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Common Ground Between the Philosophies of Christianity and Libertarianism

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This essay is addressed primarily to members of two groups: non-Christian libertarians and non-libertarian Christians. While they often view each other with suspicion or even derision, in fact, the two worldviews are remarkably consistent. For libertarians, while there may be other good reasons for not embracing Christianity, I will illustrate that what the Bible says about government is not one of them. For Christians, I will illustrate that libertarianism is consistent with Christianity, and thus, that there is no good reason for them not to embrace libertarianism as their political philosophy.

This essay is addressed primarily to members of two groups: non-Christian libertarians and non-libertarian Christians. While they often view each other with suspicion or even derision, in fact, the two worldviews are remarkably consistent.[1] That said, there are good reasons why the two groups have been wary of each other. Some Christians have confused the behavior of libertine libertarians with the philosophy of libertarianism.[2] Moreover, Christians often misunderstand the difference between legality and morality. For example, observing libertarians endorse drug legalization or legalized prostitution, Christians might easily but mistakenly conclude that being a libertarian means condoning or endorsing such behaviors.[3] Likewise, libertarians have confused the personal beliefs and behaviors of some Christians with the philosophy of biblical Christianity.[4] For example, seeing some Christians endorse government activism in economic or social realms, libertarians might easily but mistakenly conclude that the Bible endorses such behavior.[5]

Although the reasons for confusion are similar, my goals in writing this essay for the two groups are somewhat different. For libertarians, while there may be other good reasons for not embracing Christianity, I will illustrate that what the Bible says about government is not one of them.[6] For Christians, I will illustrate that libertarianism is consistent with Christianity, and thus, that there is no good reason for them not to embrace libertarianism as their political philosophy.[7] Given the tasks at hand, I will appeal to passages from the Bible that discuss Christianity and the extent to which the pursuit of governmental activism is an appropriate means to desirable ends.

Libertarians, as a group, find a limited, legitimate role for government—differing among themselves mostly on the extent to which they (1) view markets as struggling in some contexts (e.g., public goods, externalities); and (2) view government as a legitimate and effective alternative in these few circumstances. Many Christians—particularly those who are not politically active—hold political views that are close to those of libertarians, but since they are not in the public eye, it is their more politically active brethren who receive the lion's share of publicity.[8] Of these, the goals of the so-called Religious Right mostly deal with issues of social morality, while the goals of the so-called Religious Left mostly deal with issues of "economic justice."[9] Both groups then advocate government as an appropriate means to desirable ends.

Libertarians find government to be mostly incompetent and, beyond that, are philosophically opposed to most governmental activity. In contrast, Christians on the political Left and Right—like Democrats and Republicans—at least implicitly believe governmental activism to be morally appropriate and practically competent in some or many contexts. The competency of government (or lack thereof) is beyond the scope of this essay. Aside from that, their advocacy begs two questions: Does God (as described in the Bible) agree with their specific goals, and does God approve of using government as a means to reaching those goals?

Defining Terms

In any discussion, it is important that all parties understand the terms being used. I will use "legislating morality" to refer to efforts to regulate and restrict consensual but "sinful" acts between two adults in which no significant, direct costs are imposed on others. Although both parties enter the agreement willingly and expect to benefit, Christians believe that, as sin, the activity is, on net, harmful.[10] The key point is that the behavior is voluntary for both parties and both expect to benefit in what economists call "mutually beneficial trade."

Examples of this include gambling, homosexual conduct, prostitution, and illegal drugs.[11] Members of the Religious Right are often vocal about making or keeping these behaviors illegal.[12]

In contrast, "justice" issues are those in which someone's rights are directly violated. Examples of this include murder, rape, and theft. In other words, one party uses force of some type directly to harm another party; someone benefits directly at the expense of another. It follows that "legislating justice" is the use of government to try to improve justice and to reduce injustice. Members of the Religious Left are often vocal about welfare, foreign aid, and tax policies—seeking to address supposed economic injustices through income redistribution. Because the concept of justice speaks to both means and ends, I will focus on the use of just methods to reach just outcomes. (Abortion is too complicated to cover in this framework without further development and thus, requires a treatment beyond the scope of this essay.[13])

The key distinction in the two definitions is whether the costs of the "sin" are imposed directly on others or not. Of course, this is a simplification. First, the two terms are intertwined—to act justly is a matter of morality, and the morality of one's actions often determines the justice of the subsequent outcome. That said, the distinctions between mechanisms (voluntary or coercive) and anticipated outcomes (mutually beneficial or not) still serve as a useful framework.

