

1990

A Preface to American Politics

Steven Alan Samson

Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Samson, Steven Alan, "A Preface to American Politics" (1990). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 77. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/77

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Helms School of Government at Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

CHAPTER ONE: A PREFACE TO AMERICAN POLITICS

Steven Alan Samson

A. "NOW WE SEE THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY"

The Parable of the Great Fish [or, Humphrey the Whale]

And it came to pass that God looked down upon the Great Fish and inquired, "You are a wise old fish. Tell me, what is this thing, water, in which ye swim?"

And the fish thought for a moment, and replied, "I can neither taste, nor smell, nor see it. I know not what water is, Oh Lord."

And many months passed.

And lo, one day black clouds rolled across the sky and blotted out the Sun, and there came a great squall, and a tempest, and a storm which washed the Great Fish onto the land.

The Great Fish struggled mightily, but the waves grew calm and the tide receded and left him landward.

And as the clouds parted, and the Sun's rays began, first to warm, and then to bake his scales, the Great Fish looked skyward and said, "Dear God, I know now what is 'water.'"¹

1. We Are Like Fish in Water. Like other creatures, we human beings tend to be oblivious to or detached from our immediate circumstances. If everything seems normal, then it is "business as usual." We are not likely to notice the air we breathe unless we can see it or it chokes us.

a. Our Circumstances: Consider the water we drink from the tap; the steady drone of city noises; or the news we read in the newspaper and see on television. There is something abstract, predictable, and reassuringly normal even about the endless

¹Paul Stephen Dempsey, The Social and Economic Consequences of Deregulation. New York: Quadrangle, 1989, p. xiii.

international crises, scandals, murders, and natural disasters that fill the headlines. Contemplating the calamities of life, what do we do? We may wince for a moment and wrinkle our brow, but the cloud quickly passes and we distance ourselves from them. Without scarcely a thought people set out the garbage, send the children off to school, take the bus to work, pay the insurance premiums, or telephone a distant friend. Yet all of these ordinary -- these "normal" -- activities are not only affected by political circumstances beyond our personal control but also help shape the general political climate. Politics may not be everything, but it affects everything we do.

2. What Is Politics?: Let us begin by defining our terms. What is politics and why should we study it? Here we quickly discover that the concept is too broad to define in concrete terms. Politics may be defined very simply as "the pursuit and exercise of power." Politics is also called "the art of the possible." The vagueness of these non-definitions suggest that politics is not some thing, but an abstract concept or an invisible process that seldom calls attention to itself.

a. Let us focus on one ingredient: power. In the political sense of the word, power is "the ability to influence or control the behavior of others." Although we might believe that politics is a specialized pursuit, such as campaigning for political office or debating various public issues, it is actually an inescapable part of our everyday lives, like the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the city noises that drone monotonously

in the background.

b. Context: The Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, wrote that "I am I and my circumstances."² This is perhaps only a restatement of Aristotle's assertion that man is a "political animal," but it points to the importance of the milieu or context in which we live. We are inescapably a part of the life and activity of the world around us and it is inescapably a part of ourselves. There are no "self-made men." As John Donne noted, "no man is an island."

3. Purpose of the Course: Consider the many ways politics affects our air, water, and our habitat generally through laws, regulations, taxes, subsidies, privileges, punishments, and exchanges. This course is designed to introduce fresh perspectives on the common problems we face as members of various political communities, such as cities, counties, states, families, churches, and businesses.

B. CITIZENS AND HOUSEHOLD STEWARDS

1. Public and Private Distinction: You may be surprised that I have included "private" along with "public" organizations. But the distinction between public and private concerns is less clear today than ever. And politics is at least part of the reason.

a. Let me use an illustration to which we will return

²"Meditations on Quixote." See Julian Marias, Jose Ortega y Gasset: Circumstance and Vocation. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970, pp. 360-64.

later. Consider the limited liability corporation, which has the legal ability to shift the financial costs of risky ventures from its owners, managers, and even investors to its consumers, creditors, and ultimately the general public. Some estimates (1990) suggest that the cost of the savings and loan bailout will eventually surpass \$500 billion. This comes to around \$2000 for every man, woman, and child.

1) This situation should raise some questions. Why should the general public pay for the foolish mistakes -- not to mention the stupidity and greed -- of some of its members? We are always having to make choices. The fact that certain causes lead to certain effects is something we ignore at our peril. As we shall see very shortly, liability is an inescapable concept. In politics as in private life, the buck stops somewhere. Somebody pays the bill.

