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Worldview Foundations of Political Systems

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Many people identify their life philosophy with some political philosophy. That is, they identify a political philosophy that resonates with them, for whatever reason, and they build their lives around it. I suppose there is some rationality in that, but it is only partly rational. The real issue that must be faced, especially for Christians, is that there is a set of beliefs which underlie every political philosophy. And unless those underlying beliefs are identified and compared with biblical beliefs, it is very possible for one to end up advocating for policies which run counter to God and his purposes. It is not sufficient to simply like a set of beliefs because it "feels right." It is critical for individuals to identify their reason for accepting a particular political philosophy, then compare that with what God has revealed about those beliefs in his revelation.

What we want to do here is to, first of all, identify the foundational beliefs of several of the major political philosophies that are prominent in modern society. After that, we will set that aside and look at the foundational beliefs that are expressed in the Bible. Then, we will compare the political philosophies with the biblical beliefs. With that, we will be able to see where the various political philosophies agree with or diverge from biblical teachings.

Conservative

When it comes to political discussions, the term conservative covers a lot of territory. Not only that, different people latch onto and promote different parts of the conservative label. Thus, one person's conservatism may not correspond com-

pletely with another's. Because of that, it is nearly impossible to pin it down completely. But it is possible to at least give a very broad explanation and see where the general principles come from.

In broad terms, the word conservative does not represent political notions at all. It is the idea of holding on to what is traditional. As such, what is conservative in one context may be entirely different in another. So to deal with conservatism, it is necessary to first determine what a particular traditional point of view looks like.

In looking at political conservatism in American society, we must look back to America's founding to find the traditional notions modern conservatives are looking to retain. In modern political discussions, this typically gets divided into three parts. It is often called the three legged stool of conservatism. The three legs relate to three sets of values – social, national defense, and fiscal. These correspond, at least on some levels, to the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence of life (social values), liberty (safety/defense), and the pursuit of happiness (property/economics). Social conservatives promote traditional (biblical) values. National defense conservatives believe the military should be strong. And fiscal conservatives insists on a free market economy. Taking a comprehensive view, conservatives hold to all three legs.

What we are looking here to discover is where these values come from. It is pretty obvious that when it comes to conservative values in American culture, the ultimate source is the Bible.

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The social values of the founders were based on the teachings of the Bible. In fact, the entirety of the structure of government was set up based on the belief that God exists and has revealed to mankind what is right and wrong. As such, the laws which were created were based on the values which were expressed in the Bible.

As for the national defense arm, there is no specific biblical mandate for a strong military. However, there is the biblical principle that God has ordained the existence of government, and the purpose of government is to create an atmosphere where a nation can be secure and where order can be maintained in society. While it is not the government's job to do the work of God in the world (that belongs to the church), God's purpose of order provides an atmosphere where his work can be done without hindrance. One part of keeping order relates to having a military which is strong enough to protect the nation and its people from outside invaders.

The fiscal arm of American conservatism also has its roots in biblical beliefs. The biblical principle which informs this area is stewardship. In biblical terms, everything ultimately belongs to God. However, God has appointed human beings to be stewards of his creation. His purpose is for individuals to manage the blessings he has placed in their care in order to accomplish his purposes. The founders used this concept to set up a system where individuals could own property and are responsible for how they use it (free enterprise).

So, as we can see, the principles which form the traditional notions about society that modern conservatives promote, came from the Bible. While many people who call

themselves conservatives may not equally promote all three legs of the stool, and may not even promote the Christian faith in their own lives, the notions themselves do have biblical roots.

Liberal

The definition of the term "liberal" has changed significantly over the years. Up until around 1900, it was a term which referred to an ideology which advocated for private property, an unhampered market economy, the rule of law, constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and of the press, and international peace based on free trade. In modern times, though, these matters have become the domain of Conservatism while Liberalism has moved in a different direction.

Modern Liberalism has come to be associated with ideas which do not hold with traditional American values, but with values which break away from tradition. In particular, they emerge from the beliefs of Naturalism.

Naturalism is the belief that the material universe represents the entirety of reality. There is no God and, indeed, no supernatural existence at all. When applied to political ideology, the result of that kind of belief is that all laws, and other means of organizing society, must be created based on human reason. Rather than an emphasis on the individual, the emphasis is on the collective – the ultimate collective value being "the survival of the species."

When it comes specifically to the expression of political goals and means, the "law of the jungle" rules. Since there is no God and no values from any transcendent source, the ruling force becomes the individuals who are able to acquire enough power to impose their will. It then becomes their judgment which determines the best way to accomplish the "survival of the species." Typically, this approach to governing promotes a communal con-

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cept of property, a controlled economy, the rule of those who hold power, and a de-emphasis on individual liberty. Probably the ultimate expression of this kind of governing philosophy would be Marxist Communism.

Hybrids

The truth is, there is not a lot of pure conservatism or pure liberalism around. What we see most often are hybrids. These hybrids begin with the basic foundation of either Christian Theism or Naturalism, then pull ideas from other places to take some final form. This can be seen to some degree among some conservatives (as was alluded to above) who only emphasize one or two legs of the three-legged stool. But there are some more formalized hybrid belief systems, as well. At this point, we will not try to get too detailed about this since our purpose is not to do an academic treatment. Rather, we want to give a big picture sense of how this plays out.

