essence of dispensationalism was a radical re-interpretation of Christian scripture that was based on the notion that history has been divided by God into separate “dispensations,” and certain verses of scripture were only applicable to one particular period of history or dispensation. Within each dispensation, God presents mankind with a different kind of governing relationship and humans in turn must accept and fulfill a specific responsibility to God within each historical period.⁴⁷ While the theology of dispensationalism is far more complex than the summary I have provided, it should be clear that such a reorganization of the applicability of biblical scripture allowed for the Christian to continue adhering to the principle of biblical literalism in the face of contradictions unearthed by biblical scholarship or challenges presented by modern science. Any specific collection of biblical verses that seemed particularly contradictory or unbelievable in the face of newly articulated scientific principles were simply interpreted to apply to a different dispensation than the one currently occupied. A central consequence of this line of thought was the resurrection of the literal notion of the coming of the kingdom of God from the claws of evolutionary theory and liberal

⁴⁵ Dayton, “Millennial Views and Social Reform in Nineteenth Century America,” 133, 139.

⁴⁶ A far more detailed description of both the history and theology of dispensationalism is available in: Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* and Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*.

⁴⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 27-51.

postmillennialism. According to dispensationalism, the coming kingdom is, in fact, the literal reign of Christ but it is to occur in the next and final dispensation, not our own, and any efforts to hasten its arrival in this period through social reform, such as those urged by postmillennialists, were of no use because it was the will of God alone that moved history from one dispensation to the next.

The sudden popularity of dispensationalism in America following the Civil War has generally been attributed to its interpretation of scripture with regard to the “end of days” and the coming millennium. Dispensationalists believed that the social conditions of the present dispensation would, according to the biblical prophets, get far worse rather than better. This outlook dovetailed perfectly with America in the period following the Civil War because social and economic conditions had deteriorated but evangelicals were not yet ready to let go of their tendencies toward millennial thinking and the arrival of a “golden age.”⁴⁸ According to the dispensationalists eschatology, Christ would remove his true followers from earth (the Rapture) once conditions deteriorated to a certain point and the antichrist would be left to rule the world (the Tribulation). Christ would then return with his followers and defeat the antichrist in a final battle that would usher in the millennium, the literal kingdom of God promised by Christ in the New Testament. Therefore, in contrast to the postmillennial view, Christ returns before the millennium and brings about the kingdom of God by His will alone. It is this premillennial strain that now dominates evangelical Protestantism in America.

Despite originating in Britain, dispensationalism has been far more successful within mainstream American Christianity than in Britain or Canada. Marsden has provided a compelling explanation for this by pointing to the consequences of “the

⁴⁸ Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 41.

dynamics of unopposed revivalism,” in America when contrasted to other countries.⁴⁹ More specifically, Marsden suggests that the simple dichotomies or “black and white” thinking popular in the context of the evangelical revival, in combination with American Protestantism’s heightened sense of God’s supernaturalism, lends itself to a strict biblical literalism that underlies the dispensational appeal. Despite the presence of evangelicalism, both the British and Canadian Protestant traditions retained a stronger conservative and intellectual dimension that prevented the outright victory of an emotional and anti-intellectual revivalism and was therefore also less prone to feel the need to defend a strict literal interpretation of the bible. Indeed, it is worth noting that the nineteenth century brand of Ontario-based Protestantism that was associated with the more conservative “Victorian” evangelicalism of Britain in the preceding section, encountered challenges from a number of premillennial sects but managed to withstand their advances by responding with a more postmillennial interpretation wherein the mainstream churches, rather than Christ alone, were understood to be working towards the millennium.⁵⁰ Thus, postmillennial Christianity was present within Ontario but the millennium itself was never a central theme in the same way it was in nineteenth century America. In fact, as we shall see in the following chapter, the postmillennial eschatology that most influenced political thinking in Alberta was a direct import from a liberal American Protestant sect and its American roots gave it a particular “republican” slant that would have been foreign to Ontario postmillennialism or the “social gospel” based postmillennialism that emerged in Saskatchewan and Manitoba in the early twentieth

⁴⁹ George Marsden, “Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism,” in *Church History*, 46 (1977), 215-232. A similar argument is made in: Mark A Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1994).

⁵⁰ William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s, 1989), Chapter 6.

century. Ironically, the premillennialism that would strongly influence the Alberta Social Credit movement 1930s was learned by William Aberhart in Ontario, not America. However, its overall character was certainly derived from the American premillennial tradition.

Conclusion

Obviously, the above synopsis fails to do justice to the rich and diverse development of American Protestantism but it does, I hope, provide an appropriate religious and intellectual context by which one can properly grasp the conceptual and religious framework from which Henry Wise Wood, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning drew. As will be discussed more fully in the next two chapters, Wood's religious background was quite different from that of Aberhart and Manning but, at the same time, was also similar in its adherence to certain broad pillars of American evangelicalism, namely the radically democratic ethos and the strong emphasis on millennial thinking. It is this influence that, I argue, helps to place Alberta outside of Lipset's general dichotomy and thus differentiates Alberta in an important way from the rest of the Canadian Provinces. Of course, to suggest that Alberta has been influenced by American modes of social, political, or even religious thought is certainly not a revolutionary notion. It has long been assumed by scholars that any exploration of early Alberta political culture must dedicate space to the role of American influence due to the direct impact of significant American immigration. Foremost among this group is Nelson Wiseman who has argued that it was the "radical populist liberalism" brought to Alberta by the significant number of mid-west American farmers who immigrated in the first

quarter of the twentieth century.⁵¹ However, this analysis had next to nothing to say about the role played by religious ideas crossing the border.

Beyond immigration, the broad similarities between much of the post-Revolution American frontier and early Alberta also contributed to the adoption of a similar religious outlook. As W.L. Morton has noted, “Alberta was the frontier of frontiers...[and] the characteristic frontier malaise of debt, dislocation, and restlessness was active in the province.”⁵² Just as the participatory and egalitarian evangelicalism emanating out of the American Revolution was a perfect fit on the American frontier, it is not difficult to imagine that a similar religious disposition would become popular with Alberta agrarians who, for simple geographical reasons, operated in a space devoid of much traditional denominational influence, when compared to nineteenth century Ontario. Add to this rather conducive environment the steady stream of agrarian newsletters and periodicals that made their way from America to Alberta and one begins to see the possibilities of transmission beyond direct immigration.⁵³ Indeed, as Noll has argued, not only is evangelicalism an agent of democratization because of its internal democratic ethos, it also tends to prosper in Protestant societies that have recently undergone democratic revolutions or were frontier societies.⁵⁴

Although the collection of scholarship focusing on the development of religion throughout the early prairies is surprisingly small, it is not hard to find census statistics that provide a rough estimate of the numbers of prairie settlers who belonged to each of

⁵¹ Nelson Wiseman, “The Pattern of Prairie Politics,” in *Queen’s Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2, (Summer 1981), 298-315.

⁵² W.L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 37.

⁵³ Paul F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada*, 2nd ed, (Regina: Canada Plains Research Centre, 1997), 44.

⁵⁴ Noll, “Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical Social Influence in North Atlantic Societies,” 113-136.

the five major Christian churches in the early twentieth century.⁵⁵ Yet the usefulness of such statistics is not as apparent as it may seem. As each of these official churches moved westward in an effort to win converts, first from the existing Native population and later from the settler communities themselves, the challenges associated with frontier expansion forced competing denominations to cooperate or, at the very least, cede territory. It was not uncommon for settler community “A” to be served by a single Methodist church, community ‘B’ to contain only an Anglican one and community “C” be without any regular church service. It was even common for the minister of one denomination to serve in the church of another when required or vice versa.⁵⁶ In other words, the considerable theological differences that make such denominational statistics significant for scholars hoping to assess the potential social or political impact of these established churches on the populations of Eastern or Central Canada did not necessarily survive the move west intact. In fact, religious historian John Grant has argued that the ecumenical spirit generated by such denominational cooperation in the region ensured that prairie Protestant churches developed a religious ethos associated with unsophisticated theology, practicality, participation and community spirit that was quite distinct from the Eastern Canadian emphasis on refined sermons, rituals, and the traditional forms of piety that not only reinforced denominational differences but further engrained hierarchical relationships between the church elite and the congregation.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The five major denominations were the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. A helpful compilation of these census statistics covering a 40 year period can be found in: Phyllis D. Airhart, “Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism, 1867-1914,” in G. Rawlyk ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760-1990*, (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1990), 102-104.

⁵⁶ C.A. Dawson, *Pioneering in the Prairie Provinces: The Social Side of the Settlement Process*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1940), 207, 214-215.

⁵⁷ John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd ed., (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988), 51-53.

This religious ethos identified by Grant is reinforced by the findings of W.E. Mann, who studied the nature of religious practice in Alberta in the early twentieth century and found that Alberta, more than any other province, followed the post-Revolution American pattern of generating a high number of non-traditional religious sects. Most interestingly, however, was the manner by which the beliefs and practices of these sects paralleled those associated with the American evangelical tradition described above. Mann observed that the religious services conducted by sects in Alberta were relatively informal affairs characterized by unsophisticated sermons, congregational participation, and a general concern for individual salvation.⁵⁸ Mann's study certainly contained a more detailed look at the nature of religious practice in Alberta than this brief synopsis but, at this point, it is enough to note this important similarity between American and Albertan religious practice. No doubt a further comparison of grassroots religiosity between the America and Alberta would be interesting but the goal of this section is to simply suggest there are reasons to suspect important parallels exist between religious perspectives in both post-Revolution America and early twentieth century Alberta. The following two chapters will shift gears and examine in detail the political thought of the leadership of both the UFA and Social Credit movements and it is here that one will begin to see more clearly the impact that "American" religious perspectives had on Alberta politics at the elite level.

⁵⁸ W.E. Mann, *Sect, Cult, and Church in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), 44-45.

Chapter Four:

Religion and the Political Thought of Henry Wise Wood: The Liberal, Postmillennial Perspective

Scholars have typically interpreted the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA), which ruled the province from 1921 until 1935, as an economic and educational agrarian organization that eventually evolved into a dominant provincial political party. Formed in 1909, the immediate goal of the organization was the improvement of the economic condition of the farmer who, in their eyes, was beholden to the exploitation of monopolistic central Canadian grain buyers and industrialists whose financial interests were protected by a distant Federal government that showed little sympathy for the concerns of hinterland agrarians. Building upon the gains of the larger North American agrarian movement, the UFA developed into an extensive network of highly participatory “Locals,” community-level groupings of farmers that sought to protect their economic interests by lobbying government and by “pooling” both their purchasing power and their agricultural produce in an effort to leverage their way to better financial outcomes. These specific efforts were driven by a broad educational campaign waged by the organization’s headquarters that provided a vast array of literature that offered, in plain language, an analysis of the farmers’ economic condition and a concrete plan to improve it. In 1919, under intense pressure from the popular Alberta chapter of the Non-Partisan League, it was decided that these Locals should take direct political action and in 1921 the UFA, an “economic group” rather than a “traditional political party,” swept into power, led initially by Herbert Greenfield but soon replaced by John Brownlee who served as Alberta premier for nine years. However, the UFA’s inability to spur Alberta’s economy out of the eventual worldwide recession cost them much electoral support and, on the

heels of a sex scandal that engulfed Brownlee in 1934, the UFA was swept from office by William Aberhart and the Alberta Social Credit in the summer of 1935.

That the UFA was perhaps the first and only authentic grassroots participatory movement in Canada to attain political power on the back of an impressive and pre-existing network of community-level groupings of farmers has led to a significant level of attention from academics. In fact, luminary Canadian scholars such as W.L. Morton, Frank Underhill, C.B. Macpherson, Gerald Friesen, Nelson Wiseman, Thomas Flanagan and David Laycock have all studied aspects of the UFA.¹ However, when one takes a step back from the immediate economic and political themes recounted by such scholars and examines the more abstract elements of the overarching vision held by the group's most influential leader, a slightly different picture emerges that has yet to be fully articulated. The UFA was certainly eager to improve the economic position of the Alberta farmer, and it stressed vigorous participation and education at the local level as a way to meet this goal, but it was also understood by much of its leadership to be a significant player in a much larger, religiously-inspired reform movement that would improve conditions for all people. Indeed, the UFA's official organ declared in 1920 that it was "the most powerful agency in Canada today for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth."² Of course, this idealistic mindset dedicated to broad social reform was not exactly unusual in the early twentieth century, especially on the Canadian

¹ Aspects of the UFA are discussed in: W.L. Morton, "The Social Philosophy of Henry Wise Wood," in *Agricultural History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (April 1948), 114-123, W.L. Morton, *The Progressive Party in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), Nelson Wiseman, "The Pattern of Prairie Politics," in *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2, (Summer 1981), 298-315, Thomas Flanagan, "Political Geography and the United Farmers Of Alberta," in S.M. Trofimenkoff ed., *The Twenties in Western Canada*, (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1972), 138-169, and David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

² "Editorial: U.F.A. Sunday," in *The Western Independent*, May 12, 1920, 1.

prairies wherein a number of utopian visions were hatched from the optimism that accompanied a “new start” on the frontier.³ Although a good deal of this utopianism was a product of the Christian social gospel message that seemed to emanate out of Winnipeg’s Wesley College and the lectures of Salem Bland and onto the pages of the popular agrarian periodical, the *Grain Growers Guide*, the UFA was somewhat unique in that its most influential leader and thinker was someone who had migrated north from America and brought with him a religious perspective that, although similar in certain respects, was not identical. No doubt William Irvine, student of Bland, played an important role within the UFA and for this reason a strand of Bland’s more “socialistic” Christianity was clearly present within the UFA from its early years. However, it was the more “American” liberal evangelical Protestantism of longtime UFA president Henry Wise Wood, which was tinged with a particular American social gospel interpretation, that most influenced the political thought of the UFA.

Of course, Alberta was very much a Christian society during these years and it is not hard to find some basic Christian teachings at the heart of the Alberta agrarian movement that stretch back well before Wood became UFA president. As early as 1902, one can find calls for governments to operate on the principles of Christ while at the same time reassuring farmers that God intended profits to flow to those who tilled the soil rather than the dreaded middle-men.⁴ The influential agrarian periodical of the time, the *Grain Growers Guide*, was a forum for early advocates of the social gospel to spread their

³ Prairie historian W.L. Morton has written about this utopian-tendency on a few occasions. See: W.L. Morton, “The Bias of Prairie Politics,” in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Vol. 49, series III (June 1955), 57-66, and W.L. Morton, “A Century of Plain and Parkland,” in R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer ed., *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, (Edmonton: Pica Press, 1992), 27- 42.

⁴ Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 20, 57.

message of a “new social religion” that demanded commerce and politics be conducted by way of Christ’s “Golden Rule.”⁵ In 1910, UFA president James Bower insisted that the UFA was founded upon the “principle which true Christianity and humanity stand for: namely, the brotherhood of man.”⁶ Within a few years of their establishment, UFA Locals had become centres of intense social and educational activity, including a dedication to provide unofficial Christian church services in the many frontier rural areas that had been spiritually underserved. By 1914, this religious presence culminated with the introduction of “UFA Sundays,” an annual afternoon picnic which featured both religious and agrarian speakers emphasizing a “practical Christianity” that could be concretely applied to the farmers’ movement.⁷ However, it was not until the appearance of Wood as president of the movement in 1916 that the UFA shifted from an organization built upon a few broad Christian precepts to one that was, for all intents and purposes, a central player in the establishment of nothing less than the kingdom of God on earth.

The UFA itself was both a very diverse and very democratic institution, ensuring that the views of many distinct men and women from many different countries and cultures were influential.⁸ Yet, it is also not an exaggeration to suggest that Wood, president from 1916 until 1931, was, by far, the movement’s most influential figure or, in the words of his biographer, “the uncrowned King of Alberta.”⁹ The UFA’s own periodical praised Wood’s selflessness, his commitment to humanity, and his insistence

⁵ See E.A Partridge, “The New Religion,” in *Grain Growers Guide*, August 28, 1909, 4. In addition to the agrarian leader Partridge, prominent social gospel clergymen such as J.S. Woodsworth and Salem Bland also secured regular columns in the *Grain Growers Guide*. For an in-depth discussion of their message see: Richard Allen, “The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt,” in George Melnyk ed., *Riel to Reform: A History of Protest in Western Canada*, (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992), 138-147.

⁶ James Bower, “The United Farmers of Alberta and Co-operation,” in *Grain Growers Guide*, February 16, 1910, 10.

⁷ Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 81-84.

⁸ The diversity of the UFA is discussed in much detail in: Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*.

⁹ William Kirby Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 192.

on co-operation and local democracy, and claimed that “no other one person in Alberta has done more to arouse the people to accept the responsibility of their own institutions than he.”¹⁰ Consequently, Wood’s thought has garnered much interest from scholars eager to make sense of the UFA’s highly participatory nature, its support for economic co-operatives, and its peculiar advancement of “group government.” However, although most historians and political scientists have mentioned Wood’s religious background, the precise influence of his particular Christian perspective on his political thought has been largely glossed over.¹¹ Richard Allen, who has taken religious influence more seriously than most prairie scholars, did acknowledge that “Wood’s whole programme was ultimately theological,” yet in the end, did little to distinguish Wood’s thought from key Western Canadian social gospel leaders Bland, Irvine, or J.S. Woodsworth.¹² As we shall see, despite broad agreement on the need to import the social teachings of Christ into the political and economic realm, Wood’s American evangelical Protestant background would ensure important differences between his thought and that of the mainstream prairie social gospel crowd, differences that would help to steer the early political development of Alberta in a distinct direction.

This chapter argues that Wood’s personal interpretation of Christianity was a much stronger influence on his political thought and on the corresponding practical

¹⁰ “Who’s Who in the Farmers Movement: H.W. Wood,” in *The Western Independent*, January 21, 1920, 7.

¹¹ For brief discussions on Wood’s religious background see: W.L. Morton, “The Social Philosophy of Henry Wise Wood,” 114-123, Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*, 9-11, Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 212-213, Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-1928*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 205-208, and Allen, “The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt.” See also: Franklin Lloyd Foster, *The 1921 Provincial Election: A Consideration of Factors Involved With Particular Attention to Overtones of Millennialism Within the UFA and Other Reform Movements*, (MA Thesis, Queens University, 1978). Foster went beyond many UFA scholars by noting that the organization relied on a “civic” version of optimistic millennial thought that envisioned the coming of a new and better age so long as the people continued to work towards it by obeying the laws of God, although his analysis does not do much to trace the roots of this pattern of thought.

¹² Allen, *The Social Passion*, 206.

organization and direction of the UFA than has been previously recognized. It was by no means the only influence on the UFA, nor was religion the only influence on Wood, whose thought was clearly influenced by additional scientific, economic and philosophical currents. However, existing expositions of his thought remain incomplete for they fail to develop a full accounting of Wood's "framework of meaning," the canvas of ontological beliefs against which his more practical political analysis becomes more coherent. Doing so in this case requires a much more detailed examination of Wood's foundational religious views which, as we shall see, played a prominent role in his eventual social and political thought, from his views on social evolution to his advancement of a political system organized around economic groups. That said, Wood was not religious in the traditional, mystical sense of the word. He expressed very little interest in themes related to personal spiritual salvation or the afterlife. Rather, he found the teachings of Christ "to contain a wonderful storehouse of practical information," and defined his religious creed as "a desire to understand natural social law and to live and construct in accordance with that law."¹³ Yet, his religious perspective was clearly derived from the American liberal and post-millennial evangelical Protestant tradition that valued democratic participation, stressed personal responsibility, and understood individual Christians as possessing the agency required to slowly reform social institutions according to the dictates of Christ's moral message. The culmination of such efforts would be the establishment of Christ's promised kingdom on earth. What follows is a brief reexamination of Wood's religious and political background and a detailed

¹³ Wood discusses the "practical" value of the message of Christ in an undated address entitled "My Religion," currently located in the Alberta Wheat Pool Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-2369-125. For his definition of his religious creed see: H.W. Wood, letter to R.W. Frayne, August 17, 1925, Alberta Wheat Pool Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-2369-125.

reinterpretation of his social and political thought with particular emphasis on this religious foundation. Not only does this present a more complete picture of the political theory standing behind the UFA's emphasis, under Wood's leadership, on local participation, education and co-operation. It further demonstrates an important link between the American evangelical Protestant tradition and the early development of Alberta's unique political development. The broader political implications of Wood's religious-based thought, and its impact on the direction of Alberta's politics, is discussed in the concluding section.

Wood's Political and Religious Background

In order to truly appreciate the link between the American evangelical Protestant tradition and the early direction of Alberta politics, it is first necessary to explore the precise political and religious context from which Wood emerged. In fact, without this exploration one could easily fall prey to the argument that Wood was simply another social gospel advocate alongside Bland, Irvine and Woodsworth. As I mentioned above, Wood's thought was similar in many respects to this strand of religious interpretation, owing largely to his own familiarity with, and approval of, many of the works of key American social gospel writers that emerged from the urban Northeast of America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, Wood was initially exposed to a highly democratic evangelical "social Christianity" in the rural American South and it was this particular interpretation that stood at the foundation of Wood's thought. It was by drawing from each of these two distinct strands of religious-based social thought that Wood constructed his own unique interpretation that helped to set Alberta on a different path than both neighbouring Prairie Provinces and more distant eastern ones.

Wood was, like many of his UFA contemporaries, a recent immigrant from America. In 1905 he left his Missouri farm and settled on a similar plot in southern Alberta.¹⁴ His appreciation for grassroots democracy can certainly be traced back to his rural American heritage and the agrarian “populist” movement of the American South and Midwest that he supported as a young man. Although not a significant player in the movement, Wood was a participant in his “Local” of the Farmers’ and Laborers’ Union in Ralls County, Missouri and a careful observer of the broader movement, which clearly influenced his eventual analysis of the economic and political conditions faced by the Alberta farmers.¹⁵ Although Wood’s brush with the populist movement has been mentioned by nearly all those who have written about him, most commentators, having relied upon the standard historical accounts of the American movement penned by the likes of John D. Hicks, Norman Pollack, and Lawrence Goodwyn, have failed to emphasize the strong religious current which ran through it.¹⁶ However, recent scholarship has done much to highlight the significant religious dimension of the American agrarian movement from which Wood emerged.

As Rhys Williams and Susan M. Alexander have argued, traditional, non-religious interpretations of American populism have overlooked the heavy influence of evangelical Christianity on the moral and philosophical foundations of the movement in

¹⁴ For a comprehensive account of Wood’s life see: Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*.

¹⁵ Wood’s brother J.S. Wood noted this in a short untitled and undated biography he wrote on H.W. Wood currently located in the Alberta Wheat Pool Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-2369-125.

¹⁶ The standard histories of the American populist movement include: John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), and Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

the American South and Midwest.¹⁷ Joe Creech, who has thoroughly documented the evangelical Protestant “patterns of thoughts” that sat at the foundation of the populist movement, has furthered this point by noting the manner by which the agrarians were strongly moved by the evangelical belief in the capacity of the “common man” to not only interpret sacred scripture but, more importantly in this regard, to apply it to day-to-day circumstances. Thus, the plain, God-fearing agrarian within the populist movement was provided with both the confidence and the divine inspiration required to challenge traditional forms of political and economic authority in the name of Christian justice in much the same way they were previously able to undercut the power of the elevated clergy in traditional hierarchical churches.¹⁸ Beyond providing a normative foundation that praised their individual capacities to challenge a system responsible for their hardships, the evangelicalism of the rural South and Midwest also offered particular solutions.

Richard Goode and Paul Harvey have both demonstrated the manner by which American populist agrarians drew on a “rural social gospel” that was distinct from and less sophisticated than the northern and urban and largely academic social gospel espoused by the likes of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. This rural social gospel drew heavily from the evangelical values of individual autonomy and piety but shared with the northern social gospel a social condemnation, based on the “Golden Rule” of Christ, of the political and economic conditions imposed upon the plain people

¹⁷ Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander, “Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology,” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1994, 1-15.

¹⁸ Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 22-28.

by an ever-industrializing economy.¹⁹ Creech also distinguishes the evangelical “social Christianity” that motivated the American agrarians from the more sophisticated combination of theological liberalism and progressive economic theories that emerged from the oft-cited northern social gospel movement. This “common-folk,” evangelical-based social Christianity combined evangelical conceptions of benevolence and anti-elitism with Jeffersonian rural ideals related to agrarian purity, self-sufficiency, and small-scale commerce to produce “the simple yet powerful idea that economic relationships should be guided by the law of love.”²⁰

The strong evangelical basis of this sentiment ensured that agrarian populists remained fixated on individual piety even when sternly challenging a political and economic system they viewed as corrupt and oppressive. The anger of agrarians was largely directed at economic and political elites who had failed to embody the moral axioms of God and had thus allowed their corporations and political parties to operate in manners contrary to God’s principles. Therefore, as Creech notes, agrarians did not view state-led regulations on industry or private property as the answer. Instead, “a permanent change in the economic system required a change in the hearts of individuals and then through those individuals a change to political and economic organizations.” Thus, Creech continues, “through a process of moral suasion, discipline, and education, the [agrarians] hoped to create an army of enlightened individuals and then to provide pathways for those individuals, acting cooperatively, to effect change in the political

¹⁹ See: Richard C. Goode, “The Godly Insurrection in Limestone County: Social Gospel, Populism, and Southern Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (Summer 1993), 155-169 and Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South From the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press), 2005, 47-53.

²⁰ Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, 30.

economy.²¹ As will become clearer as this chapter progresses, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which this particular evangelical-based remedy for social change articulated by American agrarian populists in the 1890s, foreshadowed the essence of Wood's social and political thought made manifest in Alberta three decades later.

Closely related to Wood's exposure to this evangelical Protestant dimension of the American populist movement was his membership and active participation in the Missouri branch of the Disciples of Christ, a point made by a number of scholars, although rarely developed beyond a few paragraphs of commentary.²² The Disciples, a sect stretching back to Alexander Campbell and the American Restoration Movement of the early nineteenth century, had as their mission the reconciliation and unification of the various denominations of the Protestant Church by stressing a return to "primitive Christianity" based solely upon the teachings of Christ in the New Testament.²³ Primarily rural in nature, the Disciples in the American South and Midwest in the late nineteenth century were, in the words of historian David Harrell, "a case study of the Protestant ethic," embracing small-scale laissez faire capitalism, individual responsibility, honesty and frugality, as well as a distinctly "lower class prejudice" that singled out the unethical practices of "plutocrats."²⁴ Combined with this traditionally conservative evangelical outlook, however, was the Disciples prototypical post-Revolution religious preference for an organization that rejected the cold, formal and hierarchical nature of traditional Christianity and its tendency to elevate the learned clergy. In its place grew an

²¹ Ibid, 80.

²² See: W.L. Morton, "The Social Philosophy of Henry Wise Wood," Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*, 9-11, and Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 212-213.

²³ Wilfred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1948).

²⁴ David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865-1900: A Social History of the Disciples of Christ*, Volume 2, (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 34-47.

ecumenical and co-operative sentiment within the church as well as a broader democratic tendency toward anti-establishmentarianism and a decentralized congregational organization that demanded laymen participation. This was founded upon a strict adherence to a “populist hermeneutic” that understood the common individual as one who possessed the intellectual capacity required to interpret the teachings of Christ for him or herself.²⁵ The social and economic thought of the Disciples that grew from this “populist hermeneutic,” which Keith King describes as “Christianized, Jeffersonian agrarianism marked by antimonopoly sentiments and frontier egalitarianism,” ensured that members of the Disciples congregation were avid participants in the broader agrarian populist movement.²⁶ As will become apparent, it is not difficult to discern a distinct version of this “Christianized Jeffersonian agrarianism” in the eventual political thought of Wood, although he would also draw from a more radical interpretation of Christianity.

