

The Moral Affirmation of Liberty and the Free Market: An Economic Personalist Approach

Paul A. Cleveland
Birmingham-Southern College

The Judeo-Christian Understanding of Liberty and Personal Responsibility

Western civilization, especially as it developed in Anglo-Saxon communities, was rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition. As Christianity was practiced in these communities, the Bible was understood as being God's Word. As such, it provided instructions on how each individual person was to manage the affairs of his life. In the Old Testament, there are extensive instructions on how someone should live. For example, the book of Proverbs is intended to provide any young person with the wisdom needed to make good decisions in life. The same theme is carried over in the New Testament, which repeatedly instructs the reader to practice self-discipline. For example, in his second letter to the church, the Apostle Peter admonished his readers to "add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, to brotherly kindness love."¹ The progression he made in these verses assumes that a person acts of his own accord and, thus, he is self-determined. That is, the individual person is free to choose, but is responsible for the choices he makes.

Indeed, this pattern of Christian anthropology overarches the entirety of the Scriptures. On this basis, Christian scholars have advanced various theories about social relationships and the

¹II Peter 1:5-6, New King James (NKJ).

development of various societal institutions. Among these is the concept of sphere sovereignty (subsidiarity) which provides some overarching guidelines to govern social relationships. In his lectures on Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper developed the concept and applied it to the various areas of life. The idea of sphere sovereignty is straightforward enough. Namely, it is argued that each person is created in the image of God and is both rational and volitional. On this basis, it is asserted that each person is free to choose his own course of action. However, he is not free from God or from God's moral judgments. Therefore, each person is subject to the consequences of his actions and those consequences occur in one of two forms. First, the Bible argues that God has created a moral universe and that He has established principles such that certain actions invariably result in certain consequences. As the Apostle Paul put the matter, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."² This form of Christian thought recognizes a moral order or the existence of a "natural law" that cannot be compromised without prompting certain inevitable consequences that follow bad behavior. These penalties are understood to be warnings by God against the continuation of certain kinds of actions and the individual who suffers the costs of his imprudence or immorality is advised to change his course.

Apart from the personal suffering that occurs due to imprudent and immoral pursuits, the Bible also addresses the problem of behavior that results in the imposition of costs on others. In this case, the Scriptures call for solidarity of human action in the form of collective punishment and this gives rise to a purpose for government in society. Toward this end, sphere sovereignty recognizes the role of government to punish wrong doing in order to secure the common peace so that the

²Galatians, 6:7, NKJ.

perpetrators of evil are the ones who are made to suffer.³ Biblically speaking, the failure to execute such punishment would result in injustice and give the appearance that evil is rewarded while good is made to suffer. Thus, when societies fail to effectively pursue just punishment for crimes committed within them, they are harming themselves and exposing themselves to the potential of bringing about their own destruction.

Given this understanding of human nature and of the purpose of government, Christian thinkers in the reformed tradition began to advance the notion of sphere sovereignty, the idea being that each individual ought to lead his own life and govern his own affairs while bearing the responsibility for his actions. Moreover, it would be a violation of human dignity to arbitrarily interfere or meddle in someone else's life without that person's consent or without some overriding reason. On this basis, Christians were admonished to mind their own business. For example, in his letter to the Thessalonians Paul warned his audience, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies."⁴ On this basis, the only need for unsolicited intervention in someone else's life would occur when that person had fallen into gross sin that significantly spilled over to the detriment of others.

Accordingly, this form of Christian thought provides guidelines controlling the intervention into someone else's life. By recognizing the human dignity of the person as someone made in God's image, the

³In the 13th Chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul outlines this purpose of government. Specifically, the Apostle argues that government is instituted among men by God for the purpose of "punishing wrongdoers" who might otherwise go free to commit their crimes anew.

⁴II Thessalonians 3:10-11, NKJ.

pattern of intervention is implicitly understood to be of a temporary nature. Moreover, the extent and nature of the intervention ought to follow some pattern that extends outward from the individual himself. Thus, those in closest contact to the person would be the first to intervene in his life. Other people and social institutions in society would only need to get involved to the extent that such earlier involvement was ineffective in changing poor behavior. Therefore, other social institutions would be the next logical step of intervention needed to resolve the problem. Generally speaking, the state is the last institution called forth to intervene in someone's life and its role is largely negative in that it acts to punish wrongdoing. Thus, it is the institution of last resort punishing the truly incorrigible person whose actions have so outrageously disturbed the public peace and the security of other individuals as to warrant punishment.

