

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL REFORM

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What is Social Reform?

In most of the democratic countries of the West during the past few decades, governments and citizens have learned some valuable lessons about social reform. Open societies with representative governments have addressed many grievous social ills that have plagued human communities throughout history. At the same time, they have discovered that the health and well-being of a complex, multi-dimensional society cannot be engineered from a single center of decision making.

What do we mean by social reform in a complex society, and what are the implications of the lessons that many democracies are learning? How should we assess these developments and approach issues of social reform? These are the questions we will try to answer.

By "social reform" we mean the attempts by citizens working through their governments to overcome a variety of society-wide evils or injustices that hinder human development and well-being. Among the more obvious problems that governments and citizens have tackled through social reform efforts are illiteracy; racism; malnutrition; poor health; various forms of poverty; and urban degradation connected with inadequate housing, high unemployment, and high crime rates and drug abuse. From the point of view of government's responsibility to establish justice, to uphold social order, and to promote the well-being of citizens, most people would agree that government does have an important obligation to address these forms of human degradation in some way. And from a democratic point of view, there can be no doubt that many of the attempts to resolve these problems have come about precisely because freely

elected representatives of the people have worked to pass laws that put the government on the side of social reform.¹

The expression generally used in Western democracies to describe the type of political order that now exists as the result of democratically initiated social reforms is the "welfare state." In some democracies such as Sweden, Denmark, and Holland, the welfare state requires high tax rates but also delivers many social goods and services by government. In other democracies such as Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, a smaller number of direct services are delivered by governments, and the tax rates are not as high. But all contemporary Western democracies take for granted that governments should either deliver directly or require the indirect delivery of universal education, public health protection, the alleviation of various forms of poverty, social security services in later years, and so forth.²

What lessons have Westerners learned in the past two decades about democratic social reform? Stated generally, perhaps the most important lesson is that social reform cannot simply be imposed or engineered by government, no matter how much money it spends and no matter how large the majority might be that supports governmental reform of society. This also happens to be one of the lessons learned in a more trying way by Eastern European countries whose communist governments are collapsing. Government centralism in Europe has demonstrated that fundamental aspects of a society's well-being--ranging from family health to economic development--cannot be produced or assured by the attempts of a totalitarian government to reform society. Many social reform efforts in Western democracies lead to the same conclusion. The repeated efforts of state and federal governments in the United States, for example, to overcome poverty, stop crime and drug abuse, eliminate illiteracy, and put an end to racism have either failed or not fully succeeded for the reason that

government cannot solve all these problems simply by majority will expressed through public legislation.

Does this mean, therefore, that social reform is impossible and that democracies should forget about it? On what basis should we evaluate the development of welfare states, and the transformation now occurring in places such as Eastern Europe? To help us approach these questions, it will be helpful to consider two historical illustrations.

The Rise of Popular Democracy in The Netherlands

In nineteenth-century Europe, movements for political representation and social reform produced a variety of both constructive and destructive approaches to the existing governments. One of the most remarkable and constructive of those efforts was the building of two of Europe's first mass democratic political parties in The Netherlands. The first was formally organized by Protestants in 1879 as the Antirevolutionary Party; the second was organized by Catholics and came to be known as the Catholic People's Party.³

Both parties were opposed to the central spirit of the French Revolution, namely, the revolutionary demand for complete human autonomy in opposition to both God and every traditional human authority. And yet both parties were progressive in the sense of wanting to advance the development of society in its pluralizing diversification. They were not reactionaries who wanted to restore the old medieval society. These two parties became the vanguard of what today is the largest and most influence group of European political parties--the Christian Democrats.

Interestingly, the major issue that led to the organizing of the two Dutch political parties was education. Dutch liberals who gained control of parliament in the mid-nineteenth century, before mass popular parties had been organized, were convinced that the only way to modernize Dutch society was to

organize state schools. In the name of individual freedom and equality, the liberals set out to establish universal state education that would in essence shut down Protestant and Catholic schools or force them into a private backwater with little public influence.

The Dutch Christians agreed, for the most part, that universal education was essential for an expanding, differentiating society. What they objected to was the idea that the state should monopolize such education. From the 1860s until the 1920s, Protestants and Catholics led movements that gradually produced a model response to this need for universal education. They backed state financial and legal support for the education of every citizen, but they insisted on the rights and freedoms of parents and schools to decide how to educate children. In other words, they helped to create a genuinely pluralistic system of education in which the government's funding and legal requirements make room for many different kinds of free schools and allow parents the freedom to choose the appropriate school for their own children. Liberal, Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, Marxist, and other kinds of schools are all free to offer their services to students, and parents are free to make the choice for their youngsters.

