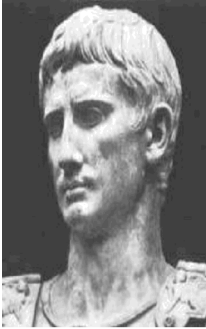


Why Christians Must Be Rabidly, Radically, Unreservedly Pro-Government

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for *Magazine*

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A theme I often hear is that Christians are compelled to do good deeds themselves, and not pass on the task of doing good deeds to government.

Indeed, a deed done by an institution like government has no moral weight. Only the good we do ourselves has this weight.

This is a bad idea on two accounts. First, it lets institutions off the hook. If institutions can't "do good," they can't "do bad," either. Which is a nice blind for corporations and other entities to hide behind. ("I didn't evict that widow and her crippled child. That was all handled by the limited partnership!")

Second, it fails the "What would Jesus do?" test.

About all Jesus said on the subject of government was to tell followers to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's, and to God what was God's. Now, this was an excellent spin-job by Jesus, because the exhortation can be taken in either of two opposite ways: either Caesar owns your butt (so obey him) or God does (so obey *Him*); so act accordingly.

But here's the deal. Jesus said what he said in an age of tyrants. People in the olden days -- say, up till 1776 -- had no moral responsibility for what their kings and despots did, because they had no input into who was king or despot. It was a morally simpler universe that way. Brutality and autocracy made it simpler.

But the universe changed, thanks largely to the egalitarian philosophies of Jesus and Paul, who believed all people mattered, free or slave, male or female, goyim or one of the elect.

These revolutionary ideas fed directly into the ideas of philosophers like John Locke and Karl Marx, and they are built into the philosophies of every democratic government worldwide. To a remarkable extent, we are living in a political world inspired by Jesus. (Which breathes relevance into Bush's selection of Jesus during the 2000 New Hampshire campaign as his favorite political philosopher.)

So what does this mean? It means our governments are different in kind than the government of ancient Judea. Caesar ruled then by the mailed glove. Caesar today rules by the ballot box, so we are morally responsible for everything done by our governments.

When our government does wrong, we are on the hook for it. So are we on the hook for it to do right. Because it does (or is supposed to do) our will as citizens.

Therefore, regardless of whether we post the 10 Commandments on our courthouse walls or not, we who are Christians and Moslems and Jews have no choice but to see our democratically elected leaders as extensions of us. (Even if we didn't vote for them -- because we exert suasion over them, if only as the loyal opposition.)

(A mischievous question: in what language were the 10 Commandments written by the finger of God, or even by Moses, inasmuch as the Hebrew people had no written language at the time? They never answered that in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, my primary source on this.)

So ... if we believe that people are ordered by God to help the poor/afflicted/despised, as Jesus described in the tale of the good Samaritan, and as spelled out in the corporal acts of mercy, it behooves us to give our money and our time to help people.

But if government is in a position to deliver this kind of help in a more efficient way -- and it generally *is* more efficient -- then we as citizens may be morally obligated to tax ourselves to effect these ends. Because to do otherwise is to violate the commandments of God.

Government must not *become* God, as it is in totalitarian or some communist countries. But it can be an instrument of God, even if it is officially nonsectarian, as ours is chartered to be.

And if a government is competitive with private charity, it should be given every consideration. The Bible tells us to have pity on the poor, the widows, the sick, the afflicted, and the incarcerated. However we do that should be fine, provided we do it the best way available to us, the way that helps the largest number of needy.

Problem is, that most efficient and most thorough entity is civil authority. No private charitable group can cover the whole waterfront of need the way a government-sponsored social safety net can.

It's more personal, and feels better, to get down in the gutter and minister to the needy oneself. But to deny help to the 99 because you got your charitable jollies assisting the one is delusionary.

So conservative (anti-government) Christians would seem to be screwed. Their preachers tell them that big government is the devil. Yet their taxes are - in a very mixed-bag way, as social safety net is intertwined with military spending and highway construction and mosquito eradication -- an instrument of God's will, just as surely as Octavian's census was, a long ways back.

Perhaps this is why so many conservatives are so unhappy with democracy: because it imposes fearsome moral obligations on them that strongman rule does not.

The fine points are still up for debate -- where we draw the poverty line, who is included/excluded from government assistance, etc. Which is what democratic governments do -- they argue about such things and keep redrawing the lines over time.

But the larger point remains. We may not back away from government, because there (in part) lies our capacity to heal a broken world.

And to turn our backs on government -- messy, bureaucratic, and itself no exemplar of virtue -- is to refuse Christ's commandment.

Hey, need a proof? In the past year, in my budget-stressed state of Minnesota, at a time when government has assiduously cut back on its commitment to people, tax cuts have flooded the upper classes with fresh liquidity.

But ... in this same difficulty period ... has charitable giving stepped up, as conservative economic economics and theology promises it will, to pick up the fallen standard?

Or was that more of a prayer than a promise?