Another important component of Judeo-Christian thought is the concept of original sin and human depravity. Throughout the Scriptures, human beings are described as sinful people who constantly go astray. As a result of their constant disobedience toward God, they invite God's judgment and wrath. Indeed, apart from the grace and mercy of God, Scripture stresses the notion that this is what people should expect. The main message of the Bible is that God does provide such grace and mercy in the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

This teaching is crucial to Christian social thought as it applies to the state. Anyone attempting to think consistently within this moral tradition never expects a utopia to arise in this life. Rather, recognizing his own failures, he expects others to fail as well and, therefore, he expects that life in this world will always be less than perfect. In addition, the recognition of one's own failures, coupled with the expectation of God's forgiveness, ought to motivate a person to be willing to forgive others for minor offenses they have committed against him. Moreover, the Bible itself instructs the Christian to practice such grace and mercy toward others as a matter of daily life because this practice is a means of affirmation of God's own merciful disposition.

The importance of this teaching for our topic is that the practice of such mercy and grace greatly limits the amount of government intervention as people seek to rectify the issues of injustice in society. Furthermore, this understanding of the world results in a rather low expectation of government's usefulness. Beyond this, it also recognizes that the institution of government itself can be turned to unjust purposes because sinful governmental authorities can misuse its power. Indeed, the concentrated power of the state may be the easiest means of busybody meddling in the affairs of others or in the violation of individual human rights.

In this regard, the Bible is very realistic. For example, in Deuteronomy, the writer admonished the governing authority to keep a copy of the Scriptures with him and to meditate on them every day.⁵ The implication of the passage was that the ruler executed his duties under the law of God and was bound by God's law. Therefore, if he attempted to establish himself above all others, or to institute unjust laws, he was essentially calling forth the judgment of God upon himself. As Kuyper stated the matter, "No man has the right to rule over another man, otherwise such a right necessarily, and immediately becomes the *right of the strongest*... Nor can a group of men, by contract, form their own right to compel you to obey a fellow-man" (Kuyper, 1998, 82). Thus, while the state is given as an institution established for the purpose of securing peace and order in society, it is also recognized as an institution that can easily be perverted and used to destroy the God-given liberty of individual choice.

The Natural Law Agreement on Which the United States was Founded

The significance of the kind of Christian social thought expounded here is that it played an important role in the American

⁵Deuteronomy 17:18-21.

founding. The founding of the United States of America is perhaps best understood as an agreement between two groups of thinkers of that time. One group followed the Judeo-Christian thought traditions outlined above while the other group embraced a more naturalistic philosophy that viewed God through the religious lens of deism. While this view of the world rejected the notion of original sin and human depravity, it affirmed the concept of a natural law that was established by God or which existed of its own accord. Generally, theorists of this mindset affirmed God's transcendence, but denied His immanence. That is, they thought of God as the one who established the universe and set it in motion. They believed that in doing so He designed it to operate according to certain laws and principles, which extended to the moral realm of human action. However, they rejected the idea that God was present and active in His creation. Thus, they rejected the concept of biblical miracles such as the virgin birth, the incarnation of Christ, and the atonement for sin. Instead, they adopted the viewpoint that human beings were basically good and that their character was perfected as they interacted in the world and learned from their mistakes. The main problem as they saw matters was a lack of information and education that resulted in human suffering. Following this line of reasoning they thought that human problems would be resolved in the course of time as new discoveries were made and disseminated.

Religiously speaking, the two views are quite far apart from one another. Indeed, the different conceptions of God and of human nature led to more than a little conflict between these two different camps of social thinkers. For example, in 1776, John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a staunch Protestant who served as president of Princeton, delivered a sermon defending the Christian doctrines of God's sovereign rule over all creation and of original sin. In that sermon, Witherspoon quotes from Thomas Paine's popular pamphlet, *Common Sense*. In his pamphlet, Paine adopted the Unitarian position and attacked the concept of original sin. He then used that attack as part of his overarching reason for rejecting British rule. On this

count, Witherspoon went to great length to counter Paine's attack on the Christian religion and to reassert the doctrine of original sin by offering supportive evidence for its validity. After quoting Paine on the matter, Witherspoon immediately went on the offensive by posing a series of penetrating questions that called on Paine to give an answer if he could. In attacking Paine, Witherspoon made it clear how repulsive he found Paine's assertions and how weak he thought Paine's position was (Witherspoon, 1996).

