American Revivalism and the Roots of the Conservative-Radical Tension in Alberta:

Religion in the UFA and Social Credit Movements

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That Alberta is a bastion of political conservatism is hardly news. Nor is it likely to raise eyebrows if one is to suggest the essence of this conservatism is somewhat distinct from the British "toryism" that has played such an important role in the ideological development of much of the rest of Canada. Surely many of the staples of toryism, including the emphasis on social stability and continuity, on a Christian God and His moral code, on local institutions and the family unit, are readily apparent in the Alberta variant. But there is also a radical "populist" streak within Alberta conservatism that stresses the capacity of the common individual and the need to ensure his or her freedom from the oppressive nature of certain established authorities. Of course, it is widely acknowledged that Alberta, from its very beginning, has been strongly influenced by patterns of social and political thought sympathetic to American republicanism that was built upon a foundation of individualism and an opposition to the hierarchical tendencies of British conservatism. In his classic attempt to explain the vast political diversity found within the Canadian Prairies, Nelson Wiseman pointed toward 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."[1] This was "a more militant, more radical, less tory form of petit-bourgeois liberalism than was the Canadian norm."[2] The resulting political culture of Alberta, argues Katherine Fierlbeck, is thus quite similar to America in its devotion to "a curious combination of market liberalism and the values of evangelical, fundamental Protestantism."[3]

This investigation into the nature of Alberta conservatism continues this tradition of looking to America to help explain the political culture of the province, but it does so with a more explicit focus on the impact of a certain religious perspective that originated in the United States. Although Fierlbeck and others have mentioned the presence of Protestant values in Alberta, they are often portrayed as being contradictory to the similar emphasis on radical individualism. While I acknowledge this tension, I want to suggest that both of these elements in Alberta politics are derivatives from the same source. Specifically, this chapter builds from the notion that the tradition of Christian revivalism that has long dominated American Protestantism unleashed both conservative and radical tendencies that continue to manifest themselves in that nation's politics. Out of this very tradition of revivalism in America grew two quite distinct religious perspectives that would eventually guide the political thought of both the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) and Alberta Social Credit movements. Although these perspectives differed in important ways, they both contained the inherent tension between conservatism and radicalism that characterized the broader history of American Protestantism. It is in the transmission of this tension from America to Alberta by way of the religious

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[1] Nelson Wiseman, "The Pattern of Prairie Politics," in *Queen's Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2, (Summer 1981), 312. This argument is developed further in: Nelson Wiseman, *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

[2] Wiseman, "The Pattern of Prairie Politics," 311.

[3] Katherine Fierlbeck, *Political Thought it Canada: An Intellectual History*, (Peterborough: Broadview, 2006), 76.

interpretations of Henry Wise Wood and William Aberhart that one begins to unearth one of the central foundations of Alberta conservatism that distinguishes it from much of the conservative tradition in the rest of Canada. The remainder of this chapter expands on this assertion by first providing an overview of the tendencies generated by American revivalism before looking in more detail at the manner by which the religious perspectives of Wood and Aberhart influenced their political thought. It is here that one begins to see both the conservative and radical tendencies that originated in American Protestantism manifesting themselves in Alberta politics.

Conservatism and Radicalism in American Protestantism

Revivalism, argued William McLoughlin, "is one of the unique – one of the most original – contributions to Christian thought and practice made by the American people."[4] This contribution was, on the surface, simply the religious act of spreading the Word of God, or evangelizing, to large audiences. Such meetings were often led by a talented orator, gifted in both biblical knowledge and the ability to speak in an unsophisticated yet emotional manner to common people, and was generally understood to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Although it is not difficult to see how the spreading of the Christian scriptures on a mass scale can equate to the promotion of a basic conservatism based upon the moral laws of God, the notion that American revivalism also promoted a certain radicalism requires a bit more reflection. To understand this inherent tension it is necessary to consider, at least briefly, the long development of American Protestantism. Central to this examination is 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.[5] Obviously, this embrace of the ideals of the Reformation commits the American religious tradition to a particular anti-establishmentarianism. This desire was encapsulated most clearly in 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. The immediate consequence of Puritan influence was a rededication in colonial America 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. Such reverence for the bible, which has remained a staple of American Protestantism ever since, has clearly promoted a certain conservatism in American life. The second principle related to the attainment of

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[4] William G. McLoughlin, "Revivalism," in Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 119.

