

LIBERALISM IN A POSTMODERN AGE

By Richard Bastien

Liberalism is the dominant ideology of our times. It defines the *Zeitgeist* of the last half century and will likely continue its triumphant march over the foreseeable future. It permeates all our institutions – our schools, our colleges and universities, our governments, our judicial system, including human rights tribunals, and even our churches. It is part of the air we breathe. Yet, it is also the ideology of a particular class and is perhaps best understood as a state religion.

Underlying today's liberalism is a creed that affirms: "I belong and account to no one but myself. There is no authority above me. I am my own god." This view is predicated on the notion that, contrary to the view of Greek, Roman and medieval philosophers, it is impossible to know what is objectively good. The essence of liberalism is that there is no transcendent, objective moral law by which each of us is bound. Liberals conclude from this dogmatic assumption that we are compelled to treat all human desires or preferences as being equally legitimate and that the ultimate standards by which political, social and moral life must be judged are freedom, equality and the satisfaction of preferences.

Claiming that moral truth is unknowable implies of course that there are no such things as moral absolutes. However, liberalism uses this alleged impossibility of moral knowledge to introduce its own set of absolutes. Having denied the existence of a transcendent and objective moral order that gives meaning to our lives and to the world we live in, it affirms that it behoves us to create meaning and order. Thus, God is immanentized – we are God! What is remarkable here is that, while claiming to be "open and tolerant" by positing the equal legitimacy of all human preferences, liberalism sets out to order all political and social affairs according to its own particular understanding of ultimate things. Part of its strength resides in this seemingly humble inability to proclaim any transcendent standard coupled with the affirmation that man is the measure of all things.

By denying the existence of a transcendent good and affirming the equality of all human preferences, liberalism requires a society allegedly based on moral neutrality. As liberal high priest John Rawls has argued, the best political order is one that is neutral between diverse moral and religious worldviews. Liberalism claims to be morally neutral by accommodating all views equally.

It is this claim to moral neutrality that reveals its basic flaw. It is logically impossible to commit to neutralism without committing to a particular value such as social peace, tolerance, multiculturalism, individualism, etc. Any such commitment entails a violation of moral neutrality. The problem is not that moral neutrality is difficult to achieve, but rather that it is *unachievable*. And it is so because it is inconceivable. It is simply impossible to make statements about social life without expressing some preference about the criteria that should govern it.

Liberals cannot counter this objection. Instead they simply assert that if the law, which binds everyone, is not dissociated from morality, which is subjective, it becomes a means

for lawmakers to impose their own moral views on others. However, that argument ignores one of the basic features of human nature, which is the existence of the moral law recognizable in every man. As a concept, moral law was first codified by the Jewish people and later developed by Greek and Roman thinkers long before Christianity appeared. It is a non-sectarian expression of objective, universal moral principles. Judges can make decisions based on natural law because it is sustainable independently of any religious view. To refrain from killing, stealing or lying is not the expression of a “subjective, arbitrary and unworkable” preference, but an objective moral law recognized in virtually all cultures because it corresponds to an unchanging universal order.

Moreover, far from being morally neutral, liberals are ushering their own agenda, better known as secularism (not to be confused with *secularity* or *separation of Church and state*, which are concepts rooted in the Christian tradition). This agenda simply assumes that transcendence can be reduced to a myth, reason to an instrument of the passions (“the slave of passion” as David Hume put it) and morality to an arbitrary constraint. Liberalism says that human freedom has no limit except that which we wish to impose upon it, which means that, ultimately, there are no limits. From this perspective, natural law and Judeo-Christian morality are merely some kind of arbitrary intellectual construct, freedom of consciences and the dignity of persons a defence mechanism against the power of human genius, religion the reflection of an immature humanity.

By refusing to recognize limits inherent in freedom, liberalism leads to the destruction of *all* freedoms. Its political program is not limited to a few cosmetic reforms of existing institutions. Rather, it aims at the creation of an entirely new society in which the role of family and school, the distinction between the sexes, the place of religion in social life, sexual morality and, more generally, the understanding of good and evil are completely transformed or, in Nietzschean language, “revalued”. Liberalism cannot create this new society without destroying the old one, which explains its spirit of destruction.

For example, human rights are reinterpreted in a way that is totally at odds with their traditional interpretation. This is perhaps best illustrated by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* (1992) where the Court determined that “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of the universe and the mystery of human life.” It is on the basis of this understanding of freedom that we have come to acknowledge a supposed right to abortion, which denies the right to life of the unborn, or a supposed right of homosexual couples to marry and adopt children, which denies a child’s right to a mother and father.