In the final decade of the nineteenth century, young liberal Disciple ministers began exploring the “kingdom theology” emanating out of the early northern social gospel movement and preached the “brotherhood of man” message to their congregations. The Disciples’ traditional emphasis on the social teachings of Christ and their broader evangelical-based insistence on the dangers of centralization ensured that Wood and his fellow Disciples were particularly well-suited to embrace elements of the broader social gospel message and, before long, the works of early social gospel stalwarts Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Richard T. Ely were printed and discussed in

²⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 71.

²⁶ Keith L. King, “Disciples of Christ and the Agrarian Protest in Texas, 1870-1906,” in *Restoration Quarterly*, xxxv, second quarter, (1993), 82. Creech also notes the significant relationship, with respect to both theoretical positions and active participation, between the Disciples of Christ and the American populist movement in the American South and Midwest. See: Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, 12-13.

the Disciples press.²⁷ Related to the introduction of social gospel themes was the Disciples' new commitment to the principles of the Enlightenment, most especially the notion of a "scientific method" that gained significant traction in nineteenth century America, from a Christian perspective. Just as the establishment of a proper method of scientific inquiry would lead all rational humans to agree on the laws at work in nature, a focus on the New Testament alone, without the interference of traditional clergy, would lead the common people to the true Christian message, and the laws it contained.²⁸ In fact, this emphasis on the "natural laws" contained within scripture, in conjunction with the broader rural-based "lower class prejudice" that ran through the sect, led the Disciples' to embrace the notion that the Antichrist was working through the elites in society in order to prevent the coming kingdom of God, a central theme eventually found in the thought of Wood.²⁹

Wood's exposure to Christian-based natural law theory was furthered by his studies at Christian University in Missouri where, according to his brother, he was deeply moved by professors who taught that co-operation rather than competition was the true social law and the inspiration for this philosophy "was not the communist saint, Karl Marx, but the Christian saint, the Apostle John."³⁰ Wood completed only two years of University before returning to fulltime farm life but he remained a voracious reader throughout his lifetime. In addition to close personal study of the Bible, especially the gospels of Christ, which he declared, "have been the greatest influence of my life," Wood

²⁷ Harrell Jr., *Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865-1900*, 85-95.

²⁸ George M Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jonavich, 1990), 58-59.

²⁹ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 76.

³⁰ Wood's brother J.S. Wood noted this in a short untitled and undated biography he wrote on H.W. Wood currently located in the Alberta Wheat Pool Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-2369-125.

studied the works of Adam Smith, J.S. Mill, Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer alongside American progressives Frank Norris, M.P. Follett, Henry George, Washington Gladden and others.³¹ The lessons Wood drew from this personal study were added to many of the central religious themes Wood was exposed to in both the agrarian populist movement and the Disciples of Christ sect and the result was a pattern of social and political thought that retained a striking similarity to the central tenets of the liberal, post-millennial stand of American evangelical theology, but was also tinged with aspects of the more sophisticated northern social gospel movement. This puts his religious views in a category separate from both the more orthodox Protestantism of Ontario and the western Canadian social gospel movement, both of which had a more European and less individualistic and democratic flavour. In the sections that follow I spell out in far more detail the religious views of Wood and how they influenced his own social and political thought as well as the organization and direction of the UFA.

Religion and the Social Theory of Wood

The social thought of Wood was grounded on two fundamental assumptions. First, human beings are naturally social beings who have a particular destiny to fulfill: to construct a proper social system within which they can flourish. They have been provided by nature with certain intellectual faculties as well as a blueprint in the form of natural laws in order to facilitate this construction, “but it is up to [them] to do the construction work. [They] can do this only by using [their] faculties under the guidance

³¹ Wood mentions the influence of the teachings of Christ in: H.W. Wood, “My Religion,” in *Winnipeg Free Press*, nd, Earl G. Cook Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-255-47, n.d. For scholarly discussions of the intellectual influences of Wood see: Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*, 11-14, 62-66, and Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 208-213.

of those natural laws.”³² Second, the history within which humans find themselves progresses in a linear fashion and has been characterized from the beginning by a cosmic struggle between two opposing forces, the true and false laws, those of co-operation and competition, that will eventually collide one final time producing a definite victory of good over evil. Wood writes:

Competition is the false social law, and no social system based primarily on this law can ever reach perfection. Co-operation is the true social law, and a true social system must be founded primarily on that law. All past social progress has been founded primarily on the law of competition, but the law of co-operation has been operating secondarily. These laws are ever acting and reacting upon each other, the destructiveness of competition forcing co-operation to higher development, and this in turn increasing the destructiveness of competition. Competition is the law of destruction, and all the destruction that has ever been wrought by man against his fellow man has been wrought by competition. All construction of social strength has been done by co-operation.³³

He continues:

Democracy can be established only on the basis of co-operation. The great masses of people have failed in their competitive struggle...[but they are now] marshalling their forces in stable groups.

When these forces are finally thus marshaled the irrepressible conflict will be on. The conflict between democracy and plutocracy; between civilization and barbarism; between man and money; between co-operation and competition; between God and Mammon. To say that democracy will fail will be to say that the design of nature in creating a social being and bringing him into obedience to social laws has failed. It will be to say that nature has failed in her supreme effort; to say that wrong is stronger than right; error stronger than truth; Mammon stronger than God.

It will not fail. It cannot fail, because the Supreme Power...will not let it fail.³⁴

³² H. W. Wood, “U.F.A Political Movement and the Alberta Wheat Pool Greatest Products of the United Farmers of Alberta, Declares President Wood in Annual Address,” in *The UFA*, February 1, 1927, 12.

³³ H. W. Wood, “The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part One” in *The UFA*, March 1, 1922, 5.

³⁴ H. W. Wood, “The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Four,” in *The UFA*, April 15, 1922, 25, 27.

This teleological interpretation of both man and history was heavily influenced by the work of Herbert Spencer, the English evolutionary philosopher and favorite of Wood. Following Spencer's general argument, Wood understood history to be unfolding by way of an evolutionary process which had as its end the creation of the morally perfect man within a perfectly moral society. This perfected society, governed by the social law of co-operation, will "be a living thing, not one that lives, reproduces and dies. Its life will be eternal and in it human well-being will be established."³⁵ The positive progression of man and society was thus a natural process that occurred according to natural laws in the same way physical evolution takes place. Much work had already been done to unearth the operation of these natural physical laws but, according to Wood, an exploration of the natural social laws, what he deemed "the realm of spiritual science," was still required for it is here "man will eventually gain an understanding of the truth that will make him free."³⁶ Even a quick glance at human history confirmed for Wood that humans had failed to comprehend, let alone follow, the natural social laws:

We look into the universe and see everywhere the works of nature and we see them all in obedience to natural law. Till we come to man, the creature that was created as a social being. There we see the great exception. Man to the present time has stubbornly refused to come into obedience to natural social law. Now there is one of two things that is going to happen...man is going to come into obedience of nature's laws or else he is going to become self-destructive. No work of nature can exist and can continue to violate natural law.³⁷

Thus, the articulation and exposition of these natural social laws became the central focus of Wood's social thought, a task made all the more necessary given the

³⁵ Wood, "U.F.A Political Movement and the Alberta Wheat Pool Greatest Products of the United Farmers of Alberta, Declares President Wood in Annual Address,"12.

³⁶ Wood, "My Religion."

³⁷ H.W. Wood, "Social Regeneration," speech given to the Calgary Labour Church, April 30, 1922, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-102, 11.

unprecedented magnitude of death and destruction occurring in the Great War of Europe. For Wood, the technological machinery required to produce death on such a scale only confirmed his thesis that mankind had progressed by great strides in the field of natural sciences but remained stuck in a state of social competition and barbarism. It was during his personal quest to identify and make known the natural social laws that would end such competitive misery that his thought takes a distinctively Christian turn. This is also the point at which most scholars that have commented on Wood's thought tend to depart from his writings and begin their own analysis of his political prescriptions and thus fail to pay much attention to the religious interpretation that drives Wood's practical mission within the UFA.

For Wood, history began with primitive man who, although provided with an intellectual or reasoning capacity, was initially guided by the spirit he inherited, the animal spirit, the law of the beasts, of competition, of every man for himself. However, implanted within man was also a "germ" of something more pure, a capacity to eventually hear "the call of nature for co-operation."³⁸ This call would come from Christ whose appearance and teachings on earth represented the first stage of the positive moral progression of man. This call is heard most authoritatively in the Sermon on the Mount, the most substantial collection of Christ's ethical teachings recited in the Book of Matthew. According to Wood, Christ's intention in this sermon is the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven that, importantly, is not to be found in a mystical heaven in the afterlife for:

He instructed them to pray for the coming of the Kingdom, and the doing of the Will of God on earth. This locates the Kingdom on earth, and makes it a

³⁸ Wood, "Social Regeneration," 6.

practical institution. This can mean nothing less than a social structure built in conformity with natural, social laws.³⁹

However, this Kingdom will not come along by way of prayer alone. The natural development of the Kingdom is, in fact, a two-stage process. First, man must come to abide by natural social laws, the moral laws of Christ delivered in the New Testament. At the heart of these teachings is the call for repentance, the beginning of individual regeneration wherein man turns away from the primitive animal spirit that is the law of Satan and embraces the demand of Christ to “be ye perfect as your father in Heaven is perfect” by bearing one another’s burdens and following the Golden Rule by “doing unto others what you would have them do to you.”⁴⁰ This revelation by Christ represented “the climax of the true principles governing individual relationships.”⁴¹ These social commands are natural because man is a social being and it is his natural end to evolve into the morally perfect social being by treating his fellow human beings in the proper manner, the manner taught by Christ. Once man completes this individual regeneration he is ready to contribute to the second phase of the development of the coming Kingdom:

When man comes to act naturally and normally under the guidance of the true spirit he will be ready to begin construction of the Kingdom. The call to repentance was a call to man to turn away from the dominion of the animal spirit that has led him into the bondage and darkness or barbarism-the world, and to turn to the true social spirit that would eventually lead him into the light and liberty of true civilization – the Kingdom.⁴²

The second phase required of the coming Kingdom, social regeneration, is thus initiated by those who have already accepted the teachings of Christ and are therefore “born again” as moral humans acting in accordance with the natural social law. The

³⁹ H. W. Wood, “The Significance of U.F.A Sunday,” in *The UFA*, May 15, 1923, 5.

⁴⁰ Wood, “Social Regeneration,” 3.

⁴¹ Wood, “My Religion.”

⁴² Wood, “The Significance of U.F.A Sunday,” 5.

social system they build will be founded upon the call for social co-operation issued by Christ. However, Wood is adamant that such construction will take place not by way of a quick and violent victory but rather by a gradual, evolutionary process wherein the spirit of co-operation overtakes that of competition. This rejection of violent revolution is again based on the teachings of Christ, most especially his “parable of the tares” recited in Matthew 13: 24-43 wherein a farmer, eager to separate the tares, or weeds, from his wheat field, is instructed by Jesus to avoid immediately pulling at the weeds for such an action will disturb the wheat as well. Instead, the farmer is to allow both plants to mature at which point it will be possible to extract the weeds without damaging the wheat. Wood, understanding the weeds to represent the spirit of Satan, the false social law that currently dominates the world and the wheat as that which is good and associated with the Kingdom of God, writes:

When both [seeds] were sufficiently mature, the false would be carefully separated and destroyed, the true only remaining. In the destruction of the false the “world” would disappear and the Kingdom only remain. This is a gradual evolutionary process. The uninformed servants, on discovering the evil tares in the field, wanted to go out and eradicate them by violent force or by revolutionary methods. The householder informed them that revolutionary violence would not only destroy the evil, but would destroy the good with it.⁴³

Relating this interpretation to the point in history he finds himself situated in, Wood writes:

At the present time the good and evil in our social system are so interrelated and interwoven with each other that to undertake to destroy the evil by violence would be impossible without destroying the good also. But, by the evolutionary process of gradually building up the good, the evil can as gradually be eliminated.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Wood, “My Religion.”

To add further credibility as well as an air of inevitability to his particular interpretation of Christ's teachings Wood turned to the Book of Revelations wherein one finds "the most wonderful picture of the development of a social system, from the false social system on up to a perfect civilization."⁴⁵ The vision presented throughout is the coming battle between the growing force of the true social law and that of the false law. The true force faces an uphill battle, encountering a number of set backs until the breaking of the seventh seal at which point the final conflict occurs. Babylon, the evil city that is toppled by the true forces represents, in Wood's interpretation, the competitive nature of commercialism one finds in present day society and its prophesized fall in Revelations 18 signals that "the superstructure has been changed from a false foundation to a true one."⁴⁶ Despite a last-gasp effort on the part of Satan and his minions to retake control, the forces of God withstand their advances and the evil one is "cast out forever, into a bottomless pit, and a social system was founded absolutely."⁴⁷ This is represented by the establishment of the New Jerusalem described in Revelations 21 where "the laws of Christ were put into complete operation...it was the ultimate accomplishment of perfect spiritual life. There was no darkness; man understood the spiritual laws of life; they didn't walk in darkness anymore, but walked in the light of truth."⁴⁸ This was the perfect social system for its construction has been guided by the "ultimate knowledge of the truth as taught by Christ," and its development has taken place "in perfect harmony with nature's laws, which are the laws of God."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Wood, "Social Regeneration," 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Wood, "My Religion."

Religion and the Political Thought of Wood

Up to this point, Wood's interpretation of the direction of history, guided by his personal reading of the New Testament, has pointed towards the gradual coming of a new age highlighted by the creation of a perfect social system. Although he is clear that humans have a substantial role to play in this development, very little has been said in the way of a detailed plan. Surely the process begins with "individual regeneration," the spiritual rebirth of the human who brushes aside selfish impulses and follows the social edicts delivered by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. This individual rebirth paves the way for "social regeneration" whereby a collection of such people begin to work together in an effort to ensure the co-operative social spirit they have learnt from Christ is extended to more and more groups of people thus building a certain momentum that ensures this spirit begins to overtake public life, eventually resulting in its complete domination over the spirit of competition. But this seems to be where the divine instruction stops. Wood writes:

Christ did not go into details in regard to social reconstruction, but many of His sayings prove conclusively that He had a clear understanding of the underlying principles of that process. After all, these principles are eternal and of primary importance, and while details will change as conditions change, it is up to us to work them out.⁵⁰

Wood was therefore left to his own devices to work out these details in accordance with the conditions he found himself in, those of the agrarians in rural Alberta. Thus, it is not surprising that he turns to the already existing UFA as an outlet for his broader goal of establishing a Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Consequently, many of his practical political and economic demands are made with the Alberta farmers in mind. However, at this point we have not yet drawn a clear connection between Wood's interpretation of

⁵⁰ Wood, "The Significance of U.F.A Sunday," 14.

Christianity and the practical work of the UFA under his guidance. The theoretical implications of his religious beliefs upon politics must first be made apparent.

Although Christ provided no specific blueprint for the creation of perfect political institutions, Wood was convinced that the moral teachings of Christ demanded, at minimum, a democratic system. He writes:

Real democracy and co-operation are not one, but they are inseparable. Democracy cannot be established or maintained except through co-operation.

This conflict [between the spirits of co-operation and competition] can be repressed only by establishing the true social law. Christ understood this and taught the true law and upheld the ideals of democracy. What could be more expressive of the true ideal of democracy, and the true function of democratic leadership than [Christ's demand that]: "whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant?"⁵¹

Although Christ fails to provide a more specific description of democratic governance, Wood's overall interpretation requires that, whatever its practical manifestation, it must be based upon the social law of co-operation rather than competition. A system dominated by competition, the law of Satan, is autocratic. It is one that is ruled by those who excel at competition, those who can dominate the weak. Any further practical details regarding the workings of a proper democratic system required a study of present conditions.

For Wood, this study quickly revealed that Canada was an autocracy ruled by the wealthy "plutocrats" rather than a democracy. This "money power," made up of large groups of industrialists and grain-buyers from central Canada, held strong monopolies in their respective fields that enabled them to exploit western Canadian farmers. Furthermore, their wealth allowed them to control politicians within the "democratic"

⁵¹ Wood, "The Significance of U.F.A Sunday," 14.

system by way of the lobbyist and thus it was the “money power” that, in effect, ensured the survival of the national tariff which protected their monopolistic position.⁵² This outcome was rendered possible by the current structure of the Canadian political system. Although a democracy in the sense that the people’s representatives were chosen in free elections, the particular evolution of the electoral system along competitive lines in Canada inhibited *actual* democracy from occurring. Despite being a collaboration of individuals seemingly working towards a common end, political parties failed to deliver accurate or honest representation of the people because they ultimately lacked unifying principles and were, in the end, simply large vote-seeking organizations offering anything to anybody in their search for power. Here Wood touched on a concern that has continued to hound contemporary democratic theorists. He writes of parties:

False appeals are frequently made in the name of the most sacred things. Prejudices and passions are appealed to. Patriotism is prostituted to the services of the most selfish interests and designs. Few questions are seriously discussed on their merits. Truth is frequently not sought after, but systematically concealed in a mass of confusion.

[Citizens] have been like the sands of the desert, blown back and forth by the changing winds of false propaganda.⁵³

It is within this confusion that the wealthy industrialist gains control of individual politicians eager to accept the donated funds of industry in order to finance their electoral campaigns or simply line their pockets. The result is autocracy, or more specifically, plutocracy. The interests of the masses become subservient to the greed of the wealthy and the politically powerful. Because the individual citizen is too weak to challenge the plutocracy and traditional political parties are susceptible to such corruption, the masses

⁵² H. W. Wood, “The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Three,” in *The UFA*, April 1, 1922, 5.

⁵³ Wood, “The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Four,” 5.

must therefore form their own groups capable of providing proper representation within the political realm in order to overthrow the “money power.” The basis on which these groups were to organize and operate within the political system has since been recognized as Wood’s most original contribution to Canadian political thought, that of group government.

Wood’s proposition was founded upon his contention that groups designed to articulate a political viewpoint can only remain stable, and thus effective, if they are organized around that which is of supreme interest to all and “at the present time humanity’s greatest general interest is economic.”⁵⁴ But Wood understood that it was not realistic to assume all people could agree on a single economic viewpoint so he argued group organization should be sub-divided by economic class. This did not refer to an upper, middle and lower class or a bourgeoisie and proletariat class but rather something akin to general occupational classes. The western world had developed as a “trading world” and its evolution had produced distinct groups of people producing certain goods or services such as farmers or bakers or labourers engaged in manufacturing. Each of these groups had particular economic interests and it is these common interests shared by members of each respective group that would encourage them to co-operate with their fellow farmer or baker or labourer within their own organization.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Wood, “The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part One,” 5.

⁵⁵ Of course, Wood never did spend much time focusing on the make-up of particular groups outside of his own “agricultural class,” a weakness that Macpherson picks up on in his insightful critique of Wood’s overall group government scheme. See Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, chapter 2. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the notion of Group Government was not initially part of Wood’s thought when he took on the presidency. In fact, he was hesitant to allow the UFA to enter politics preferring instead to lobby existing parties. Essentially having his hand forced by a restless membership encouraged by William Irvine and the Non-Partisan League, Wood allowed the locals to participate in direct political action so long as they remained agrarian-based and did not merge with other reform-minded groups. Wood’s theory of group government appeared after this compromise was made.

In accordance with his broader social theory, the formation of this occupational group represented for Wood the initial stage of the social regeneration process whereby the true social law of co-operation would be introduced into the political realm and it must be done within economic classes because “trade is the central influence in human relationships. Man touches his fellowman more often here than anywhere else and the touch is more vital than anywhere else.”⁵⁶ But such co-operation does not only guide humans closer to the long-term goal of a perfected society built on the true social law. In the immediate term, this cooperation would ensure stability within each occupational group that would allow them to maintain and articulate a consistent message in the political realm, something traditional political parties could not do. These groups would thus be resistant to the seductions of the industrial lobby and contribute to an authentic democratic dialogue by making heard the voices of the masses, at least with respect to their economic demands. The distinct economic groups, already consisting of individuals co-operating at a local level, were to co-operate with each other in the political realm or legislature in order to secure the most just outcome with respect to particular policy decisions. This was the logic behind Wood’s radical recommendation that occupational groups replace traditional parties within the legislature. It was also the reason behind Wood’s insistence that the UFA remain an “economic group” that would participate in politics rather than a traditional political party that would seek broad-based electoral support.

The health and viability of such economic groups within the legislature was, for Wood, depended upon the lengths such organizations went to ensure sufficient influence from the deliberative, community-level groupings of occupational members, or “Locals.”

⁵⁶ H.W. Wood, “Observe U.F.A. Sunday, May 27,” in *Grain Growers Guide*, April 18, 1917, 12.

It was only by way of intense grassroots participation and significant avenues for membership control that such a political organization could avoid the fate of traditional political parties and resist manipulation by outside interests. As Laycock has noted, although the implementation of true “group government” within the Alberta legislature fell short, the UFA itself operated as a highly participatory and deliberative institution that maximized the democratic potential of community-level involvement by ensuring Locals maintained significant influence over the UFA’s central leadership.⁵⁷ In fact, Frank Underhill went as far as to claim that the UFA “had worked out a method of combining constituency autonomy with group solidarity, and local initiative with central direction, which no doubt is not perfect, but does achieve the most complete and real democracy that we have yet seen in Canadian politics.”⁵⁸

Of course, the notion that citizens were to co-operate with their neighbours and participate in community-level endeavors was certainly not foreign to the farm families who were attempting to carve out a living on Alberta’s unforgiving frontier. However, the strong emphasis the UFA did put on such local activity as a prerequisite not just for economic survival but for good, democratic government and improved social conditions was championed most strongly by Wood. Indeed, he argued:

If one UFA Local could establish a purely co-operative community where all community affairs, both social and business, were dealt with in a practical co-operative way, that pioneer Local would be contributing more to right social construction and human welfare, than any individual that has ever lived.⁵⁹

Therefore, for Wood the introduction of group government, built upon a network of participatory and co-operative Locals, would ensure both a co-operative spirit in politics

⁵⁷ Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, 90-94.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, 80.

⁵⁹ H.W. Wood in a speech to the Alberta Institute of Co-operation in September 1929 quoted in: Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, 92.

as well as an authentic vehicle of political representation. Thus, the spirit of co-operation, the true law of Christ, and the establishment of true democracy perfectly coalesced in Wood's political theory. In fact, Wood argues, "The Kingdom of Heaven and perfect democracy are synonymous terms."⁶⁰

The identification of group government by economic class as a practical solution to the undemocratic nature of the political system introduces a more foundational dimension of Wood's political and economic thought. Much to the chagrin of the more radical advocates of the social gospel who called for the introduction of socialism on the prairies, Wood never questioned the economic foundation of the western world. As Macpherson has noted, Wood's theory remains faithful to a basic economic liberalism and is essentially built upon the assumption that man is a "trading animal."⁶¹ Indeed, Wood interpreted the beginning of human progress to be the point when "a primitive savage conceived the idea of trading some article he possessed beyond his immediate needs, for something he wanted that another savage had." This initial trade represented the "discovery of the great central institution of present civilization, namely, trade and commerce."⁶² From then on, social institutions have been built up with the specific purpose of governing this method of exchange, the free trade of goods and services. Because the origins of this trading system appear to Wood to be natural, he never once considered the merits of an economic system built upon anything other than the market. Thus, any social or economic problems that develop in society could not be attributable

⁶⁰ Quoted in Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*, p. 66.

⁶¹ Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, 34.

⁶² H. W. Wood, "The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Two," in *The UFA*, March 15, 1922, 5.

to the natural practice of trading but to the unnatural development of the social institutions that determine how trading takes place.

This element of Wood's thought contrasted sharply with the views of the main spokesmen of the prairie social gospel movement, notably Salem Bland, J.S. Woodsworth, and Alberta's own William Irvine. Bland, theology professor at Wesley College and unofficial philosopher and mentor of the movement, was convinced that capitalism was a corrupt system that must be replaced by socialism. Thus he, along with Woodsworth and Irvine, were strong critics of capitalism and strong allies of the urban labour movement. In fact, Bland and Woodsworth played influential roles in the Winnipeg general strike in 1919.⁶³ Irvine, a longtime member and spokesman for the UFA (although not himself a farmer), was a friend of Woodsworth and a student of Bland's at Wesley College and his conclusions matched those of his teacher.⁶⁴ Although he often lauded Wood's emphasis on the social nature of Christianity and broadly supported the concept of group government, he did not share the same feelings toward the market system. In fact, by 1935 he had published a short book entitled "Can a Christian Vote for Capitalism?" within which he makes the case that the capitalist economic system is "ethically indefensible" if one bases his moral judgments on the teachings of Christ.⁶⁵ However, although Irvine had a dedicated group of radical left-leaning followers within the UFA, the bulk of the farmers agreed with Wood and his attachment to the market system and thus socialism was never fully embraced by the organization. Subsequently, Irvine would eventually continue working towards his goal

⁶³ Allen, *The Social Passion*, 89-97.

⁶⁴ Anthony Mardiros, *William Irvine: The Life of a Prairie Radical*, (Halifax: James Lorimer and Co., 1979).

⁶⁵ William Irvine, *Can a Christian Vote for Capitalism?* (Ottawa: Labour Publishing Company, 1935).

of an anti-capitalist alliance between farmers and urban labour within the newly formed national Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF).

From the perspective of Macpherson, the fact that Wood was a longtime farmer whereas Bland, Woodsworth and Irvine, although familiar with and supportive of small-scale agriculture, were writers and clergymen, most likely goes a long way towards explaining the divergent attitudes toward capitalism. For Macpherson, Wood and the bulk of the UFA membership were simply unable to break away from the standard economic conservatism inherent in what he labeled “petit-bourgeois agrarian radicalism.”⁶⁶ Because the particular style of small-scale agriculture practiced by prairie farmers in Canada and the United States had traditionally depended upon a system of private property and a market capable of selling their produce, the notion of increased co-operation, as opposed to outright socialism, represented the only reform they considered viable. Bland and his followers, personally unencumbered by a perceived dependence of small-scale private property and acutely aware of the injustices committed upon urban labour by owners of industry, were able to avoid this “inherent conservatism” and seek a true alternative, the introduction of socialism.

There is little doubt that Macpherson uncovered an important explanatory variable in his analysis by pointing to the nature of Wood’s occupation and its position within the market system but I want to suggest that the divergent views towards capitalism between Wood and the more mainstream social gospel proponents also owe something to the distinct religious interpretations of Wood and Bland. As Richard Allen has noted, Bland derived his social interpretation of Christianity from European rather than American

⁶⁶ Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, 220-221.

sources.⁶⁷ In fact, his reading of the Bible in conjunction with social conditions led him to conclude that it was capitalism itself that was to blame for the economic oppression of the plain people, not the “original sin” of man and thus the essential task of “true” Christianity was not individual regeneration but the abolition of capitalism and the introduction of public ownership.⁶⁸ In other words, Bland’s vision of the social gospel, with its particular European theological and social roots and tendency towards socialism was not the same strand of Christianity Wood adhered to. Although they shared a basic rejection of the otherworldliness of Christianity as well as a desire to see better conditions for the plain people of the prairies by way of increased co-operation, Wood’s interpretation, although tinged with an appreciation for certain elements of the American progressive social gospel movement, was primarily derived from the evangelical “social Christianity” he had experienced in the American South. This was a more conservative interpretation that combined a basic co-operative, “brotherhood of man” ethos with a more traditional “Jeffersonian” embrace of individual piety and small-scale commercial self-sufficiency rather than a wholesale restructuring of the economic system. In fact, Wood framed his solution to the problems of the market around his broader post-millennial understanding of social life and the need for individuals and groups, motivated by the message of Christ, to embrace co-operation.