The sermon demonstrated in no uncertain terms the great religious divide that separated these two different perspectives on the world and on human life. Yet, interestingly enough, at the end of the sermon, Witherspoon gave his own reasons for joining Paine in supporting the American Revolution by telling his audience about the biblical restrictions on the rulers of this world. In doing this, he called on his fellow Christians to take the same stand as a matter of their Christian duty. Therefore, though the Unitarians and the Christians were far apart religiously, both camps affirmed certain features of the purpose of government and of human anthropology that led to an agreement upon which the United States was founded.

In particular, both groups recognized the volitional nature of human beings. Moreover, both affirmed that people are creatures capable of self-determined action. As a result, both affirmed the notion that people are individually responsible for their own actions and should, therefore, bear the consequences of their behavior. As such, both groups affirmed the idea that certain actions invariably resulted in certain consequences and that these consequences served a useful purpose in the process of the individual's character development. In this sense, both groups recognized and affirmed the concept of sphere sovereignty and, therefore, recognized the limited nature of government. In addition, they shared a distrust of the concentration of power in the hands of governmental authorities. Natural law theorists recognized that the negative consequences of human error could be significantly magnified by such power, while Christian thinkers believed

that sinful men would inevitably abuse such power. Moreover, both sides recognized the extensive historical evidence that collective power had been routinely misused.

Within the context of the agreement on these foundational issues, the two groups were able to reach a consensus about the fundamental role of government. This led to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War, and the eventual drafting of the U.S. Constitution. Under the Constitution, the federal government was authorized to play a fairly limited role in the affairs of men. In addition, it was constructed in such a way as to dissipate power through a series of checks and balances that were intended to keep governmental officials in compliance with their oaths of office. The principles articulated in the drafting of the founding documents should have also affected the organization of state and local governments since they reflected the political thought of the day, and to some extent they did. Unfortunately, these principles did not always serve as the bedrock of such state and local government action. Nevertheless, the fundamental liberty of the individual was essentially affirmed at the nation's founding. Liberty and personal responsibility were understood to go hand-in-hand and it was hoped that on this base the good society would develop.

The Secularist Attack on the Natural Law and the Collapse of the Agreement

Despite the original agreement, those who embraced the more naturalistic world view began chipping away at it. This effort began as the Unitarians of the day proposed and worked to establish government-run systems of common schooling.⁶ The effort was

⁶For an excellent history of the public school movement see, Samuel L. Blumenfeld, *Is Public Education Necessary?*, Old Greenwich, Connecticut: The Devin-Adair Company, 1981.

spawned at the state level and thus did not pose an immediate threat to the national understanding of the purpose of government. Nevertheless, the effort amounted to a breach of the agreed purpose of government at the state level since it violated the individual's basic right to his own property and the pursuit of his own happiness as he saw it. The aim of the common school movement was to consolidate government control over education. The underlying thinking behind this effort was that such a system was needed as a means to educate the populace. In the view of the proponents of such education was the notion that people needed to be instructed in such a way as to become committed to the intellectual and scientific approach to life. For the naturalist, this seemed to be fundamental to their own religious beliefs. Moreover, they promoted public schooling as a common institution in which good citizens could be molded. However, in truth, common schools were merely socialist institutions aimed at indoctrinating people into the naturalistic view of life. That is, the common schools were to be owned and operated by government authorities for government purposes.

Regrettably, though it only affected people at the state level initially, by running counter to the original principles and the purposes of government as espoused in the founding documents, the effort eroded an important principle that allowed people of opposing religious views to live together in relative peace. According to the original agreement, each side recognized the right of the other to hold views that they considered to be erroneous and detrimental. Both sides agreed that each individual is responsible for his own actions. Moreover, each side recognized that the natural order of things would tend to penalize error while rewarding the truth and, thus, they were inclined to leave one another alone to pursue religious worship according to the dictates of conscience. In this way of thinking, both sides held the belief that an erroneous position would eventually result in some kind of suffering and that religious truth would be made clearer to anyone willing to make an honest assessment of the case.

However, the Unitarians of the early nineteenth century were

not willing to leave the matter of what a “proper” education was to the individual decision maker. The common school movement amounted to an effort to strip people of their ability to seek education on their own terms. As a result, they began formulating plans to press for the establishment and extension of government-funded schooling.⁷ In doing this they inadvertently adopted the mindset of Rousseau who thought that human beings are naturally complete and self-sufficient and can be made into a society by the imposition of a legal code given by a lawgiver. Such an idea was alien to the original agreement between the early Americans who recognized the inherent social nature of man. Frederic Bastiat accurately addressed this issue when he wrote:

The idea of Rousseau that the lawgiver invented society—which is false in itself—has been disastrous in that it has led to the belief that solidarity is a mere creature of legislation; and we shall soon see that modern lawgivers use this doctrine as a basis for imposing upon society an *artificial solidarity*, which directly contravenes the action of *natural solidarity*. In all things the guiding principle of these great manipulators of the human race is to put their own creation in the place of God’s creation, which they misunderstand (Bastiat, 1964).

