

What's Wrong With Socialism

The Ideal vs. the Reality

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Introduction

Socialism has never been so popular in America as it is presently. This is largely attributable to the effects of decades of left-wing propaganda channeled through our education system, the mainstream media and popular culture. Some critiques of capitalism are certainly justifiable, especially as they relate to the kind of crony corporate capitalism that exerts such power and influence in our political system. But the question is whether state-controlled socialism is the solution to the challenges of our day.

Many young adults (“millennials”) have been indoctrinated to believe that socialism is more compatible with the ideals of “equality” and “social justice” than is a free enterprise system in which individuals generally succeed or fail on the bases of their own initiative and resources. Individual responsibility has always seemed “unfair” to those who haven’t developed the necessary skills and/or character to compete in a society that is free and open to all, and for decades opportunistic politicians have promoted this victimhood mentality and cleverly exploited it for their own political advantage.

Virtually all Democratic politicians are doctrinaire socialists, although very few (other than Bernie Sanders) are so honest and forthright as to openly admit it. Likewise, many Republicans essentially advocate socialism-lite under the cover of slogans such as “compassionate conservatism.” The tragic irony, however, is that most proponents of socialism cannot even define the term, nor do they understand the social and political implications of socialism or the real-life consequences of such a system.

The purpose of this article is to explain why socialism is inherently flawed and why, despite the good intentions of some (but certainly not all) of its advocates, it would be ruinous to America to continue down this path.

What Is Socialism?

Socialism is a somewhat nebulous term that covers a wide range of social, economic, and political orientations and policies. As commonly used, it refers to everything from relatively mild democratic and “reformist” socialism, as characterized by the Democratic Party in America and modern European social welfare states, to

extreme “revolutionary” socialism such as the totalitarian Marxist/Communist regimes of China, Cuba, and the former Soviet Union. This essay focuses more on the former than the latter, although one should acknowledge that the socialist spectrum is more of a sliding-scale continuum rather than one delineated by fixed parameters.

From its origins in the 18th Century, there are two ideals that characterize modern socialism:

(1) Government regulation or outright ownership of the production and distribution of goods and services – reputedly for the common good of all;* and

(2) Redistribution of wealth in keeping with the left-wing ideals of “social justice” and “equality.” Although moderate socialists are not opposed to private property per se, they believe that too much wealth concentrated in the hands of the social elite is not socially beneficial. Therefore, government should implement policies that minimize the gap between the rich and the poor through a progressive income tax and high inheritance taxes on individuals as well as progressive taxes on corporate profits.

There are degrees of economic socialism. Some socialists generally support private enterprise and call for relatively mild government regulations on businesses, while others advocate restrictions on how much income individuals can make or how much private property they can own. On the more extreme side, radical socialists call for the outright abolition of private property. Likewise, there are variations on political socialism. Some advocate democratic socialism and non-violent change, while others of a more Marxist orientation support a violent revolution and the establishment of an authoritarian government that controls many (or all) aspects of people’s lives. Historically, some socialists have a nationalistic orientation such as the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in Germany, while others are internationalists as in the case of Marxist/ Communists.

An often-overlooked but key issue that divides socialists from free-market advocates is the issue of how people become wealthy. In this regard, there are two diametrically-opposing views.

(1) The capitalist view: People generally acquire wealth through initiative, intelligence, and productivity. In this view, the wealthy are society’s greatest asset – the entrepreneurial class that produces useful goods and services and provides jobs for the rest of society. Rich people are

society’s best and brightest, and they should be rewarded for their creativity and ingenuity. Therefore, taxes should be mild so as to encourage entrepreneurial enterprises that generally work for the good of society as a whole.

(2) The socialist view: Most people become rich by exploiting their social, economic and political connections for private gain at the expense of others. In this view, the wealthy are clever, cunning, and devious. Greedy and selfish, entrepreneurs are little more than “robber barons” and “capitalist pigs.” Rather than being our best people, they are in fact our worst. Therefore, tax laws should penalize them for their greed and force them to share the wealth with those in need for the good of society as a whole.

There are six general tenets on which most socialists agree:

(1) A capitalistic free enterprise system is not only wasteful but dangerous. It encourages greed and promotes social inequality, class envy and even class conflict.

(2) Government should regulate or own key industries – the major means of production and distribution of goods and services – in the interest of social justice and for the common good.

(3) A redistribution of wealth can be effected through government taxation policies and social welfare programs.

(4) The ideal should be an equalitarian society in which no one has more than they need and no one has less than they need. In the interest of social justice, the gap between the rich and the poor should be closed.

(5) The priority in government policies and programs should be to promote the collective welfare of society rather than individual rights and personal autonomy.

(6) Government, cultural institutions, and individuals should promote policies and programs that encourage social cooperation rather than competition.

* As Vladimir Ilyich Lenin explained in his *April Theses* of 1917, it was the socialists’ first priority “to bring social production and the distribution of products at once under the control of the Soviets of Workers’ Deputies.”

What's Wrong With Socialism?

As I noted in the Introduction, democratic socialism is becoming increasingly acceptable in America. This is especially true for young adults, many of whom have been educated (or more correctly, miseducated) to believe that socialism is a healthy and moral alternative to the evils of private enterprise capitalism. There is no question that free market capitalism is often exploited by greedy and unscrupulous groups and individuals at the expense of the public interest, but socialism also has its dark side. Despite the good intentions of some (but not all) of its advocates, there are several fundamental problems with the theory and reality of socialism that render it not only impractical and inadvisable but potentially dangerous.

(1) Socialism has a utopian and unrealistic view of human nature. For reasons that I find inexplicable (not to mention, unbiblical and counter-historical), the left likes to imagine that mankind is naturally good, generous, cooperative and civic-minded. If liberated from antiquated and oppressive social, economic, political and religious systems, all that innate goodness within us will manifest itself and we will progress toward the next evolutionary stage in human social history: a pure classless and harmonious society based on cooperation rather than competition, and one in which the governing principle will be, "From each according to his ability to each according to his need." This is based on an unrealistic misconception about human nature and an appalling ignorance of human history.