“Commerce,” he argued, “systematically used in accordance with the true social laws of life, would be the greatest binding tie in the social system.”⁶⁹ However, the economic system had become dominated by the false social law, the spirit of competition,

⁶⁷ Richard Allen, “Salem Bland and the Spirituality of the Social Gospel,” in D. L. Butcher, C. MacDonald, M. E. McPherson, R. R. Watts, ed., *Prairie Spirit: Perspectives on the Heritage of the United Church of Canada in the West*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), 227.

⁶⁸ Allen, *The Social Passion*, 151-152.

⁶⁹ Wood, “The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Two,” 5.

and the terms of trading had thus been engineered to favour those who, driven by incessant greed, excel at competition and are therefore able to build up monopolies that exploit the masses. The solution, therefore, did not lie in a radical retreat from traditional conceptions of private property and free trade, as demanded by the socialists, but rather in a straightforward shift in spirit on behalf of individuals and the groups they participate in. Thus, Wood's thought comes full circle as he returned to his foundational belief in the teachings of Christ to offer a solution to the economic troubles the masses were facing:

Until the problems of trade are solved according to the laws of Christ, His will cannot maintain on earth, and His great prayer cannot be answered.

The solutions of the economic problems must be spiritual, rather than intellectual. Henry George cannot solve them, neither can Carl Marx (sic). Both may, and will give valuable assistance, but the solution is beyond them. Christ can and must solve them.⁷⁰

Therefore, the collection of economic groups co-operating with each other within the political system, made possible by the initial spiritual rebirth of individuals demanded by Christ, would move humanity closer to the coming kingdom:

If the relationships between economic classes can be adjusted in accordance with the true social laws of life, other social problems will almost automatically adjust themselves. When we learn to trade right we will have largely learned to live right. When man trades with man, class with class, and nation with nation in accordance with the true principles of trade, the world will be living in accordance with true social principles, and civilization will be perfected. As long as trade is carried on barbarously our so-called civilization will never rise above the level of barbarism.⁷¹

This perfected civilization is the culmination of the process of individual and social regeneration highlighted in the previous section. The practical construction of this civilization was to be completed by citizens who, over time, evolved into their natural

⁷⁰ Wood, "Observe U.F.A. Sunday, May 27," 12.

⁷¹ Wood, "The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Four," 5.

“co-operative” state by following the teachings of Christ and, in the context of commercial North America, organized themselves in appropriate economic groups that would overtake competitive political parties within the democratic system of governance. In this way, the UFA, as a particular economic group participating in the political realm, was, in the view of Wood, striving toward something well beyond the immediate economic interests of Alberta agrarians. It was an organization dedicated to ushering in the perfect democracy, the kingdom promised to us by Christ.

Conclusion:

The Political Thought of Wood and the Trajectory of Alberta Politics

For Wood, the notion that religion must be held out of politics or economics was unthinkable. Christianity, he noted, is a “capable physician, able to heal all the ills of our social and economic body.”⁷² Indeed, Wood’s entire system of thought, from the initial regeneration of the individual to the transformation of the social realm by way of group government, was built on a particular interpretation of Christianity. Yet, for the long list of scholars that have studied the thought of Wood and the practical achievements of the UFA, the role played by religion has been largely overlooked. It is true that nearly all those who have written about Wood or the UFA have mentioned religion but, for the most part, these brief references have tended to imply that the UFA was part of the broader social gospel movement that swept through the Prairie Provinces in the first quarter of the twentieth century. There is little doubt that the social gospel movement touched the UFA in important ways but, as was discussed above, Wood’s Christianity, and his subsequent conclusions regarding social reform, drew from the American evangelical tradition and was therefore distinct from the interpretations of Bland,

⁷² H.W. Wood, “U.F.A. President’s Address,” in *Grain Growers Guide*, January 31, 1917, 7, 22.

Woodsworth and Irvine, the central purveyors of the mainstream social gospel message on the prairies.

Wood's interpretation of Christianity drew from the distinct American evangelical Protestant tradition in a number of ways. Most fundamentally, he agreed with the general contention that humans are born as imperfect beings that are initially guided by "the animal spirit." It was the dominance of this spirit in public and economic life, not the capitalist economic system that required change. Given humanity's "fallen" condition, the individual required a personal conversion or rebirth through Christ to ensure they were "regenerated" as individuals. Of course, Wood's notion of conversion was not the deeply emotional, mystical, or immediate experience it was for many of the American revivalists. It was instead a gradual acceptance of the "co-operative spirit" that was at the heart of Christ's teachings. Nevertheless, embracing the populist and egalitarian sentiment inherent in the post-Revolution American evangelicalism from which he emerged, Wood understood this conversion to occur by way of the individual's free will. Once the common individual dedicated himself to the teachings of Christ, he or she could be "reborn" in a way that did not require elitist education or the blessing of the traditional clergy. Regeneration was provided to those who carefully read and took to heart the New Testament and most especially the parables of Christ. By structuring the parables around everyday situations, surely Christ intended them to be understood by ordinary people.

Yet, by suggesting that social regeneration, the victory of Christ's spirit of co-operation over Satan's competitive spirit within society, rather than individual conversion was the true end for humanity, Wood also embraced a more radical and progressive Christianity akin to that espoused by mainstream social gospel advocates. However, even

this dimension of his Christian interpretation had strong roots in American evangelicalism. It was the liberal Christian thinkers in mid-nineteenth century America that emerged out of the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening that first articulated a modern postmillennial interpretation that viewed humans, following the teachings of Christ, as possessing the capacity to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Furthermore, Wood interpreted this process through an evolutionary framework just as those liberal evangelicals in America had when confronted with the challenge of Darwin. Similarly, the physical return of Christ following the establishment of this kingdom was noticeably absent from Wood's vision. Christ had already intervened in human history to provide the natural social laws required to achieve the kingdom, those of co-operation. The cosmic struggle between God and Satan would be decided gradually as this natural law identified by Christ slowly overwhelmed humanity and they, in turn, directed their social efforts toward co-operation rather than competition and thus defeated the Antichrist in the form of a competitive spirit. Personal salvation in the foretold kingdom would thus be found on earth at the culmination of a long historical process that is bound to produce a perfect democratic society in which Christ's social teachings reigned supreme.

There can be little doubt that the broad parallels between post-Revolution American evangelicalism and the thought of Wood are attributable to his general exposure to the evangelical Protestant culture of the American South and Midwest, including the agrarian populist movement of the late nineteenth century, and his particular upbringing in the Disciples of Christ sect. The anti-elitism generated by a belief in the capacity of the common individual, the defense of individual autonomy and small-scale commercial self-sufficiency, the emphasis on personal piety and

responsibility, and the related embrace of individual-level regeneration as the appropriate tool for social change were themes central to rural evangelical Protestantism in the American South and Midwest. The intense focus on the gospels at the expense of the remaining scriptures, the emphasis on meaningful participatory democracy and co-operation at the local level, Christianized theories of natural law, and the notion of the Antichrist working through societal elites and oppressing the plain people were all staples of Disciple theology. To this foundation Wood mixed ideas from the northern American social gospel tradition (particularly notions related to the Kingdom of Heaven on earth) and broader philosophical currents (particularly Herbert Spencer's progressive evolutionism and Adam Smith's defense of laissez faire capitalism), to produce a thoroughly unique liberal and postmillennial Christian interpretation. When applied to the particular conditions that Wood found himself in as a farmer in Alberta, he turned to group government. Only this arrangement could lead to the construction of an authentic co-operative and democratic society built upon the laws of Christ within which ordinary people retained the right to participate in government through local avenues and to trade freely within the marketplace, while slowly chipping away the competitive spirit that oppressed the common people.

Although there is little evidence to suggest that Wood's peculiar interpretation of history, complete with the cosmic struggle between antithetical social laws foretold by the Christian Bible, was shared, or even fully understood, by the majority of farmers that toiled in the various locals of the UFA, the strong Christian message that it contained was an easy sell in the overwhelmingly Christian province, especially one with such a strong American presence. Of course, as Macpherson has noted, the attempted transformation

to a “group government” legislature by the UFA following their 1921 electoral victory was a complete failure.⁷³ In addition, the UFA provincial government, facing increasingly tough financial conditions, was unable to offer much in the way of radically “co-operative” policies, with the exception of some assistance to agrarian cooperatives, including the Alberta Wheat Pool.⁷⁴ So what then of the influence of Wood’s religious-political theory with respect to the direction of Alberta politics?

First, regardless of the difficulties the UFA government faced attempting to implement Wood’s vision within the constraints of a pre-existing, party-dominated parliamentary system, the theory of Wood did underlie the highly successful actions of the UFA movement outside of the legislature. By 1920, the UFA had roughly 30 000 members in addition to the 4005 women members of the United Farm Women of Alberta, all toiling in approximately 1200 Locals throughout the province.⁷⁵ In 1923, the UFA began the successful Alberta Wheat Pool, an organization led by Wood that pooled the wheat of Alberta producers to ensure a fair price. This was the culmination of a flourishing agrarian-based social movement and the success with which these Locals engaged and educated citizens in the political and economic conditions of the day has been clearly documented by scholars. However, the success of the UFA in this regard has yet to be interpreted through the lens of Wood’s religious-based political thought. From this perspective, participation and co-operation at the local level were not simply tools to be utilized in the quest for economic stability on the part of the agrarians. Rather, co-operation between citizens was the key activity required of mankind in its struggle to

⁷³ Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, chapter 3. See also, Carl Frederick Betke, “The United Farmers of Alberta, 1921-1935: The Relationship between the Agricultural Organization and the Government of Alberta,” (MA Thesis, University of Alberta, 1971).

⁷⁴ Betke, “The United Farmers of Alberta,” 71-72, 93.

⁷⁵ Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1990), 194.

establish the millennial kingdom of God. In fact, once the individual had made the choice to be reborn, to accept the call for co-operation issued by Christ, he or she would be naturally inclined to co-operate with their neighbours and this would lead to the establishment of the Local that, in turn, would nourish the provincial organization and society at large by applying the co-operative message of Christ to the social and political realms.⁷⁶ Co-operation obviously demanded intense participation from members of the UFA and this in turn fostered a highly participatory and deliberative democratic structure. This was authentic grassroots democracy where concern for the public good was paramount and citizens were expected to devote much energy towards it, the payoff being the establishment of the ultimate common good, the kingdom of God on earth. Although this emphasis on meaningful, community-level participation would eventually wane under the Alberta Social Credit (as will be discussed in detail in the following chapter), Wood's influential insistence that the UFA encourage such activity was directly related to his interpretation of Christianity.

Second, despite advocating a system of commerce based upon co-operation rather than competition, a notion that clearly seems quite radical and left-leaning from our contemporary perspective, Wood's religious interpretation ensured that the UFA rejected the more radical demands for socialism or increased state-ownership from mainstream social gospel advocates such as Bland or Irvine. Not only was commerce a "natural" institution, the notion of centralizing more economic control in governments went against Wood's evangelical populist impulses which stressed the problem-solving capacity of ordinary people. More practically, as Wood's preference for a voluntary rather than compulsory system of grain-pooling among Alberta agrarians made clear, socialistic

⁷⁶ H.W. Wood, "Democratic Organization," in *The Western Independent*, October 1, 1919, 8.

arrangements impeded individual liberty and opened the door for manipulation by the political parties of the day which were controlled by wealthy industrialists.⁷⁷ Surely this perspective was partly rooted in Wood's particular American agrarian and Jeffersonian liberal upbringing but by arguing that the only authentic solution to the problem of the economic oppression of the plain people required spiritual regeneration at the individual level, Wood drew directly from the American evangelical Protestant tradition. By instructing agrarians to embrace the teachings of Christ and "be ye perfect as your father in Heaven is perfect," Wood rejected both the secular intellectual solutions of Marx and the Christian-based social gospel calls for socialism and placed the onus squarely on the individual to bring about the perfect democratic and economic system. In doing so, Wood helped to steer early Alberta society in a decidedly anti-socialistic direction by harnessing the prairie-wide utopian hopes of Alberta agrarians to a stern emphasis on individual responsibility. As will become clearer in the next chapter, utopian dreams of a perfected co-operative society on earth would quickly fade from the Alberta political landscape under a Social Credit government but themes related to the importance of individual responsibility and a distinct antipathy towards socialism would continue unabated as the province continued to chart a political and economic course distinct from its prairie neighbours.

Third, and closely related to the points made above, the broader aspects of Wood's religiously-inspired political thought helped to solidify an adherence to a unique variant of conservatism at odds with the British-based "tory" conservatism that played such an important role in the ideological development of much of the rest of English

⁷⁷ H.W. Wood, "Compulsory Pooling of Wheat," nd, Alberta Wheat Pool Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-2369-125.

Canada.⁷⁸ I label this variant “populist conservatism.” Like the tory strain, Alberta’s populist conservatism shares a Christian foundation and thus seeks to preserve the institutions capable of spreading this moral message in the name of social stability but it does so from an individualistic and egalitarian perspective that rejects the hierarchical tendencies of tory conservatism by stressing the capacity of the common individual and the need to ensure his or her freedom from the oppressive nature of certain established authorities. Wood’s political thought, built upon an American evangelical foundation, insisted that only through an individual rebirth in Christ could society begin to improve. This rebirth required personal study of the gospels and an individual dedication to the moral code demanded by Christ. The most obvious lesson to be derived was that of co-operation, but Wood and the UFA also focused much energy on educating agrarian youth with respect to the parables of Christ and the broader Protestant ethic, including hard work and self-discipline required to become proper, contributing citizens.⁷⁹ By demanding personal responsibility, guided by basic Christian precepts, the UFA could conserve the institutions of democratic governance and commercialism that were “natural” but in need of reform. However, this reform was to come gradually for revolutionary violence would surely destroy both the good and bad in the social system and humanity would be left in a state of dangerous anarchy.

⁷⁸ The classic Canadian articulation and defense of this “tory” conservative variant remains: George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965). I originally discussed the distinction between “tory” and “populist” conservatism in: Clark Banack, “American Protestantism and the Roots of ‘Populist Conservatism’ in Alberta,” in J. Farney and D. Rayside ed., *Comparing Canadian Conservatism: Principles, Politics, and Policy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Forthcoming in 2012).

⁷⁹ See: Irene Parlby, “Mrs. Parlby’s Address,” in *Grain Growers Guide*, January 29, 1919, 8. Rennie has also commented on the strong evangelical commitment to personal responsibility and character development within the UFA. See: Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy*, 122.

On the other hand, the appeal to the individual and his or her capacity to interpret both the moral lessons of the bible and the nature of political and economic problems they faced offered a radical challenge to the more traditional attitude of deference to established power present within orthodox versions of conservative political thought. This egalitarian and dissenting sentiment, in conjunction with Wood's postmillennial sympathies related to the social aspects of Christianity and the coming kingdom, put a more radical stamp on his thought. The conception of citizenship that Wood's political theory implies shares this tension. In abstract terms, citizenship required emulating Christ and thus co-operating with those in their community. More practically, this meant contributing to your local and educating yourself with respect to the gospels in addition to current political and economic problems. By doing so one worked towards the success of the UFA that, on a higher plane, was the same as working toward the coming kingdom of God and the establishment of a just society. The role of the citizen therefore implied a duty one must fulfill in order to advance the interests of the whole society but it also contained a more radical interpretation of the common person as one of significant moral and intellectual capacity, a stance often denied by orthodox conservatism.

Thus, Wood's political thought, derived from his religious perspective, maintained both the conservative, religious-based demand for individual moral responsibility and the populist anti-establishment and egalitarian orientation that blossomed in post-Revolution evangelical America. Although unsuccessful when it came to permanently instituting his vision of group government within the political realm, the Alberta populace has, to this day, remained faithful to the populist variant of conservatism inherent in Wood's political thought, including the radical emphasis on the

virtue and capacity of the common people and the more conservative demand that individual and societal well-being is dependent upon the exercise of individual responsibility as opposed to state intervention and socialistic arrangements.

Chapter Five:

Religion and the Political Thought of William Aberhart and Ernest Manning: The Fundamentalist, Premillennial Perspective

Like the UFA, there already exists a substantial academic literature on the Alberta Social Credit that examines the rise and fall of the party, the unique interpretation of the “social credit” economic theories of British engineer Major Douglas by Alberta Social Credit founder William Aberhart, and the subsequent abandonment of social credit theory by Ernest Manning following Aberhart’s death. Unlike most academic treatments of Henry Wise Wood and the UFA however, scholars have paid plenty of attention to the strong religious current that reverberated through the political speeches of Aberhart. Indeed, a whole host of works have been produced which tell, and re-tell, the story of Aberhart as a devout Christian who was introduced to a particular version of premillennial fundamentalism in his home province of Ontario before moving to Alberta where he embarked on a successful career as school principal and radio preacher before becoming premier. In addition, nearly all commentators have mentioned the unusual mix of radical economic theories and prophetic Christianity he would eventually blend together on his radio program in the months ahead of his surprise participation, and victory, in the Alberta provincial election of 1935. Yet, rather than exploring the precise relationship between Aberhart’s Christianity and his political thought, the vast majority of this scholarly work on Aberhart’s religious beliefs has focused most intensely on either the role Aberhart’s radio ministry played in popularizing his religious-economic message, the manner by which Aberhart’s religious message spoke to the hopes of an economically insecure population in Depression-ridden Alberta, or the broad philosophical similarities

that existed between Aberhart's Christian interpretation and the economic theories of Douglas.¹ Thus, it is the goal of this chapter to move beyond these works and demonstrate a clearer understanding of the very real connection that existed between Aberhart's Christian interpretation and his political thought. In fact, without a proper grasp of the implications of his religious perspective, his politics, I suggest, make very little sense. As will become apparent, the same relationship between the theology and political thought of Aberhart would exist for his protégé Ernest Manning who would become premier upon his teacher's death in 1943 and lead Alberta until his retirement in 1968.

Aberhart moved from Ontario for a teaching job in Calgary in 1910. In 1918 he began a bible study group that steadily grew in popularity and by 1925 had turned into a Sunday afternoon radio broadcast that, by 1933, would be followed by more than 300 000 people.² In 1932 Aberhart became interested in the "social credit" economic theories of Douglas who argued that the Great Depression could be solved by the state issuing individual citizen's additional credit to enhance their purchasing power. Aberhart spent three years attempting to convince the governing UFA to adopt this economic strategy of providing "social credit" to Albertans but, after being rebuffed on numerous occasions, took to politics himself and led the newly formed Alberta Social Credit to victory in 1935. Although the economic depression was the prime catalyst behind Aberhart's

¹ See, for example, John Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), Harry H. Hiller, "A Critical Analysis of the Role of Religion in a Canadian Populist Movement: The Emergence and Domination of the Social Credit Party in Alberta," (PhD Dissertation, McMaster University, 1972), Thomas Flanagan, "Social Credit in Alberta: A Canadian 'Cargo Cult'?" in *Archives De Sociologie Des Religions*, Vol. 34, (1972), 39-48, and Thomas Flanagan and Martha Lee, "From Social Credit to Social Conservatism: The Evolution of an Ideology," in *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall 1991), 205-223.

² David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 216.

entrance into the political realm, it was the broader fundamentalist-modernist religious controversy that had been raging in the Protestant churches of America, and to some extent Canada, since the early 1920s that most shaped his thinking.

Reacting to both Darwin's theory of evolution and the application of new scholarly methods of historical interpretation to the Bible (Higher Criticism) in the late nineteenth century, many American Protestant clergymen had begun re-interpreting scripture in a way that questioned the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy. In turn, a subsequent reaction erupted within American Protestantism against the growing popularity of these modern liberal interpretations of Christianity. Fundamentalism, a term derived from a series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915 that took aim at Higher Criticism and reaffirmed a conservative interpretation of scripture, would henceforth represent the Christian beliefs of those who rejected modernism by insisting on an absolute literal interpretation of the Bible. This included a recommitment to the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy and thus the historical reality of the virgin birth of Christ, His bodily resurrection, and all His miracles and literal pronouncements, in addition to those of the Old Testament Prophets who had come before Him. Aberhart came of age in the heat of this controversy and had been groomed in his early days in Ontario by a staunchly fundamentalist preacher, Dr. William Nichol. Shortly after, Aberhart enrolled in an influential correspondence course offered by the American biblical scholar C.I. Scofield, the man most responsible for popularizing biblical prophecy and premillennial dispensationalism in American fundamentalist circles. As will become apparent throughout this chapter, it would be difficult to exaggerate how influential Aberhart's

religious views, derived squarely from the fundamentalist side of this great religious controversy, would be on his political thought and action until his death in 1943.

In short, both Aberhart and Manning subscribed to a fundamentalist, premillennial perspective. In contrast to the postmillennialism of Wood, the religiously-inspired political thought of Aberhart and Manning did not aim toward gradually perfect society through works based upon the teachings of Christ. Rather, Aberhart and Manning's premillennial theology insisted that Christ alone would bring about the Kingdom of God. Therefore, they sought to encourage individual Albertans to seek the eternal salvation offered by God prior to the point at which He would establish the millennium. This goal demanded certain political conditions be implemented in order to facilitate the personal conversion of those individuals who had not yet "found" God. It was the desire to implement these conditions that motivated Aberhart and Manning in the political sphere. However, this religious perspective did grow out of the same broad tradition of "American" evangelical Protestantism that produced Wood's religious outlook. Thus, it shared the same emphasis on individual capacity and democracy, as well as the same tensions between this more radical understanding and the conservative tendencies inherent in the Christian faith, that characterized the history of American evangelicalism and largely distinguished it from other countries, including much of English-speaking Canada. The remainder of this chapter expands on this assertion by first examining the shared theology of Aberhart and Manning before considering the manner by which this particular Christian interpretation influenced each of their political goals. The chapter closes with a comparison between the religious and political views of Wood and those of Aberhart and Manning that help to illuminate some of the more prominent differences

between the two movements as well as highlighting the broader implications of their religious-based thought and its impact on the direction of Alberta's politics.

The Shared Theology of Aberhart and Manning

That Aberhart was a Christian fundamentalist who developed a particular fondness for premillennial dispensationalism is well known. As discussed in more detail in chapter three, premillennial dispensationalism entailed an understanding of history wherein the world progressed through a series of “dispensations” within which God had a slightly different relationship with his followers. However, it was God and not man who moved history from one dispensation to the next, an outlook that was diametrically opposed to the “postmillennial” view which placed the onus on humanity to bring about the millennial reign of Christ's peace and righteousness. For premillennialists, the passage from the contemporary dispensation to the “millennial” dispensation would be solely God's doing.³ In other words, humans are active in the world but significant change, like the movement from one dispensation to the next, occurs only through divine intervention. Although introduced to dispensationalism in Ontario, it was upon his arrival in Calgary that Aberhart's involvement in prophetic bible studies and teaching blossomed and by 1924 he had published a series entitled “God's Great Prophecies” in which he outlined his dispensational theology. In 1925, he began broadcasting his sermons on radio and his highly popular “Back to the Bible Hour” program became his central outlet for espousing his fundamentalist message and attacking the growing “modernist” sentiment he sensed in the mainstream churches.⁴ In the fall of 1927 Aberhart opened the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute and Ernest Manning was one of

³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 27-51.

⁴ David R. Elliott and Iris Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart*, (Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987), 67-75.

the first students to enroll. It was here that Manning received and internalized a heavy dose of Aberhart's preferred version of Christianity. It was upon this religious foundation that they would build both a long lasting radio ministry and a durable political movement, two activities that, I will argue, must be understood as complementary strategies motivated by their larger theological beliefs.

The most thorough accounting of the relationship between Aberhart's religious interpretation and his politics to date has been completed by David Elliott whose careful study of Aberhart's early sermons and Institute writings has revealed a clear propensity toward dispensationalist themes relating to the downward course of history, the depravity of man and the coming Rapture and Tribulation prior to the millennium.⁵ Yet, Elliott moves beyond this point by arguing that Aberhart's eventual political pronouncements as leader of the Alberta Social Credit were "antithetical" to his long-held premillennial dispensationalist Christian outlook.⁶ More specifically, Elliott points to Aberhart's clear disapproval of "modernist" Christian ministers who espoused a "social gospel" version of Christianity that argued man's salvation lie in the good social works that would lead to a perfected society. From Aberhart's premillennial perspective, any effort aimed at perfecting society was "as futile as a farmer hoping to purify a polluted well by painting the pump."⁷ Such hopes were severally misplaced because, according to Aberhart's theology, the world was to progressively deteriorate until God alone intervened to defeat the antichrist and usher in the Millennium. Elliott provides two great quotes from

⁵ David R. Elliott, "The Devil and William Aberhart: The Nature and Function of his Eschatology," in *Studies in Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer 1980), 326.

⁶ David R. Elliott, "Antithetical Elements in William Aberhart's Theology and Political Ideology," in *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (1978), 38-58. See also: Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart*.

⁷ Elliott, "Antithetical Elements in William Aberhart's Theology and Political Ideology," 41.

Aberhart's pre-Social Credit sermons that solidify his premillennial view. Speaking to the notion of social reform, Aberhart stated: "God Never intended us to reform the world. This world will never be fit for the everlasting habitations of the just. We are to seek and save the lost, pointing them to Jesus."⁸ To those eager for political change Aberhart answered: "The very best form of Government, democratic or otherwise, that man could ever establish upon this earth will not be sufficient to recover mankind, but will ultimately end in anarchy."⁹

Yet, as Elliott notes, Aberhart seemingly shifted gears entirely in 1932 by strenuously advocating economic reform by way of the social credit theory with which he promised to end "poverty in the midst of plenty." Thus, Elliott suggests that by mid-1933, Aberhart's preaching "had become a kind of social gospel with emphasis on the 'brotherhood of man,' a theme that was repugnant to many fundamentalists." By doing so "Aberhart departed from a long apolitical tradition which had characterized the adherents of dispensationalism."¹⁰ In fact, Elliott suggests that Aberhart was implying that the Social Credit movement could usher in the Millennium, a direct refutation of his premillennialism.¹¹ That Aberhart himself did not see this seeming contradiction is, for Elliott, a case of having his basic humanitarian concerns awakened by the suffering he witnessed during the Depression, coupled with a tendency towards compartmentalized thinking and leadership ambitions that coalesced in a way that blinded him to the contradictions in his own thinking.¹²

⁸ Cited in Elliott, "Antithetical Elements in William Aberhart's Theology and Political Ideology," 40.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 55, 46.

¹¹ Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart*, 175, 319.

¹² Elliott, "Antithetical Elements in William Aberhart's Theology and Political Ideology," 57.

Of course, Elliot is quite correct to argue that Aberhart was a stern premillennial dispensationalist. However, the broader claim that Aberhart was unfaithful to this religious view by entering the political fray and demanding the introduction of social credit economics is built on a particularly narrow interpretation of premillennial dispensationalism that I would like to challenge. For Elliott, dispensationalism is a purely “otherworldly” theology that accepts the deteriorating conditions of the world as preordained and thus inevitable. Largely agreeing with American liberal Christians from the early twentieth century, Elliot essentially implies that the logic of such an eschatological outlook was that social efforts of any kind were pointless.¹³ Only Christ’s foretold return would usher in the millennial period of unprecedented peace and righteousness. However, as premillennial scholar Timothy Weber argues, “such generalizations about the premillennial outlook [are] simplistic and misleading.”¹⁴ It is true that premillennial dispensationalists rejected the notion of building a kingdom of God on earth but they also made a critically important distinction between the capacity of the faithful to “save the world” and their capacity to “save souls.” For premillennial dispensationalists, “accepting the righteousness that God freely offers to all” is the prime responsibility of Christians within the current age, a task that requires one to develop a personal relationship with God and be “reborn” in Him.¹⁵ Yet, there is also a further responsibility that God has given to His church in this age: evangelization, the dispensing of the gospel to those who have not yet experienced a spiritual rebirth in Christ. Like the vast majority of American Protestant evangelicals, premillennial dispensationalists

¹³ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1925*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 65-66.