2) But here we encounter a problem: Who should pay? As a society, we have chosen to socialize or spread out the costs of various economic activities, including much of what we call "private enterprise." Have we made a sound choice? This is a political issue.

2. Politics and Economics: At this point, we need to begin fleshing out the concept of politics with some content. Let us begin by injecting economics.

a. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, politics -- by definition -- had to do with the public affairs of the city (the polis). Such words as "citizen," "bourgeois," "burgess,"

"urbane," and "metropolitan" derive from various roots that mean "city" and indicate "belonging" as well as "guardianship" or "service." For the ancients, citizenship meant participation in the religious cult. Outsiders were barbarians and hence uncivilized. Aristotle defined man -- civilized man -- as a "political animal:" that is, a creature [or creation] of the city.

b. Economics, on the other hand, concerned the private affairs of the household (the oikos). Such words as "ecology," "ecumenical," "domain," "domestic," "property," "possession," "habitation," "tenure," and "house" derive from roots that refer to "having" or "holding," that is, to private ownership, human or divine.

c. The confusion of public and private affairs -- of politics with economics -- was thought to breed corruption, which is the opposite of the kind of public virtue -- moral strength or self-government -- our founders wished to cultivate. The public trust is violated by using an office for personal gain as if it were private property, just as the conscience is violated by perjury.

d. A public official does not hold a property right to his office but is a representative or trustee: that is, a steward or servant of the owner, not the master of the house, as we shall see.

e. This public-private dichotomy, then, was not simply a pagan distinction. In Proverbs 31, King Lemuel described the

household economy of the virtuous woman, who traded in the marketplace and helped the needy, while her husband sat at the city gates and engaged in public service. Indeed, the Bible has a great deal to say about politics and government, but primarily in relation to the divine plan or "economy." Jesus counseled his disciples to be ministers or servants rather than act like the gentiles who lord it over their people. Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah were elevated to offices of trust by foreign kings and proved themselves to be wise stewards. The prophets frequently condemned the misuse of political power as "oppression" and "unrighteousness."

f. Many modern ideologues tend to belittle the household as something held back from the public sphere. The 19th century French anarchist, Pierre Proudhon, for example, wrote that "property is theft!" But Christianity brings both elements -- the city and the household -- into harmony in the heavenly city of Jerusalem (Heb. 11:16) that is "prepared as a bride" (Rev. 21:2). Christ gave the household a place of honor by taking it as the model of his kingdom -- "in my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2) -- and then giving pride of place to the household servants by calling them friends (John 15:15) and adopting them as sons (John 1:12; Gal. 4:5-6). Even so, the Apostle Paul noted that the household heirs must still submit to tutors and governors until they have been prepared. Internal self-government -- obedience to the will of God -- must precede external liberty. James Madison acknowledged this connection and

understood its political significance when he maintained that "conscience is the most sacred property." We are not supposed to render everything unto Caesar.

3. Who Gets What, When, How?: Yet consider how we today have confused these two spheres, the public and the private. Harold Lasswell has given us one of the classic definitions of modern politics in the form of a question: "Who gets what, when, how?"³

a. The "what" may well be a private benefit -- for individuals or groups rather than for society as a whole.

b. The "how" may include use of the public treasury to reward friends and punish enemies. This definition necessarily enlarges the scope of modern political science.

c. In the view of Albert Jay Nock, modern politics is largely "an attempt to accomplish by political means what traditionally was accomplished by economic means." Unfortunately, libertarians tend to make the opposite mistake by putting a price tag on almost everything.

d. Neither extreme exhausts the possibilities. Dwelling on them impoverishes our lives. "For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul" (Matt. 16:26)? Neither politics nor economics -- separately or together -- should command our ultimate loyalty.

4. The what and the how raise another question: Why? The

³Harold Lasswell, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How? Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1958.

modern social sciences derive from a branch of eighteenth century moral philosophy called political economy. These two distinct concepts were thus moved from opposition to juxtaposition.

a. Ethical Issues: Political economy concerns what was then called practical knowledge, but political economy is now largely divorced from moral or ethical considerations in favor of expediency. The "what" of Lasswell's formula ("Who gets what, when, how") is not always -- or even very often -- what we may desire the most. At times this "what" may even be barely tolerable, as when our food is rationed. Political decisions often involve life and death issues. Yet the quality of the decision making -- or the decision makers themselves -- may be dismayingly poor and irresponsible. The profits of some may risk considerable harm for others. A tension is evident right at the heart of Lasswell's definition because it ignores this ethical dimension.