⁷In truth to the history of the matter of state-funded schooling, the Puritans had tried to collectivize for the purpose of promoting the Christian religion. In doing so they had adopted laws requiring tax-funded education. However, over the years private schools developed and displaced these public institutions. As a result, this earlier effort had waned and the existing common schools had a minimal role in Massachusetts during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Unitarian movement was a much more aggressive and pervasive effort in collectivizing education.

In essence, the Unitarians had denied the agreement and had embraced an alternative stance that essentially took the position that individual responsibility could not lead to harmony and, therefore, if harmony were to be achieved, it would have to be forced by the state. In time, this perspective on the appropriate use of collective power continued to grow and was extended beyond the state level to the federal level of government as well. In addition, Christians began to embrace the notion that government could be used to promote their agenda as well and this has finally resulted in the current cultural battle for political control.

As this has happened, American political thought has tended to follow Rousseau's notion of the "Social Contract" and has, thus, rejected the natural law basis on which the nation was founded. Kuyper analyzed the necessary path of this change in mindset well in his lecture on politics. In regards to this political theory that has so captured the world, Kuyper observed:

The sovereign God is dethroned and man with his free will is placed on the vacant seat. It is the will of man which determines all things. All power, all authority proceeds from man. Thus comes from the individual man to the many men; and in those many men conceived as *the people*, there is thus hidden the deepest fountain of all sovereignty [which is human will]... But here, from the standpoint of the sovereignty of the people, the fist is defiantly clenched against God, while man grovels before his fellow men, tinseling over this self-abasement by the ludicrous fiction that, thousands of years ago, men, of whom no one has any remembrance, concluded a political contract... Now it was to be not the sovereignty of the people [that would eventually serve as the underlying assertion of the purpose of government], but the *Sovereignty of the State*...

[This assertion was a product of German philosophy which has increasingly been pressed upon the peoples of the world and on this basis] the law is right, not because its contents are in harmony with eternal principles of right, but because *it is law* (Kuyper, 87-89).

As this political philosophy has been embraced, tyranny and despotism have spread across the world to the great detriment of the human race. In some places statism has resulted in some truly gruesome things such as the annihilation of people in the Jewish holocaust and the extermination of millions of people in Stalinist Russia. In other places, it has merely infringed on the individual rights of people thus limiting their ability to make economic progress. Whatever the consequences have been in different places, the spread of this political theory has eroded away human freedom. Moreover, to the degree that human freedom has been destroyed, the free market has been undercut since economic freedom is fundamental to it.

Conclusion

The original political agreement between the different groups of people who formed the United States of America has been eroding away. In modern times, both groups have failed to limit their political action to the appropriate sphere in which the public peace might be maintained. Rather, each side has abandoned the natural limitations that ought to be placed on governmental action. As a result, more and more aspects of life have been politicized. This has, in turn, resulted in greater conflict in society and an erosion of civilization.

At this point, a story might illustrate the problem of incivility today by examining a day of greater civility. According to the story, one day a friend of David Hume's saw him hurriedly scurrying down the street. When his friend saw him, he queried Hume as to where he was going in such a hurry. Hume responded that he was on his way to church to hear George Whitefield, the famous Presbyterian evangelist,

preach. His friend asked him why he was going to do that since he knew that Hume was not a Christian believer and did not possess that kind of faith. But ready with a response to that question, Hume replied, "Yes I know, but I want to hear from a man who is."

This story provides a good illustration of the kind of civil community that can be had when the different sides of a religious debate are allowed the freedom to pursue the issues of faith with intellectual honesty and candor. While Whitefield did not persuade Hume of the veracity of Christian faith, the air of freedom and civility of that day allowed for a society in which both men were allowed the opportunity to make the best case they could. Sadly, expecting more from government than its provision for the protection of fundamental human rights has eroded the ground on which such civilized human interaction can occur. It has also gone a long way to destroying liberty, both economic and personal.

References

Bastiat, Frederic. 1964. *Economic Harmonies*. Irvington, NY: The Foundation for Economic Education.

Kuyper, Abraham. 1998. "Sphere Sovereignty." *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*. James Bratt, ed. Grand Rapids, WI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

Witherspoon, John. 1996. "The Dominance of Providence Over the Passions of Men." *The Patriot's Handbook*. George Grant, ed. Elkton, Maryland: Highland Books.