One can observe here the important principle of proportional justice at work. Universal education may be a good thing, but a single, state-controlled school system does not allow the state to do justice to all the people and institutions involved in education. Public Justice needs to be done to the diverse groups and viewpoints in society. In education, the Dutch (and now most European societies) demand proportional justice in the distribution of educational benefits in a way that can also do justice to families and schools.

This same principle of proportionality was also acknowledged in the structuring of the democratic electoral system in Holland before the end of the Nineteenth Century. And it is now operative throughout most of Europe and in

many other democratic countries, though not in the United States, Britain, or Canada. Not only do the Dutch view a one-party state as unjust. They also believe that a simple majority system (which never allows representation of smaller minorities) is less than just. A system of proportional representation means that every political party gains parliamentary representation in proportion to its vote. If a majority wins 60 percent of the vote, it will certainly have 60 percent of the seats. But if another party wins 5 percent of the vote, it will gain 5 percent of the parliamentary seats rather than nothing. This is genuine pluralism, and it encourages political participation throughout society.

The Liberal-Conservative Tension in America

A second example that will help to illustrate the relation of democracy to social reform comes from my own country.

Soon after World War II, the federal government in Washington, D.C., which had begun to expand considerably between the Great Depression and the War, stepped up its efforts to deal with many social problems. The powerful Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, was followed by the "War on Poverty," which produced massive amounts of new federal legislation during Lyndon Johnson's presidency. Much of this was inspired by democratic liberalism--the American political ideology that believes government should take more initiative to liberate individuals from poverty, racism, handicaps, and social disadvantage. American liberals are government-oriented social reformers just as the Dutch liberals of the Nineteenth Century were. By the late 1970s, however, many of the government programs began to show serious limits and failures. Much good had been done, and billions of tax dollars had been spent, but the original goals were not achieved, and many negative effects from some of the legislation were also appearing.

One reason for the failures was that the liberal ideal of a democratic community is too simple and state-centered, just as the Dutch liberal ideal had been. In other words, the ideal of a free and just "political community" could not adequately take into account the complex, "differentiated" (multi-institutional) structure of American society. Contemporary societies in almost every part of the world today are no longer "undifferentiated" nations or clans. They are made up of diverse families, industries, schools, religious institutions, media, and other organizations. In the United States, those working for social reform appealed to the government to "do good" but they did not give sufficient attention to the independent responsibilities of schools, families, churches, industries, enterprises, and voluntary organizations in which most people live and work.⁴

What is now becoming clear to more and more Americans is that genuine social reform requires that people who are responsible in different arenas of life should fulfill their own obligations. Government cannot directly overcome every evil and reform all of society by direct means. Schools and families, for example, are not merely subservient parts of a larger political "whole." The state itself does not own and control everything. It is a particular kind of limited, differentiated, public-legal community. The nature and purpose of a just state is to perform an integrating and differentiating function for all other institutions and communities. But the state must take for granted the independent character of those communities and institutions--each with its own realm of responsibility.

Just as the Dutch decided to promote universal education by allowing parents and schools the freedom to pursue education in many different ways, so many Americans are now realizing that social reform will depend upon the independent actions of many institutions besides those of the state. Citizens

in a state certainly do share something in common. But the boundaries that define their political community are different from those that mark off a church or a family or a corporate enterprise. Political solidarity, therefore, should not be conceived as an all-embracing community whose government has the right to override the responsibilities of every non-political community and organization. Genuine democracy requires an open and diversified society. Social reform, therefore, can only occur in a healthy and enduring way if the diverse responsibilities of non-governmental, non-political institutions are respected and fulfilled at the same time that government fulfills its own responsibilities.⁵

From our point of view, all citizens should share equitably in the public goods and benefits of a democratic order. To the extent that this is not the case, there should be democratic political reform. But to reach correct judgments about the role and limits of government in seeking social reform, we must have a clearly defined understanding of government's proper limits in relation to all those institutions and communities which are not part of the state apparatus. The American liberal ideal of democracy and equality too easily allows for indiscriminate, loose, and often merely utilitarian efforts on the part of political leaders and interest groups. Social reforms undertaken with the motivation of this ideology have often led to social deformation, not reformation, when the consequences were governmental interference in the legitimate responsibilities of parents, teachers, church leaders, business people, and many others.