Second, both justice and morality issues involve costs imposed on others. Proponents of legislating morality often argue that other parties are indirectly harmed by gambling, prostitution, et cetera, and thus, that governmental activism is warranted. However, this view becomes untenable if extended very far. Clearly, the size of the costs imposed on others varies widely. For example, consider gluttony, covetousness, mass murder, failing to be charitable, and believing in the central tenets of a false religion. Should the government legislate against all sins?[14] When do the costs become significant enough to allow one righteously to invoke governmental solutions? To the extent that these costs can be mapped on a spectrum, one could argue that as the costs become larger and more direct, there is a greater potential role for governmental activism—at least in theory,[15] but this would still require one to distinguish between high-cost and low-cost behaviors, and thus, to embrace a similar framework.

In sum, I recognize that morality and justice are connected in practice, but for the sake of convenient labels, and recognizing their popular usage, these terms would seem to be a reasonable framework for our discussion.[16]

Means and Ends

The concept of appropriate means to desirable ends is a prominent biblical theme. In fact, Scripture models three different errors in this regard: (1) apathy toward that which we should be passionate; (2) passion toward improper goals; and (3) passion toward proper goals but pursued with improper means. Choosing three popular biblical stories to illustrate these three errors: Esau is described as "godless" for selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup; Jonah runs away from God and then despises the Ninevites after they respond positively to his preaching; and Abraham improperly pursues the child promised by God by impregnating his wife's servant.[17]

What about the goals of politically active Christians—social morality and economic justice? Apathy certainly is not a problem, but are these appropriate goals? We are told in Scripture that God is a God of justice and righteousness. In fact, righteousness and justice are the very foundations of His throne.[18] But how does this apply to a Christian's earthly pursuits?

More specifically, the Bible's general call to individual morality is well-known. Christianity's most advertised feature is the various behaviors in which one is not to engage—ironically, a topic secondary in the Bible to the necessity and availability of God's grace.[19] Exhortations to engage in a number of positive behaviors are even less-emphasized in the public mind, although they are arguably more important. Even though the moral standards of Scripture can be difficult to specify—for instance, the conditions under which lying is moral—the general call to love one's neighbor and even one's enemies is clear enough.

That said, any such call to social morality—outside the body of believers—is much cloudier. First, Christianity's plan for salvation is not based on one's morality. As Paul addressed the Christians at Ephesus: "It is by grace that you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works.…"[20] Christianity teaches that one cannot come before a holy God based on one's imperfect life; one can only approach God by accepting the atoning gift of Christ's substitutionary death.

Second, God's standards for morality say nothing about enforcing those standards on people outside the community of believers. In the Old Testament, the standards of the Law applied to the Israelites and, largely, to those who lived among them.[21] In the New Testament, the more rigorous standards established by Christ were to be applied only within the community of the church. In fact, Christians are told not to expect much from non-Christians in terms of their morality. Paul to the Christians at Corinth says:

> I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world… In that case, you would have to leave the world.… [Instead], you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater and a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.[22]

In contrast, Christians often hold the world to inappropriately high standards of moral conduct and the church to inappropriately low standards. In sum, it is difficult to assert a biblical position on pursuing societal morality as a goal for Christians.

The calls to individual and corporate justice are only somewhat similar. Their basis is on the Bible's portrayal of a God who does not show favoritism, who repeatedly condemns oppression, and who defends the poor and needy in the face of affliction and oppression.[23] As a result, leaders are instructed to judge between the rich and poor fairly.[24] Likewise, Christians are not supposed to show favoritism or oppress others.[25] Instead, they are to defend the poor, the needy, and the defenseless, and they are encouraged to do good, to be generous, to lend, and to give freely.[26] In a word, individuals (especially leaders) are called to pursue justice avidly—in both individual and corporate matters. In contrast to social morality, then, working toward justice for others appears to be an appropriate goal.

Practically, the biblical standards of justice focus on process (e.g., "oppression") rather than outcomes—the use of fraud or coercion to make others worse-off. That said, the distinction between poverty and oppression is often a point of confusion for the Religious Left. Scripture always condemns oppression but judges poverty, based on its circumstances. As David Chilton notes, actually, "God is against certain poor people"—sluggards, law-breakers, those who covet and then curse God, and so on.[27] Because many on the Religious Left miss this distinction and observe poverty around them, they infer the existence of biblically condemned oppression. This is one reason they find an aggressive role for the State in redistributing income.

In a word, means and ends are both important. As for ends, on the one hand, it would be difficult to establish social morality as a goal for Christians to pursue; on the other hand, it is easy to establish social justice as a goal for Christians to pursue. But is government a practical and ethical means to that end?