5. In part this is because we tend to confuse the interests of individuals with those of society. This is the problem of the one and the many⁴ to which we will return again and again. But more than this, we tend to confuse lesser goods for the greatest. This is the problem of idolatry, as we shall see.

a. The question is not only who pays the bill but "Who benefits?" Cui bono? [The question of salvation. See below]. The individual? Or the group? This problem may also be seen in

⁴See Rousas John Rushdoony, The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy. Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978 [1971].

our attempts to reconcile liberty and authority. Who has the right to decide? [The question of sovereignty]. The individual? Groups? Experts? From a worldly perspective, the interests of the one and the many remain always at odds. The interests of one or the other must ultimately prevail. Yet for a Christian, the two -- unity and diversity -- find their ultimate expression and reconciliation in the Godhead, in the Holy Trinity. Think of the motto of the Three Musketeers: "One for all and all for one." In genuine love -- in a covenantal unity -- there is no loss of individuality. Far stronger than coercion, even in the form of majority rule, is a consensus that grows out of a covenant relationship of mutual service.

We shall see in the following sections what happens to individuals and societies when this balance or harmony is lost.

C. DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW

1. Epistemology: Where is the starting point for understanding, evaluating, even solving the problems we confront as citizens? Here we must turn to theology and philosophy. One concern shared by both is epistemology, the theory of knowledge.

2. Differing Perspectives: Let us immediately recognize that citizens generally, even committed Christians, are usually divided both on specific issues and what they mean, as well as on the perspectives or principles that may apply in each case. Some of us will be more sympathetic to a particular viewpoint than others. Some see the issue in terms of individual

responsibility. Others see it as a societal problem. When laws are broken or lives destroyed, some may blame the victim and others may blame the system. Still others will simply ask: "What's the beef?" But we are not likely to get to the bottom of the issues themselves -- about which we will tend to disagree -- unless we can learn to see beyond the immediate circumstances. There are other questions to consider first: "Do we really know what the problem is?" If not, "how can we know?" Thgus we must learn to discern the governing principles or the rules of the game. Then we may learn to think critically. If we seek real answers, we must look beyond the individual problems and the assumptions that lie behind them. We have to get outside the immediate circumstances that may cloud our vision.

3. The Archimedean Point: The ancient Greek scientist Archimedes believed that with the proper leverage he could move the world. But that is true only if a fulcrum is placed at some point beyond it. The same principle applies to our desire to understand the world. We need a superior vantage point that lies outside it. Where will we find it?

4. By What Standard?: The theologian R. J. Rushdoony points out in his book, By What Standard?, that "what a philosophy assumes to begin with, ultimately determines all that it can be or can know."⁵ By what standard do we gauge truth, beauty, or justice?

⁵Rousas John Rushdoony, By What Standard?: An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til. Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1974 [1959], p. 2.

5. This starting assumption is known as a "presupposition." All of us reason from presuppositions. They are part of the invisible medium of our existence, so we think about them as little as we think about air, water, noise, and everyday politics.

D. BIBLICAL LAW

1. The Bible: The Bible was the original law book of the early American colonists, as it had been for ancient Israel. The biblical covenant -- with its promises of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience -- provided the blueprints, template, or model of government for civil government, church government, and family government alike.

a. Despite the great missionary efforts of the early church and the spreading influence of Christianity, the Bible was literally kept under lock and key in the Middle Ages. It was expensive to reproduce by hand and was available only in the Latin Vulgate, effectively restricting access to ordained priests and scholars. Under these circumstances, its impact on daily life was limited.

b. But this began changing in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. In opposition to the papacy, John Wyclif began translating the Bible into English around 1380. Then a new technology, Johan Gutenberg's movable type printing press, began to liberate the Bible from the cloisters and introduced it into the marketplace. Within decades, Columbus sailed to the New

World.

c. Reformation: Within decades, Martin Luther and John Calvin helped launch a sweeping reform of the Church that broke the control of the Roman hierarchy. Luther translated the Bible into German. Within another century, the Pilgrims brought their Geneva Bibles and the Puritans their King James Bibles when they crossed the Atlantic. They used the Bible as their political textbook, as their only infallible guide for governing their lives and their communities. It was this early example that laid the groundwork for our federal and constitutional form of government, as we shall see.