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

God's salvation has evolved in a way that simultaneously encourages a particular radicalism.

Subscribing to Calvinism, the Puritans believed this justification occurred by way of a "once-in-a-lifetime" personal conversion or spiritual re-birth in Christ. An important consequence of Puritan theology, founded upon Calvin's doctrine of predestination, was the presence of anxiety among followers who were eager to assure themselves they had been "predestined" to experience rebirth and thus receive God's salvation. The introduction of the evangelical revival meeting during the First Great Awakening, roughly between 1730 to 1760, encouraged a permanent shift in the style of religious worship in America because the preachers of such large-scale sessions were promising to assist with the very "conversion experience", and thus salvation, anxious believers were seeking. The result was a sudden upsurge in religious activity which retained the Puritan/Calvin emphasis on the authority of the Bible and the need for personal conversion but moved away from traditional forms of worship 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 America. Although the emerging revivalism retained the "dissenting" sentiment of the Puritans, its very structure implied a rejection of the Puritan desire for an established national church complete with formally trained ministers and replaced this with 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. The Baptist's, whose numbers grew substantially in the wake of this revival, furthered this emerging spirit by popularizing the notion of spiritual equality before God and thus rejecting the hierarchical organization of traditional forms of worship. Overall, George Marsden has argued, 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 First Great Awakening can be understood as a significant factor in the eventual Revolution itself.[6]

If the development of an American-based Protestant theology before the Revolution assisted in laying the necessary groundwork for the broader acceptance of basic democratic principles such as individualism, egalitarianism, and the right of the common people to challenge authority, it was the explosion of ground-level religious activity in the period 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. 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," who turned their

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[6] George M Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jonavich, 1990), 29-30. See also Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967).

sights on the church and effectively reshaped the practice of Christianity in America.[7] 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."[8] The result was the emergence of a wildly popular revivalist movement (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 involvement thereby further facilitating democratic sentiment by creating important new avenues for direct local participation.[9] One of these newly created sects was the Disciples of Christ, a movement dedicated to 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.[10] It was within this sect that Henry Wise Wood, born and raised in Missouri, was immersed in the American evangelical ideals that rejected the cold, formal and hierarchical nature of traditional Christianity and its tendency to elevate the learned clergy.

The emergence of this populist sentiment in American Protestantism was supported further by a significant theological development within the revivalist tradition. 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 between 1825-35, began explicitly promoting the notion of conversion as an act of choice by a free individual rather than one completed solely by God, that American Protestant theology departed from a purely Calvinist foundation. The adoption of this interpretation of spiritual conversion as an act of free individual choice had no trouble gaining support as it coalesced rather neatly with the broader republican ideals that were prominent in post-Revolution America.[11] In addition, the religious 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.[12] This

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

[8] Ibid, 9

[9] 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.

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

[11] Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 52-54.

[12] 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

emphasis on individual capacity was essential for it provided a philosophical foundation for the American 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.[13] It was out of this anti-intellectual sentiment, and the individualism of the broader evangelical tradition, that Christian fundamentalism, based upon an extreme biblical literalism, began to grow into a significant force in America following the Civil War. [14] It is this particular religious perspective that would eventually influence the political thought of William Aberhart in the 1930's.

Obviously, the scope of this synopsis of nearly three centuries of American theological and religious history borders on the absurd given the amount that has been written on the topic. However, it is hoped that such an account will have, at least tentatively, highlighted the seemingly contradictory presence of both conservative and radical tendencies within the revivalist tradition.[15] As mentioned, the conservative elements are not difficult to see. From the Puritans, through 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. The consequence, like most religious systems, was the generation of a particular moral code derived from the Word of God that placed Divine restrictions on the conduct of individuals. The implementation of this code required strong public and private institutions that could both educate and police individuals with respect to such laws. However, the second theological tenet introduced to America by the Puritans, the importance of personal spiritual conversion, simultaneously set American Protestantism down a more radical path. Although Protestantism in general invites a tendency towards individualism by encouraging followers to develop a personal relationship with God, the strong emphasis on individual choice based upon the intellectual and moral capacity of the common person that evolved within the American tradition unleashed a far stronger populist sentiment than in most other primarily Protestant countries.

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.

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

[14] George Marsden, "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism," in *Church History*, 46 (1977), 215-232. A more detailed history of American fundamentalism is available in George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[15] The conservative and radical tension within American Protestantism is discussed further in: McLoughlin, "Revivalism," 125-130.