The Bible on Government

Most biblical episodes about human government are rather ugly. Many libertarians are familiar with the incident when the Israelites request a (human) king. God told the prophet Samuel to "solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." His subsequent speech to the Israelites remains one of the greatest descriptions of the abuse of power and, too often, the standard for human government:

> … he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.… He will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers … the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves.…[28]

In addition, relationship with God is frequently described in the Bible as a marriage. The unfaithfulness of the Israelites in their relationship with God—by worshipping other gods—is graphically portrayed as committing a variety of sexual sins.[29] Likewise, various alliances with the governments of foreign powers were condemned by the prophets as (spiritual) "adultery"—seeking sustenance and protection from an entity other than God, depending on man instead of on God.[30]

Five episodes from the life of Christ are also instructive. First, in Matthew 4, we are told about the three temptations that Christ faced before beginning his ministry in earnest—including the use of political means to ends. Christ could have diminished income inequality with miracles or bought the allegiance of people with hand-outs, but did not.

Second, Christ's opponents tempted him to say things that would get him in trouble with the Roman government. Christ's response to one such question—that one should "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's"—is probably the most famous biblical remark concerning Christians and government. Notably, Christ was answering a question intended to trap him "so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor." The religious authorities were hoping to use the power of the State to stop him.[31]

Third, it is notable that, at Gethsamene, Peter inappropriately uses force by engaging in sword play, cutting off a servant's ear. Christ's rebuke of Peter probably has broader application to Christian proposals for the use of force and government: "All who draw the sword will die by the sword."[32]

Fourth, in addition to eschewing the temptation to use earthly government, Christ was critical of the methods of earthly rulers and told his disciples not to follow in their footsteps: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you."[33] The Israelites and the disciples had expected the Messiah to be a political leader, but Christ had an entirely different agenda.[34]

Somehow, today's Christians fall into an eerily similar belief, claiming that Christ's words and actions do not discourage the use of government. Their chief argument is that this tool was unavailable to him in the contemporary Roman political structure. However, the "cultural" argument is at worst, disingenuous—or at best, unsatisfying. First, Christ was offered political power—by Satan and his followers—and refused it. Second, Christ could have taken actions to ensure a substantial degree of economic and political power, but did not. Third, if the use of government was supposed to be an important tool in the Christian arsenal, a God who is sovereign over history could have sent Christ at a different, more democratic, time. And, finally, any "cultural" argument is potentially dangerous since it opens the door for its use on a wide variety of (seemingly non-negotiable) issues.

Finally, Christians should recognize that the State has made martyrs out of many of Christ's followers, and it was the State along with religious authorities that put Christ to death. That Christ was killed by a combination of religious and State authorities was no accident.

The rest of the New Testament also displays a surprising lack of interest in political issues. There were no political protests, and there are no biblical calls for the government to prohibit gambling, to expand governmental programs to feed the poor, and so forth. That said, the apostles did write a good deal about a Christian's relationship to political authorities. Paul instructs Christians to "submit to the governing authorities," and his first instructions to Timothy about worship are for Christians to pray, intercede, and give thanks for "all those in authority."[35]

Unfortunately, for past and present Christian advocates of governmental activism, there is no mandate from Scripture that endorses the use of government. As Paul Heyne noted about the Catholic bishops and their desire to "legislate justice": They "want to transform institutions; they are therefore wise to focus on gaining control of governmental policies. However, honesty requires

they give up the authority of the New Testament as support for what they are doing."[36]

The Theory Versus the Practice of Government

As the purveyor of the "legitimate" use of force, in the hands of sinful man, the powers of governance are subject to degrees of abuse. The irony is that we would not need government if men were angels, but since they are not, we must rely on non-angels to govern. In other words, when government is in charge—and particularly when it has a large degree of economic or political power—there is a significant danger that subsequent outcomes will be rather unpleasant. Government is in a position to impose tremendous costs on individuals or groups.

In fact, human government is responsible for the most gruesome events in history. Taking the twentieth century as a prime example, the world has endured the likes of Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot, as well as the brutality of the Chinese Communists, a number of oppressive African regimes, and ironically, in this context, the persecution of innumerable Christians. Besides, although less deadly, our government has engaged in other appalling uses of force: slavery, Jim Crow laws, Japanese internment camps, discriminatory laws against the Chinese, and so on.

