

## IS GOD A LIBERAL?

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Let us give the proponents of theocracy the benefit of the doubt. Let us grant that there is indeed one God, that this God knows what is right and best for human beings (far better than we do ourselves), and that, therefore, God's will constitutes the sole legitimate authority for all people and peoples. Let us concede, further, that under these circumstances it would be sinfulfulness bordering on madness to refuse to accept God's sovereignty and to insist that the state should remain a strictly secular institution, owing no allegiance to the commands of God but only to the self-involved will of its citizens. Let us grant every one of these points and proceed post-haste to construct a society founded upon God's authority rather than our own.

How are we to begin? The first thing to do, it would seem, is extend an invitation to God to come and rule over us. God, then, will tell us what to do next. There is a minor problem, however. A large portion of humanity has, in fact, been proffering this invitation to God for about as long as anyone can remember and God has thus far shown *absolutely no inclination to accept it*.

There are some who might dispute this last point. The Ayatollah Khomeini, while he was still with us, might have claimed authority from God to rule in God's name. Jim Jones might have done the same. With a little prodding we might persuade Pat Robertson (or some of his cohorts) to take up the mantle. But, though it might be sinfulfulness bordering on madness to refuse to accept God's absolute rule, it would surely be madness bordering on sinfulfulness to accept anyone else's. The history of tyranny and insanity has made it abundantly clear that we cannot simply take another's word for the fact that they speak for God. If we are to be ruled by God then

it must actually be God, not some human proxy, who rules over us. How this might work in practice can be left to God's omniscience. We can assume that if God wishes to rule, God will find a way to do so. But, as a matter of simple fact, *God does not rule*. And this, not human rebelliousness, is the problem with theocracy. All theocratic notions are based upon a false assumption. They are based upon the assumption that God *will* rule if only given the chance. But if God, in his/her omnipotence, wishes to rule what could possibly prevent it? The fact that God does not rule can only be taken to signify that God does not choose to.

The atheist, of course, has little trouble accounting for the absence of God's rule on earth. It can be attributed to the general absence of God everywhere. But the theist must take the matter more seriously. The fact that God's kingdom does not reign on earth, enforced by all the superhuman power at God's disposal, must tell us something about the nature of God's will. Despite the imperious tone of so much religious writing, God has chosen *not* to forcibly impose his/her will upon human beings. God leaves us to discover God, or not, for ourselves. A theocratic police state, however benign in its effects, is not God's style. Politically speaking, God is a liberal.

I use the word 'liberal' here in the sense in which Stanley Hauerwas has used the term in his writings. A liberal form of government is one which maintains as a supreme value the freedom of the individual to pursue his or her own goals, so long as it does not interfere with the freedom of others to do the same. It should be clear that such liberalism requires justice as a necessary concomitant. In order for liberalism to secure freedom for the least powerful, it must constrain the excesses of the most powerful. That is the charter of the liberal state. The liberal state employs its power to ensure freedom and, concomitantly, justice for all its citizens.

Hauerwas is quite correct in pointing out, however, that liberalism is not a *spiritual* philosophy. When a government founds itself upon the inalienable right of each individual to pursue his or her own 'happiness', it, by that fact, surrenders any claim to dictate what the nature of that happiness should be. To the extent that liberalism is distorted as a spiritual doctrine Hauerwas's critique is on the mark. Spiritually, liberalism becomes libertinism. But it is of the very essence of liberalism, as a *political* philosophy, that neither libertinism nor any other spiritual philosophy is dictated.

The question the Christian must ask, then, is not whether or not liberalism *is* Christianity -- clearly it is not -- but whether or not liberalism is the political philosophy most compatible with Christianity as a spiritual philosophy. Our first temptation might be to respond in the negative. A political philosophy that explicitly endorsed Christianity would seem, on the face of it, to be more compatible with Christianity than one that does not. But is this really the case? What is God's primary interest in the human being, according to Christianity? Is God interested in the external trappings of outward behavior, which can be legislated by the state? Or is God interested in the spiritual development of the individual, which cannot be. It is one of the central messages of the New Testament that the latter is of primary importance. "Not what goes into a man's mouth but what comes out of it corrupts him." It is the spiritual status of the inner person that is God's primary concern, not the mechanics of outward behavior.

But such inner spirituality cannot be imposed from without. It must be chosen. The freedom to choose one's spirituality is a precondition to the genuine adoption of any spirituality. Such freedom, also, is precisely what is held sacrosanct in the political philosophy of liberalism. By *not* imposing a specific spirituality, thus, liberalism makes genuine spirituality possible.

It is significant to note that when the Declaration of Independence declares all men "to

have been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights” it is not simply stating an arbitrary preference for those rights, it is making a metaphysical claim. Freedom of choice is not first of all a political 'right' granted by the state; it is first of all an ontological fact. Human beings *are* endowed with the freedom to choose as part of their essential nature, whether or not political institutions respect this freedom. Liberalism does not *create* freedom, it merely protects it. From a theistic perspective, then, freedom of choice must be seen as *God's* creation, and liberalism, the political philosophy dedicated to its preservation, as honoring the will of God.

Separation of Church and State, then, (an implication of liberalism), is valuable as more than just a corrective against human tyranny. It is a means of preserving the spiritual freedom requisite to a genuine spiritual life. It was in pursuit of such freedom that the Pilgrims set out from their spiritually oppressive society to found a new one.

All of this is not to deny Hauerwas' contention that liberalism, by its very nature, is a spiritually bankrupt philosophy. Indeed, liberalism is *necessarily* spiritually bankrupt insofar as it places all spiritual “capital” in the hands of the citizen. If the citizen chooses to squander this capital in a life devoted to consumerism and egoism, this may be human sinfulness but it is not the fault of liberalism. Liberalism *allows* sinfulness, but does not entail it. God, it might be pointed out, *also* allows sinfulness.

One should no more look for spiritual guidance from liberalism than one should look for nutritional guidance from a grocery store. A grocery provides every sort of food, it is up to the individual to choose the food that is best. Liberalism allows every sort of freedom, it is up to the individual to employ freedom wisely. Who, then, is responsible for the spiritual edification of the individual? Besides the individual and the state there is a third entity we must consider; the *community*. Whereas liberalism cannot mandate one or another particular kind of spiritual

community, it is of the essence of liberalism to permit all forms. The spiritual community is responsible for the edification of the individual, not the state. What distinguishes a state from a community? Force. The state enforces its will. The community is a voluntary association. Because the state employs force, its range must be strictly limited. Because the community does not, it is free to extend its range indefinitely.

And that, apparently, is as God would have it. If God wished to impose theocracy upon human beings, what power could stop it? But this is not, in fact, the way of things. Spirituality demands freedom. Not only the constitution of the United States, but the very constitution of the world implies that God is, politically speaking, a liberal. Many would prefer it otherwise. Kierkegaard and others have shown that freedom entails anxiety. But anxiety may be a precondition to growth. Liberalism may be the enemy of comfort, but it is not the enemy of God. On the contrary, it would seem to be God's political form of choice.