In contrast to 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, " American Protestantism radically challenged such hierarchical relationships by interpreting the condition of the common individual as one of capacity.[16] Unsurprisingly, such an outlook produced a strong democratic, even populist, ethic among followers who, by way of their quest for personal religious experience, seek political structures that allow for the individual freedom required to live their faith. Yet, the individualism and corresponding anti-establishmentarianism remains restricted by a sacred code of conduct derived from the Christian bible that, in a sense, replaces the authority of the traditional church. In fact, this particular intersection of conservatism and radicalism helps to explain why scholars have had a difficult time agreeing on whether the American populist movements of the late nineteenth century, which were heavily influenced by American Protestantism, were in fact conservative or radical movements. [17] The short answer to this question, given their religious foundation, was that they were both. This paper now turns to examine two Alberta populist movements, both of which were influenced by this American Protestant tradition, and both of which display a similar tension between conservative and radical tendencies.

<u>Religion and Political Thought in the UFA</u>

Henry Wise Wood, president of the UFA from 1916 until 1931, was easily the movement's most influential and philosophical figure. Although the democratic structure of the organization ensured a prominent role for a number of well-spoken men and women, the UFA's own periodical claimed Wood as the greatest of all because of his unselfishness, idealism and unshakable conviction for co-operation and local democracy.[18] Consequently, Wood's thought has garnered a large amount of interest from scholars eager to make sense of the UFA's participatory nature, its support for economic co-operatives, and its peculiar advancement of "group government." Yet, despite a number of very insightful examinations, academics have, for the most part, largely glossed over one of the central aspects of Wood's worldview: his particular Christian perspective. That Wood was a member and active participation in the Missouri branch of the Disciples of Christ prior to his

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[16] 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.

[17] For a discussion of the role played by Protestantism in American populist movements with particular emphasis on the democratic evangelical spirit see: 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 Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[18] "Who's Who in the Farmers Movement: H.W. Wood," in *The Western Independent*, January 21, 1920, 7.

migration to Alberta in 1905 is well known.[19] The Disciples were one of the many sects to emerge from the revivalism of post-Revolution America. As Hatch has noted, the Disciples "followed an unmistakable pattern emerging in the early republic" by taking seriously the rhetoric of liberty and building a religious organization that rejected the hierarchical nature of traditional forms of worship. In its place grew an ecumenical and cooperative structure that tended toward anti-establishmentarianism and vast congregational participation. This was founded upon a strict adherence to a "populist hermeneutic" that understood the common individual to possess the intellectual capacity required to interpret the teachings of Christ for themselves.[20] However, a detailed study of the connection between this American religious perspective and the eventual social and political thought of Wood does not yet exist. Within the narrow parameters of this section I will attempt to provide a more complete, although necessarily brief, account of this relationship.[21]

The social thought of Wood was grounded in two fundamental assumptions. First, human beings are naturally social beings whose destiny is 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 of those natural laws."[22] Second, the history within which humans find themselves in 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.[23] Following the work of English evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer, 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 perfect society. This society, governed by the social law of co-operation, will "be a living thing, not one that lives, reproduces and dies.

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[19] A number of scholars have mentioned the Disciples as an influence but none spend more than a few paragraphs developing it. See: W.L. Morton, "The Social Philosophy of Henry Wise Wood," in *Agricultural History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (April 1948), 114-123, William Kirby Rolph, *Henry Wise Wood of Alberta*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 9-11, and Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy: The United Farmers and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 212-213.

[20] Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 71.

[21] A far more detailed look at the influence of religion on Wood's political thought will shortly be available in: Clark Banack, *Religion and Political Thought in Alberta,* PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia, forthcoming.

[22] 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.

[23] H. W. Wood, "The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part One" in *The UFA*, March 1, 1922, 5 and H. W. Wood, "The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Four," in *The UFA*, April 15, 1922, 25, 27.

Its life will be eternal and in it human well-being will be established."[24] The 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 was known about the operation of these natural physical laws but an exploration of the natural social laws, what Wood deemed "the realm of spiritual science," was still required for it is here that "man will eventually gain an understanding of the truth that will make him free."[25] The articulation and exposition of these natural social laws became the central focus of Wood's social thought and it is here that he takes a distinctively Christian turn.