Even without malevolence of this extent leveled at individuals or groups, in a "fallen world," it seems unlikely that the State will operate under anything close to pure motives, complete knowledge, and the ability to enforce order without improperly restricting freedoms. In a word, there is a potentially vast divide between the theory and practice of government.[37]

Of course, the intersection between Christianity and government has also had a checkered past. From Constantine's mandatory worship to the "Crusades," Christians used force in unfortunate ways. In the late nineteenth century, Protestants encouraged the movement from private to public schools, hoping to use the State to indoctrinate the children of primarily Catholic immigrants. The turn of the century also saw the transition from private and largely Christian-based welfare efforts to government-run programs. Into the twentieth century, Christian faith in, and use of, government grew more rapidly—with its Social Gospel and calls for protective legislation and income redistribution, its impact on the Progressive Era's reforms, and its insistent calls for prohibition against alcohol.[38]

Government As an Idol or a Tool?

Although the contemporary level of government worship is troubling, it was especially prevalent among Christian leaders at the turn of the twentieth century. For example, Marvin Olasky quotes the Canon of Canterbury, William Fremantle, concerning the State: "[It] calls forth a worship more complete than any other …" and only government "can embrace all the wants of its members and afford them the universal instruction and elevation which they need … when we think of the Nation as becoming, as it must do more and more, the object of mental regard, of admiration, of love, even of worship (for in it God preeminently dwells), we shall recognize to the fullest extent its religious character and functions."[39]

Of course, explicit worship of an entity other than God is outright idolatry.[40] But oftentimes, that faith is more implicit, believing that government is the source of the solutions to a variety of problems. Part of this is a failure to understand the limitations of government. For instance, Pope Paul VI once said that government "always intervenes with careful justice and with devotion to the common good for which it holds final responsibility."[41] Fortunately, after seeing government's many failures over the last thirty years, contemporary observers would be far more reticent to use such terms as "always," "careful justice," "devotion to the common good," and "holds final responsibility" in their assessment of government's role and abilities.

The level of one's faith in government is also crucial because policy recommendations will follow closely. Given his faith, the pope's subsequent conclusions should not be surprising: "It pertains to the public authorities to choose, even to lay down, the ends to be achieved, and the means of attaining them, and it is for them to stimulate all the forces engaged in this common activity."[42] Whether worship of government is explicit or more subtle, *Christians need to avoid viewing government as an idol*.

Many prominent, politically conservative Christians have become increasingly disenchanted with the pursuit of governmental activism. For example, conservative syndicated columnist Cal Thomas speaks critically of the modern church's pursuit of government: "The Religious Right is making the same mistakes that the Religious Left made. To solve the moral problems of the nation, they are looking to government rather than to the author of their faith and His strategies."[43] Charles Colson argues that this fallacy stems from "too low a view of the power of a sovereign God and too high a view of the ability of man."[44] Likewise, Bill Bennett claims that "we place too much hope in politics.… [It] has too often become the graven image of our time."[45]

Because the power of government can be so alluring, and especially because Christians are warned about making government an idol, one would hope that Christians would think at least twice before embracing government as a solution to perceived problems.

The Biblical and Practical Problems with Legislating Morality

When one presents an argument against legislating morality to Christians, a frequent concern is that it is a ploy to excuse "sinful" behavior. This is not at all my purpose; in fact, it is hardly related. From a Christian perspective, downplaying sin and dealing inappropriately with "sinners" are both wrong. The Bible is clear about God's view on many "social issues"—sex outside of marriage, the abuse of alcohol, and so on, but that is not the issue at hand. The key question is: When God's moral standards are clear, should Christians actively pursue a legislative agenda to promote those standards?

As we noted earlier, although the Bible is often clear about what God wants for individuals, it says nothing about believers using human government to legislate morality for nonbelievers. Moreover, the teachings of Christ and the writings of the apostles fail to mention using the State to enforce morality.

Consider also that in terms of appropriate means to ends, the God of the Bible is concerned with freedom more, virtually, than with anything else. Why? Voluntary praise is far better than coerced praise, and free will allows the development of attributes that God wants His children to have.

Notably, the Bible opens with the theme of freedom as Adam and Eve choose to disobey God. He had given them one restriction. They were tempted by it and fell. It was not in God's plan that they should sin, but *it was God's will that they should have the choice*—the opportunity to glorify God or to separate themselves from God.[46] It is also striking that the theme of the entire New Testament is freedom—freedom from sin, from death, from bondage, and freedom to enjoy the abundant life, to better love God and others. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.… But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."[47]

Further, the Bible does not portray God as forcefully intervening in the course of human events—unless it is to affect judgment or to help believers. There are no instances when He steps in and prevents people from committing sins beforehand. Sometimes he sent warnings through his prophets, but he did not interfere with the people's choice to engage in certain behaviors. In fact,

Romans 1:24–28 describes how God frequently allows people to "hang themselves" with the desires of their heart. Likewise, the Prodigal Son of Luke 15 is given complete freedom by his father—a model for how God relates to us.