¹⁴ Ibid, 66.

¹⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 64.

believed those who died without having experienced this conversion were eternally damned. It was the role of the church to reach these individuals before it was too late.

In other words, Christians in the present dispensation did have a task to complete on earth that was separate from saving the world through works. It was to work tirelessly to bring the message of Christ to as many people as possible and thus “save” them before the Rapture. Most premillennial dispensationalists believed that the coming millennium would be preceded by the “Rapture,” the point at which Christ returns briefly to earth to gather his true followers who had experienced a spiritual rebirth. The remaining individuals who had not experienced conversion were left on earth to suffer under the rule of the antichrist, a period known as the Tribulation. To grasp the manner by which this view encouraged a dedication to particular social actions within this world related to “saving” others is critically important to understanding the thought of Aberhart and Manning.

As Weber notes, premillennial dispensationalists often utilized the metaphor of a sinking ship to describe earthly conditions: “while the church could not keep the ship afloat, it could at least rescue a few of the passengers.”¹⁶ Thus, they were not solely concerned with their own salvation, a charge often labeled against conservative Protestantism, but were moved by a distinct social duty to save others. In fact, as Marsden has argued, dispensationalists have in many cases supported public and private social programs so long as they were “understood as complementary outgrowths of the regenerating work of Christ which saved souls for all eternity.”¹⁷ Dispensationalists’ first responsibility, after ensuring that their own relationship with God was secure, was to

¹⁶ Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 71.

¹⁷ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 91.

bring the Word of God to those who have yet to convert and thus save them. In fact, the desire to do so was a central component of the larger, “love the neighbour” spirit that would naturally overcome the individual once he or she enters into a personal relationship with God. Other, more “worldly” acts would also follow conversion, especially those related to feeding, clothing and healing the needy. Such social acts were sometimes understood as precursors to the conversion of the poor if it was perceived that poverty was preventing them from properly nurturing their spiritual side. Importantly however, these acts were never aimed at ushering in the millennium or perfecting society. They were simply a means to the end of converting as many as possible prior to the Rapture. This is the fundamental difference between premillennial dispensationalism and the postmillennialism inherent in much of the social gospel with respect to action in this world. And, as I will demonstrate in a more detailed examination of Aberhart and Manning’s shared theology in the paragraphs below, Aberhart’s sudden interest in political and economic reform in the 1930s was built upon a call to action within this world that fell squarely within this version of premillennial dispensationalism.

The basic points of the shared religious perspective of Aberhart and Manning were staples of the American fundamentalist movement that had emerged out of the revivalist traditions in the early twentieth century. The central tenets of this faith included a belief in the divine verbal inspiration of the scriptures, the original “fall” of man and the subsequent “universal depravity of human nature,” the atoning efficacy of the death of Christ, the necessity of spiritual rebirth as the initial step in one’s salvation, “the everlasting happiness of the righteous and the awful and everlasting misery of the unbelieving wicked, in a literal lake of fire,” and the literal Second Coming of Christ,

first “at His appearing in the air for His Church,” and second, “at His coming to the Mount of Olives to establish the millennial reign of righteousness upon the earth.”¹⁸

The last point referring to the return of Christ “appearing in the air for His Church,” prior to returning again to establish the millennium was a reference to the Rapture discussed above. The importance of the Rapture within the theology of Aberhart and Manning was captured in *The Branding Irons of the Antichrist*, a play penned by the duo in 1931 that featured a brother and sister who had failed to seek a personal relationship with Christ and thus suffered terribly during the Tribulation. The play ends with a voice behind the curtain offering the audience a rather dramatic warning: “Such shall be the tragic end of all those who learn too late that except a man be born again he will be left behind at the Rapture to face the branding irons of the Antichrist.”¹⁹ Not only did such a warning underline the consequences of failing to accept Christ before the coming Rapture, it also points to the motivation of Aberhart and Manning’s ministry within this dispensation: convincing people to seek Christ and experience a spiritual rebirth. It is this emphasis on evangelism that broadens the focus of dispensationalism beyond that of a pessimistic assessment of current social conditions toward a sense of mission on earth and is the key to explaining the larger purpose of both Aberhart and Manning’s actions in this world.

For dispensationalists, the present “age of Grace” was a time wherein individuals were to develop a personal relationship with God in order to rectify their sinful nature

¹⁸ “Doctrinal Basis of the Institute,” in *Bulletin of the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute*, nd, Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1357 -1.

¹⁹ The text of this play is available in: L.P.V Johnson and Ola J. MacNutt, *Aberhart of Alberta*, (Edmonton: Co-op Press, 1970), 231-239.

and prepare themselves for the millennial reign of Christ. Man was understood to be a fallen creature and therefore possessed inherent tendencies toward evil. Manning writes:

One of the great fallacies in so many modern religious philosophies is that they assume that man is inherently good at heart. [In fact] Scripture declares that the exact opposite is true. That all men are born into this world spiritually dead...with a heart that is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.²⁰

Importantly, man is incapable of altering this aspect of his nature independently. Change was possible by the power of Christ alone and this could only occur through a spiritual rebirth in His name. Retelling the story of Nicodemus from the Book of John, Aberhart notes that Christ pointed to:

The absolute necessity of him being regenerated or Born Again by the Holy Spirit by which act he would receive a new and divine nature which would identify him with Christ and enable him to comprehend the things of God.

The Word of God declares that there is an atoning efficacy in the shed blood of Christ which cleanses the soul of the individual who personally appropriates the finished work on his behalf...and makes him fit to enter into the presence of God Himself.²¹

Immediately, one notices in this theology a significantly different starting point than many of the mainstream social gospel versions of Christianity that viewed man as essentially good and capable of attaining salvation by following the social teachings of Christ on earth. By stressing man's inherent depravity, Aberhart and Manning articulate a religious viewpoint that rejected any interpretation of eternal salvation through good works. It is rather by the divine grace of God that Christian individuals could find redemption by accepting His mercy and affirming Christ individually. However, the notion of good works is not foreign to this interpretation of salvation. Rather, good

²⁰ Ernest Manning, letter to T.G. Irwin, November 1, 1946, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 69.289 file 1179.

²¹ William Aberhart, letter to J.H. Caldwell, October 15, 1932, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-30.

works on earth will be a direct result of this individual rebirth. Manning notes “the spiritually regenerated individual thinks differently from the one who isn’t. His attitude to his fellowmen is different. His attitude towards what he regards as his responsibilities to people is different. He inclines to love people instead of hating them.”²² It is this humanitarian concern, motivated by the Holy Spirit that resides in the individual who has experienced rebirth, which is to make a difference in the lives of others. Attempting to do good works without such regeneration is bound to fail because of the fallen nature of mankind. However good one’s intentions, sin will eventually overcome the individual who has not had his or her soul cleansed by the Grace of God through rebirth. The individual who has found Christ in this way is driven by “a love of Christ for what he’d done for us,” and this is replicated in his or her dealings with fellow humans. “In other words,” Manning says, “we express our Love for Him by being concerned about the people He was concerned about enough to die for.”²³

The expression of this love for others following individual regeneration was, for Manning, the single greatest factor explaining the actions of his mentor who, Manning suggests, “had a very, very deep sense of responsibility, and this grew from his Christian conviction that we were in this world to serve, that we are our brother’s keeper, we have an obligation to others.”²⁴ Surely it is this sense of obligation to his fellows, which Aberhart would mention on a number of occasions when promoting social credit doctrines, that encourages scholars to view Aberhart as akin to the minister who preached

²² Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 19, (August 20, 1980), 13 Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

²³ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 39, (May 17, 1982), 27 Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

²⁴ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 16, (July 18, 1980), 41, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

the social gospel. Recall Elliott in particular, who found this emphasis on serving others so difficult to square with the “pre-social credit” Aberhart. Yet Manning, who took pains to repeatedly stress the “love for others” one would feel following rebirth, repeated the essence of Aberhart’s contention in 1967 (fully 35 years after Aberhart took up the social credit cause) that the prime function of Christians within this world was not to solve social problems but to “bring people into a personal relationship with Christ.”²⁵ This is a significant point in the theology of Aberhart and Manning that, I argue, has been severely misunderstood. Both men’s suggestion that the aim of Christians in this world should be encouraging others to develop a personal relationship with Christ is intimately tied to the broader belief in a deep “love for others” that motivates the regenerated individual to seek out and assist those who have yet to experience rebirth and thus save them from eternal damnation. Therefore, the notion of “being our brother’s keeper” is a sentiment that demands much more than simply providing those in need with physical handouts as the social gospel argues. It requires the Christian to facilitate the personal rebirth of those in spiritual need and thus assist with the biggest prize of all, salvation in Christ. As I will argue shortly, it is in the spirit of this facilitation, not in the hopes of building a perfect society, that Aberhart undertook his efforts to reform the economic system of Alberta.

Despite rejecting outright the postmillennial notion of humans possessing the ability to usher in the millennium, Dispensationalists did, in theory at least, believe it to be possible to improve conditions slightly within each dispensation.²⁶ Speaking to the proper application of social credit economics, Aberhart argued “it is the transformation of the individual’s life and attitude of mind from this personal relationship with the living

²⁵ Ernest Manning, letter to G. Drexhage, February 28, 1967, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173 file 800.

²⁶ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 63.

Christ that...is essential to the proper application of economics in order that the desired results may be realized.”²⁷ Manning agreed that the best human efforts could not prevent social problems from deteriorating but that the root of the problem was not “the system” but rather the individual’s alienation from God and the subsequent evil tendencies he or she suffered. Therefore, “the restoration of men to a right relationship with God is the first step towards an effective solution of our national problems.”²⁸ In fact, the regenerated Christian has a duty in this world to alleviate the evil that lies at the root of present social problems. Manning writes:

While a Christian is in the world but not of the world he nevertheless has a responsibility to exert a maximum measure of influence to restrain the corruption in the world and to advance righteousness and whatsoever things are true.²⁹

He continues elsewhere:

I have never been able to follow the reasoning of Christians who isolate themselves from public affairs then spend much time in deploring the fact that public life so often tends to materialism and unrighteousness.

In the realm of politics as in the realm of business [Christian] influence must always be toward righteousness and against evil.³⁰

In fact, it will not be possible for the regenerated individual to avoid bringing his “love for others” into the social realm:

Once a man is genuinely and supernaturally born again of the Holy Spirit the new nature he thereby acquires changes his attitude towards every issue of life, including those things that pertain to the government or management of the country of which he is a citizen.

²⁷ William Aberhart, letter to J.H. Caldwell, October 15, 1932, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-30.

²⁸ Ernest Manning, letter to Ronald S. Dinnick, January 10, 1961, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173 file 394a.

²⁹ Ernest Manning, letter to G.M. Wilson, April 18, 1962, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173 file 394b.

³⁰ Ernest Manning, letter to Ruth Bedford, April 18, 1962, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173 file 394b.

It is his duty wherever he goes to leave behind the greatest impact possible by his Christian testimony and influence. There is no scriptural justification for excluding public affairs and other responsibilities of citizenship from the field of his influence.³¹

In these passages one finds a distinct notion of Christian service *in this world*, with the intent of restraining evil and extending God's love. Such an interpretation surely contradicts the purely "otherworldly" interpretation of dispensationalism offered by Elliott, and there were certainly fundamentalist Christian sects that would have loathed such attitudes toward earthly service. However, both Aberhart and Manning never wavered from their more foundational belief in the supreme aim of Christianity in this age: bringing others into a personal relationship with Christ before the Rapture occurred. Thus, any action in this world was, in the end, motivated by this concern and not any desire to perfect society. Unlike Henry Wise Wood, who adhered to a particular postmillennial interpretation of history, neither Aberhart nor Manning suggested that all humans would eventually be converted and, consequently, all social problems solved. In fact, Aberhart argued that the Sermon on the Mount, the collection of Christ's social teachings that Wood interpreted as a guide to implementing the kingdom of God on earth, was meant for the "millennial age," not the present "age of grace."³² What Christians could do was use their "love for others" to expand His influence in this world in a way that encouraged others to personally seek Christ and thus be "saved" prior to the Rapture. It is in this interpretation of the supreme duty of Christians in this age that one finds the key to understanding the social actions of both Aberhart and Manning.

³¹ Ernest Manning, letter to Lester C. Frets, July 24, 1958, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 69.289 file 2187.

³² William Aberhart, letter to J.H. Caldwell, February 2, 1933, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-30.

Stretching back to the Second Great Awakening in the United States, American evangelical Protestants have understood personal spiritual conversion to require two things. First, the potential convert would obviously require some knowledge of Christ and the Scriptures in order to comprehend the reasons why one should seek such rebirth. This “educational” requirement was met by the revivalists who took it upon themselves to spread the Word of God in such a way that the plain people of the republic could understand and thus be enthused and overcome by the Holy Spirit contained within the Word. Second, the potential convert required a certain freedom to seek God’s grace. Recall that American Protestantism evolved away from the Calvinistic notion of predestination and toward the *Arminian* notion that conversion, and thus salvation, was now considered to be an act of free individual choice. Therefore, individual freedom in the religious and intellectual realms became a paramount concern of nineteenth century Protestants. These prerequisite conditions necessary for conversion were fully embraced by the Christian fundamentalist movement that emerged out of the revivalist tradition in the twentieth century. As American fundamentalist scholar George Marsden has argued, “The closest thing to a political principle that most fundamentalists seemed to share was a profession of individualism that paralleled their theological dictum that the individual was the basic unit in the work of salvation.”³³ It was from this fundamentalist movement that Aberhart derived much of his theology so it should come as no surprise that his social actions in Alberta, like Manning’s, were based on this principle of individualism and aimed at fulfilling both of these conditions. The first condition, “education” was undertaken through their ministry, mostly over radio. It was in this service Aberhart, and then Manning, followed in the footsteps of the early American revivalists and brought, in

³³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 208.

plain language, the Word of God to the people of Alberta. The second condition, ensuring that the individual possessed the freedom necessary to seek God's grace, was the primary concern of their political and economic beliefs, and it is to this realm of action I now turn.

Aberhart and Social Credit Economics

The story of Aberhart's introduction and conversion to Douglas's social credit economic theories has been told in great detail many times over so I will provide only a brief summary here. In short, the Depression that followed the great stock market crash of 1929 had a considerable impact on Aberhart, as it had on all Albertans. The economy of the Prairie Provinces was devastated by the culmination of high interest rates, mass unemployment and a severe drought and Aberhart was witness to a whole host of suffering, especially that of his students he taught in Calgary. In 1932, one of these students committed suicide due to his family's dire economic circumstances and this shook Aberhart considerably. That summer he was introduced to social credit economics by a fellow teacher who presented him a book by Maurice Colbourne, *Unemployment or War*. After staying up through the night to read the book in its entirety, Aberhart reportedly exclaimed the following morning that he had found the solution to the Depression. By the fall of 1932 he was including an explanation of, and enthusiastic support for, social credit economics within his radio broadcasts.³⁴

Social credit, in its simplest formulation, blamed the current economic conditions on a lack of purchasing power possessed by regular citizens who were beholden to large financiers that controlled credit. Thus, despite the technological advances that had

³⁴ A more detailed description of this chain of events can be found in: Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta*, 43-49 and Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart*, 100-110.

increased production, the economy was slowed to a halt because greedy bankers refused to lend at reasonable rates thus impeding regular patterns of consumption. The result was “poverty in the midst of plenty.” To rectify this situation the state was to take control of credit away from the greedy financier who profited from high interest rates and provide its citizens a share or dividend of this “social credit” to allow them to buy goods. In doing so, purchasing power is reestablished and the economy is thus revived. However, Douglas was quick to note that such an action was not a charitable handout. Rather, the technological advances that had increased production were the result of the culmination of all the people’s efforts within the state and any production was therefore part of their “cultural heritage.” In other words, all citizens had a right to a share of that which was produced. Yet, this was not a socialist vision. Citizens were to receive a dividend but this was meant to cover only the bare necessities of life. Douglas was a firm believer in the freedom of the individual and the notion of the state providing completely for him or her would wreak havoc on the market-based incentives that encourage the individual to continually develop. This would be a theme that would prove vitally important to Aberhart’s own interpretation and attempted implementation of social credit economics in Alberta.³⁵

By 1933, Aberhart was fully converted to social credit economics and was eagerly lobbying all who would listen that it was the key to ending poverty in Alberta. In a letter to an inquisitive listener he wrote confidently:

The Douglas System provides the bare necessities of life to every bona fide citizen of the Province, and forever frees our loyal citizens from the dread of poverty and starvation in the midst of plenty. At the same time it respects the

³⁵ An insightful and detailed examination of the economic theories of Douglas and the interpretation of such by Aberhart is provided by: C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), chapters four and five.

personal rights and liberty of each individual citizen and has a definite policy for the encouragement and rewarding of his individual enterprise.

One thing that appeals to me and I believe to every thinking Christian, in the Douglas System of Economics is the fact that from beginning to end it is based on the great principles of God's great economy.³⁶

Within this statement one finds three precise reasons why Aberhart favoured social credit and, despite never directly mentioning any religious motivation in his well-known *Social Credit Manual* published in 1935, they all were strongly correlated with his theological position. First, it appealed to Aberhart's Christian sense of duty to his fellows by ensuring an end to the suffering associated with the Depression. Second, it appealed to his premillennial dispensationalism by protecting the freedom of the individual. Third, he was convinced that the structure of the social credit plan was actually modeled after the plan God had provided individuals with which to attain salvation. I will expand on each of these points in due course but it is first necessary to say a few words about the speeches and writings of Aberhart.

Elliot is quite right to suggest that the Depression and Aberhart's interest in social credit did bring about a significant shift in the tone and content of his sermons and speeches. His promotion of social credit was full of references to the "brotherhood of man" and the Christian duty to "end poverty in the midst of plenty." Aberhart also regularly suggested that social credit was modeled after "God's plan" and that "God stood behind our crusade" and that "deliverance" was near should Alberta adopt the Douglas plan. This shift did, it seems, commit Aberhart to a "worldly" position much closer to the social gospel than that of a premillennial dispensationalist. Yet he continued to preach much of the standard "find Christ before the Rapture" Christianity even as he

³⁶ William Aberhart, letter to J.H. Caldwell, March 29, 1933, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-30.

defended economic reform. This combination blurred his intended meaning to such an extent that it is rather easy to see why Elliott would charge him with speaking in a contradictory, perhaps even incoherent, fashion. However, I argue that a careful reading of Aberhart's endorsement of social credit economics reveals that a basic framework of dispensationalist thought, with a special emphasis on the spiritual development of the individual, was still present.

Aberhart's defense of social credit was built firstly on his belief that a central demand of Christianity was to be "thy brother's keeper." To do nothing while your fellows suffered was not possible for the regenerated individual who was overwhelmed with a love for both God and His people. Preston Manning, who grew up hearing many stories about Aberhart from his parents Ernest and Muriel, who both knew Aberhart quite well, argues that it was precisely this basic Christian dimension that initially drove Aberhart into politics. "According to my mother," Preston notes:

the line-ups of discouraged, hungry, and even injured people in those soup-kitchen lines [at Aberhart's Bible Institute in Calgary during the Depression] increasingly drove Aberhart wild. The daily experience of seeing these line-ups, and the human waste and tragedy they represented, drove him to the point where he believed that something had to be done.

[The theory of social credit] happened to fit with Aberhart's preference for "reforming capitalism" rather than abolishing it as the socialists wanted to do. But what got him started on this whole strain of thought and action...was a social consciousness informed by his Christian faith that simply couldn't abide the tragedy...of those soup kitchen lines.³⁷

According to Aberhart's theology, this sense of duty to those in need extended to all spheres of the regenerated individual's life and the magnitude of the suffering he witnessed simply drew this social sentiment to the fore of his religious thought in the early 1930s. The Depression inflicted a wide-ranging poverty that could not be rectified

³⁷ Preston Manning, conversation with author, Nov. 10, 2010.

with the more basic “tough love” strategies commonly associated with Christian fundamentalism. The culprit in this case was not laziness or ineptitude on the part of the common folk. It was rather the economic system that allowed greedy financiers to overcharge for credit that was to blame. Acting from his Christian sense of duty to his fellows, Aberhart led the charge against this system with the goal of eliminating the poverty that was crushing Albertans. Aberhart’s sudden interest in the poor during the Depression did invite a host of criticisms from the more extreme fundamentalists of his audience who associated all social action with the heresy of the social gospel crowd. To one critic, who implied that the Depression was the cost Albertans must pay for their sins, Aberhart responded:

[Citizens] are suffering, not because God has failed to give but because the selfish, greedy, ungodly worshipers of the Golden god and their henchmen have stolen the bounties from them. God hasn’t punished mankind. He has poured out from his rich storehouse of heaven upon mankind but these grafters, these men who have confiscated the power are depriving people from their very living, starving them to death. Children are crying for bread. This man says you shouldn’t try to relieve them?

It was the Lord Jesus Himself who took the whip of cords and drove the moneychangers out of the temple, wasn’t it? He didn’t stand at the door and pray that God would put them out.³⁸

To those who further criticized his interest in worldly happenings Aberhart simply replied with Psalm 41 that told of the blessings one would receive from God should he consider the poor.³⁹

For Aberhart, social credit economics represented an attempt to put these Christian principles of brotherhood into practice. The confusion felt by fundamentalist critics and

³⁸ William Aberhart, Radio Address, April 21, 1935, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-82.

³⁹ William Aberhart, Radio Address, April 28, 1935, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-82.

the more liberal leaning ministers in the province by this stance was due to the fact that the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), heavily influenced by the major players in the prairie social gospel movement, was also pointing to the same Christian principles in their demands for government intervention to end poverty. Thus, the effort to differentiate Social Credit from the CCF and their particular version of socialism became a central goal of Aberhart. Responding to a letter writer who suggested Christ would support socialism, Aberhart was quick to revert back to his fundamentalist-based dislike of the social gospel and its promotion of socialism by arguing that “One of the weak points of socialism is its complete failure to recognize that a right relationship between man and man cannot exist until a right relationship between man and God is first established.”⁴⁰ By focusing on “works” at the expense of “faith” the social gospel had overlooked the vital step of individual rebirth, from which good works would eventually follow. By paying little attention to such a necessity, left-leaning ministers were promoting an economic system that failed to protect the freedom of the individual, that sacred pocket of liberty that was required for the individual to fully experience Christ and thus be “born again.” In contrast to the “regimentation of the individual” experienced under socialism:

Social creditors believe in the freedom of the individual and provide for that freedom by guaranteeing to him the bare necessities of food, clothing and shelter...

This provision of the bare necessities of life will give the individual an economic freedom that he has never known before and must of necessity therefore give him a chance for self-development.⁴¹

⁴⁰ William Aberhart, letter to J.H. Caldwell, March 29, 1933, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-30.

⁴¹ William Aberhart, Radio Address, June 18, 1935, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-83.

Within this passage one is provided with a glimpse into the overall goal of social credit as interpreted by Aberhart. The poverty experienced during the depression was not simply a case of human suffering that had to be rectified because God demanded charity for the poor. The poverty was, further, an impingement on the freedom of the individual and his development. As Manning would later explain, Social Credit's association with Christianity was based upon its recognition of "the supremacy of the individual as a divinely-created creature, possessing, as a result of divine creation, certain inalienable rights that must be respected and preserved."⁴² Therefore, the goal of the Social Credit philosophy was "a free society in which the individual would have the maximum opportunity to develop himself." This required addressing the poverty of the Depression because the "attention to the cultural realm of life was limited by the economic conditions of that time."⁴³

Douglas had often mentioned the importance of individual development within the context of poverty elimination and Colburn, who popularized the theories of Douglas, observed that, because of the Depression, "man, although able to keep alive is unable to live fully, he exists but with bent back and brow weighted with anxiety and care."⁴⁴ However, it was Aberhart's particular interpretation of Christianity that led himself and Manning to interpret this concern for individual development as primarily spiritual in nature. As an article from the Alberta Social Credit Chronicle argued, "Crushing and demoralizing poverty obscures men's spirituality." The goal of implementing social

⁴² Ernest Manning, letter to G.M. Wilson, April 18, 1962, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173 file 394b.

⁴³ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 2, (December 18, 1978), p.14, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Frank Dabbs, *Preston Manning: The Roots of Reform*, (Vancouver, Greystone Books, 1997), 17.

credit economics was to end this poverty and “only then would it be possible to appreciate completely the message of Him.”⁴⁵ Aberhart alluded to this problem in his first electoral campaign when he suggested “much of man’s selfishness is produced today through the mad scramble to get the necessities of life. We have to trample one another down to do this.”⁴⁶ By providing these necessities, the social credit system allowed the individual to cease this “mad scramble” and instead put his energies into “cultural” activities aimed at self-development, which for Aberhart clearly implied spiritual development. Upon encountering the constitutional roadblocks that prevented the implementation of social credit financial policies while in office Aberhart complained: “The money monopolists will not issue the money tickets to enable the great clumsy, outworn financial system to work so the people must suffer privation and want. They must exist in undesirable depressing conditions that cannot improve their spiritual development.”⁴⁷ In his admonishment of those who were thinking of abandoning the efforts of Social Credit to reform the economy, Aberhart told his followers that they required more tenacity and persistence “in our endeavor to help our friends and neighbours to find Christ in the supreme life.”⁴⁸ And in 1939 he stated bluntly: “I am convinced that dire poverty and want makes people bitter and turn away from God.”⁴⁹

Thus, true to his dispensationalist interpretation of history, Aberhart was attempting to fulfill his primary Christian duty within the “age of grace” by promoting

⁴⁵ “Materialistic and Spiritual Blend in the Social Credit Faith,” in *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle*, September 7, 1934, 1.

⁴⁶ William Aberhart, Radio Address, June 18, 1935, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-83.

⁴⁷ William Aberhart, Sunday Radio Address, June 5, 1938, Fred Kennedy Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1621-6.

⁴⁸ William Aberhart, Sunday Radio Address, September 4, 1938, Fred Kennedy Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1621-6.

⁴⁹ William Aberhart, Sunday Radio Address, March 19, 1939, Fred Kennedy Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1621-7.

social credit economics. The prime function of the Christian in this world was to bring individuals into a personal relationship with God. It was by way of his Prophetic Bible Institute and his radio ministry that he first sought to achieve this goal but the poverty of the Depression was impeding Albertan's capacity to develop spiritually. Therefore, working out of his "love for thy neighbour" sentiment that had been implanted in his soul following spiritual rebirth, Aberhart took up the cause of economic reform as a means of freeing the individual from an economic slavery that prevented spiritual rebirth. Social credit, rather than socialism, was the answer because, although socialism may be able to provide the individual with certain provisions, it also forced the individual into a certain bondage to the collective. The liberal-leaning ministry had little problem with this outcome because they failed to appreciate the primary requirement of the Christian as individual spiritual rebirth. Instead, advocates of the social gospel understood themselves, in the view of Aberhart, to be building the kingdom of God on earth. This was diametrically opposed to the religious goal of Aberhart who sought to extend the Word of God to as many as possible prior to the Rapture. By protecting the freedom of the individual, social credit economics could facilitate this evangelicalism. In fact, in his refutation of the socialist position based on their failure to guarantee individual liberty one finds the reasons why Aberhart was not interested in establishing a state religion based on his own fundamentalism, despite the claims of his critics.⁵⁰ Spiritual rebirth and was a matter of free choice and coercion on the part of the church or the state in this direction could never deliver God's salvation to the individual just as the good works of

⁵⁰ William Aberhart, Radio Address, August 11, 1935, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-83.

socialism could not. It was the protection of the individual, not the establishment of the millennium or a religious dictatorship, which stood behind his promotion of social credit.

