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# COMPASSION VERSUS SOCIAL JUSTICE

## *Have the Progressives Sold OUR Souls?*

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### A CAUTION

**By Jay B Gaskill**

When we think of *compassion* writ large, we tend to think of those charismatic spiritual leaders who, in the model of Jesus, the Buddha and Albert Schweitzer, promoted universal compassion by their personal examples, by appeals to a higher authority (or our better angels), but not by government coercion.

But when we think of *social justice*, we tend to think of political figures on a mission, compassion with teeth.

The early phases of social justice were inspiring missions of compassion-motivated liberation pursued by non-violent means - thinking especially of iconic figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. But all movements evolve, and in its later phases, the social justice movement *mutated*, turning into a fundamentally different political animal, one in which individuated justice and acts of person-to-person compassion were swamped by sweeping schemes aimed collective human betterment.

The mutation passed almost unnoticed. To understand its true nature, compare and two models:

- I. The old model was social justice as the liberation of a colonized country, or of a repressed race; these are liberations from imposed injustice, a redaction of coercion. They represent countless individual instances of liberation without the need to inflict unjust coercion on the rest.
- II. The new model is state-sanctioned 'transformation' of a social and economic order, whether *in toto*, or material part. These efforts always seem to create some 'unearned winners' and 'innocent losers'; and for that reason there are instances of injustice and very imperfect justice in the mix, on both sides of the ledger. Lenin excused this mess with the cynical observation that 'you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs'. Of course the Lenin-Stalin omelet was rotten; and the broken eggs were broken human bodies, casualties piling up in the millions.

Such extreme examples foreshadow the potential endpoint of all the less extreme examples. The question of the day is whether the gradualist trend of state-compelled social justice, particularly the agenda of compelled human equalization, when administered incrementally in small doses, is taking us to a similar Leninist endpoint.

Here is the core issue: Is it wise or even permissible to enlist political power to remake human society, given the risk that such projects do not stop with just a safety net, but all too easily lead on to a 'captive democracy' in which political power remakes voters into subservient elements in a highly controlled social order?

John E. E. D. Acton, the first Baron Acton (1834–1902) penned a famous letter to one Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 in which he warned that '**Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**' Lord Acton was a noted historian devoted to a history of liberty; he was a committed 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal, a friend of Tocqueville. Lord Acton was neither the first nor the last prophetic voice that warned us of the traps and snares that await those humanitarians who make a bargain with the powerful to force people 'do good', or to 'be good'.

The legend of Faust is a cautionary fable about the risks that attend a power-bargain with the devil. The Christian Gospels capture a similar moment of power-temptation when the devil offered Jesus temporal kingship over the world (offer refused). But modernity in all its 'scientific' glory has ushered in an era of incautious social experimentation and 'people-engineering' that takes on its own momentum, proceeding apace with fewer and fewer institutional or moral limits.

Many sophisticated moderns, caught up in the enthusiasm of the progressive project, tend to dismiss Faust's bargain and Christ's power-temptation as poetry or superstition, respectively; and Acton's warning is ignored as irrelevant, or disparaged as the ranting of a dead white Englishman. In these and other ways, we face the modern and postmodern ethos, now amped up by cool devices that relentlessly deliver information overload twenty four hours a day. This is a tsunami of the spirit, smothering our wisdom legacy deep under its brackish waves.

Enter the social justice *church* movements. Political issues are delicate for religious institutions because they can lose their charitable tax exempt status by becoming political action organizations, shilling for candidates. But if you look carefully, you will find examples of religious institutions weighing in on the fashionable social justice issues of the moment, like 'taxing the rich', 'spreading the wealth', and using government to 'fix the homeless problem'. I invite you to do your own survey. I suspect you will find that a social justice group in a church or synagogue is often less and less about directly and personally helping the poor, comforting the unfortunate and giving refuge to the victim of tyranny, and more and more about pressing for 'legislation' that will 'do good things'. This translates in practice to 'doing good things' by reallocating taxation (i.e., raising it), adjusting spending and regulation policies (in the direction of greater control) to some social end. This is frequently defended (even in the religious setting) by using the same collective language that the Marxists use, 'structural change', 'group empowerment' and 'reducing inequality'. When one is in this mindset, government is seen as the tool of politics by which a dominant group represses a victim group or by which that process is reversed.

Now I don't want to stray from the core issue, say, by getting into talk show host Glenn Beck's peroration against 'social justice churches' *as a group*. After all, religion's traditional and legitimate province **is** the moral realm. The political class, should never be shielded from the scorn of 'prophets' when that approbation has been earned...and it surely has been earned.