Sadly, Christian advocates of governmental solutions implicitly view freedom and virtue as antagonists. Instead, *freedom is a prerequisite for virtue*. By prohibiting, taxing, subsidizing, or mandating behaviors, government reduces or eliminates the virtue and morality behind those decisions. In sum, there can be no moral choices without the freedom to choose. If there had been religious conservatives around in those days, one wonders if they would have built a fence around the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, or perhaps, even chopped it down.

Consider also the ministry of Christ. Starting with a thought experiment: Imagine Christ in the middle of a busy day of teaching, healing, working with his disciples, and rebuking Pharisees. He takes a break to call a few legislators who are pivotal to the passage of a state sodomy law. Then, he appears on a local radio talk show to argue against a referendum to bring gambling to the state. Finally, from the pulpit, he devotes half of his sermon to harping on the pagans for their immorality and exhorting his followers to make their voice known on the important social morality issues of the day. Anyone familiar with the Gospels will find it difficult to imagine these activities in Christ's agenda.

Moreover, there are a variety of other issues that should concern Christians—the practical costs of attempting to legislate morality. This activity promotes judgmentalism (judging people rather than behaviors) or at least the perception thereof. It often amounts to legalism (elevating gray issues to black-and-white or imposing personal preferences on others). It enhances the perception that Christianity is a works-based religion. It typically ignores the opportunity cost of the resources used in this endeavor. It is often ineffective and misses better solutions. (I will illustrate this with the essay's closing example.) Too, it is often applied inconsistently (legislating against some sins without pursuing legal prohibitions against more destructive sins).[48]

In sum, legislating morality is neither explicitly condemned nor encouraged in the Bible, but notably, politics and concern for "social issues" are absent from the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Moreover, legislating morality is inconsistent with the style of Christ's preaching and the substance of his message, and it is fraught with significant practical costs that should make it unattractive as a strategy.[49]

The Importance of Legislating Justice—Properly

So, why is the pursuit of justice for others different from the pursuit of morality for others? As we noted earlier, there is a strong biblical call to work for justice, including societal justice. This is especially noteworthy in the absence of any such case for pursuing social morality. From the Gospels, we can also see that Christ defended the rights of others and did not restrict the freedom of nonbelievers.

We have also seen how attempts to legislate morality are fraught with unfortunate costs. In contrast, attempts to legislate justice—especially if done effectively—have a number of beneficial by-products for Christians and the world. To note, only those who stand to lose from ending an injustice will be bothered by one who pursues justice for others. Yet, this question still remains: How does one legislate justice properly?[50]

It is easier to discuss first how to legislate justice improperly, since the Religious Left has provided us with so many examples. As a group, they endorse income redistribution, minimum wages, stronger labor unions, socialized health care, and so on.[51] In past years, they were among the most avid fans of outright socialism—at least until it was so heartily discredited by history. Unfortunately for advocates of economic intervention, Scripture not only fails to endorse such an agenda, it at least implicitly condemns this use of governmental activism as a means to an end.

Christians of this ilk make two related mistakes. As with legislating morality, Christians confuse the biblical call for them, as believers, with a supposed call for nonbelievers. For example, Christians are to assist the poor,[52] but that does not mean they should impose those burdens on others. Further, they are not diligent in considering whether the means justify the ends they pursue. The key is that governmental activism of this type uses force to make some better-off while leaving others worse-off. With direct redistribution, government takes money from *A* to give it to *B*. In private matters, this is called theft—a violation of the eighth commandment. Though Christians may choose to give their money to the poor, Scripture does not endorse compelling others to give to the poor through taxation.

Other favored policies of the Religious Left involve indirect redistribution and forcibly prevent mutually beneficial trade and, thus, cannot be sanctioned either. For example, a higher minimum wage would increase unemployment among the unskilled, and it redistributes income from consumers, investors, and those workers who lose their jobs, to those workers who keep their jobs at the higher wage. Moreover, a higher minimum wage makes it illegal for a

worker and an employer to contract with each other for a wage under the minimum. Scripture provides no license for Christians to advocate such a policy.

In a word, we have returned to an earlier theme: It is not enough to pursue biblical goals; one must also use biblical methods. The use of government to redistribute income and prevent mutually beneficial trade is, at best, inappropriate. And sadly, its outcomes often run counter to those supposedly being pursued by advocates of governmental activism.