I suspect that a good deal of this misunderstanding with respect to his goals can be attributed to Aberhart's continual references to social credit as "God's Plan" or that it was based on the "great principles of God's great economy." As a series of lectures on the relationship between Christianity and economics in 1933 indicate, Aberhart had convinced himself that the social credit plan was in fact modeled after the plan God had provided for humanity to attain salvation. This connection is built upon Aberhart's interpretation of Isaiah 55: 1-2 which reads:

[1] Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. [2] Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.⁵¹

In this passage God is offering eternal salvation, something that satisfies mankind much more than bread or milk, to those that have no money. However, for Aberhart, the individual had to choose to seek God and thus accept this gift of salvation. In other words, the individual could not attain salvation on his own but only in cooperation with God. Aberhart writes, "Christ has done for you what you can never do yourself...by association you get divine rights, forgiveness, mercy, peace." But, he continues, "people are the same in salvation as economics."⁵² The individual cannot free himself from the oppression of the poverty experienced in the Depression on his own. Rather, such a task requires the co-operation of individuals in the form of state control over credit and the

⁵¹ All biblical verses are taken from the King James Version, the bible Aberhart perceived to be the only authentic translation.

⁵² William Aberhart, "Money in the Fish's Mouth: The Dilemma of Taxation," in Religious Notebooks, 1933-2, William Aberhart Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2005.075/02.02, n.d.

creation of purchasing power. Thus, Aberhart provided a justification for the group action required to solve the Depression by reminding listeners that salvation too requires a sort of co-operation, that between the individual and Christ.

However, the connection Aberhart draws between Christianity and social credit economics goes beyond this parallel with respect to co-operation and action. Aberhart argues that the only solution to the Depression that will work “must be fashioned along the system or plan that God has revealed.”⁵³ Just as Isaiah 55: 1-2 suggests that the salvation of the Lord is abundant but requires no money, our economic system should operate on the same principles. “Therefore,” Aberhart writes, “if we are to pattern our economic system on God’s plan we must conduct our business without money and without profit. This is basic to the theory of social credit.”⁵⁴ Remarkably, Aberhart essentially suggests that the technicalities of social credit theory, including the issuing of a dividend at no monetary cost to the citizen and the establishment of the “just price” to constrain profiteering, were sanctioned by God because they are in accordance to this passage in Isaiah that implies the Lord’s salvation is “without money and profit.” Thus, just as “Recognition and declaration of Jesus Christ as the all wise, all powerful son of God is essential to a full and complete deliverance, [the implementation of] social credit cuts off our dependence on financial credit and we are delivered economically.”⁵⁵

The attempt to link social credit to “God’s plan” in this manner was surely one of Aberhart’s more bizarre conclusions. It is really quite difficult to know whether Aberhart

⁵³ William Aberhart, Untitled Lecture, in Religious Notebooks, 1933-2, William Aberhart Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2005.075/02.02, n.d.

⁵⁴ William Aberhart, “Buying Without Money: An Economic Feature not Found in Present Day Capitalism,” in Religious Notebooks, 1933-2, William Aberhart Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2005.075/02.02, September 17, 1933.

⁵⁵ William Aberhart, “Money in the Fish’s Mouth: The Dilemma of Taxation,” in Religious Notebooks, 1933-2, William Aberhart Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2005.075/02.02, n.d.

really believed in this association or if it was merely a way to provide social credit theory with a Divine foundation in the eyes of his Christian audience whose support he was actively seeking. What can be gleaned from this attempted linkage is the ease with which listeners, and later academic commentators, could be seduced into believing social credit was meant to usher in a new and perfect society within which citizens would acquire deliverance not only from poverty but also from eternal damnation. Again, whether Aberhart meant to, very gently, imply that this was the case in order to gain more supporters, we will probably never know, but from his broader theology, and some specific comments with respect to social credit economics, we can be sure that he never interpreted the end of the Depression to be the promised millennium. Around the same time Aberhart was delivering this lecture series on Christianity and economics, he sent a letter to J.H. Coldwell that made explicit reference to his belief in distinct “dispensations” and in the very next paragraph he speaks of the Douglas system and its present application. There was absolutely no indication that social credit was meant to bring about the next and final dispensation, the millennial age.⁵⁶ In addition, prominent Social Credit member Cyril Hutchinson later admitted that Social Credit was never meant to solve entirely society’s “spiritual problem” and thus did not have any role to play in the glorious return of Christ.⁵⁷ This point makes sense when set against the larger argument of this section that Aberhart’s goal was to free the individual from poverty in order to allow the conditions necessary for personal conversion to take root. However, because such an argument has not yet been made in detail, it has been easy for scholars to ignore

⁵⁶ William Aberhart, letter to J.H. Caldwell, February 2, 1933, Walter Norman and Amelia Turner Smith Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1157-30.

⁵⁷ Cited in: Harold J Schultz, “Portrait of a Premier: William Aberhart,” in *The Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. XLV, No. 3, (September 1964), 194.

such comments and suggest Aberhart interpreted social credit economics as an idea that could usher in the millennial reign of Christ.

Manning and Social Conservatism

Ernest Manning took control of Alberta Social Credit following the death of Aberhart in 1943 and led the party to a resounding electoral victory in 1944. He would remain the Premier of Alberta until his retirement in 1968, having led Social Credit to seven consecutive electoral victories. The leadership transition from Aberhart to Manning has been interpreted by scholars as a critical stage in the development of the party because it was at this point that any serious attempts to implement the radical social credit economic reforms favoured by Aberhart were essentially abandoned and the party instead took a decisive turn right towards a full-fledged approval of free market capitalism. To some, this shift indicated a return by Manning to the traditional fundamentalist Christian roots of the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute that rejected outright the social gospel and any related attempts to remake society in a way that could usher in the millennium.⁵⁸ Yet, as I have argued above, Aberhart's intentions were not in fact contrary to his fundamentalist or dispensational Christian beliefs and thus any interpretation of Manning's political motives as representing a clear shift away from the religious perspective of Aberhart is incorrect. Rather, I argue that Manning remained faithful to the same theology of Aberhart but that his shift in policy direction as Premier

⁵⁸ This argument is most prominent in: Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). Finkel largely adopts Elliott's view of Aberhart as someone who abandoned his fundamentalist religious roots and embarked down a left-leaning political path and essentially became "a social gospeller." It was not until the electoral victory of 1944 that the party took a decisive turn to the right, according to Finkel, largely because of Manning's more orthodox interpretation of his fundamentalist Christian background that "does not appear to have embraced social gospel views comfortably."

was instead the result of different legal and economic conditions that led to different policies rooted in the same theological precepts.⁵⁹

Overall, Manning remained convinced that the fundamental cause of all social problems was that of man's alienation from God. It is only by way of individual spiritual regeneration that social conditions can get better but, given its penchant for coercion and its distance from the activities of the church, the state could never take an active and direct role in this process. Rather, it was the job of the church to deliver the Word of God to individuals who, in turn, would be responsible to address the problems of their community. "If the church is doing its job in building up people spiritually," argues Manning, "it's going to make them concerned for people; it's going to change their attitude toward people; and it's going to make them actively involved, I believe, as individuals."⁶⁰ The state, unable to ever fully reconcile humanity with God and thus address the root of all social problems, has as its responsibility the protection of the individual. Fundamentally, this required the state to ensure that individuals are as free as possible to fully develop themselves, a goal that, for Manning as it was for Aberhart, implied a freedom to enhance their spirituality by pursuing a freely chosen relationship with God. However, this commitment to the individual by the state did not equate to a simple adherence to the concept of negative freedom wherein the individual was simply allowed to operate freely. Manning, following Aberhart who had been moved by the

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that Dennis Groh has related Manning's political thought to his broader Christian-based belief that society should be organized in such a way that the individual's "search for the grace of God" is facilitated. Although the complete relationship between Manning's religious theology and his political ideology is a bit more complex, or at least a bit more detailed than Groh admits, overall, his interpretation of Manning is quite sound and his thesis remains, in my opinion, the most accurate work yet with respect to the role played by religion in the dominant ideology of the Social Credit. See: Dennis G. Groh, "The Political Thought of Ernest Manning," (MA Thesis, University of Calgary, 1970).

⁶⁰ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 19, (August 20, 1980), p.10, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

Christian principle of the “brotherhood of man,” felt that the state was responsible for assisting individuals in their quest to develop themselves by ensuring the facilitation of certain conditions that individuals could not create on their own. This would entail the upholding of law and order to ensure the safety of the individual as well as the creation of a stable economic system that provided the basic needs for citizens. Manning notes:

Economic insecurity is one of the things that circumscribes people and...[would be an area] where the government would assume responsibility. If we were going to put people in a position where this freedom of choice would be meaningful, then you had to do things which would...enable them to have economic conditions that wouldn't circumscribe them too much.

But one of the objectives of [Government involvement] – sort of a new objective, in a way – was that that person, having some measure of economic security, whether he got it through government programs or greater development of the private sector – however he got it, would have that much more freedom to do the developing himself in these other lines.⁶¹

Thus, Manning retained a strong commitment to the same fundamental goal Aberhart had stressed: the facilitation of spiritual rebirth for as many individuals as possible. This was done first by his continuation of Aberhart's radio ministry which brought the Word of God to tens of thousands and second, by seeking to implement political and economic policies as premier that protected and enhanced the freedom of the individual.

As mentioned previously, Aberhart had interpreted the devastating poverty caused by the Depression as a fundamental impediment to individual freedom and thus spiritual development. Manning entered the Premiership facing a far different, far more positive, economic picture. The Depression had ended and Alberta was on the cusp of a general post-war boom that coincided with the discovery of large pockets of oil and gas in Alberta in 1947, an event that would transform the Alberta economy for good. In

⁶¹ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 38, (May 10, 1982), p.4, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

addition, Manning had lived through the long string of constitutional roadblocks that prevented Aberhart from implementing any serious social credit reforms in the late 1930s. By the time he was Premier, Manning had been largely convinced that such reforms would be impossible under the current legal structure of Canada but with the end of the Depression and the arrival of an economic boom, the party's implementation failures were essentially irrelevant. Now that the threat of mass poverty had largely subsided, Manning's central foe became the program of socialism promoted by the CCF who had swept into power in Saskatchewan in 1944 and were gaining supporters in Alberta. The CCF was led by the popular Baptist minister and "social gospeller" Tommy Douglas, whose liberal theological position put him at immediate odds with Manning. It would be this battle against socialism, and the corresponding rigid defense of free enterprise, that defined Manning's politics and, like Aberhart, the foundation of this battle was his Christian premillennial dispensational perspective.

Because the pressing issue of wide-scale poverty had ended, Manning's religiously inspired political goals were rather straightforward compared to those of Aberhart who first had to solve the Depression before he could ensure freedom for the individual. In place of social credit economic doctrine, Manning would advocate a political philosophy he dubbed "social conservatism." In an effort to unite the humanitarian concern of socialism with the economic principle of free enterprise, Manning, with his son Preston, penned a treatise outlining his political views. Within it he lauded the socialist's concern for poverty, disease, and underdevelopment but attacked its "insistence on collectivist approaches to the solution of public problems to a degree

that seriously infringes upon individual liberties and freedom of action.”⁶² For Manning, that the socialism of the CCF failed to deliver individual freedom was an inevitable consequence of its association with the social gospel. Like Aberhart before him, Manning complained that people were “being misled into acceptance of a social gospel as being the key to personal salvation rather than supernatural regeneration performed by the Divine person of the Holy Spirit”⁶³ In doing so, citizens were missing the key point of true Christianity, developing a personal relationship with Christ. If this personal relationship was devalued, the individual freedom that it required would be devalued also.

Furthermore, Manning was convinced that the socialist economic doctrine, which favoured state control and direction of the economy, created more long-term economic problems than it solved and thus failed to provide the resources needed to fund its humanitarian projects. However, free market capitalism “presents a highly practical and realistic system for the maximum development of physical resources through the utilization of human initiative and enterprise stimulated by the prospect of rewards,” by stressing private resource development, supported appropriately by government.⁶⁴ Yet, Manning admitted that despite preserving the freedom of the individual, this philosophy had “too often been lacking in positive commitment to social goals of a humanitarian nature.”⁶⁵ This was a problem for Manning because of his Christian sense of duty to his neighbours. “Yet,” Manning continued, “it is [this] economic system...that has the

⁶² E.C. Manning, *Political Realignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians*, (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 59.

⁶³ Ernest Manning, letter to Robert Sheath, April 5, 1967, Premier’s Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173, File 800.

⁶⁴ Manning, *Political Realignment*, 61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 62.

definite capability to produce the goods and services required...to adequately finance human resources development and social programs.”⁶⁶ Thus, Manning stressed social conservatism, which would harness the humanitarian concerns of the socialist to the free enterprise system because it alone was capable of addressing them. However, Manning was also clear that the development of physical resources, and the addressing of humanitarian concerns, were means to a larger end: “The supreme objective in developing the physical resources of a nation should be to make possible the development of free and creative individuals.”⁶⁷

Perhaps nowhere was this line of thought more apparent than in Manning’s intense opposition to the proposed universal National Medicare program that was being debated across Canada in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Manning was clear that he favoured the objective of the plan, ensuring that quality medical care was available to every citizen of the country, regardless of income level. However, the notion of a “universal” program concerned him greatly:

What is meant by the term “universal” is that the plan arbitrarily includes everybody whether they need the benefits and whether they wish to be included or not. It is a compulsory program in which participation is compelled by the state and not left to the voluntary choice of the citizen himself.

This feature of the plan violates a fundamental principle of free society, namely the right of each citizen to exercise freedom of choice in matters relating to his own and his family’s welfare. Welfare state advocates will scream that this is not so but no man can truthfully say he has freedom of choice if he is forced to participate in a compulsory state scheme for his medical services, whether he wishes or not.

For Manning, the logical outcome of adopting such a plan could not be more clear: “Canada is dangerously close to setting her feet on a path that can lead to but one

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 67.

ultimate end. That end will be a nation turned into a regimented socialistic welfare state.” Thus, Manning championed an alternate system built around deterrent fees and a means-based system that ensured low-income citizens would receive government assistance for their private insurance premiums:

What I am advocating as a superior alternative to the federal proposal is a voluntary state-subsidized medical insurance program based on two sound fundamental principles.

- 1) That the individual has a responsibility to provide for his medical needs just as he has a responsibility to provide for his own needs in other areas affecting his welfare.
- 2) That society as a whole has a responsibility to ensure that such services are available at a cost to the individual within his ability to pay

The alternative plan I have proposed does not require any element of compulsion and therefore does not do violence to the basic principles of a free society.⁶⁸

Perhaps the most striking thing about Manning’s attack on a compulsory medical care program, as well as his broader treatise on “social conservatism” was that, despite his obvious religious background, neither contained any reference to religion save a brief mention of the need for religious liberty. In this way, both were modeled after Aberhart’s *Social Credit Manual*, which provided a purely secular description of social credit economics in 1935. In fact, Jared Wesley’s careful study of Social Credit campaign literature reveals that, despite the religious background of Aberhart and Manning, “religious references were surprisingly absent from most Social Credit literature.”⁶⁹ Yet, when provided with the appropriate contextual background, as I hope to have done

⁶⁸ Ernest Manning, *National Medicare: Let’s Look Before We Leap*, 1965, accessed through the Prairie Manifesto Project compiled by Jared Wesley, jared.wesley@gov.ab.ca. See also: Jared J. Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 73-75.

⁶⁹ Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, 76-77.

above, it is not difficult to see the connection between the broader political goals Aberhart and Manning shared, namely a fundamental defense of the individual and his or her inalienable right to be free, and their particular Christian theological outlook. Indeed, from this perspective it is quite clear that Manning's shift from social credit economics to free enterprise capitalism and a rejection of state-enforced collectivism originated in the religious interpretation initially espoused by Aberhart.

Recall Manning's emphatic argument that the prime function of Christians within this world was not to solve social problems but to "bring people into a personal relationship with Christ."⁷⁰ This task required a combination of evangelicalism, which Manning provided in the form of a radio ministry, and the construction of a political environment that protected the individual's freedom, which Manning found in "social conservatism." Even the strong emphasis on human well being that was present in Aberhart's promotion of social credit reappeared in Manning's political views. This only makes sense given their shared belief in the Christian notion of "love thy neighbour," a sentiment that would be inescapably embraced by the spiritually regenerated individual. In other words, the endorsement of specific types of political and economic policy shifted from Aberhart to Manning, but the end goal, derived from the same theological foundation, never wavered. It is here that commentators eager to apply "left-wing" and "right-wing" tags on Aberhart and Manning paint a slightly inaccurate picture by depicting Aberhart and Manning as significantly different political animals. This misses the fact that for both men, political policies were simply a means to a far greater end, eternal salvation for as many individuals as possible prior to the Rapture, and thus could

⁷⁰ Ernest Manning, letter to G. Drexhage, February 28, 1967, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, 1977.173 file 800.

and should be changed if the social conditions affecting the individual's freedom required it.

Despite the fact that Manning's thinking about the state, the role of the market and the importance of the individual was clearly derived from his Christian theology, there has been a broad assumption, especially among Alberta journalists, that the influence of religion upon Manning's political thought was most apparent with respect to his positions on specific social issues, such as laws around liquor consumption or regulations on businesses on the Sabbath. In other words, critics pegged Manning as an early social conservative, utilizing biblical arguments to decide specific policy issues. Yet, as former Social Credit cabinet minister Ray Speaker argued, "there was no direct religious influence in cabinet decisions with Ernest Manning. The only question we asked ourselves when a decision had to be made was 'where is society at on this?' If it was clear they wanted something, that is what they got."⁷¹ That is not to say that Manning would not have developed strong policy preferences on certain social issues that were influenced by his faith. In fact, Manning believed that there was a collective responsibility for morality that fell to the government. He notes: "I don't depreciate one bit the prime responsibility of the individual; he has to assume responsibility for his own morality standards. But I think the state has a legitimate and inescapable responsibility in the field of morality."⁷² However, as Speaker noted in the above comments and author John Barr has argued elsewhere, Manning did not seek to impose his particular religious-

⁷¹ Ray Speaker, conversation with author, February 15, 2011.

⁷² Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 14, (July 4, 1980), p.29-30, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

based values upon others through specific social policies.⁷³ Rather, he approached his responsibility as premier for society's collective morality in a more nuanced manner that was, unsurprisingly, also derived from his Christian beliefs.

When faced with the prospect of the government encountering a scenario that demanded a "collective moral response," Manning drew from a particular passage in the Old Testament. This was the story of the ancient nation of Israel demanding a king despite the earlier commandment by God that they were to be different from all other nations and follow the leadership of God rather than a human king, recounted in 1 Samuel. Samuel, the spiritual leader of Israel, remembered God's initial commandment and thus asked God to intercede on his behalf to ensure the people did not turn their back on the earlier demand of God. However, Manning notes, God would not comply with Samuel's request. Instead:

He went on to say [to Samuel], "Do what they say, but before you do it, tell them (and he stressed this repeatedly) what the consequences will be." I think the expression is "vehemently protest unto them" what will be the consequences of choosing this materialistic society of the nations round about them, versus their society which had the powerful spiritual background of their close personal relationship with Deity. It always seemed to me there's a great lesson there for governments and leaders in a democracy. You can't refuse... the ultimate will of the people. But you do have a responsibility to say, "Look, before we do this, stop and realize this is going to be the ultimate consequence."⁷⁴

It was for this reason that Manning was willing to make his case on certain issues, such as liquor laws but, in the end was willing to, in the words of Speaker, ask "where is society at on this?" Despite his belief that God would most likely prefer certain policies as opposed to others, Manning felt that it would be against God's larger edict for

⁷³ John J. Barr, *The Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of Social Credit in Alberta*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 152-153.

⁷⁴ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 14, (July 4, 1980), p.31-32, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

government's to impose them on the people. In fact, this commitment to following the will of the people coincides with Manning and Aberhart's more fundamental concern with respect to the role of the state. Its purpose was not the creation of a Christian society. Rather, its purpose was to protect the freedom of the individual who had been created by God and must be allowed the room to develop to its fullest capacity. Ensuring this freedom as political leaders, in conjunction with efforts at spreading God's word outside of the state apparatus (such as their radio ministry), would provide the two conditions necessary for individual spiritual regeneration and the eventual improvement of society by "reborn" Christians eager to spread God's love while they awaited the return of Christ and the implementation of the Millennial Kingdom of God. Thus, both Manning's preference for the free market and his respect for the people's political will derived squarely from his religious beliefs.

Conclusion:

The Political Thought of Aberhart and Manning and the Trajectory of Alberta Politics

Like Henry Wise Wood, the notion of keeping religion out of the political realm was, for Aberhart and Manning, impossible. As Manning noted, genuine Christianity provides one with an outlook on life that cannot be divorced from anything: "It isn't a matter of 'should [politics and religion] be mixed.' You can't separate them."⁷⁵ In fact, as the above sections have demonstrated, the political thought of both of these men was founded directly upon their particular Christian interpretation. Of course, Wood drew from the more progressive postmillennial religious outlook and this produced a much more optimistic account of the possibilities contained within political action than that of

⁷⁵ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 19, (August 20, 1980), p.13, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

Aberhart or Manning who were stern premillennialists. Because they interpreted the coming millennium to reside completely outside the realm of human action, their understanding of the aims of “post-conversion” Christians on earth were far different from that of Wood who had suggested that mankind was to usher in the millennium by way of good works that followed the teachings of Christ. Instead, Aberhart and Manning argued that action in this world must be part of the larger goal of facilitating the spiritual conversion of as many as possible prior to the Rapture. Obviously this difference committed the UFA and Social Credit to favour different political policies aimed at distinct political goals, essentially the difference between “saving the world” and “saving souls.”

More generally, however, because the religious outlooks of both Wood and Aberhart did draw from the same broad tradition of American evangelical Protestantism, they both largely inherited the same unique tensions between conservative and radical tendencies. In other words, the “populist conservative” sentiment discussed in the previous chapter that was inherent in the political thought of Wood was reaffirmed in the thought of Aberhart, and then Manning. At a basic level, Wood, Aberhart and Manning all began from the evangelical Protestant assumption that human nature was inherently evil and it was only by way of spiritual regeneration or “rebirth” in Christ that one could cleanse his or her soul of selfishness and sin. This obviously placed a significant responsibility upon the individual citizen and generated a particularly conservative emphasis on individual behaviour in both the private and public realms. This conservative element is not difficult to see in the Alberta Social Credit. The intense devotion to biblical literalism that characterized the Christian fundamentalism of

Aberhart and Manning obviously encouraged a strong conservatism based upon the moral laws of God. Although they obviously agreed with Wood's insistence that the individual citizen must be a disciplined and hard worker, Aberhart and Manning went beyond Wood in this regard by continually lamenting the declining morality of society, expressing their distaste for alcohol, cards, dancing and commercial or sporting events on Sundays, and even attacking journalists for daring to question an organization as divinely inspired as Social Credit. However, the emphasis they placed on the common individual's intellectual and spiritual capacity for spiritual rebirth, and especially the conditions such conversion required, committed Aberhart and Manning to an equally intense devotion to individual liberty not typical of tory conservatism. Thus, a certain radical anti-establishmentarianism, and a corresponding commitment to grassroots democracy, grew out of their opposition to any institution that impinged on the freedom of the individual required to pursue spiritual rebirth.

For Aberhart, this meant attacking the "Fifty Big Shots" whom he understood to be withholding credit and thus causing "Poverty in the Midst of Plenty." For Manning, who would preside over far more prosperous economic conditions in Alberta, this meant supporting the free market in the face of an emerging socialism that threatened to subdue the individual to the collective. Of course, Manning's shift away from social credit economics and toward an uninhibited capitalism has garnered suggestions that he and Aberhart were, ideologically, distinct political animals. However, from the perspective of their shared religious foundation that exalted the common individual and his or her liberty, we see their divergent economic policies were simply circumstantial means towards the same end. Nevertheless, both Aberhart and Manning followed the general

path groomed by the political thought of Wood and maintained both the conservative, religious-based demand for individual moral responsibility as well as the populist egalitarian and anti-establishmentarian orientation that blossomed in post-Revolution evangelical America but was largely foreign to the more “tory” strains of conservatism in the rest of Canada.

Despite this similar commitment to a “populist conservative” sentiment, however, the defeat of Wood’s “postmillennial” religious interpretation by Aberhart’s “premillennial” version did have a significant impact on the precise direction of Alberta politics from 1935 onward. On the whole, Aberhart and Manning certainly shared Wood’s antipathy towards the socialistic economic arrangements advocated by prairie social gossellers in the first half of the twentieth century. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wood understood commerce to be a “natural” institution and the notion of centralizing more economic control in governments went against Wood’s evangelical populist impulses that stressed the problem-solving capacity of ordinary people. More fundamentally, he felt that the economic oppression of the farmer was due to the depravity of men operating within the market system as opposed to the structure of the system itself. Only large-scale individual spiritual regeneration, rather than the abolishment of capitalism, could lead to a society wherein trade became a more just enterprise conducted on the basis of Christ’s moral laws.

No doubt Aberhart and Manning would have agreed that, ultimately, economic oppression was rooted in the depravity of man and that society’s only hope to fully rectify the situation was a wide-scale religious conversion or “rebirth” at an individual level. However, because of their premillennial Christian interpretation that relied upon

God rather than humanity to usher in a millennial period of perfect justice on earth, the notion that men could succeed in converting the whole world and thus build their own perfected social system was fantasy. Thus, despite mentioning the virtue of co-operation on a number of occasions, the notion of building the perfect “co-operative” economic or political system demanded by Wood was never a goal shared by Aberhart or Manning. In fact, from their premillennial perspective, even attempting to construct such a system was well beyond the proper aim of the state, that of simply ensuring that the freedom of the individual was protected. It is true that Aberhart generated a scathing critique of aspects of the political and economic system, especially pertaining to the power possessed by the large economic and financial interests who were in a position to exploit the small farmers and businessmen of Alberta. Yet, he never offered more than a general demand to “reform” such institutions, and even that amounted to a proposal which was designed to enhance the agency of the individual by ending the poverty that was impeding their freedom. When the oil boom changed the economic dynamics of the province under Manning, all notions of significant reform were abandoned and the government was in a position to simply ensure that a condition of individual freedom and opportunity prevailed by allowing the market to operate in a largely unregulated manner. Thus, although Wood’s initial antipathy towards socialism helped set Alberta on a particular ideological path, it was the intense devotion to individual freedom stressed by Aberhart and Manning that led to the vilification of any form of economic collectivism that may jeopardize the freedom of the individual. It is here, I suggest, that one largely finds the roots of contemporary Alberta’s strongly pro-market, anti-statist sentiment.

Beyond the generation of this pro-market sentiment in Alberta, the difference between Wood's postmillennial approach and the premillennialism of Aberhart and Manning also helped to ensure an equally important distinction between the approach to politics stressed by the UFA and Social Credit. As C.B. Macpherson, and later David Laycock, have noted, although both parties were clearly committed to the principle of populist democracy, Social Credit essentially abandoned the UFA's insistence on intense grassroots deliberation in favour of a top-heavy "plebiscitarian" populism built around the authoritarian personality of Aberhart and his faith in the complex workings of social credit economic theory.⁷⁶ There were still local groups, or "Social Credit study groups" throughout the province that stood at the foundation of the movement and there were clearly thousands of supporters who helped to spread the message of social credit economics to the unconverted but, as Laycock argues, that participation was restricted to mass education and organizational tasks rather than more meaningful avenues wherein participants could "critically assess their problems, or develop their own solutions within a general ideological framework."⁷⁷

In fact, Aberhart, who followed Douglas in this regard, had insisted that the role of the people within a functioning democracy was to simply "demand results," and the role of the democratic leader was to respond to this general demand by enlisting the services of the necessary experts to "deliver the results." The result was a technocratic and non-deliberative form of populism that attempted to meet the needs of the "people" but was devoid of the type of citizen involvement stressed by the UFA. Indeed, as Aberhart notoriously argued:

⁷⁶ C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), chapters six and seven and Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, chapter five.