There are a number of sharply limned moral issues that by their very nature involve government, and therefore politics: (in an earlier era) slavery; (in any era) questions of war and peace, the blatantly immoral conduct of a public official and the endless hypocrisies of the elites; (in today's news) abortion, euthanasia and human cloning.

I sense that by giving money to political advocates, our religious social justice friends intend to leverage their gifts. Buy a homeless man a lunch is a one-off event, but buying a politician's support for your cause is a gift that keeps on giving...or so it seems. But too often for all to many of us, the attraction to a 'cause' and our enthrallment to the gestures and symbols of support for it, become a substitute for actually helping that suffering man, woman or child just a few feet away.

In the temptation to go for the deceptively easy fix, to get our local politician to 'pass a law', the core issue was lost: When endowed bureaucracies are politically tasked to fix the human condition and are given the coercive power to make a go of it, the whole effort erodes human dignity and displaces common humanity and charity. Such power, once conferred on government bureaucrats, is hard to reclaim and even harder to contain. We will hear that 'charities are not enough'. But neither is the government's welfare apparatus.

I grant that some conservatives and liberals are personally ungenerous; but many more of these men and women are generous than not. Ah, but it turns out that the members of new crop of *progressives* are far less personally generous (with exceptions noted) in the sense that political contributions trump charity, than typically conservative men and women. Is it not striking that the populations of the conservative, red-voting states, are significantly more likely to donate time and talent to charities than those who live in liberal, blue-voting states?

If this gives you pause, then consider the trend of events over the last five decades. And also consider that the progressive train, here and in Europe, is running on empty. The tipping point signs are concealed in plain sight. In one country we read of scary 'welfare' riots, in another country we read of asset seizures by the government, in yet another we read of yet one more public debt fix, 'concealed' borrowing generated by zero interest 'loans' of fiat money...and so on.

After these tipping point signs play themselves out fully, the truly stark choices will begin to confront each set of political elites: Each challenged social economy will back off from the bureaucratic welfare state model in favor of less 'perfect' but more individuated, person-to-person solutions; or it will head full-on into the total bureaucratic state. There will be no announcement of the arrival of the full on bureaucratic state because this was a gradual process *by design*.

### **So how will you tell?**

In a full-on bureaucratic state, your most important choices, most of the time, whether to start or change a business, to get or not get care, to work or not work in a given field or job, are petitions directed at a government agency, bureau or department, or to a thoroughly regulated and controlled 'private' one performing essentially the same function. True creative innovation will be strangled but you may not notice because the fruits of someone's earlier innovations will still be in the pipeline. Yet your sense of life will increasingly feel cramped. You will be talking about the 'new normal' with a sense of resignation. The political system will look democratic to you, but every change in policy, for good or ill, is controlled by the bureaucrats. Members of the political class, especially those closest to you, are reduced to working out 'favors' for their various constituents. Real 'structural change' will seem out of the question, because it will already have happened.

Anyone who lived in Eastern Europe from 1955 through 1995 is far more sensitive to these signs than those of us who have not 'enjoyed' the experience of living in a 'benign' bureaucratic state. The general forms and staging of these developments were carefully and cogently predicted by the 20<sup>th</sup>

Century Austrian economist, **Friedrich von Hayek** (1899-1992), a liberal who addressed this important book to ‘my fellow socialists’. {*The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents--The Definitive Edition*, University of Chicago Press 2007, 1944.} Hayek’s main thesis, carefully and cogently argued, was that the very essence of the progressive socialist project (i.e., the ‘benign’ bureaucratic state) was the conceit that central, top-down planning can be accomplished without perverse, inhumane results (as Hayek put it, results that well-meaning socialists would reject). These systemic creeping authoritarian features were built into the very scheme. What Hayek did not say, partly because it was so obvious to him, and cannot say to us now – because he died in 1992, was the explicit warning that once a society is caught in this trap, getting out becomes a multi-decade exercise in frustration, suffering and despair.

Therefore, the next time (whether in a church, synagogue, cocktail party, or an across the street conversation) you hear ‘those right wingers’ disparaged, or someone griping about ‘heartless conservatives’, or anyone uttering any of the countless ‘socially conscious’ epithets based on the ‘everyone knows we’re right’ premise, steel yourself with a corrective.

Thinking liberals and conservatives are in this together. The moment-to-moment policy choices may be challenging and complicated, but cutting through all of the political and ideological rhetoric we face the same chilling reality: **Authentic person-to-person compassion and ‘progressive social justice’ are at war.**

Reasonable minds can differ about individual policies (which is why real dialogue is essential), but in a war like this you and I need to take the same side, in favor of person-to-person compassion and a freer future. Then we do our homework, stay engaged and never give up.

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