For Wood, natural man was provided with an intellectual capacity but was also initially guided by the animal spirit, that of competition. However, implanted within man was also a "germ" of something more pure, a capacity to eventually hear "the call of nature for co-operation."[26] This call would come from Christ, heard most authoritatively in the Sermon on the Mount, the most substantial collection of His ethical teachings. Christ's intention in this sermon was the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven but for Wood this was to occur on earth, not in a mystical afterlife.[27] The responsibility for establishing this Kingdom fell on mankind who were required to complete a two-stage process toward this end. First, man must come to abide by the natural social laws, the moral laws of Christ delivered in the Sermon. At the heart of these teachings is the call for repentance, the beginning of individual regeneration wherein man turns away from the animal spirit, the law of Satan, and embraces the demands 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."[28] This revelation by Christ represented "the climax of the true principles governing individual relationships."[29] Once man completes this individual regeneration and is "born again" he is ready to contribute to the second phase of the development of the coming Kingdom, social regeneration, the practical process of constructing the perfect social system.

However, "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

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[24] H. W. Wood, "U.F.A Political Movement and the Alberta Wheat Pool Greatest Products of the United Farmers of Alberta," 12.

[25] H.W. Wood, "My Religion," in *Winnipeg Free Press*, Earl G. Cook Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-255-47, n.d.

[26] 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, 6.

[27] H.W. Wood, "The Significance of U.F.A Sunday," in *The UFA*, May 15, 1923, 5.

[28] Wood, "Social Regeneration," 3.

[29] Wood, "My Religion."

underlying principles of that process."[30] The central principle, Wood suggested, was a basic commitment to democracy. 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?" [31]

Democracy for Wood was built upon Christ's ethic of co-operation and was thus antithetical to autocracy, the system built upon the law of Satan that encouraged the rule of the few who excel at competition and can dominate the weak. Beyond this general commitment to democracy rather than autocracy, the implementation of the Kingdom was to be completed in a way that took into consideration the circumstances of any given society.

From Wood's prairie agrarian perspective, Canada was surely an autocracy ruled by the wealthy. This "money power," made up of large groups of industrialists and grain-buyers from central Canada, maintained a powerful influence over politicians that enabled them to ensure the survival of the tariff and thus continue to exploit prairie farmers. This was rendered possible by the structure of the political system, within which traditional political parties had evolved in a manner that inhibited *actual* democracy from occurring. Despite being a collaboration of individuals seemingly working towards a common end, 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 in the competitive electoral system.[32] This instability allowed the wealthy industrialist to gain control of politicians who were eager to accept their donations. The interests of the masses thus became subservient to the greed of the wealthy and the politically powerful. Because the individual citizen is too weak to challenge the system and traditional parties are susceptible to such corruption, the masses must form their own groups capable of providing proper representation within the political realm in order to overthrow the autocratic system. The basis on which these groups were to organize

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[30] Wood, "The Significance of U.F.A Sunday," 14.

[31] Ibid.

[32] H. W. Wood, "The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part Four," in *The UFA*, April 15, 1922, 5.

and operate was Wood's most original contribution to Canadian political thought: the notion 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."[33] But Wood understood that agreement on a single economic viewpoint was unrealistic so he argued that organization should be sub-divided by occupational class, the natural groupings that have been produced by the evolution of our "trading world." Each of these groups had particular economic interests shared by all members, a commonality that would encourage them to co-operate with their fellow farmer or baker or labourer within their own organization. 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 is introduced into the political realm. 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 co-operation ensures stability within each group that allows them to articulate a consistent message in the political realm, something traditional parties could not do. These groups are thus resistant to the seductions of the industrial lobby and contribute to an authentic democratic dialogue by making heard the voices of the masses. Therefore, group government, built on the co-operative spirit demanded by Christ, promised authentic political representation and therefore proper democracy.

Although I have provided only a cursory overview of Wood's social and political thought, it should be clear that religion permeated his outlook. For Wood, the notion that religion must be held out of politics or economics was unthinkable. Christianity, he notes, is a "capable physician, able to heal all the ills of our social an economic body." [34] It was within the "locals" of the UFA that the message of Christ, first introduced to the individual by the church, was to be broadened out and applied to the social realm. But it is important to note that the responsibility of beginning this process originated with the individual and his or her choice to accept these teachings and begin to apply them in their community. [35] However, local participation alone was not sufficient to overthrow the forces of autocracy. This battle required that the people be educated, not just in abstract Christian parables but also with respect to current political and economic problems and potential solutions. Therefore, a strong emphasis on practical education existed in nearly all locals.[36] It was by way of local participation, guided by this practical education, that the UFA set upon the road to social reform. This emphasis on grassroots

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[33] Wood, "The Significance of Democratic Group Organization – Part One," 5.