Of course we live in an age in which the capitalist/industrial complex, aided by phenomenal advancements in science and technology, has dramatically improved both the standard of living and the life expectancy of hundreds of millions of people worldwide. But human nature does not change, and individuals are every bit as egocentric today as thousands of years ago. The Bible refers to this human condition as "sin," and it is the perennial besetting problem in human nature that can only be modified through a life-transforming spiritual conversion via the grace and power of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

(2) Socialism has a simplistic view of social and economic history. Much of our socio/political ideology stems from our understanding of human nature (as mentioned above), but also from our view of social class. In American history, the Populist and Progressive reform movements of the late-19th and early-20th centuries were responses to political ineptitude and corruption as well as dehumanizing business practices that exploited the vulnerable status of the working class. Many mainstream reformers were middle-class people who didn't challenge free enterprise and capitalism per se but sought to rectify the worst abuses in business and industry in order to make the condition of workers less harsh and more humane. Influenced by utopian idealism, they tended to idealize the poor as noble and innocent victims of an unjust social order, and they considered government benevolence to be the solution. As one reformer put it, "The real heart of the movement is to use the government as an agency of human welfare."

Further to the left, however, socialists had a more cynical view of the social order. They were generally convinced that free enterprise capitalism (particularly corporate capitalism) was immune to reform, and that the only solution to capitalistic exploitation was strict government regulation – or in some cases, outright government ownership – of the economic system. Although most reformers at the time supported a graduated income tax, socialists were more radical in calling for a comprehensive redistribution of wealth. Most American socialists, however, were democratic (or "utopian") socialists rather than Marxists, and they called for radical but peaceful change through the democratic process rather than a violent revolution.

As mentioned earlier, a fundamental difference between those on the left and the right derives from the issue of how one gets rich, and the personal and social responsibilities that accompany wealth and power. Conservatives generally believed that most people prosper by living responsible lives, by hard work and exercising individual initiative, by being productive, and by providing a good product or service at a competitive price. Some argued that the rich have few if any social responsibilities, while others believed that the blessings of wealth, status,

power and influence should be used benevolently for the betterment of others. Many conservative Christians believed that the church should be the primary social institution for the care of the poor, while others advocated private charities. But in either case, the orientation toward helping those in need was essentially paternalistic in nature.

Socialists, like the more radical Marxists, contended that wealth is acquired either through unearned (and undeserved) inheritance or, more typically in the modern industrial age, by devious means – usually by exploiting the working class by under-paying and over-working those who do the actual productive labor in society. If this view of wealth acquisition were true, then an ethical case could be made for confiscatory taxation, redistribution of wealth, and strict government control of the means of production.

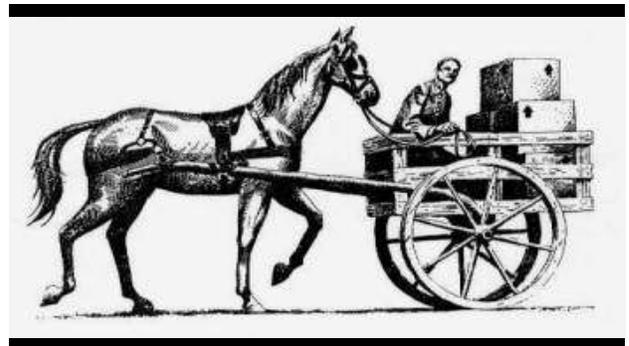
The reality of the situation, of course, is that throughout history people have acquired wealth by various means through a variety of channels, some legitimate and some not. But even those who have acquired it through less-than-admirable means often produce necessary goods and provide services that create jobs and ultimately benefit society in general. So even if it had the power to do so, government would be wise not to punish those who start and maintain businesses, produce vital goods and services, generate wealth, and provide the jobs on which a nation's economy depends.

(3) Socialistic centralized economic planning doesn't work. Socialistic systems operate on the basis of two assumptions that seem self-evident. First is the observation that free market capitalism is wasteful as it uses valuable (or even scarce) resources on the production of unnecessary goods and services. This is doubtlessly true. Second is the premise that centralized government planning and management of the economy is considerably more efficient. This is doubtlessly false. In the real world, economies don't run like well-oiled machines. History has shown that government bureaucrats, often far removed from the intricate and subtle market forces that operate at the local level, tend to be out of touch with the realities of market pricing and supply-and-demand. Reliable information cannot be collected, analyzed and processed by a centralized bureaucratic agency and

used effectively to formulate a plan for an entire economy. As the Nobel Prize-winning economist Friedrich Hayek argued, the "fatal conceit" of socialism is the optimistic delusion that government planners can manage economic growth by substituting their expertise for the information generated by the billions of daily interactions of a complex market society.

In reality, there is little that government does that private enterprise doesn't do better (other than the military). This appears to be the case for everything from the production of building materials and consumer goods to providing health care and designing curricula for public schools. When theory fails repeatedly to correlate to reality, reasonable and realistic people begin to conclude that the theory is flawed. Centralized economic planning simply doesn't work.

(4) Socialism puts the economic cart before the horse. There are two major components of any economic system: the *production* of wealth (via the production of goods and services) and the *distribution* of wealth (via the distribution of goods and services). Obviously, the priority has to be on the former or else there is little to distribute. Therefore, any government policies that punish or discourage productivity – and by extension, the creation of wealth – are counterproductive.



In modern history this has been a recurring problem and a fatal flaw in all left-wing ideologies. By shifting the primary focus from the generation of wealth to the redistribution of wealth, they discourage individual initiative, creativity and productivity, which naturally cripples economic activity. This is a critical weakness in socialism and a serious error with far-reaching consequences. As Margaret Thatcher once described it, the basic problem with socialism is that sooner or later you

run out of other people's money – in which case there is no more wealth to be redistributed. Radio talk show host Dennis Prager summarizes the problem this way: "Socialism spends what capitalism creates." The inevitable result, as economist Thomas Sowell explains, is this: "The history of the 20th century is full of examples of countries that set out to redistribute wealth and ended up redistributing poverty." He explains the obvious reason why this is the case: "You can only confiscate the wealth that exists at a given moment. You cannot confiscate future wealth – and that future wealth is less likely to be produced when people see that it will be confiscated."

