

Does the Welfare State Have a Future

When a Christian raises questions about the welfare state and its liberal agenda, the immediate reaction is: "So, you too have joined the religious conservative right." I know that many evangelical Christians do classify themselves as politically, morally, and religiously conservative. I also realize that some Christians believe that the liberal social agenda reflects the basic teaching of Scripture.

No one is neutral. Everyone has a world and life view. Which world-view will triumph in Canada? The welfare state quandary reflects the struggle for the religious direction of our nation. Who will determine which spirit is to give direction to our nation? Liberals, conservatives, socialists or Christians?

What one believes matters. Faith gives direction to action. What one believes determines what one does. Therefore, there can be no correct behaviour without a correct belief. Action and belief belong together. What one believes about God and His Word should make a difference to one's approach to the complex problem of poverty.

A Christian world and life view may never be identified with either conservatism or liberalism. And it does not coincide with capitalism, which is based on the individual rights of the strongest, nor with socialism, which is based on collective solidarity at the expense of individual responsibility. In other words, Canada's social, moral and welfare tribulations call for a development of a comprehensive Christian social philosophy. Of course no one can provide a comprehensive Christian social program in one article. I can only point to some basic fundamental principles which should undergird it.

The Bible

The atheistic-existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre admitted that one must surrender either to God or to the absurd. We witness plenty of absurdities in our modern society. Only a surrender to God can bring real life for the here and now and for the hereafter. He speaks to us through His Word and changes us through His Word. The Bible tells us who we are in God's sight and what our task is in God's world. The Bible is our infallible rule for faith and practice. It is the norm for private and public life, for economic and social as well as political issues. Modern privatization of the Christian faith is totally foreign to Biblical teaching. The Christian faith is not just for home and church. Obedience to God's revelation results in works that relate to our time and situation also in the public square. In other words, the Bible calls for a heart commitment to live here and now and by its light (Psalm 119:105).

Man

Who is man? What one thinks about man determines one's approach to social issues. The fundamental belief of Canada's welfare state is the modern view of man as a psychobiological entity with material needs, a consumer with an insatiable appetite for more consumption items. And man's inherent nature is good. He is, therefore, naturally

co-operative, caring, sharing and creative. Francis J. Turner says that, in the Canadian welfare state,

when he is functioning at his full potential, when free from serious deprivations, when afforded access to society's potential, man is essentially good.

But this optimistic evolutionary view of man contradicts God's Word. The Biblical view is that man is not junk. He is not a piece of machinery. He is not an advanced animal in the evolutionary process. He is unique and therefore deserves respect and dignity. To treat the poor with disrespect is therefore a violation of their human dignity.

Man is different from all other creatures. He is God's image bearer and His covenant partner. Even though man fell into sin, he did not lose entirely that image of God in which he had been created, as distorted, twisted, and fragmented it might be. As covenant partner and God's image bearer, man is accountable to God. He lives in covenant relationship with his Creator. To take away man's responsibility is to dehumanize him. In other words, despite all its good intentions, the welfare state robs man of his dignity by taking away his responsibility for his actions.

Man is not an isolated individual who, like Robinson Crusoe, lives entirely on his own. He is not a lone ranger. God placed man in a communal setting. He belongs to a family. He has relations with his wife, children, parents, neighbours, community, workers, and so on.

God gave man dominion over all the earth (Genesis 1:28). And his task is not over. He will remain God's earth-keeper until the end of times. Peter Nykamp perceptively comments:

The Bible clearly reveals that man is not a passive being: on the contrary, man has been given the responsibility to develop the earth and society in honour of the Lord and for the benefit of his fellow human beings.

Sin

Man created in the image of God fell into sin. One of this century's great mysteries is the continued optimism about the nature of man. What is man's problem? George Bernard Shaw, Irish-born dramatist, critic and social thinker, member of the socialist Fabian society, was convinced that poverty, and not ignorance or sin or decadence, was the root of all evil. Poverty is a crime, and it is a crime to endure it and to be content with it. To better themselves, people do not need more religion or morality, but simply more money. Money is supposed to solve every human need.

And many put all their hope in education. They believe that man's root problem is ignorance. All that he needs is more education. Through education, society will overcome inequality, racial discrimination, homophobia and so on. The spread of information, the breaking down of caricatures and cultural exchanges will eventually bring peace and harmony. Some forty years ago, Dr. Robert Maynard Hutchins, then

president of the University of Chicago, suggested that all the dreadful things that threatened modern civilization could be eliminated by a more generous distribution and reading of the Encyclopedia Britannica! What unadulterated nonsense!