Partly because liberal reform efforts failed to achieve their goals in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, some Americans began to rethink the nature of social reform and the limits of government. Their contributions to some important public policy debates in the past decade have been to point out the importance of what they call "mediating structures" in society.⁶ The phrase

refers to the non-political or non-governmental institutions such as family and church, and to organizations such as schools and enterprises.

The liberal error, according to these "neo-conservatives," is not in assuming that government bears a degree of responsibility for social reform. Indeed, it does. Rather, the error is in failing to come up with public policies that give proper recognition to neighborhoods, families, churches, voluntary associations, and other social arrangements that "mediate" between the individual and the state. Just as the Dutch Protestants and Catholics argued for educational pluralism so that schools can maintain their independence from the state, so this contemporary American argument insists that social life is made up of more than the state and individual citizens. People actually live in a diversity of social and economic relationships. Public policies, therefore, should be shaped to recognize the independence of mediating structures, both to protect and to utilize them in the process of promoting social welfare. Government should not try to take over or displace such institutions but, instead, should seek to "empower" them.

Comparison

Toward a Constructive View of Democratic Social Reform

With these Dutch and American illustrations in mind, we should now try to evaluate the prospects for democracy and social reform for ourselves. Clearly a Judeo-Christian view of human nature and social life has had a great impact on the shaping of Western politics and society. But equally as clear is the impact of other forces and ideologies that conflict with principles derived from the biblical tradition. We cannot simply hold up an American or Dutch model as the "the truth" for all societies in all times.

What we need to develop is a perspective grounded in an understanding of the true nature of God's creation--a perspective that can do justice to the multiple responsibilities the Creator has given to human creatures for the

historical unfolding of his creation.⁷ To start with a general commitment to democracy and self-government is not enough. We need to understand the just forms of democracy and the proper tasks of government with regard to social reform. Everything done in the name of democracy and social reform is not necessarily good.

Return for a moment to the American liberal-conservative tension that we discussed so briefly above. The neo-conservatives are surely correct that healthy social reform will require a more adequate recognition of what they call the "mediating structures" of society. The reason for this, we would argue, is that human beings possess many different kinds of responsibilities which require a diverse range of institutions and organizations for their fulfillment. Any political process, even a democratic one, that tries to centralize all authority or which tends to level society, will do an injustice to the reality of social life in God's creation. Public law, if it is to be just, must recognize that a variety of institutions are responsible for social well-being and for social reform where deformity exists.

American liberals, on the other hand, grasp a different element of truth in emphasizing that governments and legal systems do serve to integrate society's diversity into a common public order. Consequently governments bear an important responsibility for the shape of that public order. The reality of a modern society is not simply that it is highly complex and diversified, but also that its citizens are bound together through public law and governance.

The political order, as American liberals are sometimes better able to understand than are American conservatives, performs a public integrating function and not merely a protective function for individual rights and freedoms in society. A political order is a commonwealth, a public community. To establish justice, governments must not only identify and protect the

rights and identities of individuals; governments must also uphold and promote the good of what is held in common by all participants in the public square under public law. The task of government, limited as it is, should be to guard the "commons," to uphold the justice of the commonwealth, to enforce laws for a just republic (res publica--"public thing"). Government does bear responsibility for some aspects of social reform that require public, legal change.

At the same time that we try to appreciate the elements of truth in the views of American liberals and conservatives, we should also look closely at what they may be overlooking or misinterpreting. Conservatives, for example, do not go far enough in articulating the standards by which to recognize and evaluate the political order as a common, public-legal community. They emphasize individual and associational freedom and warn of the danger in liberalism's (or socialism's) tendency to level society and hinder freedom. Liberals, by contrast, give insufficient attention to government's responsibility to deal justly with a structurally complex society. They do not articulate adequately the standards of the limited political community as the public trust of a complex society. While properly emphasizing the injustices of a society where people do not enjoy a fair share of the "commons," they tend to overlook or underestimate the legitimate differences that should be allowed to exist outside the "commons." For the most part, liberals address questions of injustice as if all injustice is a public matter capable of being addressed through democratic action expressed in public law. They seem to assume that society is a single whole--a unitary community or "family" with one will.