One should acknowledge that democratic socialism is oftentimes motivated by sincere humanitarian values and impulses, and that the ideal of social equality is theoretically admirable. But when implemented in real-life situations, socialistic policies result in adverse and unintended consequences including less entrepreneurial activity, less innovation, less productivity, higher unemployment, lower standards of living, higher taxes, and a less dynamic economy. In short, socialism fails the primary test for a viable economic system: the production of wealth for the general good of all.

(5) Socialism promotes irresponsibility and dependency. Regardless of any good intentions, socialist systems create an entitlement mentality in which people come to depend upon the government for things they ought to provide for themselves. Many of the Progressive and socialist reformers in the early 1900s sincerely desired to help the poor by equalizing economic opportunities, but the policies they advocated are innately problematical due to the realities of human nature, social psychology, and institutional limitations. Rather than truly assisting the underclass, socialistic-style government welfare has often eliminated the strongest incentives that the poor need in order to take responsibility for their life and improve their situation. As the modern addiction recovery movement emphasizes, there is a fundamental difference between *helping* others and *enabling* them. When we truly help, we offer the necessary assistance, the resources, or the incentives that stimulate others to positive change. On the

contrary, when we enable others, we merely provide the means by which they can continue to perpetuate their current condition.

All Christians should be sensitive to those who struggle in this life, and we should be eager to help in constructive ways. As the Christian left constantly emphasizes, concern for the poor is a major biblical theme. Furthermore, under Article I, Section 8 of our Constitution the federal government has the authority (and, some might add, the responsibility) to provide for the "general welfare" of the American people. Most Christians would probably agree that a publicly-financed "safety net" for victims of misfortune and unusual circumstances is justifiable. But as William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, famously put it, benevolence should be "a hand-up, not a hand-out," and in most cases public welfare should be linked to workfare. When we work for what we have, we usually value it more than if it were handed to us.

This simple concept was generally understood in American society until the 1960s. In colonial times local governments took responsibility for their poor, but only under certain circumstances. In most cases, able-bodied men and women were not supported by taxpayers unless they worked – in which case they were often housed in group homes in exchange for their labor. Only those who were too young, too old, too ill or too disabled – and who had no friends or family to help them – were provided public assistance despite their idleness. Often in association with churches, many local governments provided a subsistence level income for such citizens with special needs. (By contrast, the idle poor in England were given enough public welfare to enable them to get by. As a result, there were far more poor people per capita in England than in America in the late 1700s and early 1800s.)

As an acute observer of human nature and behavior, Benjamin Franklin articulated the common sense of his day regarding the problem of the poor. In his mind, the most effective way to help the underclass was to make them uncomfortable in their poverty and thereby motivate them to do something about it. Speaking from personal experience, Franklin commented: "In my youth I traveled much, and I observed... that the more public provisions were made for the

poor, the less they provided for themselves.” Others such as Thomas Jefferson agreed, and in this regard we would be well-advised to heed his warning when he noted that the American republic “will cease to exist when you take away from those who are willing to work and give to those who would not.” Even in the midst of the Great Depression, President Roosevelt declared, “The government will, and must, get out of this business of welfare. To administer welfare is to administer a narcotic – a subtle destroyer of the human will.”

Public assistance at taxpayers' expense should be a temporary expedient, not a lifestyle. But in the 1960s under Lyndon Johnson's Great Society initiatives, welfare was redefined as a fundamental “right” (in the same sense that comprehensive health care has recently been declared an entitlement by those on the political left), and the traditional distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor evaporated in the face of rising divorce and illegitimate birth rates and the disintegration of the traditional family structure. Understandably, since no one wished to see children suffer for the irresponsible behavior of their parents, politicians and social workers no longer sought to distinguish between those who were victims of misfortune and those who were poor due to irrational or unhealthy life choices. As society became increasingly permissive and “tolerant” regarding “alternative” lifestyles and family structures, any attempt to require welfare recipients to alter their behavior was considered “judgmental” and tantamount to punishing the poor.

The result is that today about one-half of the American people work to support the other half who live totally or partially off public welfare. A socialistic welfare society is intrinsically counter-productive. It treats adults as perpetually dependent children who are incapable of living as responsible and productive citizens who can function as contributing members of society.

(6) Socialism threatens individual liberty and inevitably leads to an authoritarian political system. As often portrayed in academia and the media, socialism is regarded as a relatively moderate left-wing socio/economic/political ideology in contrast to extreme “right-wing” fascist-style regimes such as Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's

Nazi Germany, Francisco Franco's Spain, and numerous other military-style dictatorships in post-World War II Latin America. In other words, socialism is represented as the humane alternative to fascism, as depicted in the Standard (Linear) Model of Political Orientations on page 7.

But this is a rather obvious fallacy. As it relates to political ideologies, the real question is, “How much control over people's lives does a particular political system exert?” rather than some simplistic and arbitrarily-assigned label such as “right-wing” or “left-wing.” That being the case, a more accurate depiction of political orientations is the Revised (Two-Dimensional) Model in which the vertical (‘Y’) axis represents the extent of government control over the economy while the horizontal (‘X’) axis depicts the extent of government control over the social and cultural life of a society.

[Note that with contemporary conservatism, contemporary liberalism and socialism, the degree of government control over the moral, religious and public policy aspects of the culture varies according to the respective values and priorities of each of these ideologies. For example, liberals and socialists typically want more control over the education system and the media than do conservatives, yet they tend to take a more libertarian attitude toward drugs, pornography, abortion, etc.

Also note that although the common terminology of “left” and “right” sometimes misrepresents political realities, we are virtually compelled to use these labels in our public discourse due to their widespread acceptance. Therefore, I've resigned to use them in this article, although I clearly identify “fascism” as a left-wing ideology.]

