

Our Fragile Democracy

Which of these two visions has shaped our own cultural heritage? Because of its roots in the Christian faith, the West has largely been shaped by the conservative vision of reality. Take, for example, our conception of the state. Two of the most important insights shaping the modern democracies have been the rule of law and the limited state.

Ruling the Rulers

In most societies, law is conceived simply as the means by which the government makes the people do what it wants them to do. Law is a tool of power. It merely codifies what the rulers want. And what they want today might be different from what they want tomorrow. The state is absolute: what it declares legal is also what is right - there is no higher standard of judgement.

Christianity gave rise to the conviction that there is a higher law than any devised by human rulers, namely, the law of God. This transcendent law governs even the ruler. He is not free to pass whatever laws he likes; he must pass laws that express what is right by God's standard. And if he fails to do so, the people have a basis for challenging him. The state is not absolute.

Only a belief system that asserts a higher origin, a higher destiny, and a higher law for mankind can oppose an absolute state. Only such a system can establish true human rights, antecedent to and independent of the state. The American founding fathers understood this when they wrote the 'Declaration of Independence' with that great phrase, "certain *inalienable* rights." Who gives these rights?, asks Francis Schaeffer. The state? Then they are *not* inalienable, for what

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the state gives the state can also take away. The founders understood there must be Someone transcendent to the state who grants these rights in order for them to be truly inalienable. And so they asserted that men are endowed with fundamental human rights "*by their Creator.*" The state merely recognises rights that already exist by virtue of Creation.

Many of us do not realise how rare this insight is in our world today - and, as a result, how rare is the rule of law. For example, during the 1970's, a diplomatic conference was held under the auspices of the 'International Committee for the Red Cross' in order to devise an international law against terrorism. The contrast between the concept of law held in the West and that held in most of the rest of the world soon became apparent, and stymied the talks. The Western delegates assumed that law is a matter of principle: it transcends all parties and cannot be changed to suit the interests of those in power or any other interest group. The participants from Socialist and Communist countries, along with most of the participants from Third World countries, not only disagreed but *couldn't even comprehend* such a notion. As Douglas Feith reports, for them, law is a tool for advancing the interests of those in power (or, in the case of "liberation" movements, for advancing the interests of those who would like to take

power). In Feith's words, "In most of the world outside the West, law does not constrain governments; indeed, it often serves merely as a device by which ruling parties suppress their opponents."

If we want to preserve the great human freedoms we have in the West, we must realise how rare and fragile they truly are. The rule of law is a unique and precious heritage, safeguarding us in the West from the oppression of an arbitrary and absolute state. And this heritage rests upon a biblical basis. As biblical faith loses its hold on our culture, what will happen to the freedoms we have grown accustomed to?

The Limited State

In the conservative vision, the state (like all other institutions) has specific functions to fulfil within society. Primary among them are the internal defence of its citizens (maintaining a police force), national defence (maintaining a military), and the provision of certain public services (e.g. building highways). To say the state has definite functions is to imply that it has these *and no others*. It must not usurp the functions proper to other institutions within society.

It must not take over the functions of business, for example, as it does in socialist countries, where the state sets wages and prices and decides how goods will be distrib-

uted. It must not take over the functions of the church, as it did in Nazi Germany (in the Nazi party, Hitler created a blasphemous parody of Christianity, with a Nazi creed, marriage service, and sacraments). It must not take over the functions of the family, as it does in Communist countries, where children are trained in Communist ideology from the time they are infants in state-run-day-care centres and parents are forbidden to pass on their own religious beliefs. In short, the family, the church, the schools, voluntary associations, and the business community all have their own intrinsic functions, which the state must not encroach upon.

Which is to say, the state is limited. This vision of the state has its roots in the doctrine of Creation - just as God created separate "types" within the biological world (not merging into each other as in evolution), so He created separate structures for human social life. The greatest freedom results when power in society is decentralised by being dispersed throughout these various structures.