Christians, then, are responsible for pursuing proper goals with proper methods. This still allows, and even bolsters, the call for individual Christians to pursue justice, to help the poor, and so on, but invoking the use of force on others is inappropriate. That might seem to fully eliminate Christians from influencing the political arena. Instead, it merely redirects them to ending current governmental injustices. If Christians can stop the use of force against others, especially the poor, they are well within the biblical mandate to pursue justice while using just means.

In fact, this leaves a host of important issues. Government does much to redistribute income to the non-poor, to lock the relatively unskilled out of labor markets, to enhance monopoly power for suppliers, to restrict trade, and so on. In each case, a special-interest group uses the force of government to make themselves better-off at the expense of others, and often, disproportionately harm the poor.[53] Both the process and the outcomes are unjust and deserve the attention of politically interested Christians.

An Application to Education Reform

Earlier, I had argued that pursuing inappropriate means often paralleled missing appropriate and more effective solutions. Education reform is a case in point and provides a closing example on how to pursue a positive agenda with respect to justice and morality issues.

The current educational system is dominated by a government-run entity with tremendous monopoly power, particularly over the inner-city poor. With such an arrangement, it should not be surprising that we observe low quality, high costs, extensive bureaucracy, and a lack of concern for consumer preferences. Although not universally true—illustrating the point that poor institutions can conceivably yield decent results—our government schools too often model what one would expect from such an arrangement.

Most proposals for school reform—religious and secular, from the Left and the Right—merely tweak this ineffective institutional arrangement. The Left suggests standardized testing, self-esteem training, and always, more money.

The Right typically seeks to work within the government monopoly, seeking to capture its decision-making process on issues such as discipline, prayer in schools, standardized testing, and improved curricula.

In contrast, libertarians and a growing number of others are embracing institutional reform—seeking to inject the private sector and competition into the current market for education. Proposals vary—school choice, charter schools, educational vouchers, tax credits for donations to private scholarships, and so on—but the basic premise is the same: *The current institutional arrangement is philosophically unpalatable and economically inefficient.*

How do proposals for substantive reform fit within the legislating morality/justice framework? Those on the Left should be excited to enhance educational quality, especially for the poor. Those on the Right would accomplish their goals as well—in particular, lower taxes and the freedom to determine curricula issues in the schools of their choosing. The only losses would be to suppliers who benefit from the monopoly power of the status quo and to those who wish to forcibly indoctrinate others to a particular worldview. While non-Christians may find it desirable to support a government monopoly, this is not a viable option for Christians.

As Doug Bandow has argued: "Statism has become the basic theology for those committed to using government to coercively create their preferred version of the virtuous society."[54] From the Religious Left, the preferred view of society involves community virtues—for instance, taking care of the poor. From the Religious Right, the preferred view involves individual virtues—forcing people to adhere to a moral code of conduct. In both cases, independent of the merit of their goals, by biblical standards, the use of force is an inappropriate method to reach those goals. In this very important respect, libertarians and biblical Christians are on common ground.[55]

Notes

1. Other authors have made this point. For example, see G. Brennan, *The Christian and the State* (Melbourne, Australia: The Center for Independent Studies, 1983); D. Bandow, *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1988); and R. Bass, "Liberty and the Judeo-Christian Heritage," working paper (Bowling Green State University, 1998). In addition, Advocates for Self-Government, founded by Marshall Fritz, is a libertarian organization with a strong Christian flavor.

2. See W. Block, "Libertarianism and Libertinism," *Journal of Libertarian Studies* (Fall 1994): 117–28.

3. A related issue is that many libertarians implicitly emphasize liberty over responsibility.

4. Throughout the essay, I will assume "biblical" rather than "cultural" Christianity. The latter is a function of birth or culture and does not involve embracing the tenets of the faith or often, its more challenging practices. Although far more frequent than biblical Christianity in this country, it is not particularly relevant to this discussion.

5. This comparison is not wholly apt. In both cases, it is the Christians who are largely responsible for the confusion—in the first case, about the ramifications of libertarian political philosophy, and in the second case, about the implications of their sacred text. That said, one should also note that most proponents of governmental activism—whether Christian and whether concerning economic or social goals—often confuse prescriptions for nonactivism with apathy, or worse.

6. Atheists appeal to evidences in support of materialistic evolution (such as they are), as well as subjective and objective evidences against the existence of God. Deists and non-Christian theists hold to the claims of other religious beliefs aside from the exclusive claims of Christianity. In John 14:6, Christ says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Ironically, although Christ claimed to be the exclusive means of entering into relationship with God, His salvation is free (versus earned; see Rom. 4:1–5)—and is, thus, in a sense, less exclusive than the works-oriented plans for salvation of other religions.