⁷⁷ Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, 218.

You don't have to know all about Social Credit before you vote for it; you don't have to understand electricity to use it, for you know that experts have put the system in, and all you have to do is push the button and you get light. So all you have to do about Social Credit is to cast your vote for it, and we will get experts to put the system in.⁷⁸

Manning, ten years after his retirement from politics and over thirty years after Aberhart made the above claim, similarly defined democracy as “people expressing a general will for general results and leaving experts to work out the details.” This approach, Manning continued:

is probably a little more realistic even than participatory democracy. In participatory democracy we have tended, I think, to ask people to make decisions which they are not in a position to make for the simple reason that they haven't the technical knowledge or background, or information, to make that decision.

However, the theory of Douglas avoided the problem posed by an ignorant citizenry because it did not require that the “rank-and-file” need to “know how.” Rather, “what they need to worry about is the results they want. The government's job is to respect that expression of public will, and to assume the responsibility of obtaining the technical experts...to develop programs which will give the results the people want.”⁷⁹ For Laycock, this conception of democracy “was the result of Aberhart's organization and proselytization, his acceptance of Douglas's political strategy, and his authoritarian and demagogic leadership style.”⁸⁰

The implications of this “plebiscitarian” theory of democracy was an adherence to a “model of benevolent technocracy,” in the words of Laycock, that insisted that the deliberative political life stressed by Wood and the UFA was largely unnecessary. “Why

⁷⁸ Quoted in: Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta*, 152.

⁷⁹ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 1, (December 4, 1978), p.24, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

⁸⁰ Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies*, 218.

would people need or want to concern themselves with other people's business," asks Laycock, "when it is apparent that all are well attended to in the scientifically arranged land of abundance?"⁸¹ Indeed, the certainty with which Aberhart explained the "purely scientific" nature of social credit economics that would undoubtedly end the Depression made the type of grassroots deliberation that took root in the UFA Locals seem inefficient. However, this clear lack of concern for the input of the common citizen was not only a product of Aberhart's confidence in the technocratic theories of Douglas or his own authoritarian leadership style. In addition to these variables introduced by Laycock, Aberhart's premillennial interpretation of Christianity was an important factor in this approach to democracy.

The broader religious goal of Aberhart's involvement in politics was, again, the facilitation of spiritual rebirth for those individuals not yet saved. For Wood, whose goal was the perfection of society, the notion of intense grassroots co-operation was an absolute requirement for the successful implementation of the "co-operative spirit" in the society at large. Surely Wood's American populist agrarian background encouraged in him a certain sympathy towards populist, ground-level co-operation but, beyond this, his religious-political goal of societal perfection called for the type of deliberative participation that occurred in the UFA Locals. Aberhart's religious perspective, on the other hand, ensured that he had no interest in perfecting society or the grassroots deliberation it apparently required. He did support the notion of the "spirit of Christ" overcoming as many as possible but this did not require deliberation but only a personal commitment to God and the scriptures. Similarly, citizens were expected to "support" Social Credit but extensive debate or co-operation beyond this support was unnecessary

⁸¹ Ibid, 258.

and, in fact, might even impede the individual's spiritual self-development by placing restrictions on his time and energy that was to be spent investing in his personal relationship with Christ. In other words, scholars have been correct to point out the "apolitical" mentality and the corresponding lack of concern Social Credit displayed for local deliberation when compared to the UFA but they have failed to see the manner by which this difference is partly derived from the larger premillennial religious vision of Aberhart when compared to the postmillennial vision of Wood.

This is a vitally important point if one hopes to understand more fully contemporary Alberta's paradoxical populist yet apolitical culture given Laycock's argument that this dimension of Social Credit discourse "was central to the process within Alberta that eviscerated popular democracy and undermined opportunities for its future rebirth."⁸² Yet the development of this apolitical or "plebiscitarian" populist political culture, like the province's strong commitment to an unregulated market economy, is a product of the broader emphasis on individual freedom stressed by Aberhart and Manning, an emphasis that was largely absent from the postmillennial thought of Wood. Indeed, since 1935, Alberta politics have been defined by an emphasis on individual freedom that both encourages an anti-statist and pro-market sentiment and questions the need for traditional deliberative politics.⁸³ Folk wisdom seems content to associate this emphasis on individual freedom to Alberta's "rugged-frontier" or "cowboy" heritage. However, as I hope this chapter has demonstrated, this emphasis on

⁸² Ibid, 259. Roger Epp has also located the roots of contemporary Alberta's "apolitical" populist leanings in this aspect of Social Credit democratic discourse. See: Roger Epp, "The Political De-Skilling of Rural Communities," in Roger Epp and Dave Whitson ed., *Writing Off the Rural West*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press and Parkland Institute, 2001), 315-16.

⁸³ Jared Wesley has noted that, since the Great Depression and the emergence of Social Credit, Alberta's dominant parties have continued to rely on an extensive "freedom-based narrative." See: Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*, 12, 55-113.

individual freedom has very strong roots in the fundamentalist premillennial Christian religious interpretation of Aberhart and Manning and their long and influential reign over Alberta's politics. The majority of men and women who today abide by this particular freedom-infused sentiment in Alberta have managed to disassociate it from its initial religious mooring, but to miss the fact that this religious foundation did exist is to miss a good deal of the story of Alberta's political development and contemporary political culture.

Chapter Six:

Religion and the Political Thought of Preston Manning: The Contemporary Premillennial Perspective

In 1971, only three years after Ernest Manning retired from the premiership of Alberta, Social Credit's thirty-six year rule came to an end at the hands of Peter Lougheed and the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party (PC). The province was growing increasingly urban, secular and dependent upon the oil and gas sector, and the accession of the young, Harvard-trained Lougheed seemed an appropriate antithesis to Social Credit and their general agrarian and conservative Christian-based platform. For many, especially the growing contingent of non-religious in the province who were more inclined to bracket religious considerations from political debates, the rise of Lougheed and the PCs represented the final nail in the coffin for Christian-based public policy in Alberta. Yet Manning's retirement in 1968 and the PCs victory in 1971 did not come to represent the end of religious influence in Alberta's politics as many had predicted. In fact, despite the province growing more secular as a whole, religious-based political thought in Alberta would enjoy a resurgence of sorts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, first with the formation of the federal Reform Party of Canada, largely based in Alberta, then with the more contemporary provincial PC party under premiers Ralph Klein and Ed Stelmach. This chapter shifts gears, away from the historical influence of religion and toward this contemporary religious resurgence at the elite levels of Alberta politics. Although a number of high-ranking contemporary Alberta politicians adhered to a variety of Christian perspectives, this chapter explores the precise role of religion upon the highly influential political thought of Preston Manning, founder of the federal Reform Party and Alberta MP from 1993-2002.

Despite being a federal rather than a provincial politician, this chapter argues that Manning, son of longtime Social Credit premier Ernest Manning, had a very important influence on the direction of Alberta politics in the early 1990s. In fact, it was partly in response to his calls for increased fiscal responsibility on the part of governments that the Alberta PCs changed course and embraced a program of sharp reductions in government expenditures under the premiership of Ralph Klein in the early 1990s. Although scholars have previously noted Manning's influence in this regard, they have largely failed to grasp the religious interpretation upon which his influential political thought was built. That is not to say contemporary academics or journalists have completely ignored the political influence of religion. In fact, much has been written, especially by journalists, on the contemporary influence of religious-based social conservative arguments leveled in opposition to homosexual rights, secular public education or abortion, for instance, by both Alberta-based Reform MPs and provincial PC MLAs. However, it is my contention that this focus on social conservatism in contemporary Alberta politics has caused many to overlook a more important, although somewhat subtler, instance of religious influence that is found in the political thought of Manning.

Manning has, for many years, expressed a particular affinity for the writings of former Czechoslovakian president Vaclav Havel, "a man whose resistance to the leveling tyranny of the old order in his own country was rooted in deeply held spiritual (although not explicitly Christian) values."¹ There is something quite telling in this admiration of Havel for it is my contention that Manning's own political opposition to the "tyranny" he saw within the Canadian liberal-based welfare state, was derived, somewhat abstractly, from his own deeply held spiritual beliefs. In short, Manning's demand for a smaller,

¹ Preston Manning, *The New Canada*, (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1992), 290.

fiscally conservative, and democratic state that was more responsive to the wishes of “the common people,” was built upon a premillennial Christian perspective that he largely shared with his father Ernest Manning and Social Credit founder William Aberhart. In other words, his strong pro-market leanings were not derived from the wave of “new-right” economic and political thought that was emanating out of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations of Britain and the United States respectively. Rather, it was rooted in a decidedly anti-collectivist sentiment that originated with the belief that the divine purpose of the state was to ensure the freedom of the individual citizen.

There is no doubt that religious-based social conservatism was present in both the Reform and PC parties, but to fail to see the more influential stream of religious-based political thought articulated by Manning is not only to miss a vitally important point of continuity between Ernest and Preston Manning, but also to overlook the continuing presence of a particular “individualistic” religious interpretation within the elite political circles of Alberta. This interpretation can be traced back through the thought of Ernest Manning, William Aberhart and Henry Wise Wood and into the broader American evangelical Protestant tradition articulated earlier. To grasp the full extent of the Manning’s influence requires, however, a brief detour through the context of contemporary Alberta’s political development, which is presented below. The chapter then explores the influence of religion on Manning’s approach to politics, his understanding of the state, and his conception of democracy. Finally, the chapter concludes with a more general commentary on the broader political implications of the religious-based political thought of Manning and the manner by which it represents an important bridge between historical and contemporary Alberta and its continued

adherence to an anti-statist and fiscally conservative trajectory as well as a populist yet non-deliberative or apolitical democratic sentiment.

The Politics of “Post-Social Credit” Alberta

Between 1971 and 1985, PC premier Peter Lougheed largely abandoned Social Credit’s laissez-faire approach towards economic development and utilized the province’s substantial oil and natural gas royalties to pursue an aggressive strategy of government-led economic diversification that required extensive infrastructure improvements and state resources to assist Alberta-based businesses.² However, the implementation of the National Energy Program in 1980 combined with a worldwide oil price bust in the mid 1980s dramatically changed the fiscal picture in Alberta. Despite a variety of measures implemented by Lougheed’s successor Don Getty, major Alberta business subsequently began to crumble and the government’s deficit ballooned. Consequently, confidence in the “state-led” economic strategy quickly eroded and a more blatant “pro-market” sentiment began to reemerge, ultimately culminating in the PCs embrace of a neo-liberal economic agenda, complete with a significant reduction in government expenditures, under new premier Ralph Klein in the early 1990s.³ Yet, in a remarkable testament to the popularity of this fiscally conservative approach, the PCs

² For a detailed discussion on the state-led economic development program under Lougheed see: John Richards and Larry Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), chapters 7 and 9, and Allan Tupper, “Peter Lougheed, 1971-1985,” in Bradford J. Rennie, ed., *Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), 203-228.

³ Detailed commentaries on the approach taken by the Klein government can be found in: Gordon Laxer and Trevor Harrison ed., *The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada*, (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1995), Barry Cooper, *The Klein Achievement*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Centre for Public Management, 1995), Mark Lisac, *The Klein Revolution*, (Edmonton, NeWest Press, 1995), and Christopher J. Bruce, Ronald D. Kneebone and Kenneth J. McKenzie ed., *A Government Reinvented: A Study of Alberta’s Deficit Elimination Program*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997).

were actually able to maintain, and perhaps even enhance, their support among the electorate after unleashing a painful round of cuts.⁴

The less-than-rosy economic situation Alberta suddenly found itself in during the mid 1980s had a significant impact on the public's appetite for smaller government and state interference in the market. In addition, this anxiety around public deficits in Alberta was encouraged, especially in elite academic and business circles, by the neo-liberal economic arguments emanating out of the Reagan and Thatcher governments of America and Britain respectively. However, for the grassroots Albertans that embraced government frugality in the early 1990s, it was the arguments made by the soft-spoken orator with the familiar last name that most influenced their way of thinking. As David Taras and Allan Tupper have argued, it is difficult to overstate the important role the Reform Party's sudden rise had in shaping the public mood in the province and subsequently capturing the attention of provincial PC MLAs. In fact, the PCs were beginning to fear a potential provincial wing of the Reform party which, according to polls at the time, would have easily defeated them in the early 1990s.⁵ As the Alberta economy waned and the provincial deficit grew, Reform's initial crusade against high taxes and government spending, led by Preston Manning, became awfully appealing to working class Albertans and, loudly encouraged by the wealthy business class based

⁴ Keith Archer and Roger Gibbins, "What Do Albertans Think? The Klein Agenda on the Public Opinion Landscape," in Christopher J. Bruce, Ronald D. Kneebone and Kenneth J. McKenzie ed., *A Government Reinvented: A Study of Alberta's Deficit Elimination Program*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 462-485.

⁵ David Taras and Allan Tupper, "Politics and Deficits: Alberta's Challenge to the Canadian Political Agenda," in Douglas M. Brown and Janet Hiebert ed., *Canada: The State of the Federation, 1994*, (Kingston: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1994), 66-67. For poll results that suggest a provincial Reform Party would have easily defeated the PCs see: Trevor Harrison, "The Reform-Ation of Alberta Politics," in Gordon Laxer and Trevor Harrison ed., *The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997), 53.

largely in Calgary, Klein's PC government responded with a deep program of cutbacks aimed at substantially reducing the size and scope of the provincial government.

Founded in 1987, Reform had grown to be a formidable political force in Alberta by the early 1990s, gaining 22 of the province's 26 seats in the 1993 federal election and continuing to dominate Alberta federal constituencies throughout its existence.

Demanding a fairer deal for western Canada within confederation, a hasty end to high taxes and out-of-control spending at the federal level, and a more general reform of Canadian political institutions to ensure the "common sense of the common people" was given more weight, Reform managed to articulate and re-popularize a strong pro-market, anti-state sentiment that had long been part of Alberta's political culture but had gone somewhat dormant during the 1970s oil boom and the subsequent explosion of state expenditures under the premiership of Lougheed. As will become clearer as this chapter progresses, Reform's fiscally conservative message owed much to the political thought of Manning who, in turn, drew from a familiar religious foundation. However, a significant misunderstanding has arisen with respect to the true nature of the influence his religious background had on his political thinking.

Although continually emphasizing issues related to economic and democratic reform, Reform quickly gained a reputation, especially in the national media, as an adherent of a religious-based socially conservative outlook that could result in the imposition of Christian morality on Canadians by way of regressive social legislation should they secure federal power. It is undeniable that the party did include, in both its membership and caucus, a group of religiously motivated social conservatives who were eager to reject the legalization of abortion and the advancement of homosexual rights

while simultaneously demanding a return to traditional “family values.”⁶ Social conservative sentiment has traditionally been strong in Alberta, especially in rural areas, but the late 1980s and early 1990s represented a revival of sorts, largely in response to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the doors it opened for those groups who had previously been denied certain rights because of the perceived “immorality” of their behaviour by the larger, Christian-based public. Faith-based uneasiness with the increasing moral permissiveness of Canadian society was certainly part of Reform, but the man most responsible for its initial articulation and dissemination was not Manning but rather Edmonton-based magazine publisher and early Reform advocate Ted Byfield. It was within the pages of Byfield’s legendary *Alberta Report* newsmagazine, which enjoyed immediate success in the province on the back of its strident opposition to Trudeau’s much-hated National Energy Program, that over 250 000 readers were provided with an articulate and passionate defense of conservative Christian values in a language that spoke to the average citizen.⁷

The essence of Byfield’s social thought, and the message that most easily resonated with readers, was the notion that the vast majority of the ills of contemporary society, including crime, domestic abuse, family break-up, and even rampant government

⁶ That religiously-inspired social conservatives made up a part of Reform’s support base is confirmed in a number of commentaries on the Party including: Tom Flanagan, *Waiting For the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning*, (Toronto: Stoddart, 1995), Trevor Harrison, *Of Passionate Intensity: Right-Wing Populism and the Reform Party of Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), Keith Archer and Faron Ellis, “Opinion Structure of Party Activists: The Reform Party of Canada,” in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, XXVII:2 (June 1994), 277-305, and David Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada: Understanding Reform and the Canadian Alliance*, (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002). For specific instances of religious-based anti-homosexual sentiment within the Party see: Peter O’Neil, “Reform MPs turn attention to family issues,” in *Edmonton Journal*, June 17, 1994, A3 and Sheldon Alberts, “Gay ‘family’ not in party vocabulary; Day One,” in *Edmonton Journal*, October 14, 1994, A3.

⁷ Carole Paquin, “How the West was Won,” in *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Spring 1991. See also: Harrison, *Of Passionate Intensity: Right-Wing Populism and the Reform Party of Canada*, chapters two and three. Although he did not spend much time dissecting Byfield’s religious views, Harrison has documented the significant influence that Byfield and *Alberta Report* had on the founding of the Reform Party.

spending leading to chronic deficits, could be traced back to the declining influence of traditional Christian values, especially as they pertained to the norms governing sexual behaviour.⁸ For Byfield, contemporary society's acceptance of pornography, adultery, feminism and homosexuality was rooted in the increasingly secularized public school system and ultimately represented a rejection of the traditional family, the natural institution that exists to provide children with the initial love, support, and, most importantly, moral foundations upon which they could grow into upstanding Christian citizens. The approach of contemporary government, dominated by the "liberal left" was one of complicity. The embrace of secular public schools, easier divorce laws, the legalization and funding of abortion, feminism and the devaluing of the "home-keeping function," generous welfare programs that eliminated natural incentives to work, the homosexual "lifestyle," and most recently, the potential for universal daycare, all reeked of an attack on the traditional family.⁹ In place of behaviour guided by traditional moral barriers within society, Byfield now saw a rampant increase in crime, neglect, abuse, and a government spending recklessly in an effort to rectify it. In short, society was reaping what it had sown. Responding to "the systematic attempt to abolish religious influence on the law," Byfield utilized the *Alberta Report* as a vital tool within the larger battle to gradually reestablish traditional Christian morality in the minds of citizens.¹⁰

Of course, the story of society's demise constructed by Byfield was simplistic and lacking causal rigor. Yet the simplicity of the story was precisely why it connected so

⁸ Ted Byfield, conversation with author, February 22, 2011.

⁹ Although these themes were repeated often in Byfield's columns, they are spelled out clearly in: Ted Byfield, "As if the Family Hasn't Enough Trouble, Now it's Being 'Helped' by the Lib-Left," in *Alberta Report*, January 24, 1994, 44. See also: Ted Byfield, "Why This Magazine Ran that 'Disgusting' Story on Gay Pride," in *Alberta Report*, August 30, 1993, 44.

¹⁰ Ted Byfield, conversation with author, February 22, 2011.

clearly with a conservative-minded Alberta population that had come of age largely within the confines of a Christian-based code of personal and societal norms and was now increasingly bewildered by the direction their society had taken. Older citizens, who played a significant role within the Reform Party, had witnessed first hand the rapid changes that seemed to accompany the increasingly anti-Christian sentiment present within society and Byfield's attempt to draw a causal link between it and the problems of contemporary society hit home with force. It was out of this sentiment that a number of Alberta Reform MPs and PC MLAs argued vehemently against the legalization of abortion and the advancement of homosexual rights in the 1990s. The PCs in particular, whose caucus following the 1993 provincial election included an inordinate proportion of politicians from the more socially conservative rural areas of the province, would essentially go on to wage a much publicized 15-year battle against the progression of homosexual rights in Alberta.¹¹

Preston Manning's own admission that he was an "evangelical" Christian who attended a particularly conservative church in Calgary added to the speculation that he too was a strident social conservative who sought the opportunity to impose his religiously-based views of a properly-ordered Christian society upon an unsuspecting public. Indeed, this view was encouraged by the publication of two journalistic books and an influential news article that argued Manning was a stern social conservative who was eager to rewrite Canadian social policy according to his religious views should he

¹¹ For a discussion of the Alberta PC governments strong hesitation with respect to homosexual rights see: David Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions: Public Recognition of Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), Julia Lloyd and Laura Bonnett, "The Arrested Development of Queer Rights in Alberta," in Trevor Harrison ed., *The Return of the Trojan Horse: Alberta and the New World (Dis)Order*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2005), 328-341, and Clark Banack, "Conservative Christianity, Anti-Statism and Alberta's Public Sphere: The Curious Case of Bill 44," in S. Lefebvre and L. Beaman ed., *Religion in the Public Sphere: Perspectives across the Canadian Provinces*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Forthcoming in 2012).

attain power in the 1993 election.¹² However, political scientist Tom Flanagan, who worked closely with Manning while serving as Reform's Director of Policy, Strategy, and Communications in the early 1990s, has convincingly challenged this depiction of Manning as a hard-core Christian fundamentalist eager to impose a socially conservative agenda upon Canada. Speaking to the influence of religion on the political thought of Manning, Flanagan argues that he is best understood not as an evangelical moral crusader intent on "storming Babylon," but rather as one seeking to bring the Christian principles of mediation, reconciliation and self-sacrifice to bear on federal politics.¹³

Indeed, as the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, Flanagan is quite correct to dispel the argument that Manning's politics were driven by religious-based social conservatism. Although working from a conservative Christian foundation similar to Byfield, Manning largely followed the religious perspective of his father and insisted instead that the divine purpose of the state was to protect the freedom of the individual rather than to legislate "righteousness" by way of socially conservative policy. However, despite acknowledging Manning's loose adherence to the "social conservative" philosophy espoused by his father Ernest in the 1960s, which promised to unite the humanitarian concerns of the left with the free-enterprise philosophy of the right, Flanagan completely overlooks the religiously-based logic that operated behind Ernest Manning's development of this "socially conservative" position and subsequently

¹² See: Murray Dobbin, *Preston Manning and the Reform Party*, (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1991), Douglas Todd, "God, Politics and the Reform Party: As a Fundamentalist Christian and Political Leader, Preston Manning has his Beliefs Under Public Scrutiny," in *The Vancouver Sun*, December 21, 1991, B3, and Sydney Sharpe and Don Braid, *Storming Babylon: Preston Manning and the Rise of the Reform Party*, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992).

¹³ Flanagan bases this assertion on his reading of Manning's chapter on the "spiritual dimension" in *The New Canada* and his own interactions with Manning. See Flanagan, *Waiting For the Wave*, 7-8. Manning biographer Frank Dabbs also makes this point. See: Frank Dabbs, *Preston Manning: The Roots of Reform*, (Vancouver, Greystone Books, 1997), 60-61 and 85-86.

continued to inform the political thought of Preston.¹⁴ In fact, despite acknowledging Manning's desire to import a Christian-based approach to mediation and reconciliation into the political sphere, Flanagan concludes that Christianity "is the personal motivation for Manning's political career but does not determine his political positions."¹⁵ This chapter takes direct aim at this conclusion, arguing that Flanagan, along with most commentators on Manning and the Reform Party, has overlooked a more subtle yet incredibly significant dimension of Manning's thinking which grew directly out of his religious perspective and connects quite clearly with his broad political ideology. Thus, I argue that Manning's thought represents a distinct religiously-motivated conservative strain that differed from both the secular, urban conservatism of Peter Lougheed or Ralph Klein, and the social conservatism of Ted Byfield, even though all four of these influential actors shared a similar belief in fiscal conservatism. The following three sections expand on this assertion by exploring Manning's Christian perspective and its influence on his approach to politics, his view of the state and its relationship to the market, and his conception of democracy.

Preston Manning's Christian Approach to Politics

Largely in response to the negative attention his religious background was receiving from the national media, Manning included a chapter on his spirituality in his book *The New Canada* that set forth his broader political vision. Beginning with a description of the two most prevalent historical streams of Protestantism on the Canadian prairies, the left-leaning social gospel and the right-leaning evangelical traditions, Manning suggests that at the heart of both is the Christian principle of reconciliation.

¹⁴ The religious foundations of Ernest Manning's "Social Conservative" ideology are unpacked in the previous chapter.

¹⁵ Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave*, 8.

While acknowledging the value in reconciling the broken relationships between diverse groups of people on earth, what the social gospel tradition calls “social justice” and Manning himself refers to as the “horizontal” dimension of Christianity, he follows his father in asserting that it is reconciliation with God, or the “vertical” dimension, that is first required before one can turn with appropriate care to the needs of his neighbour.¹⁶ As noted in his personal journals, “love of one another is the principal effect of receiving the gospel,” but this first requires a response on the part of the individual to the initiative God has taken, through Christ, to reach out to each of us.¹⁷ Although “strained or broken relationships are the principal sources of frustration, pain, and despair in our modern world,” it is in building our relationship with God, rather than developing any particular social program, that will lead to improved relationships on earth.¹⁸

Despite sharing this broad evangelical notion of the necessity of spiritual renewal in Christ with Aberhart and his father, as well as a traditional premillennial Christian understanding of the “end of days,” complete with the Rapture, battle of Armageddon and the final return of Christ that will occur at the bequest of God alone, the potential immediacy of such an occurrence did not push Manning towards the prophetic scriptures that Aberhart and Manning had emphasized.¹⁹ In fact, Preston rejected the theory of dispensationalism and conceives the kingdom of God as “a sphere in which one is rightly related to God and that God is genuinely supreme,” rather than as a precise political order

¹⁶ Manning, *The New Canada*, 97-98.

¹⁷ Preston Manning, Personal journals, July 6, 1998, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.10.

¹⁸ Manning, *The New Canada*, 97.

¹⁹ Journalist Lloyd Mackey, a longtime associate of Manning, argues Preston is a mainstream evangelical Christian interested in the “relational aspects of faith” whereas his father Ernest invested much time in the unique eschatological theories associated with early twentieth century Christian fundamentalism. See: Lloyd Mackey, *Like Father Like Son: Ernest Manning and Preston Manning*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 1997), 123-124 and 153-158.

that one should expect to find on earth.²⁰ Yet Manning does believe there are major epochs in history in which God deals with “his own people” differently than in other periods.²¹ The primary example of this difference is found when comparing the actions of God in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, a distinction that strongly influences the direction of Manning’s Christianity. Manning interprets much of the Old Testament as an account of God’s “legal initiative,” the record of God providing a set of laws to Moses which, if obeyed, would restore the Hebrews relationship with God. However, this attempt at reconciliation through the application of “the rule of law” was unsuccessful, leading the latter-day prophets to realize that “unless laws can be inscribed on the human heart, and not merely written on parchment or tablets of stone, law by itself is insufficient to restore or regulate relationships between people and God or among themselves.”²²

This realization was confirmed by God’s second initiative that comprises the bulk of the New Testament. This is the “mediation initiative,” the arrival on earth of Christ, “a unique and divine mediator” sent by God “to restore our relationship to him and to one another.”²³ Christ’s life was one dedicated to reconciling people with God by way of his teachings. Motivated by a selfless love, Christ eventually makes the ultimate sacrifice in the interests of reconciling humanity with God. The resurrection of Christ, according to Manning, is to be interpreted as a sign that God has accepted this mediation effort and humanity is now free to accept the self-sacrifice of Christ, and His accompanying promise to free us from our sins, so long as we follow His teachings, seek forgiveness,

²⁰ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

²¹ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

²² Manning, *The New Canada*, 99.