Learning from the Dutch experience, I would urge that we work to develop an adequate political perspective built upon the truths that both the American liberals and conservatives have stumbled over. We should recognize, for example, that justice needs to be done to the full reality of today's complex,

differentiated societies. The history of our world keeps pushing human beings into ever more complex and diversified social structures. The truth behind movements for democracy in authoritarian and totalitarian societies such as China and the Soviet Union is the biblical truth that no human person or institution can function in the place of God trying to rule over everything. Historical diversification, therefore, requires forms of public governance that both accept the state's limited authority and respect the need for adequate, free, and proportional representation of all citizens in the process of lawmaking. It also demands public laws that respect the independence of families, schools, scientific and artistic organizations, churches, and many other kinds of social relationships.

The differentiation of human responsibilities through history implies, from this point of view, that we should look for the underlying creational basis--the principled norms or standards of God's creation order--as the framework by which to judge between health and disease, between order and disorder in society. Families, schools, churches, business enterprises, and countless professions and voluntary associations all have their own peculiar and precious nature that should not be leveled by totalitarian dictatorships or by tyrannical democratic majorities. Each sphere of human responsibility, including the state, has its own integrity and stands accountable before the higher authority of God.

This also means that those who bear authority in each social sphere also bear responsibility for social reform in that arena. Social reform, therefore, can never be merely or primarily political reform or reform achieved through political means. Though, of course, reform of the political arena must be achieved by citizens, their representatives, and their governments, in accord with the demands of public justice. Governments have been ordained by God to

establish justice. The public protection of every citizen's individual rights, of the rights and freedoms of diverse institutions in society, and of the public health as a whole--these are precisely the tasks of government. Social reform, therefore, will depend on what kind of deformity exists in society and on who is primarily responsible to initiate reforms--parents in homes, teachers in schools, officers in various organizations, and government in the political order.

Since a state or political order is a complex community built upon and presupposing a differentiated society, the government's responsibility to promote economic reform, for example, cannot be pursued apart from its dealing fairly and proportionately with independent families, business enterprises, schools, and so forth. Government policies, whether those of taxation, control of the money supply, welfare, education, health care, or regulation of business, cannot properly be directed toward individuals alone--simply as individuals. The citizens of a society always live and work in a wide variety of institutions and social relationships in addition to fulfilling their role as "citizens" in the state.

Our challenge today in every country on earth, it seems to me, is to discover, systematically, how the public laws of government should be designed both to treat all citizens equitably in the public arena while doing the same for the diversity of non-political institutions and relationships in which they live and work. We need to do more than cry out for democracy, equality, and freedom, even if fundamental legal reforms must occur first in order to make possible the recognition of a differentiated society. We need social reform that will go beyond liberalism, conservatism, and socialism.

As I see it, we should accept the state as a public-legal community ordained and held directly accountable by God to enact legal reforms necessary for the sake of public justice. We should value the important processes of

full civic representation in government, of due process of law, of constitutional limits on governmental powers, and of many other common features of modern democracies. But we should also recognize that these procedures and processes do not in themselves completely define the public order or articulate the standards of justice. Many questions of substantive political good, of civic well-being and social reform, can be answered only in the context of a principled understanding of what constitutes a just state in a differentiated society.

Finally, we should say a few things about the increasingly close interconnection of all states in our world. No longer may human beings think of public justice and social reform as issues only of domestic politics. The vast emigration of peoples across borders, the intricate telecommunications networks, the dense patterns of travel, commerce, and trade--these and many other signs testify to the reality of our "shrinking globe." The very complexity that we have pointed to in considering differentiated Western democracies is now a fact of international life as well. Thus, an increasing number of questions about social reform will require international cooperation and joint action among governments and non-governmental institutions.

Here again is where the contribution of a Christian perspective can be so important--a perspective that can help us transcend the limits of merely humanistic socialism/ liberalism/conservatism. Our legitimate democratic concerns with due process of law, individual liberty, civil rights, and popular representation, can contribute only so much to an understanding of the substantive content of a just international order.⁸ We need a clear and principled conception of political order that grasps the full, differentiated, and integrated character of today's global realities. The world today is not like a single giant state in which all reforms can be achieved by governmental

and international public organizations. But neither is our world defined completely by the internal domestic affairs of more than 150 states. Justice, and therefore meaningful social reforms, cannot be established without various kinds of international law governing labor, the environment, food, health, and so forth. Much of the "commons" today is international and not domestic.