7. This essay is excerpted from a completed but unpublished manuscript, *Turn Neither to the Right Nor to the Left: A Consistent Christian Philosophy of Government.*

8. Most members of the two major political parties—whether Christians or not—are relatively casual observers of politics or self-interested members of some interest group that benefits from a narrow range of governmental policies.

9. Environmental justice is another prominent theme of the Religious Left, but this would take us beyond the scope of this essay.

10. The alternative is to believe that God would send His Son as an atoning sacrifice for bozos like us and then play the role of Cosmic Killjoy and Sadist—prohibiting that which is, in fact, beneficial, and mandating that which is, in fact, harmful.

11. Some of these issues are clearly "sinful"; others are gray areas (either indeterminate or context-specific), wrongly interpreted by some to be black-and-white.

12. Similarly, activists with this agenda are often interested in using government to force "good" behaviors such as prayer in schools.

13. When members of the two groups have the same starting assumptions about when "life" begins, they reach very similar policy conclusions.

14. Of course, from a Christian perspective, all sins are equal in that they require the blood of Christ for atonement. But *if one insists on treating all sins the same politically, they are stuck in the untenable position that all sin should be punished by government*.

15. A related argument is that the indirect costs are not particularly indirect—for example, a supposedly strong causation between pornography and child abuse. But, in addition to the question about whether this connection is merely correlation, we still run into the same difficulty—Should Christians advocate prohibitions against cars, alcohol, guns, and so on? If one argues that pornography is different because the costs are substantial, to be consistent, Christians should also vocally pursue legislation on issues such as false religions and cigarette smoking.

16. If you are not satisfied with my definitions, find your own, but distinctions must be made; as noted above, an all-encompassing definition is of no use. Without a viable, alternative framework, one implicitly equates rape and murder with smoking marijuana, eating too much junk food, and going to casinos too often. After all, each of these impose costs on other people. Likewise, people often throw around terms like *justice* and *social justice* without defining them rigorously or wrestling with whether they have found appropriate means to these vague ends.

17. See Heb. 12:16 (discussing Gen. 27, note that the birthright included being in line for God's promises to Abraham's descendants), the book of Jonah, and Gen. 16 (the resulting child was Ishmael; the child of promise turned out to be Isaac).

18. Ps. 89:14. See also Job 37:23; Ps. 33:5; Isa. 9:7; 28:17; Jer. 9:24; and Rev. 15:3.

19. Of these, the most famous are "The Ten Commandments"—although few people know that only six of the ten deal with our conduct toward others, and fewer actually know more than two or three.

20. Eph. 2:8–9.

21. The Old Testament is replete with references to God's directing the use of government to regulate the behavior of the people. The Israelites were to enforce the dictates of the Law—but only in their community. The exception is God's desire for his people to settle in the Promised Land, which included instructions for the Israelites to destroy the pagan nations who, until then, had controlled Canaan. However, this exception cannot serve as a model for contemporary efforts to legislate morality. These efforts were undertaken (1) by a nation set apart by God; (2) with God's explicit direction and command; (3) for a specific purpose—to prepare Canaan for Israelite occupation and dominion; and (4) to simultaneously render God's judgment—death and destruction—to a prohibitively sinful people

through a mixture of natural and supernatural means. None of those conditions is relevant today.

22. 1 Cor. 5:9–13.

23. On these three points, see Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; and Isa. 10:1–3; Jer. 5:26–29; 7:5–7; Ezek. 45:9–10; Amos 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4–7; James 5:1–6; and Deut. 10:18; Job 5:15–16; Pss. 12:5; 72:4; 107:41; 140:12; 146:7; Isa. 3:14–15; Ezek. 22:29–31; and Mal. 3:5.

24. Exod. 23:3, 6; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:17; 16:18–20; Jer. 22:3–5, 13–17.

25. See Prov. 22:22; 1 Tim. 5:21; James 2:1–9. Pointing to Lev. 19:11–15 (Robert Bass, "Liberty and the Judeo-Christian Heritage," working paper, Bowling Green State University, Department of Philosophy) exclaims that "This embodies stunning insight, considering that, twenty-six centuries later, many still have not realized that injustice can be done by being partial to the poor as well as by deferring to the great."

26. Ps. 112:5; Prov. 19:17; 1 Tim. 6:18–19.

27. D. Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider*, 3d ed. (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), 80–85. See Prov. 6:6–11; 28:6; 30:7–9.

28. 1 Sam. 8:11–18.