²³ Ibid.

and make restitution for our sinful behaviour. The suggestion that we are “free” to do so, however, is of supreme importance. The essence of Christianity is, for Manning, making the free choice to follow or not follow the teachings of Christ, to accept His offer of reconciliation or reject it and continue to fall short in our relationship with God and others. One cannot be coerced into righteousness.

Although this choice represents the fundamental turning point in the life of a Christian, it is not the endpoint. Believers, argues Manning, possess “an obligation to have a Christian influence on everything – from bringing Christian ethics to bear, to practicing reconciliation, to trying to introduce people to Christ in whatever sphere we’re in.”²⁴ Clearly influenced by his father’s long involvement in both Christian evangelism and Alberta politics, Manning was quick to conclude that Scripture did not support arguments made by certain Christian fundamentalists in favour of political non-involvement.²⁵ Indeed, given the enormous impact the state can have on the lives of its citizens, in addition to its potential for constraining evil, Manning concluded that it would be foolish to completely abandon this institution to the non-religious. This is especially important when one considers the divine purpose of the nation, an understanding that Manning draws from the seventeenth book of Acts wherein Paul explains to the Athenians that God created nations. For Manning, this point implies that nations must necessarily possess a particular spiritual purpose envisioned by the creator. Thus, reasons

²⁴ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

²⁵ In the transcripts of an undated address Preston gave over his father’s radio program, he provided a number of examples drawn from the Bible meant to discredit the arguments for political non-involvement made by certain fundamentalist Christians. See: Preston Manning, “Christians and Politics,” *Canada’s National Back to the Bible Hour*, nd, accessed in the Prairie Provinces Collection, University of Alberta Library. In an interview with the author Preston estimated this address was given in the 1960’s or 70’s.

Manning, nations are “the context in which man seeks for God.”²⁶ Therefore, although the process of law-making can never fully reconcile humanity with God and lead to completely harmonious relations on earth, as evidenced by the experience of the Hebrews in the Old Testament, the political realm is of supreme importance nonetheless. The nation is a creation of God that must be governed in a particular manner in order to allow it to serve its purpose: facilitating humanity’s search for God. By facilitating this search, the state could indirectly assist citizens in their quest to improve social relations on earth as more and more individuals turned toward God. The implications of this conclusion with respect to the proper arrangement of the state will be explored in the following section.

Confident that Christians were meant to have influence in the political sphere, Manning delivered a speech in 1988 that outlined his preferred approach.²⁷ Despite the allegations made against Manning in the early 1990s with respect to a “secret social agenda,” he clearly distanced himself from any attempt to utilize the legislative and administrative machinery of government to implement a Christian agenda based upon the laws of God. Not only would such a coercive approach turn many ordinary Canadians away from Christianity, it would also further distance Christians from the actions of Jesus who was clearly a non-coercive figure. Thus, Manning instead developed an alternative method of political involvement, based upon his deep faith in the actions of Jesus, that he dubbed “Working Christianly with Someone Else’s Political Agenda.” This method drew inspiration from Biblical situations wherein followers of God were a minority living

²⁶ Preston Manning, Personal Journals, June 20, 1992, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.04.

²⁷ Preston Manning, “Christians and Politics,” a presentation to a Regent College Seminar, Vancouver, British Columbia, January 1988, Political Papers Collection, University of Calgary Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

within pagan kingdoms yet eventually managed to have a significant impact. Following the example of Jesus, who rejected the idea of pursuing a direct political agenda, “this approach leads Christians to play more of a servant role, and mediating role, in the political process, rather than an advocate or interest-group role.” Indeed, Manning continues elsewhere, “The heart of practicing Christianity is the sacrifice of self-interest in the interest of reconciliation, unity, and the bringing into being of a new creation.”²⁸ As Flanagan has rightly noted, it was upon this interpretation of the life of Christ, the ultimate example of self-sacrifice in the interests of reconciliation between God and humanity, that Manning modeled his approach to politics in general and his role as leader of the Reform Party in particular. However, it is a mistake to assume this was the only way in which religion influenced Manning’s politics. Despite Flanagan’s suggestion to the contrary, Manning’s faith did clearly impact his thinking on questions related to both the role of the state and his conception of democracy, although it did so in a more nuanced manner than many commentators have understood.

Manning’s Religious Perspective and his Conception of the State

In an important 1987 speech, Manning clearly articulated a political position that would largely form the backbone of Reform Party policy for the next thirteen years.²⁹ Drawing from his interpretation of “the West’s Conservative heritage,” Manning outlined four basic conservative principles that the new party must commit itself to and summarized them as follows:

²⁸ Preston Manning, Personal Journals, May 18, 1998, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.10.

²⁹ Preston Manning, “Laying the Foundations for a New Western Political Party,” a presentation to a Public Information Meeting, Calgary, Alberta, August 10, 1987, Political Papers Collection, University of Calgary Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

1. Firstly, it would mean a new and deeper commitment to the individual person and family as the primary units of Canadian society...
2. Secondly...we are prepared to rely heavily on the exercise of responsible individual and corporate enterprise, and the operations of the marketplace, as the primary engine for guiding economic development...
3. Thirdly...we view government as an institution whose primary mission is to enable free and responsible individuals and organizations to pursue their own interests and aspirations within a framework of law...

This means we would express a distinct preference for a modest and fiscally responsible government at the federal level...

4. Finally...while we uphold freedom of conscience for all citizens, we also acknowledge Canada's Judeo-Christian heritage and its value as a source of moral and ethical guidance...

Thus, in rejecting any form of political collectivism that jeopardizes the primacy of the individual (or the family that sustains it) in society, and similarly relying upon an unregulated economic market and a scaled-back federal government that is not afraid to acknowledge Canada's religious heritage, Manning offers a vision of a "New Canada" that clearly moves away from the liberal-based secular welfare state model of governance that had emerged in the post WWII period. In fact, many commentators have suggested that a good deal of Reform's sudden electoral support was due to the general breakdown of consensus in developed societies around the welfare state model now that countries were facing mounting fiscal and social problems.³⁰ Although decreasing confidence in the welfare-state model in the 1970s and 1980s may help to explain certain segments of Reform's electoral support, it is a mistake to assume Manning's interest in reducing the size of government and freeing individuals and corporations in the marketplace was a product of this new wave of neo-liberal thought that was gaining followers in the

³⁰ These arguments are reviewed in: Trevor Harrison, Bill Johnston and Harvey Krahn, "Special Interests and/or New Right Economics? The Ideological Bases of Reform Party Support in Alberta in the 1993 Federal Election," in *Canadian Review of Sociology*, Volume 33, Issue 2, (May 1996), 159-197.

intellectual and political circles of United States, Britain and Canada. Rather, his broad political principles are a clear continuation of his father's political thinking that stretches back into the 1940s and was most clearly articulated as a "socially conservative" position in the book Preston co-authored with Ernest in 1967.³¹ More importantly, however, is the acknowledgement that this strand of pro-market, small-government ideology is derived at a fundamental level from the Christian perspective that Manning and his father largely shared.³²

In the same journal entry that Manning worked from the Book of Acts to conclude that the purpose of the nation is to provide a context in which man seeks God, he continues: "A nation will be judged on the extent to which it fulfills God's purpose for it – the freedom it gives to seek (or not seek) God."³³ Indeed, if one accepts that the boundaries of nations were set by God, reasons Manning, it implies that He understood nations to have a particular purpose and therefore a nation may be judged in the end, "not just on its economic performance or political structure but did it serve some bigger, broader purpose...did it honour the freedom that God seemed to value or it did not."³⁴ This emphasis on freedom within the nation is tied directly to humanity's condition as

³¹ E.C. Manning, *Political Realignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians*, (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

³² Richard Sigurdson has argued that Manning's thought was not a continuation of his father's Social Credit ideas but rather represented a new wave of "postmodern" political thought in Canada that sought to respond to the failures of the secular modern state with a program of conservatism that transcended the "old" left-right divisions. There is certainly some truth to the suggestion that Manning articulated a "new" approach to politics, and Sigurdson correctly notes that some of Manning's particular policy prescriptions are quite distinct from those espoused by earlier Western Canadian populist movements, yet he largely ignores the deeply rooted religious perspective of Manning that stood behind his broader political ideology and thus misses the very real points of continuity between the thought of Manning and his father that are anchored in their shared faith. See: Richard Sigurdson, "Preston Manning and the Politics of Postmodernism in Canada," in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 27, Issue 2, (June 1994), 249-276.

³³ Preston Manning, Personal Journals, June 20, 1992, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.04.

³⁴ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

determined by God. Men and women, Manning argues, have been equipped by God with certain reasoning capacities but:

[God] also seems to attach enormous value to their freedom to exercise it one way or the other, including negatively. I mean, He didn't create pre-programmed robots; He made human beings with reasoning capabilities and the freedom to exercise those capabilities. What I find awe-inspiring is the fact that He gave humans freedom even knowing that they would abuse it.

Thus, Manning continues:

I think God values freedom because of the relationship it makes possible when people freely choose to follow Him.

[Because] God himself seems to attach an inordinate value to freedom – evidenced by the fact that He gave people free will, including the freedom to reject him...we too should attach a high value to personal freedom.³⁵

Freedom is therefore a foundational component of Manning's Christianity and an absolute requirement within the nation that, in the view of Manning, has as its divine purpose the facilitation of humanity's search for God. The central political question that emanates from this view therefore is, as Manning asks in his personal journal, "What laws, institutional arrangements, [or] public policies facilitate the seeking after or not seeking after God?"³⁶ In answering this question, Manning, along with most conservative Christians, is clear that no authority, be it the church or the state, can coerce someone into accepting Christ by way of a spiritual conversion. This can only occur through a personal decision by the individual to respond to the offer of salvation made to us by Christ. Thus, "one of the biggest things a state can do," answers Manning, "is to make sure it itself is not a coercive force restricting people's liberty and to do all it can to create an environment where freedom of choice and personal freedom of conscience is

³⁵ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

³⁶ Preston Manning, Personal Journals, June 20, 1992, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.04.

respected and protected.”³⁷ It is precisely at this point that Manning’s Christian perspective and his political ideology meet.

The liberal welfare state model, although obviously preferable to outright totalitarianism, was problematic for Manning because it relied upon a large, interventionist government that built barriers between individual citizens and the freedom they were entitled to. Surely the Canadian welfare state that Manning railed against in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not overtly restricting the freedom to worship but, by imposing hefty personal taxes to fund a myriad of secular social programs that were administered by an army of bureaucrats, the Canadian state was placing undue restrictions on the individual. Not only would he or she be required to work longer hours to earn the cash required to support their family due to high taxes, they would inevitably find themselves entangled in the cold and inefficient web of government bureaucracy when accessing services. More problematic, however, was the potential power and size of the secular state relative to the individual should the collectivist logic operating behind the welfare state model be followed to its conclusion. As government services grow, the corresponding responsibility of individuals, families, and even community-level organizations, is eroded. To continue down such a path would not only further impede basic political and economic freedoms, it would also jeopardize the individual’s ultimate freedom, that of religious worship and expression, as the secular state gained more and more control over the lives of citizens. Manning’s emphasis on individual freedom in the political and economic realms, and the corresponding demand for a small government that respects freedom of conscience, identified in the 1987 political speech and eventually

³⁷ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

solidified within much of the Reform Party's policy platform, was therefore derived directly from his Christian perspective.

Yet Manning's preference for relying upon a largely unregulated economic market as the chief distributor of resources as opposed to a state-led socialistic system had even more precise biblical roots in addition to his broader concerns surrounding individual freedom. The Biblical view of human nature, Manning suggests, is accurate in that it clearly recognizes the human disposition toward evil and greed. More interesting, however, is the fact that the Bible "doesn't denounce self-interest outright but rather tries to turn it into good." Manning continues:

For example, the old Jewish law about loving your neighbour could have stopped right there – "Love your neighbour. Period." But it doesn't. It says: "Love your neighbour as yourself." There's some sense in which appreciation of your own self-interest is necessary to know what it is you can do and should do for others. And the same principle is found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount...He said "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." There's a subordinate clause, which follows the altruistic clause, which is tied to self-interest. Again the implication is that unless you have an appreciation of your own self-interest, you won't be able to understand the interests of others and therefore be able to respect and serve them.³⁸

It is the capitalist rather than the socialistic economic system that allows people the freedom to both follow their self-interest, a desire inherent in our natures, and to follow or reject the teachings of Christ which compel us to overcome extreme selfishness and act charitably towards others. Manning returns to the Book of Acts to provide an early example of the dangers a community faces should it fail to take the presence of human self-interest seriously. Chapter two of Acts depicts an early group of Christians living in a socialistic arrangement wherein an attempt was made to hold all possessions in

³⁸ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

common and provide to anyone as he had need. However, this community failed to account for self-interest and quickly broke down. Manning notes:

The principle of “from each according to his ability” was almost immediately violated by Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11) who sold a piece of land ostensibly to support the church but withheld a portion of the revenues for themselves. And the principle of “to each according to his needs” began to break down (Acts 6: 1) when the Gentile widows claimed they were receiving less charity than their Jewish counterparts. Ananias and Sapphira paid with their lives for the violation of the principle “from each according to his ability” - that’s the degree of coercion (the death penalty) that you would have to have to fully enforce that principle.³⁹

Of course, even a cursory glance through the Gospels of the New Testament makes clear that God wants humanity to act charitably toward those in need but, Manning argues, such behaviour will only happen consistently if the individual freely chooses to follow this command. Only the freedom inherent in a market economy allows for this choice. Forced charity, or “social justice,” within a strongly regulated market is bound to require immense impediments on the freedom of the individual, as was the case in the story from the Book of Acts. Any potential gains in terms of addressing pressing social inequalities by way of socialism are simply not worth the steep decline in personal liberty paid by citizens. The nation’s purpose is to safeguard the freedoms required to choose to follow or reject God. Poverty is a very real problem but any meaningful solution must grow from voluntary charity on the part of individuals who have chosen to build a relationship with God and therefore freely follow the commands of Jesus to act honestly and with compassion and service to the needy. This Christian-based behavior represents the height of what Manning labeled “the exercise of responsible individual and corporate enterprise,” in his 1987 speech. We should always, adds Manning, “stress the importance

³⁹ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010. Manning initially drew upon this story within the Book of Acts in his radio commentary “Christians and Politics,” *Canada’s National Back to the Bible Hour*, nd, accessed in the Prairie Provinces Collection, University of Alberta Library.

of accepting responsibility whenever we talk about the importance of freedom itself.”⁴⁰

The notion of the state stepping in to enforce this responsibility, beyond some general laws which protect citizens from particularly heinous acts, is bound to fail and is contrary to God’s wishes for a free nation.

This did not mean that Manning was outright opposed to all government services, much to the chagrin of stern neo-conservative Tom Flanagan, Reform’s former Director of Policy, Strategy, and Communications. In fact, in noting that Manning showed little interest in academic “neo-conservatism,” that he failed to exhibit strong policy preferences with respect to common conservative issues like the Crown or the military, and that he dared propose both clear pro-market/anti-statist initiatives *and* plans for government-led programs which would fund various scientific research, assist with job retraining and encourage “green” industry, Flanagan concludes that Manning was an “eclectic” thinker akin to American Democrat Bill Clinton rather than an authentic conservative.⁴¹ Indeed, Manning did call for certain government initiatives to ensure those most in need would be taken care of as well as for certain regulations that could help to prevent negative environmental consequences of economic activity.⁴² Yet to imply that Manning’s thought was somewhat “eclectic” because of these views is to misunderstand the philosophical foundations from which this thought grew.

Working from a particular Christian perspective rather than a neo-conservative intellectual foundation, the protection of individual liberty through reductions to government services and the encouragement of more unregulated market activity was of immense importance but the embrace of such public policy could not overlook the

⁴⁰ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

⁴¹ Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave*, 12-16.

⁴² Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

Christian-based responsibilities followers had to their fellows or even the natural environment. In an ideal world, all charitable activity would be led by voluntary organizations but, in the conditions Manning found himself in, the requirement to “be thy brother’s keeper” demanded a place for certain state-led programs. The trick, however, was to limit such activity as much as possible and certainly not let it grow to a level that severely limited the individual’s liberty by way of burdensome taxes and excessive restrictions. Whether or not a few government regulations on an otherwise unregulated market economy could really make much of an impact with respect to environmental protection or poverty alleviation is, of course, debatable, but this was the logic behind Manning’s “eclectic” political thought nonetheless.

Manning’s Religious Perspective and his Dedication to Democracy

Overall, Manning’s political thinking with respect to the purpose of the state and its corresponding relationship to the free market, derived from his Christian perspective, was translated into a more general “anti-big government” and “pro-free market” stance that subsequently formed much of Reform’s policy backbone. However, it is important to recognize that it was translated into policy not simply because it was favoured by Manning but also because Manning perceived this type of policy to represent the wishes of the majority of Western Canadians.⁴³ In fact, Flanagan bases his contention that Manning’s political thought was not strongly influenced by his religious beliefs on his observation that, at a foundational level, Manning’s ultimate goal was not the promotion

⁴³ There is a tension here that was initially flagged by Flanagan. Despite Manning’s contention that Reform policy represented the wishes of its members, many of the original party principles were authored by Manning prior to any membership consultation. Of course, subsequent research has shown that Manning’s pro-market policies were strongly favoured by Reform supporters but this does not change the fact that Manning most likely had more initial influence in setting the direction of Reform policy than he often admits. See: Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave*, 24.

of small government/pro-market policy but rather the introduction of democratic reforms that would ensure the political demands of the majority of citizens were respected and acted upon.⁴⁴ This coincides with Manning's admission that he was largely driven by his "personal conviction that there is a need to restore "the common sense of the common people" to a more central position in federal politics," a desire that resulted in the continual demand for the implementation of a number of mechanisms designed to enhance direct democracy.⁴⁵

Admittedly, this desire for a more representative democratic system that places increased political weight on the views of a potentially secular majority rather than the particular policy positions developed by Manning in accordance with his Christian views seems counterintuitive. Yet Manning's overall approach to politics outlined above clearly rejected any attempt to impose public policy based upon Christian values on others. Of course, this emphasis on democracy is most certainly related to Manning's broader understanding of individual freedom as the highest goal of political action. In what other political system are individuals more free than in the most democratic? Indeed, in a journal entry in 1997 Manning confides that he views the growing call for democracy around the world as the "work of God."⁴⁶

Manning, following his father, drew additional inspiration in the value of the common will of a potentially secular citizenry from the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel.⁴⁷ This was the historical account of ancient Israel's response to God's initial

⁴⁴ See: Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave*, Chapters one and two.

⁴⁵ Manning, *The New Canada*, 26.

⁴⁶ Preston Manning, Personal Journals, January 19, 1997, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.07.

⁴⁷ Preston Manning recounts this lesson in: "Christians and Politics," *Canada's National Back to the Bible Hour*, nd, accessed in the Prairie Provinces Collection, University of Alberta Library. Ernest Manning recounted the very same story in an interview after his retirement. See: Ernest Manning, interview by

commandment that they were not to follow the leads of neighbouring nations who had kings but were to be governed solely by God. However, Israelites began clamoring for a king of their own and Samuel, their spiritual leader, was forced to reluctantly ask God for a king despite his own view that the people were acting wrongly by making this demand. Upon hearing this request God instructed Samuel to “protest solemnly unto them (the citizens of Israel), and shew (sic) them the manner of the king that shall reign over them.” Samuel subsequently delivered a lengthy speech to the people of Israel that listed the many ways in which a king would abuse them, but to no avail. The Israelites maintained their wish for a king, and God complied and ended His divine reign over them. Preston took from this account three lessons for Christians who find themselves in political office: Such individuals should pray for God’s counsel as Samuel did, they should “protest solemnly unto the electorate and endeavour to show them where their demands may eventually lead” should they desire something contrary to the will of God, and finally, they should be prepared to accept the demands of the masses but interpret this decision as a rejection of God rather than a rejection of their political leadership.⁴⁸ Both Ernest and Preston Manning followed these lessons in their political lives and, so long as they possessed the opportunity to explain why certain public policies were unwise, were prepared to accept the will of the majority despite the knowledge that such an action could be against the will of God. Again, the freedom to reject God is paramount.

Perhaps most interestingly, this method described in 1 Samuel was the precise approach Manning devised for Reform MPs who were faced with a vote on a contentious moral issue wherein their own personal views may differ from the will of their

Lydia Semotuk, Interview 14, (July 4, 1980), p.30-32, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

⁴⁸ Manning, “Christians and Politics.”

constituents. Rather than simply voting their conscience, he instructed MPs to make their preferences known to their constituents, engage them in a debate with the hope of demonstrating why their view was more appropriate than the other but, in the end, vote in accordance with the wishes of the majority. The decisions made by such a majority may be wrong in the eyes of God but such a method ensures an element of transparency: it will be the majority of citizens rather than the individual politician that will be held morally accountable, just as the Israelites, rather than Samuel were held accountable by God. Thus, the democratic will of the majority, regardless of the wisdom inherent in their position, was to prevail over Manning's or his MPs' own preferences in the political realm.⁴⁹

Yet, as the quote above regarding his desire to “restore ‘the common sense of the common people’ to a more central position in federal politics” attests, Manning was not simply a democrat. He was a radical democrat who believed in the moral and intellectual capacities of the ordinary citizen and sought to bring the demands of such “common people” to bear on a political system. This demanded a party structure that welcomed and engaged ordinary “grassroots” citizens in a series of open meetings wherein their judgments could be heard and incorporated into the very policy proposals that would eventually be put to a vote. Despite the strong influence Manning's Christian faith had on so much of his thinking with respect to approaching politics and developing particular public policy, he notes that his appreciation of the “common sense of the common people,” and the righteousness of populist movements built upon this sentiment, came

⁴⁹ Manning's approach to such occurrences is documented in: Manning, *The New Canada*, 107-108.

“first and foremost from my study of western Canadian political history and from my father’s long involvement in one such movement.”⁵⁰

Of course, he is correct to point to the decidedly “populist” nature of western Canada’s political history and it is certainly not a stretch to suggest that a politically aware individual growing up in the midst of this culture, especially the son of Alberta’s premier, would tend towards a favorable impression of “the common sense of the common people,” and the corresponding argument that this “common sense” should carry significant political weight. Yet, even this argument for populist politics based upon political culture rather than explicit religious interpretation has a religious dimension to it. As discussed in more detail in previous chapters, given the strong influence the American evangelical Protestant strain had on the political thought of Henry Wise Wood, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, it is easy to see how the individualistic and anti-establishmentarian populist sentiment inherent in this religious tradition was transposed onto the early Alberta political scene.

Despite the fact Manning seems unaware of this connection between the American evangelical Protestantism tradition and the populist sentiment in early Alberta politics, there is no doubt that his reading of the life of Jesus strongly reinforced his belief in the righteousness of populism. The ministry of Jesus was one clearly built around the common people rather than the spiritual and political elite. However, Jesus was not simply taking advantage of those most easily manipulated. Manning notes:

[Jesus] respected the capacities of ordinary people – some of His most profound statements, like in John 4 about “God is a spirit,” were made to humble ordinary people like that Samaritan woman at the well. He must have

⁵⁰ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

believed, not only that she could understand what he was talking about, but also that she could act on it and communicate it to others.⁵¹

In a series of personal journal entries in the fall of 1996 Manning further noted the various ways in which the actions of Jesus recorded in the Book of Matthew reinforce a populist approach to democratic politics. Jesus showed compassion for the physical and spiritual needs of the people, He believed them to be more receptive to spiritual truths than elites, and He responded to them emotionally rather than intellectually so as to truly meet their needs. Yet Jesus also condemned the people for living a wicked and godless life although, Manning notes, the blame for this condition was actually aimed at the spiritual and political leaders of the people for leading them down this sinful path. By placing blame on the elites, Jesus provides the people with an assessment and condemnation of their leaders.⁵² Such reflections on the part of Manning point to the clear parallels he perceived between the actions of Jesus in relation to the common people to whom He hoped to deliver spiritual salvation and Manning's favoured "populist" approach to federal politics that was meant to deliver democratic justice to the masses. In fact, Manning follows his reflections on the populist nature of the actions of Jesus with a message of condemnation aimed toward the political elites that was clearly inspired by the language of Jesus when addressing the spiritual leaders of His time:

By your preoccupation with partisan interests and your excessive discipline you have stifled the voice of the people and subverted the public interest.

...because you have banished the spirit and the will of the people from your deliberations, the people have forsaken you.

Because you have taken this House of the People, and turned it into the House of the Parties, because you have subjected the will of the voters to the

⁵¹ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 10, 2010.

⁵² Preston Manning, Personal Journals, September 22 and October 20, 1996, E. Preston Manning Fonds, University of Calgary Archives, 2003.054/14.07.

will of the whips, because you have turned this temple of democracy into a den of patronage and partisanship, the will and spirit of the people has departed this place.

And it will be so, until enough Reformers are elected to restore the spirit of democracy to this place.⁵³

Despite this parallel, however, Manning never wavered from his broader contention: politics could never deliver the spiritual salvation that humanity ultimately desires. This was available only by way of a personal relationship with God made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. Thus, he approached politics in precisely the same way both his father and Aberhart had done before him: instrumentally. The overarching purpose of the nation was simply the facilitation of the individual's freedom to pursue this spiritual relationship. Manning, like his father, understood limited government and a free economic market as the best way to ensure such freedom and they each favoured particular political policies accordingly. However, to impose such policies on an unwilling public would obviously be self-defeating. The citizenry may require instruction from time-to-time, as the common people did from Jesus, but ultimately, it is their freedom to choose the appropriate policies that matters. Thus, despite extensive mental effort devising political positions that ensured individual freedom, Manning had little choice but to allow grassroots citizens the opportunity to be the final arbiters after he presented his political vision. This must have been a difficult position to accept at times and, as Flanagan has argued, Manning was not always able to overcome his personal preferences when policy decisions were made, but this was the logic behind Manning's emphasis on democracy in general and populism in particular.⁵⁴ It, like his general pro-market, anti-state ideology, was derived largely from his religious

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave*, 24.

perspective. To overlook this is to misunderstand a great deal of Manning's political thought.

Conclusion:

The Political Thought of Manning and the Trajectory of Contemporary Alberta Politics

Despite emphasizing the relational principles of reconciliation and self-sacrifice rather than the dispensationalism and “end of days” biblical prophecy of William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, Preston Manning's Christianity was largely a continuation of their premillennial interpretation. Society's ills were the result of our distance from God and only by way of an individual effort on each of our parts to seek spiritual renewal and build our relationship with Him could we rectify the pain in our personal and social lives. The chief product of this individual renewal with God would be a newfound love for others and a desire to bring this love to bear on the various spheres of life that one operates within. However, the notion that society could be perfected was fantasy for it was inconceivable that all people will actually seek a spiritual rebirth. Perfection would come from God alone. Thus, the divine purpose of the state was not to seek a perfected society but rather to ensure individuals were free and thus granted the potential to seek out God without undue restriction. This obviously led Manning to stress the right to religious freedom but, like his father, this emphasis on individual freedom also carried with it a strong aversion to economic collectivism and excessive state interference in the lives of its citizens. The result was a clear commitment in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the market economy and a less active state, a stance that would ultimately help reposition the Alberta electorate, away from Lougheed's state-led model and towards the program of state-reduction embraced by Klein and the governing PCs.

Beyond this demand that the state's size and scope be reduced was Manning's fundamental commitment to democracy in general and populism in particular. Both the Christian-based commitment to the freedom of individuals, including the freedom of citizens to make poor political choices, as well as the broader anti-establishmentarianism inherent in the American evangelical Protestant tradition that, by way of his father, he was groomed in, lie behind Manning's thinking with respect to democracy and populism. Similarly, this Christian-based preference for democracy also lies behind his rejection of the notion that the state ought to impose traditional Christian morality upon its citizens, a stand that clearly distinguished his thought from that of Ted Byfield and other social conservatives that were active in Alberta in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Manning's conservative Christian background ensured that he most likely agreed with Byfield that abortion or same-sex marriage were contrary to God's moral laws but his overall commitment to democracy, derived from his broader conception of the divine role of the state as being the guarantor of individual freedom, meant that imposing Christian morality on its citizens was of greater harm.