“Liberal fascism,” as Jonah Goldberg emphasizes in his book of the same title, is the “collaboration of government, church, unions and interest groups to expand government” and, therefore, “the liberal impulse for controlling the lives of others.” As such, liberal fascism is the natural political orientation of the left in the sense that fascists are those who want to use the power of the government to suppress the inalienable rights of individuals. It is the partnership of government and private industry under the guise of promoting the collective good. In that sense, corporate crony capitalism is an integral component of fascism just

Christian Socialism

For several years in the late 1970s and early '80s I was involved in a variety of groups and causes associated with the Christian left. [A disclaimer: I was never a "liberal." I always sensed that the ideology of modern liberalism was little more than the socio/political expression of a secular humanistic philosophy. Nor did I ever buy into the whole socialist agenda. In reality, I was more aligned with the principles of distributism, as described below.] In modern history, Christian socialism is a variation on democratic utopian socialism that attempts to apply biblical values and principles to social, political and economic issues. As such, it is a moderate form of socialism that recognizes the role and responsibility of the government to provide for the "general welfare" of society by promoting equal opportunity, social justice, and government regulation of the economy within a democratic political system. In contrast to more radical forms of socialism, it does *not* advocate violent revolution, the abolition of private property, state ownership of all production and distribution of goods and services, or an authoritarian political system.

In 1979 I helped organize the Atlanta chapter of Evangelicals for Social Action, and the following year I was offered a position working with ESA in Philadelphia. During this time I subscribed to periodicals such as *Sojourners* and *New Oxford Review*, devoured books such as Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Tom Sine's *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* and John White's *The Golden Cow: Materialism in the 20th Century Church*, took our family on summer vacation to Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia, and edited the publications of Prolifers for Survival, an organization that sought to connect the pro-life and anti-nuclear movements.

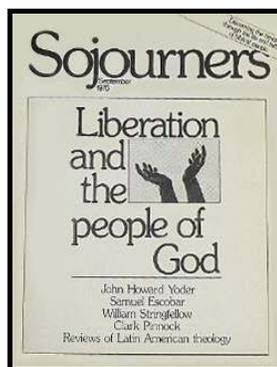
As a young adult, Christian socialism appealed to my idealism and sense of justice. It was apparent to me that American society and our cultural institutions were corrupt and dysfunctional,

and that neither modern corporate capitalism nor secular socialism were compatible with biblical Christian values and ethics. A few years earlier I had been influenced by the radical Christianity of the Jesus Movement, and I believed that an integral part of a wholistic understanding of Christian discipleship was to strive to live according to the countercultural values of the Kingdom of God in contrast to the ways of this world – the obsession with self-centered individualism, social status, wealth, materialism and hedonism.

There have been notable Christian thinkers who shared a similar orientation and vision. In *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) C. S. Lewis observed that in the late 19th Century Christian socialism posed a great threat to Satan's Kingdom of Darkness in its advocacy of much-needed social reforms. Writing in the spirit of the arch-demon Screwtape, Lewis reminded his readers:

Let me recall to your minds what the human situation was in the latter half of the nineteenth century.... The great movements toward liberty and equality among men had by then borne solid fruit and grown mature. Slavery had been abolished. The American War of Independence had been won. The French Revolution had succeeded. Religious toleration was almost everywhere on the increase. In that movement there had originally been many elements which were in our [i.e., the demons'] favor. Much atheism, much anti-clericalism, much envy and thirst for revenge.... It was not easy to determine what our own attitude should be. On the one hand it was a bitter blow to us – it still is – that any sort of men who had been hungry should be fed or any who had long worn chains should have them struck off. But on the other hand, there was in the movement so much rejection of [the Christian] faith, so much materialism, secularism, and hatred, that we felt we were bound to encourage it.

But by the latter part of the century the situation was much simpler, and also much more ominous. In the English sector... a horrible thing had happened. The Enemy [i.e., God], with His usual sleight of hand, had largely appropriated this progressive or liberalising movement and perverted it to His own ends. Very little of its own anti-Christianity remained. **The dangerous phenomenon called Christian socialism was rampant.** Factory owners of the good old type who grew rich on sweated labour, instead of being assassinated by their workpeople... were being



frowned upon by their own class. The rich were increasingly giving up their powers not in the face of revolution and compulsion, but in obedience to their own consciences. As for the poor who benefitted by this, they were behaving in a most disappointing fashion. Instead of using their new liberties – as we reasonably hope and expected – for massacre, rape, and looting, or even for perpetual intoxication, they were perversely engaged in becoming cleaner, more orderly, more thrifty, better educated, and even more virtuous. Believe me, the threat of something like a really healthy state of society seemed then perfectly serious. [C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper/San Francisco, 1942, 1996), p. 194ff.]

But unfortunately for humankind, and as Screwtape proceeds to explain, “Thanks to our Father Below [Satan] the threat was averted.” What corrupted the humanitarian socialist ideal were the perverted social theories of secular philosophers such as Rousseau, Hegel and Marx that provided a moral pretext for evil geniuses such as Lenin and Hitler to impose their demonic totalitarianism regimes.

Lewis rarely addressed social, economic and political themes in his works, and he resisted identifying with any particular ideology. He was at heart a traditionalist, but not necessarily a conservative in the modern sense of the term as he valued morality and nature over unrestrained development, science and technology. His sci-fi novel, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), included perhaps more socio/political commentary than any of his other works. In particular, Lewis expressed his distrust of state socialism and his contempt for modern humanistic “values-free” secular education. But he also feared that England would be overdeveloped and ruined by greedy capitalists who cared nothing for its natural or historical heritage. This was the context in which he warned against the emerging amoral secular technocratic/industrial complex. As he described it:

The physical sciences, good and innocent in themselves, had already, even in Ransom’s own time, begun to be warped, had been subtly maneuvered in a certain direction. Despair of objective truth had been increasingly insinuated into the scientists; indifference to it, and a concentration upon mere power, had been the result.... Dreams of the far future destiny of man were dragging up from its shallow and unquiet

grave the old dream of Man as God. The very experiences of the dissecting room and the pathological laboratory were breeding a conviction that the stifling of all deep-set repugnances [i.e., traditional values, religious faith, Judeo-Christian morality, etc.] were the first essential for progress ... What should they find incredible, since they believed no longer in a rational universe? What should they regard as too obscene, since they held that all morality was a mere subjective by-product of the physical and economic situations of men? The time was ripe. From the point of view which is accepted in Hell, the whole history of our Earth had led up to this moment. There was now at least a real chance for fallen man to shake off that limitation of his powers which mercy had imposed upon him as a protection from the full results of his fall. If this succeeded, Hell would be at last incarnate. [C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1946, 1965), pp. 203-4.]