What liberals fail to realize is that they impose their own philosophy on the whole of society. They are doing exactly what they accuse social conservatives of doing. Whereas liberal neutrality was initially a means of limiting what the State could do, it is now used by the State to limit what citizens can do. Liberals understand human nature as a more or less malleable reality that can be perfected by a so-called progressive accumulation of “scientific knowledge”. Morally-laden decisions traditionally left to civil society – the family, independent schools, religious institutions, and local communities – are now being made by technocrats and self-proclaimed government experts. And public school

systems are used in the pursuit of goals that have various moral implications. What is objectionable here is not that liberal governments pursue a moral agenda. All governments do. What is objectionable is that liberals claim to be neutral while depicting those who oppose them as unreasonable or downright intolerant.

Liberalism frowns upon anything that smacks of normality, permanency, constancy, universality, order or tradition. It celebrates diversity and tolerance – except for Christian ideas. It affirms that freedom consists, not of doing what is right, but rather of *defining what is right* for oneself, which is the very essence of moral relativism. It negates both nature and culture. For example, it insists that homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, heterosexuality and even gender-change should be considered as equally legitimate options. Destiny thus equates with choice and creativity.

In short liberalism seeks to implement the revaluation (or transvaluation) of all values proposed by the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In a book titled *The AntiChrist*, Nietzsche argued that the whole moral framework inherited from Christianity is “hostile to life” because it views sex as essentially sinful and life as merely a test for the hollow promise of a blissful afterlife. In the concluding paragraph of *The AntiChrist*, he described the Judeo-Christian tradition as “*the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct of revenge*” and proposed to salvage mankind through “*the transvaluation of all values!*”

What we are witnessing today under the guise of “gender equity”, “reproductive health”, “same-sex marriage”, “children’s rights”, “diversity”, “multiculturalism”, is the transvaluation of values envisioned by Nietzsche. Thus, liberalism has become largely indistinguishable from nihilism, nay it is nihilism dressed in glittering garbs. French philosopher René Girard says that “the twentieth century was the century of classical nihilism. The twenty-first century will be the century of alluring nihilism”.

Over the past half century, liberalism has percolated through the entire culture largely through political correctness. Political correctness assumes that Western civilization has long been under the grip of a white, male, Eurocentric and Christian population whose sectarian prejudices have led to systemic discrimination against certain people on the basis of gender, race, beliefs or sexual orientation. The role of the State is to right the wrong thus created by establishing the equal participation of those allegedly “victimized” by such discrimination. Past social stigmas must be viewed as by-products of the old oppression. The flip side of granting special status to victims of discrimination is the lowering of the status of white, Christian heterosexual males and, more generally, the removal of all traces of Christian influence. Henceforth, all cultures must be equal and, as one famous author had it, *some more than others*. Those having doubts about this need only consider the new Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum taught in all elementary and high schools in Quebec, including private denominational schools. This compulsory course suggests that all religions are equally true because they are equally subjective, the obvious intent being to ensure the emergence of younger generations firmly convinced that religion has nothing to do with objective truth.

What are the root causes of liberalism?

To oppose liberalism, we must understand whence it issued, which means replacing it within the broader cultural movement known as modernism (or what some people call rationalism, positivism, scientism or naturalism). Indeed, liberalism can be considered as the political brainchild of modernism. Ushered into the Western world by philosophers like Rousseau, Voltaire, Hume and Kant who thought they would bring *Enlightenment* to the world, modernism posits a complete separation between faith and reason and holds that true knowledge is limited to: a) logic and mathematics; and b) propositions that can be experimentally tested. Any proposition outside this realm is thus relegated to that of personal opinions. It can never be truthful in the usual sense of that word. Thus, religion is said to be utterly irrational. This quite conveniently serves to hide the fact that modernism, by arguing on the basis of reason alone that reason is our only guide to knowledge, is in effect arguing in circle and is itself devoid of any rational foundation.

One major implication of this modernist-liberal position is skepticism. Modernists reject Plato's view that "God is the measure of all things" and reaffirm the pre-Socratic view that "man is the measure of all things". The world is measured by us, which implies there can be no real certitude about things. The only thing we "know" about the world is what reaches us through our senses and mental impressions. There is no way for us of being absolutely sure that those impressions correspond to reality. We believe certain ideas to the extent they can be said to "work", but we have no absolute certainty about how they actually fit with reality.

This modernist skepticism is at the root of another feature of liberalism – its practical atheism. It claims that the existence of God is a matter of sentiment or emotion, but not of reason. However, it can never provide a rational justification for its atheism because it is impossible to prove the non-existence of a being. Moreover, it fails to distinguish between two fundamental issues: the existence of God and His identity. Whether God exists and Who He is are two very different questions. The latter – who God is – can only be answered through faith, which is why religious freedom is so important. However, the former question – whether God exists or not – is a philosophical question that can be addressed on the basis of reason alone. One need only ask the most radical philosophical question that can ever be asked – why is there something rather than nothing? – to realize what the answer is. To say there is no answer to such a question is to say there is no meaning in the universe, that everything is meaningless, which is self-contradictory.