Beyond this general commitment to democracy, however, was Manning's oft-cited desire to increase and enhance the avenues available for direct citizen participation in the democratic process. Indeed, his continual calls for the implementation of populist mechanisms such as citizen initiatives, nation-wide referenda and the ability to "recall" MPs placed him well outside of the distinctly anti-participatory conception of populist democracy adhered to by both William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, who defined democracy as "people expressing a general will for general results and leaving experts to

work out the details.”⁵⁵ As discussed in the previous chapter, this amounted to a “model of benevolent technocracy” that sought to ascertain the “peoples will” but was devoid of the type of meaningful citizen involvement stressed by the UFA in the 1920s and 30s. Preston Manning, for his part, completely disavowed the notion, implicit in Social Credit’s view of democracy, that ordinary citizens were incapable of make vital political decisions. Instead, Manning argued that so long as they were provided the proper information, society would be better off if the “people” rather than the “elites” were charting its political course.⁵⁶ More importantly, Manning understood the exercise of political freedom through active political participation as a necessary requirement to maintain political freedom itself, a view that clearly differed from the implicit suspicion of political participation that one finds in the strong premillennial perspective of William Aberhart and Ernest Manning discussed last chapter.⁵⁷ Thus, whereas Henry Wise Wood encouraged participatory and deliberative populist politics in part because such activity was required to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, and Aberhart and Ernest Manning placed less emphasis on such participation as they distanced themselves from any notion that humanity could, in fact, build a Kingdom of God on earth, Preston Manning reaffirmed the importance of political participation because, ultimately, he understood such action as mandatory if one hoped to ensure individual freedom was to be protected from a potentially oppressive state. In other words, Manning’s interest in participatory politics is rooted, paradoxically, in a foundational anti-statism that itself is derived from his insistence that God wants individuals to be free. This is an important

⁵⁵ Ernest Manning, interview by Lydia Semotuk, Interview 1, (December 4, 1978), p.24, Ernest Manning Fonds, University of Alberta Archives, Edmonton, Alberta.

⁵⁶ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 9, 2011.

⁵⁷ Preston Manning, conversation with author, November 9, 2011.

point of contention between Aberhart and Ernest Manning on one hand, and Preston Manning on the other, who together shared both a certain Christian-based anti-statism and a strong commitment to democracy, yet differed with respect to the value they placed on political participation.

Yet, as David Laycock has argued, the strong anti-statist/pro-market message inherent in Manning's political thought and the platform of Reform equated to an indirect commitment to significantly contract the parameters of democratic life. Although Manning was motivated by a genuine desire to increase the political influence of "grassroots" citizens, and early Reform membership conventions did include vigorous participation from "common" people, his strong opposition to an active state and the "special interest" groups that fed off its public subsidies inadvertently committed Reform to a "plebiscitarian" conception of populist democracy akin to the one adhered to more explicitly by Aberhart and Ernest Manning. This conception, argues Laycock, holds that:

[the] mediation of citizens' policy preferences through deliberation in and among traditional political parties and organized interests harms the body politic because such processes are too easily captured by a closed circle of "special interests" and their benefactors. The only way to avoid such harm is to minimize the influence of the institutional players in the policy process by maximizing the number and impact of detours around them. On this view, direct democracy is a construction kit for detours around policy intersections that have been clogged and polluted by parties and organized interests.⁵⁸

For Laycock, this conception of democracy rests upon the assumption that "the common people" are essentially in agreement on general political matters and that it is traditional political parties or other organized "special interests" that sow confusion and division among the public. Importantly, given the strong anti-state, pro-market stance taken by both Manning and the larger Reform Party, "special interests" in their case were

⁵⁸ Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*, 95.

defined as groups “that support the welfare state, oppose major tax cuts, and propose that social resources should be allocated on the basis on non-market principles.”⁵⁹ The solution, therefore, was to construct direct connections between the “people” and the “results” they seek (ultimately “freedom” according to Manning’s worldview) by curtailing any potential distortion of the people’s preferences by intermediary political institutions that placed non-market-based impediments between individuals and freedom. The result is a genuine emphasis on “direct democracy” mechanisms such as recall, initiative, and referendum that attempt to ascertain the people’s preferences and bring them to bear on national policy debates, but in a way that bypasses “the social processes and political institutions that serve to moderate individual interests in light of community needs” and instead treats citizens as “political consumers who simply need to register privately formed preferences on a pre-established set of choices.”⁶⁰ This “plebiscitarian” democratic outcome is the logical result of the anti-statism inherent in Reform, a view Laycock summarizes as follows:

Fundamentally, politicians and public life deserve our disdain because it is wrong to seek public, political solutions to problems that are essentially private. Instead of encouraging meaningful participation in deliberative, educational, and pluralistic political encounters, therefore, the new right undermines such democratic activity on the grounds that it may lead to state involvement in the effort to address collective problems. In order to reduce the role of the state in such efforts, new right politicians must translate the collective problems that animate such public gatherings into private challenges that self-sufficient individuals can tackle with the assistance of family and, at most, voluntary charity.⁶¹

There is something quite insightful in Laycock’s analysis but, like most commentators on Reform, he largely misses the religious argument that underlies the

⁵⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 109.

⁶¹ Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada*, 93.

anti-statist and fiscally conservative stance of Manning. Thus, like his prior analysis of the particular styles of populist democracy advocated by both Henry Wise Wood and William Aberhart, he misses the vital religious dimension that underlies certain aspects of each of these distinct approaches to political participation. Of course, the religious underpinnings of Preston Manning's antipathy towards an active state and the "special interests" that fed off of it were not widely held by contemporary advocates of "new right" economics in Alberta, but their shared aversion to state-led economic collectivism ensured that a "plebiscitarian" form of democracy described above was central to the platform of Reform, despite a very real effort by Manning to implement a variety of direct democracy mechanisms.

Interestingly, the Alberta PC Party under Klein would similarly commit itself to the somewhat paradoxical apolitical yet populist approach to politics one finds in both the Alberta Social Credit and the Alberta-based Reform Party. Largely responding to Manning's insistence that governments implement mechanisms capable of restoring "the common sense of the common people" to its rightful place atop political structures, Klein embarked on a campaign to ensure the demands of "ordinary Albertans" were adhered to.⁶² Yet, as Gordon Laxer has noted:

In Klein's Alberta...the public sphere is discredited. It is viewed as bloated, inefficient, and staffed by public employees holding on to their vested interests. By contrast, the marketplace is portrayed as the purveyor of all that is good. It's efficient, competitive, and teaches people tough love: how to be self-reliant. The marketplace removes the "privileges" of "special interest groups" who (it is implied) are parasitically living off those who are "doers" in the private sector. These assumptions underlie an attempt to reverse the 1960s and 1970s expansion of what constituted the public sphere.⁶³

⁶² Trevor Harrison, "The Changing Face of Prairie Politics: Populism in Alberta," in *Prairie Forum*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 2000), 107-121.

⁶³ Gordon Laxer, "The Privatization of Public Life," in Gordon Laxer and Trevor Harrison ed., *The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1995), 101.

Of course, this attack on the public sphere was a direct result of the ideological orientation held by many in the PC Party that has little to do with religious interpretation or their particular understanding of democracy. However, it is worth noting that the implication of this ideological orientation, as Laycock noted with regard to Manning and the Reform Party, is a commitment to a form of democracy that is suspicious of meaningful debate and deliberation in traditional associations within the public sphere. Indeed, this approach seems to fit nicely with the broader non-deliberative or apolitical form of plebiscitarian populism that has dominated Alberta since the days of Aberhart and the early Social Credit Party. Although religious interpretation seems to have little to do with the adherence to this approach to democratic politics on the part of the contemporary PC Party, it is important to recall that this version of populism replaced the more participatory style advocated by Wood and the UFA. Just as Wood's version of postmillennial Christianity demanded such participation on the part of citizens, Aberhart's premillennial Christianity sought to reduce the demands the state placed on citizens, including the demand to participate in a way that went beyond simply voting. As the above quote demonstrates, a strong suspicion of "the public sphere" still exists in Alberta and this sentiment can be partly traced back to the religious-based anti-statism of Aberhart that was carried into contemporary Alberta through the thought of Ernest, and then Preston, Manning.

More broadly, Manning's intense commitment to both populism and an unregulated economic market spoke to his adherence to the same "populist conservative" sentiment that had been previously established in Alberta by the long rule of both the UFA and Social Credit, two parties that inherited the unique tensions between

conservative and radical tendencies from the American evangelical Protestant tradition. Indeed, Reform's platform, which demanded increased mechanisms for direct democracy, an end to government interference in the market, and a return to "common sense" approaches to law and order (with a tinge of religious-based social conservatism at its foundation from Byfield and his followers), represented a blatant populist conservative message. At its base was Manning's radical, Christian-based belief in the supreme value of the "ordinary" individual, including his or her moral and intellectual capacity, and a subsequent commitment to ensuring his or her liberty was protected. This sentiment, which went well beyond the parameters of "tory" conservative thought, stood behind Manning's pro-market, anti-statist sentiment that informed much of Reform's economic policy platform as well as his commitment to democracy in general. Yet, Reform's promise to protect the personal liberty of citizens in the marketplace was accompanied by the simultaneous demand that they behave responsibly in both the market and their general private lives. An explicit demand was obviously made by Byfield and the socially conservative wing of the Party that insisted individuals were to follow the moral laws of God. A more implicit, although probably more significant, demand to behave was the byproduct of Manning's desire to reduce the size and scope of the state. In calling for a significant cut to government services, Reform issued a largely unspoken call for individual Canadians to embrace the principles of individual responsibility and self-help rather than continue to rely on the state.

It is here that the paradox inherent in the Christian-based populist commitment to individual freedom is made apparent. Wood, Aberhart and both Ernest and Preston Manning had incredible faith in the mental and moral capacity of the individual yet,

precisely because the individual possessed such capacities, it was expected that the he or she would utilize them and thus act in an intelligent, moral, and responsible way.

Citizens should be permitted a reasonable amount of freedom to pursue their ends but, if they fail to act “properly,” the state, given the reduction in size and scope required to permit such freedom in the first place, will no longer be there to provide much in terms of support. There is, therefore, a unique tension here between a radical populist celebration of the capacities of the individual and his or her subsequent right to be free and the corresponding conservative demand that this freedom be utilized in a particular way, either explicitly by following the moral laws of God, or implicitly by acting responsibly in the marketplace and thus avoiding poverty and destitution. Indeed, when thinking about this paradox in the Christian-based political thought of Manning, one is again reminded of Phillip Hammond’s point that the long tradition of American evangelical Protestantism had “saturated America with the idea that people should be free to do pretty much as they like, as long as they look out for themselves...and, of course, behave.”⁶⁴ Given the strong influence this same evangelical Protestant tradition had on the elite strands of political thought within Alberta, it should come as no surprise that the province’s political culture seems to be guided by this precise tension identified by Hammond.

In fact, the notion of enhancing the economic freedom of individuals while simultaneously demanding a certain type of behaviour from citizens was at the heart of the drastic cuts to government expenditures made by Klein’s PCs in the early 1990s. As Claude Denis has argued, this embrace of “new-right” economic policy was accompanied

⁶⁴ Phillip E. Hammond, *The Protestant Presence in Twentieth-Century America: Religion and Political Culture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 45.

in Alberta by a largely unspoken attempt to morally regulate the population by instilling the values of self-help and self-discipline in the population, “admonishing individuals and communities to become responsible and independent, [and] castigating as un-Albertan whoever is not inclined or able to join the crusade.”⁶⁵ Of course, it was largely secular fiscal conservatives in the PC cabinet that directed the revival of this general anti-statist, pro-market sentiment. In fact, much has been made by academics and journalists with respect to Alberta’s adoption of a secular “new-right” approach to the size and scope of government in 1993 that mirrored the “neo-liberal” economic policies of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Regan in the United States.⁶⁶ However, I want to suggest that the revival of this general anti-statist, pro-market sentiment in Alberta by the Klein PCs had stronger roots in the province’s traditional aversion to economic collectivism in general and Preston Manning’s well-received demands for fiscally conservative policies in particular. Indeed, as a number of scholars have observed, the sudden rise of the Reform Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s did much to shape the public mood in the province in a fiscally conservative manner.⁶⁷ And, as I have argued throughout this chapter, Manning’s call for a fiscally conservative and democratically enhanced state was derived squarely from a religious perspective that he shared with his father and William Aberhart. In fact, when thinking about the long-running emphasis on populist politics and the rejection of economic collectivism in Alberta, stretching all the way back to Henry Wise Wood and the UFA’s refusal to embrace the socialism advocated by the

⁶⁵ Claude Denis, “‘Government Can Do Whatever It Wants’: Moral Regulation in Ralph Klein’s Alberta,” *In The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Volume 32, Issue 3 (August 1995), 374.

⁶⁶ See: Laxer and Harrison ed., *The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada*, Lisac, *The Klein Revolution*, and Brooke Jeffrey, *Hard Right Turn: The New Face of Neo-Conservatism in Canada*, (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999).

⁶⁷ See: Taras and Tupper, “Politics and Deficits: Alberta’s Challenge to the Canadian Political Agenda,” and Harrison, “The Reform-Action of Alberta Politics.”

radical prairie “social gospel” crowd, it is quite significant to note that a certain religious interpretation has undergirded this populist, pro-market sentiment from Wood, through the thought of Aberhart and Ernest Manning, and into the thinking of Preston Manning in contemporary Alberta. This is a vital point of continuity that binds together the political thought of four remarkably influential politicians from distinct points in Alberta’s political history and sheds significant new light on the province’s longstanding commitment to populist democracy as well as its aversion to government regulation in the marketplace.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusion

Despite the vast academic attention the political development of Alberta has received, the influence of religion on this development has been treated, in the best of cases, superficially. It is well known that both a liberal and a more conservative Christian interpretation was at work in the UFA and the Alberta Social Credit respectfully, but a careful and detailed analysis of this influence has, up to this point, been non-existent. This is especially surprising given that formative political leaders like Henry Wise Wood, William Aberhart, Ernest and Preston Manning were clearly moved by a deep religious faith. It has been my broad contention throughout this study that this oversight has seriously impaired our understanding of the roots of Alberta's political development and I have thus attempted to at least begin to rectify this rather large gap by investigating the influence of religious interpretation on the political thought of four important Alberta political leaders, both historically and more recently. This was done by way of an "interpretive" approach that sought to access an aspect of the subject's "framework of meaning" (their religious perspective) and demonstrate the relationship between this "background" and some particular thought and/or action completed by the subject in question (their political thought and action). Although this inquiry began by articulating the subject's own self-understanding in this regard, I hope to have provided an explanation of the relationship between their religious perspective and their political thought and action that goes beyond even their own initial understanding of this relationship. Not only has this effort uncovered a clearer picture of the political thought of these individuals than has previously existed, it has also revealed some important ways

in which religion has helped to shape the direction of Alberta's unique political development and political culture.

At the outset, this study proposed to ascertain the manner by which the religious-based political thought of these leaders influenced the political development of Alberta by asking three broad questions: In what way were the personal conceptions of human nature, agency, justice, citizenship, democracy and the proper role of the state shaped by religious belief and how, in turn, did this influence their political goals, strategies and discourse? Second, and more generally, what pattern emerges with regard to religion and political thought and action when we consider these questions over a century of Alberta's history? And finally, given the well-documented influence of American populist traditions in Alberta, to what extent can one trace this phenomenon of faith-driven politics back to specific American religious movements? In general, I argue that the political thought of each of these leaders was significantly influenced by their particular religious perspective and that Alberta's political development as a whole subsequently owes much to the broad American-based evangelical Protestant tradition from which these leaders drew much of their Christianity. More specifically, I argue that the contours of Alberta politics have been shaped considerably by a particular "premillennial" Christian interpretation introduced by the Social Credit in 1935 and reinforced by the thought of Preston Manning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I briefly summarize these arguments below.

The UFA's chief philosopher and longtime president Henry Wise Wood was guided by what I have dubbed a liberal and postmillennial stream of religious-based political thought. This was centred around a particularly optimistic understanding of

humanity's capacity with respect to ushering in the kingdom of God on earth. Wood was convinced that by following the model of Christ and adopting a co-operative way of being, individuals and the groups they form would induce a broad social regeneration wherein Christ's law of co-operation would overcome the destructiveness of competition within society. This newly formed democratic and "co-operative" society, which he equated with the kingdom of God, was the end goal of his political thought and action. Although this line of thinking helped encouraged a strong populist and co-operative ethic within the UFA, it is important to understand that Wood refused to renounce the existing market system and embrace the socialism inherent in the more mainstream social gospel message of prairie preacher Salem Bland and his followers. This refusal, I have argued, was partly rooted in the individualistic nature of Wood's religious interpretation that was derived from the broader American evangelical tradition. Rather than focusing squarely upon the economic system, Wood insisted that societal improvement was dependent on individual regeneration. This is a vitally important point that deserves pause given the revered status nearly all subsequent streams of Alberta political thought have granted to "the individual" as well as his or her need to act responsibly. Working out of the "populist" evangelical tradition, Wood understood the common individual as one of superb mental and moral capacity and therefore encouraged an anti-hierarchical political structure that would allow for maximum grassroots control. This relatively radical demand for the political freedom of the common citizen was, however, dependent upon simultaneous individual responsibilities. Society could only regenerate if each individual did his or her part to embrace the message of Christ. Thus, a certain conservatism attached itself to Wood's populist leanings from the very beginning.

This broad populist conservatism that emerged from the American evangelical Protestant tradition and characterized much of Wood's political theory would largely reappear in the political thought of William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, founders and longtime leaders of Alberta Social Credit. Like Wood, they both understood the common individual to possess a high degree of moral and mental ability, which had the potential to culminate in total spiritual renewal. Beyond a basic commitment to democracy, the logical conclusion of this understanding for Aberhart and Manning was a devotion to individual liberty and a corresponding anti-establishmentarianism uncommon in the "tory" conservative tradition. For Aberhart, this meant attacking the "Fifty Big Shots" whom he understood to be withholding credit from the common people and thus causing "Poverty in the Midst of Plenty." For Manning, this meant supporting the free market in the face of an emerging socialism that threatened to subdue the common individual to the collective. Yet, the actualization of the individual's God-given moral and mental capacity that made personal freedom a political requirement simultaneously demanded that the individual follow the moral laws of God and thus a certain conservatism was appended to the radical individualism espoused by Aberhart and Manning. In other words, the populist conservatism inherent in the thought of Wood, which both celebrated the capacity of the common individual and demanded a stern personal responsibility, largely continued unabated throughout the years of Social Credit rule in Alberta. And, as I have argued throughout, the persistence of this populist conservative sentiment can be traced back to the American evangelical Protestant tradition from which both Wood and Aberhart's religious interpretations emerged.

However, the defeat of the UFA at the hands of Aberhart and Social Credit also represented a vitally important change in the direction of Alberta's politics. Because Aberhart and Manning abided by a premillennial Christian interpretation that understood the coming kingdom of God to exist outside the realm of human agency, the notion of encouraging citizens to "co-operate" in an effort to usher in the kingdom made little sense. Rather, it was the job of Christians to assist the "unborn" to find Christ and experience a spiritual rebirth prior to the Rapture. Aberhart and Manning sought to accomplish this goal by way of their radio evangelism but the severe conditions of the Depression, which provided a clear impediment to the personal freedom required to experience conversion, drew them into politics where they set out to enhance and protect the freedom of the individual by promoting social credit economics. It is at this point that a significant shift occurred in the direction of Alberta politics. No longer was the state understood to be the culmination of a co-operative effort of individuals. Instead, the state came to be understood as a potential impediment to the individual freedom God had granted humanity and thus the proper role of government became that of ensuring restrictions were placed on the state's size and scope. Correspondingly, both the call for a "co-operative" economic system and the intense pressure on citizens to participate politically in a deliberative and time-consuming way that had been stressed by the UFA was abandoned and replaced by an absolute rejection of economic collectivism and a call for citizens to state their "preferences" and allow benevolent politicians and their "experts" to install programs that would ensure individual freedom would be protected as far as possible. This shift, which grew out of the distinction between "post" and "pre" millennial religious interpretations, represented a heightened focus on individual freedom

that subsequently encouraged both a blatant anti-statism and the end of a more radical and deliberative politics in Alberta.

The influence of religion on the politics of contemporary Alberta, which is obviously far more secular than during the days of the UFA or Social Credit, is a bit more complicated. Clearly the religious-based social conservatism that I associated initially with journalist and early Reform Party advocate Ted Byfield has played a noticeable role, especially within the contemporary PC caucus, which essentially engaged in a fifteen-year battle against the advancement of homosexual rights in the province, a key issue by which to measure a certain kind of religious conservative influence in politics. Yet the precise nature of this social conservative influence requires a more in-depth consideration than I have provided here. In the course of this study, I did conduct some exploratory interviews with a number of Alberta-based MPs and MLAs who abided by this religious-based socially conservative worldview, but further research is required to ascertain the level of influence these politicians actually had with respect to concrete policy decisions. That said, social conservative rhetoric has declined significantly in Alberta since its height surrounding the “Vriend” case and the subsequent debate around same-sex marriage in the 1990s and early 2000s, a fact that suggests religious influence on the province’s politics in this regard has largely subsided. In fact, a recent poll suggests that province-wide opposition to the legal recognition of same-sex marriages in Alberta stands at 28% in 2011, down from 59% in 1996.¹ This should not come as a surprise given Alberta’s increasingly secular nature.

¹ See: Faron Ellis, *Traditional or Progressive: Albertans’ Opinion Structure on Six Policy Issues*, Citizen Society Research Lab, Lethbridge, AB, November, 2011, <http://www.lethbridgecollege.ca/about-us/applied-research-innovation/citizen-society-research-lab/alberta-opinion-studies>, (accessed November 7,

According to the 2001 census, Alberta is second to only British Columbia among all Canadian Provinces with respect to the percentage of citizens who declared they had no religious affiliation whatsoever.² In addition, only British Columbia and Quebec contained a smaller percentage of citizens that regularly attended religious services at least once a month than Alberta.³ Obviously these statistics do not provide a conclusive picture of religious activity in Alberta but they certainly contradict the general thesis that Alberta is a Canadian outlier when it comes to religious participation among the electorate. Alberta is not, it seems, a province dominated by the religious, nor is it overwhelmingly opposed to the advancement of homosexual rights. However, as I have argued throughout this study, it is a mistake to simply assume that the contemporary political influence of religion can only equate to this strand of social conservatism, or that religious thought does not still shape Alberta and its politics in all kinds of critically important ways. As I hope to have shown in my exploration of the political thought of Preston Manning, it is certainly conceivable that a non-socially conservative strand of religious based thought has helped to shape the direction of contemporary Alberta's politics.

Largely adhering to the premillennial Christian interpretation espoused by his father Ernest, Preston Manning understood the ills of contemporary society to have grown large because of our distance from God and only an individual effort on the part of the citizen, perhaps aided by the church, to reestablish a relationship with God could

2011), and Chris Varcoe, "Is Alberta Shifting Left When it Comes to Hard-Line Issues Like Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage?" in *Calgary Herald*, November 6, 2011, A6.

² "Religions in Canada: Highlight Tables, 2001 Census," *Statistics Canada*, <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/highlight/Religion/Index.cfm?Lang=E//>, (assessed August 25, 2010).

³ Warren Clark, "Pockets of Belief: Religious Attendance Patterns in Canada," in *Canadian Social Trends*, (Spring 2003), 2-5.

make things better. However, because a truly perfected society was beyond humanity's reach, the divine role of the state in this process was simply to guarantee the individual the personal freedom necessary to allow this relationship with God to flourish. Like his father, this focus on individual freedom encouraged in Preston both a clear commitment to democracy as well as a certain anti-statism that, in turn, generated an aversion to any state-led efforts to impose an economic collectivism on an unwilling public. Hence, the result was a clear preference for an unregulated market economy and a simultaneous reduction in the size and scope of the state that would be responsive to the demands of the "common people." Importantly, it is in this point of agreement between Ernest and Preston Manning that we find a vital, religious-based continuity with respect to both the populist sentiment and pro-market leanings that have defined Alberta politics for decades. Surely religious-based political thought at the elite level is not the only factor to have pushed Alberta in this direction, but it has, I argue, played a significant role that has largely been neglected by academics eager to explain the particular political development of the province.

This is especially so with respect to the contours of contemporary Alberta politics that seems, aside from pockets of noisy social conservatives, to be completely devoid of religious influence. In fact, it has become fashionable to interpret contemporary Alberta as the host of a new fiscal conservatism or "neo-liberalism" modeled after the Thatcher and Regan governments in Britain and America respectively. Yet, highlighting the shared convictions of Ernest and Preston Manning goes some way towards unraveling the "newness" of this economic approach in the province. It was the decline in the province's economic fortunes, rather than their religious faith, that convinced the average

Albertan voter to accept the need to drastically reduce the size of government. And, of course, the fiscally conservative scholars working to spread “new right” ideas beyond the halls of academia in the province were largely driven by the arguments of Hayek rather than the Apostle Paul. Yet, it is important to remember that Preston Manning, who for all intents and purposes put fiscal conservatism back on the public agenda in Alberta with the creation of the Reform Party in 1987, was motivated by the same religious concerns that led his father Ernest to battle the socialism of the CCF decades earlier. Thus, despite the fuss over the adoption of “new right” economics by secular fiscal conservatives within the Alberta PC government in the early 1990s, the immediate stimulus for this course of action was the popularity of the Reform Party and the calls for a reduction in the size and scope of government from its religiously-motivated leader Preston Manning who simply extended many of Ernest Manning’s beliefs into the contemporary period.

More generally, however, the influence of religion on contemporary Alberta politics goes well beyond either Byfield’s social conservatism or Preston Manning’s particular fiscal conservatism. It is found, rather, in the continued persistence of the broader populist conservative sentiment within Alberta politics. It is this sentiment, which both celebrates the intellectual and moral capacities of the common individual and simultaneously places clear limits on his or her behavior, that helps to explain both the individualistic, anti-statist, and populist tendencies within the province as well as the conservative emphasis on individual responsibility within the province’s unique political culture. And, as I have argued throughout, this populist conservatism is largely rooted in the religious arguments that emerged out of the American evangelical tradition and were initially imported into Alberta provincial politics by Wood and Aberhart.

Despite this common heritage, however, it is worth reiterating how important the defeat of Wood's "postmillennial" religious interpretation by Aberhart's "premillennial" version was with respect to the precise direction of Alberta politics. Indeed, since 1935, Alberta politics have been defined by an emphasis on individual freedom that both encourages an anti-statist and pro-market sentiment and questions the need for traditional deliberative politics. Surely the majority of men and women who today abide by this particular freedom-infused sentiment in Alberta have managed to disassociate it from its initial religious mooring, but to miss the fact that this religious foundation did exist is to miss a good deal of the story of Alberta's political development and contemporary political culture. This is not to say that historical conditions related to the province's quasi-colonial status within confederation, or the distinct immigration patterns or initial class composition of the province are unimportant when trying to understand the development of Alberta's politics. Yet, it is only by highlighting the role of religion that we approach a clearer picture of what formative political leaders such as Wood, Aberhart and Ernest and Preston Manning were trying to accomplish and how these religiously-motivated goals set Alberta on a particular political path that continues today.

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