Distributism: The Road Less Traveled

Lewis was not a Christian socialist so much as he was a critic of *laissez-faire* unregulated capitalism. In fact, his views were more in line with distributism, an economic philosophy that emerged in the 19th Century based on the co-op (co-operative) model as an alternative to private-owned capitalism and state-owned socialism. One of the early proponents of a form of distributism was the French social philosopher Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809-65), who in 1849 published “The Solution of the Social Problem” in which he set forth his theory of “mutualism.” As Proudhon envisioned it, the ideal social and economic system of the future would be one in which “labor associations” owned and managed factories and other major businesses. This would be an intricate network of co-ops, each operating on democratic principles, that would replace the private ownership of land, buildings, and the means of production.

Although Proudhon was a secular utopian idealist whose grandiose plan for reforming society was utterly unrealistic, some Christian social philosophers advocated distributism as the best economic model for integrating Christian social ethics and real-world realities. One of the first substantive defenses of distributism was put forth in Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (“Of Revolutionary Change”), in which the pontiff emphasized three points:

- Property ownership is a basic human right in accord with the principles of natural law;
- Workers should work faithfully and diligently, show their employer respect, and refrain from acts of violence and destruction of property; and
- Employers should pay a living wage, provide a decent work environment and time off for religious days and holidays, and treat workers with dignity and respect.

Forty years later, Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-39) issued *Quadragesimo Anno* ("In the Fortieth Year," 1931), reconfirming the key tenets of *Rerum Novarum*, as did his successor Pius XII (r. 1939-58). Distributism was also the socio/economic philosophy advocated by Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II, r. 1978-2005) over the course of his career as a supporter of the Solidarity labor movement in Poland.

As the concept and principles of distributism circulated throughout Catholic and Protestant intellectual circles in the early 1900s, it was adopted and endorsed by influential Christian thinkers such as Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, Christopher Derrick, Dorothy Sayers, and J. R. R. Tolkien. Far from being a form of socialism, Chesterton actually regarded distributism as a kind of micro-capitalism, which was the meaning behind his comment: "Too much capitalism does not mean too many capitalists, but too few capitalists." Conversely, in the case of Tolkien, his whole depiction of Middle Earth in *The Lord of the Rings* was a damning indictment of industrial capitalism.

Despite these and other endorsements of distributism as a more humane "third way" between mainstream capitalism and socialism, it has rarely been implemented to any extent in the hyper-competitive world of business, industry and commerce. The foremost exponent of distributism in the past fifty years was the British economist E.F. Schumacher in books such as *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* (1973) and *Good Work* (1979).



The Case for Christian Socialism

Having grown up in a conservative Christian family and evangelical churches, I realized that conservatives were generally good, honorable, sincere and dedicated people. However, in my late teens I began to notice that many conservatives were essentially status quo conformists who accepted, apparently without much thought, conventional American attitudes when it came to consumerism and materialism – in addition to other "traditional values" such as racial prejudice and male chauvinistic attitudes regarding women. Most were very practical people, not at all aesthetically-inclined, and it seemed to me that their lives were as devoid of art and culture as they were deficient in terms of intellectual sophistication.

To their credit, conservative Christians were concerned about the breakdown of the family, the escalating divorce and illegitimate birth rates, the hyper-sexualization of the culture, and the proliferation of drugs. But although resolutely opposed to the countercultural trends of the Sixties, few understood the philosophy that animated the arts and the culture of the time. So while conservatives were justifiably alarmed by these trends, most lacked the historical, philosophical or aesthetic background to offer a thoughtful and convincing critique. [Note: This would be Francis Schaeffer's most significant contribution to Christian thought – his emphasis on cultural apologetics.]

In some respects the Christian left shared some traits in common with Christian conservatives. Both were concerned about the trends in our society and culture, and both sincerely desired to make a difference – unlike the vast majority of Americans (and so many Christians) who seemed so self-centered, apathetic, uninformed and unengaged.

On the Christian left there was a legitimate concern for social justice and a revulsion toward traditional Christian complicity in the evils of racism, sexism and classism. I admired and appreciated the emphasis many of them placed on living a simple and unpretentious lifestyle in the context of a committed community of believers. Unlike many conservatives, they conscientiously sought to resist the idolatry of addictive consumerism, mindless materialism and blind

patriotism. They sincerely wanted a society based more on cooperation than competition, and on the common good rather than purely individualistic self-interest. They also showed far greater sensitivity toward the poor and more concern for the care and protection of the environment than most conservatives I knew. With their emphasis on social justice, simple living and community, Christian socialists emphasized certain biblical principles and practices that are often ignored by mainstream Christians, including the following:

- Proverbs 30:7-9 – “Two things I ask of you, O Lord; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and forget you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”
- In Amos 5:21-24 the “word of the Lord” came to the prophet Amos as a sharp rebuke of the superficial religiosity of the nations of Israel and Judah: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like a never-ending stream!”
- In Acts 2:44-45 the Christian chronicler Luke refers to intense spiritual and social zeal of the followers of Christ immediately after the Day of Pentecost: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”
- Likewise, in Acts 4:32-35 Luke once again emphasized the radical social and economic practices of the early church in Jerusalem: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared

everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

- Perhaps most striking is II Corinthians 8:13 in which the apostle Paul appeals to the relatively prosperous Christians in Corinth to share liberally with the impoverished believers in Macedonia so that “there might be equality... as it is written: ‘He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.’”

Furthermore, much of the Epistle of James, which many Bible scholars consider to be one of the earliest Christian writings, focuses on social consciousness, concern for those of low socio/economic status, and warnings against the seduction and deceitfulness of wealth.