The vision of the limited state also has its roots in the doctrine of sin. It was inspired by the principle that since all people are sinful, no one should be entrusted with too much power. Instead, power should be distributed over various groups, not concentrated in any one person or group. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely" is a biblically based insight. Even the power of various groups *within* the government is limited through the establishment of separation of powers, with checks and balances. The founding fathers' distrust of power led them to divide the government into three branches: a judicial, a legislative, and an executive branch.

Restriction of governmental power has led to genuine freedom in other spheres of society. It has stimulated great creativity and inventiveness in the economic, cultural, religious and intellectual realms. We often take our form of government for granted, as though it were a natural product of human society. But it is not natural, neither is it very common in the world. It is no accident that the greatest flowering of culture and industry the world has ever known has taken place in Christianised Europe and in her

cultural "offspring", North America and Australia.

The Necessity of Christianity

It is not culturally bigoted to say the West is unique. We are not saying we are inherently better people. The same principles of the rule of law and limited government - with the resulting free exchange of goods and ideas - can just as well be adopted by non-western countries. Indeed, they have been, and have been just as effective in supporting freedom and creating wealth there as in the West. Witness the astonishing progress of the so-called Asian rim countries, which have nearly outdone the West in their exercise of free enterprise: Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. From utter poverty and the devastation of war these nations have become among the most prosperous in the world in a matter of mere decades.

We have also witnessed the opposite. Nations once strong and prosperous have bowed in this century under oppression and poverty. One of the most notable features of the 20th century has been the rise of modern totalitarianism, foremost among them Nazism and Communism.

Dictators and tyrants there have always been. But never before have we seen governments so systematically oppressive, nor so relentless in their expansion.

The 20th century has witnessed the decline of belief in God, and with it the rise of men who have no fear of God and who believe themselves restrained by no absolute code of conduct. In an article entitled, "The Necessity of Christianity," former socialist Paul Johnson lists the consequences of what he calls the de-Christianization of the world.

It began in Russia. Lenin hated Christianity, viewing it as an enemy. The only true guide to behaviour was what he called "the revolutionary conscience" - that is, whatever serves to advance the Communist Party. In short, Leninism represents what we have called the liberal vision: there are no transcendent standards, all is in flux, and those who stand at the forefront of change are entitled to call the shots. Johnson asks, "Can we wonder then that this monster murdered or starved to death five

million of his own countrymen, and that his successor, Stalin - who inherited his mantle - dispatched a further 20 million?"

The process of de-Christianization moved next to Germany - though there it was mercifully temporary. Hitler hated Christianity with a passion that rivalled Lenin's. Shortly after assuming power in 1933, he said he intended "to stamp out Christianity root and branch." How that would be accomplished was immaterial: Christianity might be destroyed by force, or it might be "left to rot like a gangrenous limb." Either way, the masses would "never again" be Christian.

Is it any surprise that these two men, dedicated to the destruction of Christian faith and ethics, constructed two of the most fearful regimes ever known to history? Has the world ever before seen horrors like Auschwitz or the Gulag Archipelago? Here we see, Johnson says, "the first bitter fruits of a de-Christianised world."

Since World War II, the process of de-Christianization has proceeded throughout the world with the break-up of the great European empires. The empires did not always succeed in constructing genuinely Christian societies, but they did bring to the world Christian ethics and Christian ideals of justice and the rule of law. Consider some examples Johnson cites.

Cuba was until 1959 a broadly Christian country, with some political corruption but also with considerable personal freedom and one of the highest standards of living in Latin America. Today, Johnson notes, Cuba is a de-Christianised Marxist totalitarian state. It has become one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, worse off than many of its neighbours on whom it once looked down. It would be even worse off if the Soviet Union weren't pouring massive aid into it. Virtually all of that aid, however, is military - in spite of its impoverished population, Cuba supports a larger armed forces than any other Latin American country (even exporting soldiers to other countries, like Angola, to prop up Marxist dictatorships there). The prison system in Cuba is patterned after the Soviet Gulag - for a gut-wrenching

expose, read 'Against All Hope', the prison memoirs of Armando Valladares.