29. See Ezek. 16 and Rev. 18.

30. In the most sexually graphic language in the Bible, Ezekiel 23 condemns the Israelites' prostitution, lust, nakedness, promiscuity and lewdness, and predicts their resulting "defilement." See 2 Kings 15:19–20; 17:3 for examples; see also Jer. 46:25; Lam. 5:6; Hos. 5:13; 7:8–11.

31. Luke 20:20, 25.

32. John 18:10; Matt. 26:52.

33. Matt. 20:25–26.

34. See John 6:15.

35. Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–3.

36. P. Heyne, *The Catholic Bishops and the Pursuit of Justice* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1986), 23.

37. As William Miller notes, "Here the fault often is idealism. The idealist begins with an abstract list of good things, drawn out of the mind—equality, peace, justice—instead of with the world as it is. He misses the fact that politics is not just about pure ideals but about policy—that is, about relating particular objectives to

other objectives and to what is possible; especially, he ignores the facts about power and interest and responsibility." *The Protestant and Politics* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1958), 36–37.

38. Aside from the general practice of government, there are further concerns specifically related to the prospect of politically active believers. First, those who seek to use government as a tool must take great care to "do it right." They risk violating the third commandment—misusing God's name. Second, relative to the import of "spreading the Gospel," political activity in the church promotes division within the church and with the world around relatively unimportant issues and promotes unity around improper and distracting issues. Third, the practice of politics in a democracy promotes a "rights" mentality, but one would be hard-pressed to find the concept of "Christian rights" in the Bible. And even if one developed such a case, one would have to quickly admit that those rights should be sacrificed in ministering to others (Gal. 5:1, 13). Fourth, for Christian advocates of governmental activism, there is a fine line between pursuing government as an appropriate means to an end and idolatry of government as provider, protector, and even, as savior. Finally, Christians should give great pause and reflection to attempts to bridle the powers of the State. Government is not only powerful but is eminently reversible.

39. M. Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992), 122.

40. For an overview of the topic in the context of contemporary culture, see H. Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990).

41. Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (Vatican City, 1971), no. 46.

42. Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Vatican City, 1967), no. 33.

43. C. Thomas, "More Than Politics," *(Louisville) Courier-Journal* (March 22, 1995). See also C. Thomas and E. Dobson, *Blinded By Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), which led to much public discussion among evangelicals about the role of government.

44. C. Colson, *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*, ed. M. Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 36, quoted in J. Whitehead, *Christians Involved in the Political Process* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 32.

45. W. Bennett, "Revolt Against God: America's Spiritual Despair," in *Reclaiming the Culture*, ed. A. Crippen (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Focus on the Family Press, 1996), 15–16.

46. Robert Bass (ibid.) uses this to argue against Christians pursuing "apple" or drug prohibition.

47. Gal. 5:1, 13. See also 1 Cor. 6:12: "Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial."

48. Developing these points is beyond the scope of this essay but is the subject of chapter 5 in *Turn Neither to the Right Nor to the Left*.

49. A case can be made that Christians can distinguish between that which they would actively advocate and that which they would accept. For instance, this is not a call for Christians to advocate legalized gambling or gambling as an activity but, merely, that they should not actively oppose legalized gambling.

50. Note also that if one insists on supporting efforts to legislate morality, one will be unable to effectively refute a "biblical case" for socialism or governmental activism in economic arenas. If the use of government force is appropriate to reach morality goals, it is arguably as appropriate to use force to redistribute wealth, require military and community service, and so on.

51. See *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986), and an influential book for Protestants, Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Publishing, 1990). For an effective critique of the former, see P. Heyne, *The Catholic Bishops and the Pursuit of Justice* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1986). For a devastating and entertaining rebuttal of the latter, see D. Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald J. Sider*, 3d ed. (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985).

52. Of course, the question of how to assist the poor is rather complex—and beyond the scope of this essay. For an overview, see chapter 12 in *Turn Neither to the Right Nor to the Left* and chapters 12–17 of D. Eric Schansberg's *Poor Policy: How Government Harms the Poor* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

53. For a description of the mechanism by which this takes place, see chapter 4 of *Poor Policy*. For an overview of these policies, see chapters 5–11. See also chapters 8–9 in *Turn Neither to the Right Nor to the Left*.

54. D. Bandow, *The Politics of Envy: Statism As Theology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994), xviii.

55. Although libertarians and biblical Christians should reach similar conclusions on the contexts in which government is an appropriate tool for them to invoke, they may arrive by somewhat different routes. To note, a Christian will not reach the libertarian position by embracing markets as much as by rejecting governmental activism as a means to an end. Also, there are subtle differences in their conclusions as well. For example, a Christian will not as much reject governmental activism, in general, as reject it as something that he or she should personally advocate.