What this means is that liberalism is compelled by its logic to evacuate anything that smacks of religion out of the public square. It is a religion onto itself, sometimes called Secular Humanism. It has its own dogmas – those mentioned earlier – and its own priesthood – the liberals who control the world of media and academia.

What to do?

Firstly, we should be more concerned about intellectual clarity than about institutional reform. Institutions issue from our beliefs about good and evil, about freedom and

authority. The degradation of institutions such as marriage and family, church and state, results from a withering of our Judeo-Christian culture. The core of common culture is religion. We are in the midst of a “culture war” opposing two religions: Christianity and liberalism.

These two religions entail two different views of morality based on two different views of reason. Modern and postmodern liberals claim to know what they are talking about when talking of reason. They say it is what the Enlightenment and, more specifically, Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Kant, thought it was. Yet, the Enlightenment concept of reason is much more limited and narrow than what Greek, Roman and medieval philosophers understood as reason. As mentioned earlier, it says that scientific reason is the only form of reason and that what is not empirically verifiable lies outside its scope.

The result is twofold. First, modern and postmodern reason excludes God because he can't be tested scientifically. Second, the only aspects of human nature deemed worthy of study are those that lend themselves to measurement. This perhaps explains why, in spite of the fact that a very large proportion of all scientific books now being published are about human psychology, there is no science with less agreement and less certainty. Modern man seems to know himself less well as a result of the narcissism that pervades contemporary culture. The more we look at ourselves, the less we understand. As John Paul II once said, man is incomprehensible to himself without God.

We cannot solve this problem because it is not a problem, but a mystery. *We are* the problem. We are a mystery to ourselves. Liberalism says that it's only a matter of time before science resolves that mystery. But that's precisely where the error lies. What science can say about man accounts for a relatively small part of whom and what he is. Man is much more than what experimental science can ever expect to say about him. By sticking to its positivist dogmas, the only thing that liberalism can say about morality is that it emerges from “fellow-feeling” – the recognition that your pain and suffering is no less important than mine. But that leaves pending the fundamental question of evil.

What is the source of evil? Why is history replete with examples, not only of the absence of fellow-feeling, but of deliberate hateful and inhumane acts? There are three answers: the Socratic explanation, according to which evil is caused by ignorance; the Enlightenment explanation, that blames evil on faulty social engineering; and the Judeo-Christian explanation that says evil is caused by our wounded nature – Original Sin.

The Socratic explanation has been largely discredited by centuries of experience, which show that smart and knowledgeable people are no less prone to evil than the dim-witted. It is also inconsistent with the view that the moral law is written on the human heart.

As for the Enlightenment explanation of evil, the history of modern times shows that it is wanting and tends to be used as a means for self-proclaimed “bright and broad-minded” people to impose their will on the majority. It has been tested through Nazism and Marxism and found inhumane. Precisely because it believes that scientific reason is the only form of reason, liberalism in effect declares itself incapable of dealing with issues of

good and evil because good and evil are not scientific categories. That's why liberals are so rarely heard condemning the evils of oppressive regimes such as the former USSR, Cuba, China, Iran or Korea. Liberalism cannot even differentiate between different religions such as Islam and Christianity. If reason is no more than scientific reason, it cannot concern itself with the question of God and, therefore, cannot argue that a God who commands Jihad is better or worse than a God who does not. For a liberal, both Gods are figments of the imagination.

The result is that liberalism is utterly incapable of seeing a quite intelligible thing for what it is. For example, it will describe violent actions of Islamists as "crimes" to be explained in terms of victimhood, sociological categories, economic or psychological deprivations, rather than as acts of war, which is what they truly are.

There is only one other explanation for evil – the Judeo-Christian explanation. It can best be summarized in the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who, reflecting on the horrors of Communism, noted that "the line between good and evil is drawn not between nations or parties, but through every human heart".

Liberals say that religious believers should behave in the public square as if God did not exist. The historical record suggests the very opposite. Since all the values that we hold steadfastly to – freedom, tolerance, care for the needy, respect for science – were ushered by the Judeo-Christian tradition, it seems that it would be in the very interest of liberals themselves to act, not as if God did not exist, but rather as if He does exist. Inviting them to do so is not trying to impose religious beliefs on them. Rather, it is asking them to acknowledge that the freedom they cherish issues from a philosophy and a religious tradition without which it cannot be preserved in a lasting way.

A religion whose highest principle is freedom cannot survive because freedom can only be freedom to do something: it must be in the service of some higher good. That higher good can only come from our Judeo-Christian tradition.

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