[34] H.W. Wood, "U.F.A. President's Address," in *Grain Growers Guide*, January 31, 1917, 7, 22.

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

[36] David Laycock, *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies, 1910 to 1945*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 85.

participation and education within the UFA has been mentioned by a host of scholars but none have considered it within the larger context of Wood's religious-political views, at least with much persistence.

Wood's interpretation of Christianity, derived largely from his background in the Disciples of Christ sect, drew from the broader American evangelical tradition in a number of ways. He agreed with the general contention that humans are born as imperfect beings. It is the dominance of this animal spirit in public and economic life, not commercialism itself, which required change. Given their "fallen" condition, the individual required a rebirth through Christ to ensure they were "regenerated" as individuals. Importantly, Wood understood this conversion to occur by way of the individual's free will. Once the individual dedicated himself to the teachings of Christ, he or she would be "reborn" in a way that did not require 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. The parables themselves were set in everyday situations and were therefore meant to be understood by ordinary people. Thus, Wood's religious interpretation maintained the "populist" and egalitarian orientation that blossomed in post-Revolution America by emphasizing the need for individual conversion as well as his or her capacity to engage with the bible and bring about such regeneration by way of their own actions. There was essentially no concern with theological perplexities or the opinions of the classically educated clergy. Christianity was a religion for ordinary people and it required action on the part of the free individual.

Given this strong association with American Protestantism it should come as no surprise that Wood's political thought shared the same tensions between conservatism and radicalism. At its heart, Wood's theory was grounded in a Christian moral code that individuals were to follow. Doing so would allow for the conservation of the institutions of democratic governance and commercialism that were "natural" but in need of reform. However, this reform must 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. 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. In fact, it is clear that Christ favours a democratic system that protects the interests of the masses rather than the elite. This egalitarian and dissenting sentiment, in conjunction with Wood's progressive 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 following His moral teachings and cooperating with those in ones community. More practically, this meant contributing to your local and educating yourself with respect to current political and economic problems. The role of citizen therefore

requires a vital duty one must fulfill in order to advance the interests of the whole society but it also contains a more radical interpretation of the common individual as one of significant moral and intellectual capacity, a stance often denied by orthodox conservatism.

Religion and Political Thought in the Alberta Social Credit Party

The manner by which religion influenced the political thought of William Aberhart and his protégé Ernest Manning differed substantially from that of Wood. Rather that interpreting the scriptures as a blueprint for perfecting society, Aberhart and Manning subscribed to a stern fundamentalist view that denied the possibility of such perfection and thus the goal of Christians was far different. The basic tenets of their shared religious perspective were staples of the American fundamentalist movement that had emerged out of the revivalist tradition in the early twentieth century. These included a belief in the Divine verbal inspiration of the bible and its supremacy, the creation of man by God, the atoning efficacy of the death of Christ, the necessity of regeneration for salvation, the everlasting happiness of the righteous and the misery of the unbelieving wicked and the visible bodily return of Christ, first to gather His Church and then to establish the millennial reign of righteousness upon the earth.[37]

This last point referring to the return of Christ prior to His second arrival to establish the millennium was a reference to the Rapture, a distinguishing feature of the premillennial dispensationalism to which Aberhart and Manning adhered. This was a theology that originated with John Nelson Darby, founder of the British Plymouth Brethren sect, and was eventually popularized in America by C.I. Scofield.[38] The essence of dispensationalism was a radical re-interpretation of Christian scripture based on the notion that history has been divided by God into separate "dispensations," and certain verses of scripture were only applicable to particular dispensations. In direct contrast to Wood, dispensationalists such as Aberhart and Manning believed the literal kingdom of God that had been foretold in the scriptures was coming but its appearance was wholly discontinuous with the history of this dispensation. The shift from the current dispensation, "the age of grace," to the "millennial" dispensation wherein Christ's kingdom would be established, would occur solely at the bequest of God Himself, not through the works of individuals committed to social reform. Therefore, the responsibility of mankind within the current dispensation was not to seek a perfect society but

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[37] "Doctrinal Basis of the Institute," in *Bulletin of the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute*, Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute Fonds, Glenbow-Alberta Museum Archives, Calgary, Alberta, File M-1357 -1, n.d.