What's Wrong With Christian Socialism

After a few years it became increasingly apparent to me that whatever problems and inconsistencies were common among Christian conservatives were just as prevalent among those on the left. If not more so. I knew many radical Christians who were sincere and admirable people, but like everyone (including me!) they had their “issues”– their egos, idiosyncracies, prejudices, obsessions, and limitations. Considering the rather limited parameters and experiences of my youth, I’m grateful for the people I came to know and the experiences I had during this time in my life. All of this certainly opened me up to new ways of thinking that I otherwise would never have seriously considered. But ultimately I found the Christian left to be every bit as much of an ideological straitjacket as the Christian right.

The issue for me then became: Which ideology in general – conservatism or socialism – correlates best with reality? Which ideology has a more accurate understanding of human nature and the realities of human interactions and

human institutions, and which system is more conducive to economic freedom and productivity? Without committing myself wholesale to one or the other, it became obvious to me that while Christian conservatism has its deficiencies, it is considerably more realistic than the Christian socialist alternative. In particular, there are two critical problems with Christian socialist socio/political philosophy that disqualify it as a viable option:

(1) An over-reliance on government as the solution to most social, economic and political problems. In their misunderstanding of social justice, the Christian left tends to insist upon not only equal opportunity in society but an unrealistic equality of results. This is simplistic, and it denies the reality of individual differences – including the relevant personality and character factors that often determine our life situation. Like secular liberals, the Christian left tends to de-emphasize individual responsibility and instead attributes most social problems to external factors: poverty, inequality, racism, sexism, classism, etc. There is no question that these have been major issues historically, but there also is no doubt that America made unprecedented progress in the second half of the 20th century in dealing with these maladies that have plagued every civilization throughout human history. For example, racial conflicts would be relatively rare today were it not for certain individuals and groups that have a vested interest in manufacturing and exploiting inter-racial tensions. Rather than honestly trying to solve racial problems, they often create them.

Poverty, racism and injustice don't *cause* social pathologies such as crime, violence, drug addiction, unemployment and illegitimate births, although they can certainly *contribute* to them. The left must understand that government can do relatively little to solve problems that are essentially moral- and character-based in nature. As Aleksander Solzhenitsyn once noted, the line between good and evil passes not through governments or institutions but directly through every human heart. A fundamental problem with the Christian left is the tendency to fixate on corporate and institutional sin to the virtual exclusion of private and individual sin. They sincerely want a more just and civil society, but they tend to ignore or excuse many of

the anti-social attitudes and behaviors that corrupt and pollute our society. Furthermore, they seem to think that the only people who have a problem with selfishness and greed are the rich.

Like their secular liberal counterparts, Christian socialists are very sanctimonious and generous when it comes to redistributing other people's money. As mentioned earlier, this is one of the distinguishing features of the Christian left – income redistribution via the coercive power of state. Some Christian socialists even regard this as the core of the gospel message. Jim Wallis, the founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine and an acknowledged leader in the Christian left, has been quite explicit that the redistribution of wealth is "what the gospel is all about."*

* See Michael Youssef, "Keep Jesus Out of Your Socialism." [<http://www.michaelyoussef.com/michaels-blogs/keep-jesus-out-of-your-socialism.html>.]

As a student at Michigan State University in the late 1960s, Jim Wallis was the president of the radical left-wing Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1971 he and others founded *The Post-American* magazine, later renamed *Sojourners*. He also co-founded Sojourners Community, an intentional community and left-wing activist organization in Washington, D.C. In 2009 Wallis was appointed a "spiritual advisor" to President Barack Obama along with a few other liberal religious leaders.

In 2010 Marvin Olasky, the editor of *World* magazine, revealed that *Sojourners* had received in recent years more than \$200,000 in contributions from George Soros' Open Society Institute. Wallis originally denied the story but later claimed that the contributions were "so small that I hadn't remembered them."

Like many liberals such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Wallis has flip-flopped in recent years on the issue of same-sex marriage. In 2008 he declared, "I don't think the sacrament of marriage should be changed. Some people say that Jesus didn't talk about homosexuality, and that's technically true. But marriage is all through the Bible, and it's not gender-neutral. I have never done a blessing for a same-sex couple. I've never been asked to do one. I'm not sure that I would." By 2013, however, he had changed his position and is quoted as saying, "Marriage needs some strengthening. Let's start with marriage, and then I think we have to talk about, now, how to include same-sex couples in that deeper understanding of marriage." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Wallis]

Certainly, there are people in America today who are victims of misfortune due to employment lay-offs, accidental injuries, or unusual physical or mental circumstances, and most Christians would probably agree that such people are worthy of at least temporary public assistance. But realistically, many who receive government assistance are substance abusers, welfare cheats or the chronically lazy for whom welfare is a lifestyle. Since the enactment of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society welfare programs in the mid-1960s, the federal government has spent trillions of American tax dollars on anti-poverty programs with relatively little success. Too often, such programs don't alleviate poverty so much as they incentivize it. But the Christian left tends to excuse indolence and irresponsible personal behavior, and in the process it violates the biblical social principle of self-responsibility. As the apostle Paul noted in Ephesian 4:28, everyone should work, "doing something useful" to provide for themselves and their family. Furthermore, as he stated unequivocally in II Thessalonians 3:10, "If a man will not work, he should not eat."

(2) A basic misinterpretation and misapplication of biblical social justice. A second and equally confounding problem with the Christian left is their misuse of the Bible, particularly certain prophetic passages related to social justice which they use to promote policies and programs such as the redistribution of wealth and a utopian socialist agenda. One of the insights I gained from my involvement in the Christian left was their emphasis on God's special concern for the poor, the powerless, and the most vulnerable among us, and God's condemnation of the rich, the powerful and the privileged who, according to the standard narrative, have gained their wealth and status by exploiting others. This was a recurring theme in the writings of the Old Testament prophets and a major reason why God brought judgement down on the ancient Hebrew kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It was also a prominent theme in the ministry and teachings of Jesus and throughout the New Testament.