We live in an abnormal, corrupt, fallen world. There is something drastically wrong with man's nature. That's why the welfare state will never become a utopia. Sin is not a minor infraction of a rule. It has a devastating affect on every area of life. It is a malignant power that holds humanity in its grasp. It is universal in scope (Romans 3:23). It is because of sin, man's rebellion against God, that society has to cope with social and economic problems. The latter are expressions of man's basic sinfulness and must be treated in that light. For example, sin leads to the oppression of the weaker members of society by the stronger, the exploitation of workers by unscrupulous capitalists. Greed contributes to gambling away hard-earned money, making a profit at all cost, and labour unions squeezing as much as possible out of a contract. The cause of these social evils, says Abraham Kuyper, lay in this:

that men regarded humanity as cut off from its eternal destiny, did not honour it as created in the image of God, and did not reckon with the majesty of the Lord, who alone by his grace is able to hold in check a human race mired in sin.

A responsible society

Since sin has disappeared from our postmodern vocabulary, our society is now reluctant to label anything as wrong, bad or evil. Concern for baby seals now outranks the concern for sanctity of human life. And in our welfare state many citizens have a diminished sense of responsibility. Many now even assume that the individual is not responsible for his actions. Psychology has taken over religion; the psychiatrist is its priest. Man is conditioned by his genetic make-up and his environment. C.S. Lewis rightly remarked that we now address people who have been trained to believe that whatever goes wrong in the world is someone else's fault - the government, the capitalist and so on. Structures are blamed for all the social ills.

The Bible has a totally different view of man. Man is both free and responsible. Although fallen into sin, perverse by nature, he is still accountable to God, free to obey Him or to choose his own moral standards. He chose to follow Satan instead of God. And God held man responsible for his actions. God did not create robots but free and responsible human beings. Our freedom is never freedom from something. It implies freedom to do something. K. Schilder spoke about the obligations we have toward God and our fellow man.

Our obligations represent God's sovereign claim over us. Our duty is to obey God's law (Psalm 119). We are commanded to love and serve God and our fellow man (Matthew 22:34-38). Every human being should be given the opportunity and room to exercise his responsibility and freedom. Man is not shown respect when his responsibility and accountability are taken away from him. The state may not take over the individual responsibilities of its citizens. Private initiative should not be discouraged. The state should do as much as possible to advance it. I suggest that Canada should develop a

Charter of Responsibilities as antidote to its Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Dr. H. Henry Meeter observes that as God's image bearer man

has duties and responsibilities in his private life beyond the duties he owes to the State for which he must be allowed the necessary freedom, and upon which the State may make no encroachment.

Christian social thinkers advocate "a responsible society" rather than a welfare state. Responsibility needs to be restored. Irresponsibility should not be supported. For example, current welfare benefits for unwed mothers foster irresponsibility. An unwed mother is responsible for her actions and her child. And many fathers have abdicated their responsibility. But the fathers are also responsible. Mothers and fathers lose their human dignity if they are not held accountable. Each citizen has a responsibility to society as a whole and for each individual within society.

The wealthy are responsible to God for their wealth. They are stewards of their possessions for the benefit of society. Scripture does not teach that the rich should give away their possessions. God commands that those who have an abundance of possessions should aid the poor. The rich are often admonished not to put their trust in worldly goods, to guard against stinginess, to show mercy and generosity (Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10; 1 Timothy 6:9, 17-19).

The Bible takes up the case of the oppressed and persecuted, the helpless and the needy, not only in our own communities but also when they are far away. The third-world poor and oppressed should not be neglected in our thoughts, cares, prayers and deeds of mercy. James says:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep one from being polluted by the world (1:27).

The institutional church also bears a responsibility toward social issues. After World War II governments became increasingly involved in every sphere of society. The development of the nanny state philosophy encouraged citizens with difficulties and needs to turn to the state for support, while close relatives and the churches kept aloof. Times have changed. The new conservative government in Ontario has asked churches to do their share in bringing relief to the needy. In response some churches are now supporting food banks and making their facilities available for the homeless. In Reformed circles, deacons are becoming increasingly involved with ministries within their communities. Churches have a significant role to play in alleviating poverty. Through word-and-deed ministry they can address such problems as out-of-wedlock births and addictions, provide counselling to the unemployed, and so on.

The New Testament era is a classical example of churches shouldering responsibility for relieving social needs. When the early church began to penetrate the decadent polytheistic Greek-Roman world, it opposed idolatry, adultery, prostitution, abortion,

greed, dishonesty and cheating at work and in business. In word and deed it proclaimed truth, righteousness, justice, mercy, love for neighbours, the sanctity of life and marriage, and the value of work. Today's church has the same calling.

There is so much more one could write about a responsible society. I did not deal with Jesus' attitude toward the poor, the duties of the state, love for the neighbour, the meaning of work, stewardship, the role of the family and the Biblical view of justice. The latter shows that caring for the poor is not just a matter of charity but of justice.

Although we live in society which no longer acknowledges its Christian heritage, we should not feel defeated. We still have a calling to understand the times, to discern the spirits, and to live for the glory of God.

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