[38] A far more detailed descriptions of both the history and theology of dispensationalism is available in: Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) and Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1925*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

rather to seek and accept the righteousness that God freely offers to all.[39] This was done by experiencing a personal "rebirth" in Christ that was necessary to rectify the sinful nature of mankind and prepare themselves for the millennial reign of Christ.

Upon experiencing this spiritual rebirth, Christians had one further responsibility: evangelization, the dispensing of the gospel to those who have not yet experienced rebirth. Like the vast majority of American revivalists, dispensationalists believed that those who died without having experienced this conversion were eternally damned. It was the role of the church, acting out of the Christian spirit of brotherhood, to reach these individuals before it was too late. For the dispensationalists, the coming millennium was to be preceded by the "Rapture," the point at which Christ returns briefly to earth to gather his true followers who had experienced rebirth. The remaining individuals were left on earth to suffer under the rule of the Antichrist, a period known as the Tribulation. Thus, Christians in the present dispensation did have a task to complete on earth that was separate from perfecting society. It was to work tirelessly to bring the message of Christ to as many as possible and thus "save" them before the Rapture. As Timothy Weber notes, 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."[40]

As David Elliott's careful study of Aberhart's early sermons and Institute writings has revealed, dispensationalist themes relating to the downward course of history, the depravity of man and the coming Rapture and Tribulation prior to the millennium were prominent.[41] In 1931, Aberhart and Manning together penned a play, *The Branding Irons of the Antichrist*, which 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."[42] Not only did such a warning underline the consequences of failing to accept Christ before the coming Rapture, it also pointed to the motivation of Aberhart and Manning's ministry within this dispensation: convincing people to seek Christ and experience a spiritual rebirth. In fact, it is this same motivation that explains Aberhart's sudden interest in social credit economics.[43]

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[39] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism,* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 64.

[40] Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, 71.

[41] 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.

[42] 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.

[43] A far more detailed articulation of this argument will shortly be available in: Clark Banack, *Religion and Political Thought in Alberta,* PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia, forthcoming.

The most widespread academic interpretation of Aberhart's eager promotion of social credit was that such social concern was essentially antithetical to his theology.[44] Because dispensationalist's understood the foretold Rapture, Tribulation and Millennium to be completely outside the realm of human agency, many have suggested that the overarching logic of dispensationalism was a complete rejection of social action. Indeed, many dispensationalists, including Aberhart, ridiculed the social gospel's goal of ushering in the kingdom of God through social reform as futile. However, 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." Marsden continues:

> The [dispensationalist's] theological stance theoretically in no way
> should have been threatened by a commitment to social action per se.
> The necessary first step in a Christian's life was repentance for sin and
> total dependence on God's grace. Good works should follow.[45]

Thus, there is nothing inherently contradictory in a dispensationalist stepping away from the pulpit to engage in acts in this world. Their primary responsibility, after seeking a personal conversion, was to bring the Word of God to those who have yet to convert and thus save them. The desire to do so was a central component of the larger "love the neighbour" spirit that would naturally overcome the "reborn" individual. Other, more "worldly" acts would also follow conversion, especially those related to feeding, clothing and healing the needy. In fact, such social acts were often 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 social or charitable 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. It is in this context of facilitating the rebirth of those in spiritual need that Aberhart's promotion of social credit makes sense.

The story of Aberhart's introduction and conversion to Major Douglas's social credit economic theories has been told in great detail many times over. In short, the suffering caused by the Depression shook Aberhart to his core. He was introduced to the theory in the summer of a particularly tough year (1932) and by that fall he was including an explanation of, and enthusiastic support for, social credit within

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[44] 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: David R. Elliott and Iris Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart*, (Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987).

[45] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 91.

his radio broadcasts.[46] In a letter to an inquisitive listener in 1933 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 personal rights and liberty of each individual citizen and has a definite policy for the encouragement and rewarding of his individual enterprise.[47]

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.[48] This sense of duty extended to all spheres of the regenerated individuals life and the magnitude of the suffering Aberhart witnessed simply drew this social sentiment to the fore of his religious thought. The Depression inflicted a wide-ranging poverty that could not be rectified 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 "fallen" individual. 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.

However, the poverty experienced during the Depression was not simply a case of human suffering that had to be rectified because God demanded solidarity with 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."[49] 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."[50]

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[46] 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.