But when the Christian left cites many of these passages, they tend to do so out of context. The Bible is quite clear that the true children of God –

i.e., those who have been spiritually born-again by grace through faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ – are called to live according to the highest standards of morality and ethics. In every respect, Christians should be not only model citizens but exemplary humanitarians. Old Testament Israel was called by God to be his "chosen people" – a uniquely theocratic nation, governed by the strict rules and regulations of the Mosaic Law. As such, ancient Israel would serve as God's model community here on earth. Accordingly, they would also be the means by which God would effect the salvation of humanity.

But in virtually every respect Israel failed, so God established a New Covenant, this time not with an earthly nation but with a spiritual community of followers of Jesus Christ. And just as God set down specific moral and civil laws for the governance of Old Testament Israel, he established standards of morality and civil ethics for New Testament Christians. In Philippians 2:4 Paul reminds his readers, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others." On a more radical note, as cited earlier, in I Corinthians he exhorts the Christians in Corinth to "excel in the grace of giving" on behalf of the churches in Macedonia that were suffering from "extreme poverty." He notes, "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but *that there might be equality...* as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'" (II Cor. 8:13-15).

It is important to note, however, that when the church operates organically as the living Body of Christ, it often functions as a kind of "socialistic" community in which members attend not only to one another's spiritual needs, but their material needs as well. Led by the Holy Spirit, they put into practice what it means to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love others as themselves. But of course there is a fundamental and obvious difference between this kind of Christian community-consciousness and state-sponsored socialism. The former is purely voluntary and Spirit-led, while the latter is mandatory and coercive. One respects the right of private

ownership (or more correctly, God's right of ownership over all that we possess), while the other assumes that the state has the right to confiscate the assets of its citizens in order to redistribute wealth according to its preferences.*

Perhaps the most basic problem with the Christian left is that they fail to distinguish between God's moral and ethical standards for his people (i.e., the church), and what we might reasonably expect from mainstream (secular) society. Or as Augustine would describe it, the highest biblical principles related to social justice and equality apply to the "City of God" (the community of Christ), not the "City of Man" (mainstream society). Obviously, all societies would be better off if they were governed by biblical principles, in which case there would be no injustice. People would be charitable, considerate, and eager to share with those who are less fortunate. In keeping with Christ's "Greatest Commandment," they would love others as they love themselves. But mainstream society is not Christian, and as Christians we cannot impose specifically Christian values and practices on non-Christians. When the Christian left seeks to do this, it must rely upon the coercive power of the state to force compliance, which is just as counter-productive as when the Christian right tries to use the state to enforce overtly biblical standards of sexual morality.

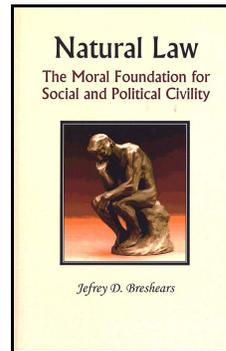
Many Christians seem confused on this point. They wonder that if we cannot and should not force Christian values and practices on mainstream society, then how can society function at all? In other words, if a society doesn't operate according to biblical principles, is there any moral basis for governing at all? There is, but it is derived not from God's special revelation via the Bible but from God's general revelation in nature. Remarkably, all civilizations throughout history have acknowledged (either explicitly or implicitly) a basic set of moral and ethical principles that philosophers refer to as Natural Law. The apostle Paul alludes to it in

Romans 1-2, and the principles of Natural Law surface repeatedly not only in the New Testament but throughout the history of moral philosophy.

What exactly is Natural Law? In effect, it is a kind of moral-based common sense – a set of moral and ethical principles that is universal and transcultural, and which comes to us via general revelation. It is also intuitive as a result of the *Imago Dei* (the Image of God) that is implanted within our soul. All humanity recognizes these fundamental principles of Natural Law – although they are often ignored and violated by those who choose to lie, cheat, steal, exploit and abuse others for their own benefit.

(See the chart on the following page: "Fundamental Principles of Natural Law.")

Again – to reiterate – these are universal principles that all civilized societies generally acknowledge, although the *full understanding* and *application* of these principles often varies from one society and culture to another. Just like individuals, no two cultures are equal; some have higher moral and ethical standards or are more consistent in terms of enforcing these principles than others. Of course, due to human sin, these principles are regularly ignored and violated for various reasons by those who have the power and the will to do so. But the point is that this is the best we can expect from any secular society: a recognition of these basic Natural Law principles and the will to enforce them. Anything else – whether it relates to Christian sexual morality, Christian ethics related to social justice, or any other explicitly Christian values and practices – should be taught and practiced by the community of Christ, but it cannot be forced on others. To attempt to do so only imposes standards that people who lack the internal guidance and power of the Holy Spirit cannot possibly meet. Furthermore, such an attempt is counterproductive in that it renders the Christian community in society a source of repression and coercion rather than a living model of liberation.



* More commonly in modern democracies, the state collects money from its most productive citizens through confiscatory taxation in order to buy the votes of the underclass.

Fundamental Principles of Natural Law

1. There is a God (or gods, or "First Cause," or some unifying power or principle) that is responsible for the existence and maintenance of the universe.
2. There is a universal moral law to which we are accountable.
 - Certain attitudes, speech and actions are objectively right and wrong regardless of our personal feelings about them.
3. The sanctity of human life and a prohibition on murder.
4. The rule of law (either a formal written code or informal customs).
5. The right of self-defense and protection from physical and/or emotional abuse by others.
6. Virtues such as wisdom, honor, courage, and moderation.
7. Honesty in normal interpersonal relations and commercial transactions.
8. Standards of social decency and propriety.
9. Sexual restrictions: The sanctity of marriage, and prohibitions on sexual promiscuity, incest, and rape.
10. Respect for one's parents, ancestors and elders.
11. Proper protection and provision for children.
12. The value of kindness, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.
13. The primacy of the common good over individual liberty.
14. The principle of reciprocity, and a tacit acknowledgment of the "Silver Rule": "Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you."
15. The summary principle: "Do good and avoid evil."