Christians live by a faith that is truly global in character--faith in Jesus Christ who is Lord of all lords, and King of all kings. He is destined, we believe, to fulfill his rule over the entire creation to the glory of God. This faith should motivate Christians the world over to develop a sense of common civic responsibility and cooperation at many different levels of social reform--both governmental and non-governmental. Christians, more than any other people on earth, should be able to respect and appreciate the highly diversified, multicultural, multinational beauty of God's creation at this late date in history. They should be driven to work for the kind of global harmony that is built upon the protection and not the destruction of the creation's diversity.

At the same time, Christians should have a healthy and balanced respect for the limits of the states in which they live. Without being either nationalistic chauvinists or anti-national revolutionaries, Christians can work for justice and social reforms that strengthen civic life both domestically and internationally. Justice should be the standard that enlivens both their domestic faithfulness and their international cooperation as citizens. With immense respect for fellow human creatures, with measured skepticism about the ability of sinners to order society properly, and with complete dedication to the Lord who is Creator, Judge, and Redeemer, Christians should go forward together as faithful citizens and dedicated social reformers.

END NOTES

¹See, for example, Robert E. Goodin, Reasons for Welfare: The Political Theory of the Welfare State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), which includes an extensive bibliography. See also, "The Political Origins of America's Belated Welfare State," in Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., The Politics of Social Policy in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 37-80.

²See P. Flora and A. Heidenheimer, eds., The Development of Welfare States in Europe and America (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1981); Amy Gutmann, ed., Democracy and the Welfare State, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, The Welfare State in Crisis (Paris: OECD, 1981); and Hugh Heclo, "The Political Foundations of Antipoverty Policy," in Sheldon H. Danziger and Daniel H. Weinberg, eds., Fighting Poverty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 312-340.

³On the development of Dutch democracy and particularly the emergence of the Christian parties, see Michael P. Fogarty, Christian Democracy in Western Europe: 1820-1953 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), pp. 149-178, 294-317; Harry Van Dyke, Groen Van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution (Jordan Station, Ontario: Wedge Publishing Co., 1989); McKendree R. Langley, The Practice of Political Spirituality (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1984); James W. Skillen, "The Development of Calvinist Political Theory in The Netherlands," (doctoral dissertation at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 1974); and Christian Political Options (The Hague: The Antirevolutionary Party, 1980). On the development of Dutch education policy,

see Charles L. Glenn, Jr., The Myth of the Common School (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 38-62, 109-112, 244-249, 270-278; and Glenn, Choice of Schools in Six Nations (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1989), pp. 47-80.

⁴See, for example, David T. Ellwood and Lawrence H. Summers, "Poverty in America: Is Welfare the Answer or the Problem"; William Julius Wilson and Kathryn M. Neckerman, "Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap between Evidence and Public Policy Issues"; and Michael R. Sosin, "Legal Rights and Welfare Change, 1960-1980"--all in Danziger and Weinberg, op cit., pp. 78-105, 232-259, and 260-286, respectively. See also Charles Murray, Losing Ground: American Social Policy: 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1984), and my review of Murray's book, "In Search of Something that Works," Christianity Today (June 4, 1985), pp. 26-29.

⁵See my "A Consensus in Need of a Philosophy" (a review of Michael Novak, et al. The New Consensus on Family and Welfare), in This World (Spring, 1988), pp. 136-139, and my review of Murray's book (see note #3 above).

⁶See, for example, Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy (Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute, 1977); Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); Michael Novak, et al., The New Consensus on Family and Welfare (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1987); and Novak, The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). Complementing the work of Novak, Neuhaus and others is: Michael J. Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Family and Nation (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986); and Nathan Glazer, "The Limits of Social Policy," Commentary (September, 1971), pp. 51-58.

⁷The argument that follows here is developed in greater detail in my forthcoming book The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), and in my "Going Beyond Liberalism to Christian Social Philosophy," forthcoming in The Christian Scholar's Review. See also Paul Marshall, Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and Rockne McCarthy, James Skillen, and William Harper, Disestablishment a Second Time: Genuine Pluralism for American Schools (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); and my "Human Freedom and Social Justice: A Christian Response to the Marxist Challenge," in John C. Vander Stelt, ed. The Challenge of Marxist and Neo-Marxist Ideologies for Christian Scholarship (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1982), pp. 23-53.

⁸A highly important cross-cultural, comparative study of human rights that should be consulted in this regard is Max L. Stackhouse, Creeds, Society, and Human Rights (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). In addition to considering the ancient and medieval background, Stackhouse compares the American, East German, and Indian experiences.

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