The loss of political freedoms in Communist countries is often justified with the argument that at least the imposed redistribution of wealth eliminates poverty. But unfortunately that is not true. Every country that has adopted a Communist economy has become poorer than before, leaving the poor with less instead of more. As Michael Novak has said, Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor offered a false choice when he said we must choose bread or freedom. The opposite is actually the case: we cannot have bread *unless* we have freedom.

Take another example. Vietnam is now the most militaristic state on earth, with more men under arms in relation to its population than any other country in the world (Cuba is second). Once under the protection of France, a great Christian power, Vietnam was in the south at least mostly Christianised. As in Cuba, there was corruption, but there was also a high degree of freedom, and rising prosperity. Since 1975 when the United States left and the North Vietnamese Communists walked unopposed into Saigon, Vietnam has become more thoroughly Stalinized than other nations that have been under Communism much longer (e.g. Eastern Europe). The Vietnamese regime keeps the population in fear and poverty through all the standard tools of oppression: concentration camps, political police, neighbourhood cell groups. For a first-hand account, read 'The Vietnamese Gulag', by Doan Van Toai and David Chanoff.

Angola and Mozambique once formed the jewels of the Portuguese empire. Though they were hardly modern democracies, the Christian culture imported by the Portuguese did bring with it the rule of law and basic Christian ethics. Portuguese rule has now been succeeded by one-party Marxist dictatorships, famine, and starva-

tion. Both countries are racked by civil war as sizeable portions of the population take up arms to resist the imposition of Marxism - or, as it is fashionably called, "African socialism."

Most pathetic of all, perhaps, is Ethiopia, the only African country to retain its Christianity from antiquity. As Johnson tells it, there was considerable freedom and some progress under the old emperor, Haile Selasse, until 1974 when the Soviets caused him to be smothered to death and installed a puppet Marxist regime in his place. Now, just over a decade later, Ethiopia is stricken by civil and external wars and is enduring the worst famine in its history, created at least in part by deliberate decisions on the part of its Marxist rulers. (In this they are following the tradition of Lenin and Stalin, who used famine as a weapon to destroy their opponents.) Soviet aircraft are employed to bomb the refugees from the famine-stricken areas.

Not all modern horrors are attributable to Communism. Some have been results of a return to pre-modern paganism: Idi Amin, who plunged Uganda into eight years of terror, was the Moslem son of a Lugbara witch woman, and apparently practised ritual cannibalism. Yet it can be said that liberalism, in the broad sense we have been speaking of here, has been the chief cause of suffering of the 20th century: the rejection of God and of transcendent norms of behaviour, and the idealisation of race or "the people" or the forces of history as the justification for any action, no matter how barbarous.

Build up the Walls of the City

What do we learn from this dreary recitation of oppression and misery? Paul Johnson concludes: History teaches the necessity of Christianity for restraining evil and tyranny. The retreat of Christianity in our century has allowed great

horrors, both physical and ideological, to rush in and fill the vacuum it left. Are we not forced to conclude, asks Johnson, that Christianity, despite the failings and weaknesses of its followers, is the only force that successfully keeps men from each other's throats?

It is not a matter of faith but an empirical generalisation: to construct a humane society, it is necessary to adhere to transcendent norms that restrict not only the people but also the rulers. It is necessary to respect the "givens" of human nature and society that restrict efforts to remake man in the image of some ideology. In short, it is necessary to adhere to the *constrained* vision - what we have called the conservative vision.

Liberalism says man is restricted by no transcendent norms, by no created structures. Though it exalts human freedom, it has led again and again in the modern world to oppression. Compared to its effects elsewhere, liberalism as we encounter it in the West is a pussycat. Yet it operates from the same core set of beliefs. What makes it different is that here it is restrained by the Christian heritage we continue to enjoy. But what will happen as that Christian heritage is eroded? What will stand between us and the abyss?

The necessity of Christianity implies the necessity of Creation. For Creation is the basis for much of Christian teaching. It is because God created us that we are bound by divine law, which gives us an unchanging standard whereby we can judge all earthly governments. It is because God has created us with a definite nature that we can resist all efforts to remake us into the New Man of Communism, or any other "ism". Creation versus evolution is not a scientific question, only of importance to engineers and biologists. It is a crucial doctrine underpinning our very way of life.

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