The Right and Wrong

As a graduate student in history, one of my areas of concentration was the history of modern political philosophies. Due to my background and experiences prior to grad school, I found that I was relatively well prepared to study the intricacies of political philosophy from a Christian perspective. I relished the opportunity to read and discuss the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Edmund Burke, De Tocqueville, Marx, John Stuart Mill, Lenin, Hitler and others, and in the process a synthesis began to form that avoided the extremes of both the left and the right. Later in my academic career I taught a course on the American Political System in which I sought to present a balanced, moral-based and realistic approach to the subject.

On one occasion I stopped for gas at a local convenience store when a car pulled in next to mine. I hardly noticed it until a young man got out of the car and greeted me: "Professor Breshears – my conservative mentor!" I must have looked at him quizzically because he proceeded to explain, "I was in your political theory class three or four years ago, and you're the one who turned me on to politics." I exchanged a few pleasantries with him, told him I was glad he was doing well, and then left. Later, I ruminated on what he had said: "*My conservative mentor*"? Whatever was he thinking? I certainly didn't label myself a conservative at the time, but then it dawned on me: I had always tried to teach history honestly, fairly and objectively, and I challenged my students to think critically in the context of the moral and ethical standards of Natural Law theory. In practice, I avoided using my position as a propaganda platform. I knew that such an approach was relatively unusual in the Humanities and Social Sciences, which tend to be dominated by liberals and radical leftists. Therefore, this student naturally assumed that I was a conservative. In retrospect, it was one of the more encouraging affirmations I ever received from a student, and a good reminder that integrity and a commitment to truth ultimately prevail.

Over the years I've grown more conservative while mainstream liberalism has veered farther and farther toward the far left. To paraphrase a quote

usually (and perhaps erroneously) attributed to Winston Churchill, “If you meet a young man who isn’t a socialist, it means he has no heart; if you meet an older man who is still a socialist, it means he has no head.” I take that as a personal compliment, and it’s comforting to know (or at least, to presume) that one is making some progress in life – not only spiritually but intellectually.

A favorite conservative mantra since the time of Ronald Reagan has been the notion that “Government is not the *solution* to our problems; government *is* the problem.” Although bloated and intrusive government is undeniably a hindrance to a well-functioning society and economy – and in America it is getting worse all the time – we should also keep in mind that old-style *laissez-faire* capitalism (especially corporate capitalism) can be ruthlessly exploitative and should be subject to reasonable regulations. Historically, of course, this was why labor unions were necessary, but it was also a significant factor in the growth of government involvement in the economy for much of the 20th century.

One can reasonably argue that today most labor unions have out-lived their usefulness and that government is far too large, too powerful, too wasteful, and too intrusive. But the solution is not to be found in some misplaced nostalgia for an idealized past that never existed in the first place. The ideology of *laissez-faire* capitalism denies the complex realities of human nature. We need boundaries – checks and balances in government and regulations and controls in business – lest the strongest, the most ambitious and the most ruthless achieve total domination. To hear the way some conservative Christians speak so effusively (if not reverently) of the glories of the free market, one might assume they think that the only human beings born without a sin nature are capitalists.

There is no question that the original American system of government as structured under the Constitution was essentially libertarian in nature. The federal government was relatively weak, and the Bill of Rights maximized individual liberty and freedom. As mentioned earlier, although the Constitution granted Congress the power to enact legislation to provide for the “general welfare” of the American people, this provision was interpreted

very narrowly and rarely exercised in the first century of the nation’s history. But what libertarians and conservatives often overlook is that the Founding Fathers could only establish a system as they did because of the residual influence of our Judeo/Christian heritage which tempered the worst of our natural impulses. Although fraught with imperfections and inconsistencies, there was nevertheless a common consensus in America at the time that derived from two sources: traditional biblical Christian values and Enlightenment political philosophy.

Still, libertarian-style government was a great risk. In 1787, in the wake of Shay’s Rebellion, George Washington admitted that “We have, probably, had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation” – an assessment that precipitated the discarding of the Articles of Confederation in favor of a new system that granted substantially more power to the federal government. In support of the ratification of the new Constitution, James Madison acknowledged in *The Federalist Papers* that there is “a degree of depravity in mankind” that must to be accounted for in the creation of a workable political system. Madison and others among the Founding Fathers thought the experiment in self-government to be worth the risk – but based on a very critical consideration. As Madison put it:

We have staked the whole of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government, upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.

John Adams thought the same, and was quick to warn that “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to govern any other.” Washington added that “It is impossible to rightly govern without God and the Bible.” Some contemporary historians note this correlation, such as George Tindall and David Shi in their textbook, *America: A Narrative History*.

The new American republic would endure so long as the majority of the people were virtuous and willingly placed the good of society above the self-interest of individuals [or groups]. Herein lay the danger of the new American experiment in popular

government; even as leaders enthusiastically fashioned new state constitutions, they feared that their experiments in republicanism would fail because of the lack of civic virtue. [George B. Tindall & David E. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*. Fifth Edition (W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 273]

It is no coincidence, then, that as the common consensus regarding “civic virtue” gradually eroded over subsequent generations, as the influence of biblically-based morality withered, and as powerful individuals and groups took advantage of freedom to exploit their fellow citizens, there was more need for government to step in and regulate business practices and the economy in the interest of the general welfare.

Libertarianism, like authoritarian socialism, fails to adequately account for the egoistic impulses of human nature. Libertarians put forth a minimalist view of government: they argue that government is

by nature imperious, corrupt and untrustworthy, and therefore individual liberty should be maximized to keep government in check. Authoritarian socialists also purport to believe in the inherent goodness of humankind, yet they promote policies that maximize government authority in order to enforce their idea of “social justice” via the redistribution of wealth. The Founding Fathers, although more sympathetic to libertarianism than authoritarianism, attempted to strike a prudent balance in keeping with the realities of human nature and the moral climate of their time. In doing so, they created a system that guaranteed basic civil liberties while emphasizing the responsibilities of citizenship in keeping with the moral and ethical principles of Natural Law.



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