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

[48] Transcripts of Manning Interview, Interview 39, (May 17, 1982), p.27, University of Alberta Archives, Ernest Manning Fonds.

[49] Manning to G.M. Wilson, April 18, 1962, Premiers Papers, Provincial Archives of Alberta, 1977.173 file 394b.

[50] Transcripts of Manning Interview, Interview 2, (December 18, 1978), p.14, University of Alberta Archives, Ernest Manning Fonds.

Douglas had often mentioned the importance of individual development but it was Aberhart's particular interpretation of Christianity that led him and Manning to understand this 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 credit economics was to end this poverty and "only then would it be possible to appreciate completely the message of Him."[51] 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." [52] By providing these necessities, social credit allowed the individual to cease this "mad scramble" and instead put his or her 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, 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."[53] 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 neighbour to find Christ in the supreme life."[54] And in 1939 he stated bluntly: "I am convinced that dire poverty and want makes people bitter and turn away from God."[55]

Thus, true to his dispensationalist theology, Aberhart was attempting to fulfill his primary Christian duty within the "age of grace" by promoting 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 radio ministry that he first sought to achieve this goal but the poverty of the Depression was impeding the capacity of Albertan's 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. Surely such interest in social conditions was quite distinct from that of

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[51] "Materialistic and Spiritual Blend in the Social Credit Faith," in *Alberta Social Credit Chronicle*, September 7, 1934, 1.

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

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

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

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

Wood who believed in the possibility of establishing God's Kingdom on earth by following the social teachings of Christ. Although both Aberhart and Wood drew from the same Protestant commitment to individual rebirth or regeneration in Christ to counter mans inherent depravity, their interpretation of the aims of "post-conversion" Christians differed entirely. However, Aberhart's theology, derived from the American fundamentalist movement that grew out of the same tradition of revivalism that had produced the Disciples of Christ, inherited the same tension between conservative and radical tendencies.

The intense devotion to biblical literalism that characterizes Christian fundamentalism obviously encourages a strong conservatism based upon the moral laws of God. This tendency was much stronger for Aberhart and Manning then it was for Wood as was demonstrated in their distaste for alcohol, cards, dancing and commercial or sporting events on Sundays. However, the emphasis they placed on individual spiritual rebirth, and especially the conditions such conversion required, committed Aberhart and Manning to an equally intense devotion to individual liberty not typical of orthodox conservatism. Thus, a certain radical anti-establishmentarianism grew out of their opposition to any institution that impinged on the freedom of the individual required to experience spiritual rebirth. For Aberhart, who entered the political realm in the heart of the Depression, 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 very different 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.[56] Although scholars have pointed to this shift in economic ideology from Aberhart to Manning as evidence of a basic discord between their outlooks, I argue that such an interpretation 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 and should be changed if the social conditions affecting the individual's freedom required it. For Manning, this meant the development of the free market rather than a planned economy given the evolved social conditions that no longer witnessed mass poverty. It is in this point that one finds the answer to Fierlbeck's bewilderment at the Albertan devotion to both fundamentalist Christianity and market liberalism.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to build on the well-worn thesis in Canadian political science circles that the dominant ideologies of this country have been

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[56] Manning's defense of the free market and corresponding attack on socialism is encapsulated within his call for "Social Conservatism," which is outlined in: E.C. Manning, *Political Realignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians*, (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1967). For an insightful examination of the religious beliefs operating behind Manning's political thought see: Dennis G. Groh, "The Political Thought of Ernest Manning," MA Thesis, University of Calgary, 1970.

influenced by a British "tory" element that distinguished itself from the individualism of American republicanism. That the dominant ideology in Alberta resembles the American rather than the Canadian variant of conservatism has also been well established. However, this paper takes this connection one step further by suggesting that the early influence in Alberta of religious perspectives that originated in America helps to explain the unique tension between conservatism and radicalism in Alberta's reigning ideology. This was attempted by highlighting the vital role played by particular "American" interpretations of Christianity in the development of the political thought of the UFA and Alberta Social Credit respectfully. Obviously the narrow confines of this paper prevented a properly detailed exposition of these relationships but it is hoped that I have at least pointed towards a topic that requires further consideration if we are to move towards a fuller understanding of conservatism in Alberta which continues to display a unique tension between traditional Christian values and a radically individualistic and anti-establishment or populist sentiment that belies the conservatism of much of the rest of Canada.