Libertarian

In its essence, Libertarianism is the view that people have the right to live their lives any way they choose so long as it respects the rights of others. Libertarians tend to defend each person's right to life, liberty, and property. The primary focus is to favor freedom and oppose government action which attempts to promote either equality or order.

From a big picture point of view, Libertarianism is weighted toward Conservative ideas. It strongly argues for the implementation of conservative economic policy, and has a particularly strong bias in favor of interpreting the Constitution based on original intent. On the other hand, it is more liberal when it comes to social issues. Since Libertarians believe in personal freedom to an extreme, they believe that people ought to be able to live their lives pretty much any

way they wish as long as it does not impose on the rights of others.

From a worldview perspective, the economic and constitutional notions of Libertarianism are founded upon the biblical concepts of stewardship and the idea that there is an objectively real and valid foundation upon which to base law and order. On the other hand, its view of social issues is more complex. The concepts of individual rights and personal freedom definitely have their roots in biblical morality. However, its view that it is possible for people to be completely autonomous concerning morality without affecting the order of society comes primarily from the Liberal belief that there is no such thing as an objectively real morality. Thus, libertarians end up hybridizing Christian Theism and Naturalism to create their point of view.

Socialist & Progressive

While Libertarianism is a hybrid weighted toward conservatism, Socialism and Progressivism are weighted toward liberalism. Socialism is a political and economic approach to organizing society which promotes the notion that the state should own all the means of production and distribution. It advocates that everyone work for the government and it is the government's job to distribute the proceeds of that work as it sees fit. Progressivism, as it is conceived of in modern culture, has basically the same goals as Socialism, but seeks to get there in a progressive manner rather than simply switching immediately.

The goal of both is to improve human life by human effort. This point of view is based on the Naturalistic worldview belief that man can, by his own efforts, create a society which is just and fair.

In order to come to its ideals, though, there must be some definition of what

justice and fairness means. Justice and fairness based on a naturalistic point of view does not have any kind of objective basis. In fact, even the very concept of justice and fairness are not inherent to naturalistic worldview presuppositions. Thus, socialists and progressives must borrow their moral beliefs from somewhere else.

In America, since the beliefs about morality emerged out of a historical context in which Christianity was the prior dominant belief, the ideas about justice and fairness that Socialism and Progressivism latched onto were Christian. In essence, what they did was to take these concepts and divorce them from their Christian worldview roots, and attach them to their new naturalistic systems. In this way, a hybrid belief system was created using both naturalistic and Christian theistic ideas.

Biblical

For Christians, the most important thing is not any kind of political expression. Rather, it is the biblical teaching. Political goals are completely subordinated to the purpose of God. In God's economy, ultimate goals are spiritual, not physical. God's purpose is for every person in the world to enter into a personal relationship with him based on Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

But that does not mean there is no value in political efforts. The Bible is very clear that God created government for a purpose, and that human beings should live life as good and faithful citizens. And just what is that purpose? It is to create a just and orderly society so that God's work can be effectively accomplished in the world.

This does not mean that the government is to be the instrument for doing the work of God. Rather, it is to create an environment where justice and order prevail so that citizens can go about doing the work of God in a free and open society.

Of course, there is no system of government that is able to perfectly fulfill God's purposes. However, the founders of the American structure were able to create a system which provided the means for that to happen. This system was specifically built on principles that are unique to Christianity. These principles enshrined, as non-negotiable precepts, the rule of law, freedom of conscience, the value of life, and the priority of the individual. Based on these principles, everyone, regardless of their individual religious preferences, can live their lives as they see

fit. It also provides a system of order which is both fair and just based on the definitions of fairness and justice which are expressed in the Bible. If any of these underlying principles are changed, an entirely different society necessarily emerges which does not allow for the kinds of rights and freedoms which are inherent in biblical values.

Where Biblical Teachings and Political Philosophies Diverge

Obviously there is a certain amount of overlap between worldview beliefs and political philosophy. After all, every approach to politics emerges out of some belief about how reality is structured.

For some, there is actually no divergence whatsoever. The goals of the worldview are the same as the goals of the political philosophy.

When it comes to the Christian faith, though, there is a divergence. This divergence is not in the values and principles that guide it, but in the roles that are played by the various institutions of society.

The ultimate purpose of God, as revealed in Scripture, is for people to know him in a personal relationship. He created the world and man in a way that can provide for that relationship. But the nature of the material world is such that the various institutions which operate in the world must have their own purposes, as well. For the institution of government, that purpose is to provide an environment for society which promotes order and justice. The reason for this purpose, in God's economy, is so that his work can be effectively accomplished in the world. It is not government's job to do his work – that is the work of the church. However, his purpose is that government create an environment where that can happen. So while there is a divergence of sorts, the purposes do overlap.

Where the overlap exists is that the government should create an environment of order and justice based on the values God has revealed. Using a different set of values does not provide that outcome. Different values promote a loss of liberty which inhibits the work of God in the world.

Where it All Ends

In the end, I believe everyone desires a utopian world. And most people look to political forces to create a means for that to happen. But not all value sets allow people to move toward that outcome. What is necessary for movement in that direction is for

there to exist a set of transcendent values which are recognized and followed by the entirety of society.

In the entire history of the world, the only set of values which has ever been able to provide for the kind of liberty necessary to accomplish that goal are biblical values. To the degree politicians and political institutions recognize and follow that pattern, order and justice will prevail. To the degree they don't, chaos will ensue.

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