2. General Revelation: The Bible is unique as an example of special revelation. But general revelation is also important for all of us. God's creation is governed by his law: not only what we read in the Bible, but also what we discern from the creation about us. All of us enjoy the blessings of what may be called "common grace." God sends his rain upon both the just and the unjust. The common life of humanity is governed by the inescapable realities of God's creation. As Russell Kirk has observed: "Although the hatred of order is suicidal, it must be reckoned with: ignore a fact, and that fact will be your master."⁶ God's realities are inescapable.

E. INESCAPABLE CONCEPTS

⁶Russell Kirk, The Roots of American Order. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974, p. 7.

Consider the following observations by Dr. Rushdoony:

Man is inescapably religious. He may deny God, but all the categories of his life remain religious, and all are categories borrowed from the Triune God. Since the only world man lives in is the world God created, his thinking even in apostasy is inevitably conditioned and governed by a God-given framework. Men cannot escape that framework. They may deny God's sovereignty; but they cannot stop believing in sovereignty; they merely transfer it to man or State. Total law and planning, i.e. predestination, is inescapable; denied to God, it is simply transferred to the scientific socialist State which predestinates or totally governs and plans all things; if deity be denied to the God of Scripture, it merely reappears in man or the State. And if the church ceases proclaiming the Gospel, then religion does not perish; it reappears as politics or economics, and salvation continues to be offered to inescapably religious man.

Salvation is a necessity of man's being, and the goal of salvation is new life and freedom. If salvation be not accepted in God through Christ, then it is accepted in man, or in an order of man such as the State.⁷

1. Shortly, we will add liability and infallibility to the above three: sovereignty, predestination (law), and salvation (religion).⁸ But let us begin then with the first of our inescapable concepts: the claim of sovereignty. It is the original source of power or ownership. It is expressed in terms of a legal relationship. It is the prerogative of a king over his realm and his subjects. What is demanded by the one and owed

⁷Rousas John Rushdoony, "The Society of Satan," Biblical Economics Today, 2 (Oct./Nov. 1979).

⁸Immanuel Kant, who rejected Christianity and sought to develop a man-centered philosophy, still acknowledged the same basic categories. According to Stanley L. Jaki, Angels, Apes, and Men (Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden, 1983), p. 27: "The course on logic . . . shows Kant's preoccupation with man. Its introduction contains a list of four short questions to which all philosophy can be reduced: '1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope? 4. What is man?'"

by the other is allegiance: the loyalty a vassal swears to his lord. In politics, sovereignty embraces all three functions of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. It asks an executive question: Who wields ultimate authority, who is in charge, who is the boss? It asks a legislative question: Who makes the rules, who sets the agenda? Finally, it also asks a judicial question: What is the court of last resort, the highest court of appeal? In other words, Where does the buck stop? President Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that said "The buck stops here."

a. Creation, Fall, and Redemption: The Biblical view is that God is our Creator and that He alone is sovereign. The creation, including humanity, depends on God for its unity, purpose, and meaning: indeed, for its very existence. But man has "changed the truth of God [infallibility] into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). Thus all humanity has fallen into sin -- into depravity [liability] -- by rejecting God's rule [predestination]. Instead of exercising lawful dominion or stewardship, Adam -- the guardian of Eden -- rebelled and led all creation in rebellion against its Creator. Yet God is merciful and stretches out a saving hand [salvation] to a faithless and perverse generation through the preaching of the Gospel [infallibility]. The theme of creation, sin, and deliverance out of the house of bondage runs in multiple cycles throughout Scripture and, indeed, throughout history. When the people of Israel demanded a king so

that they would be like other people, the LORD said to Samuel, "they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (I Sam. 8:7b).

b. Nature: Few people consciously hold to the Biblical view today. Some maintain that sovereignty is vested in Nature. For example, some radical feminists and environmentalists, known as "deep ecologists," have adopted an earth goddess religion (Gaia).

c. Secular humanists of the last two centuries usually locate it in the people (hoi polloi). They reject theonomy (God's law) in favor of autonomy (self-law). While Christianity begins and ends with God, humanism begins and ends with man. It is the temptation to "be as gods, knowing [determining for oneself] good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Two centuries ago the popular saying was "the voice of the people is the voice of God (vox populi, vox dei)." This assumes the people speak with one voice -- or hold one ideology -- which seems to have been one of the purposes for building the "tower of Babel." But in fact, the word "sovereignty" is absent from our own Constitution, a remarkable omission which suggests that the officers of our government are servants who hold positions of trust rather than title.

d. An earlier claim of "divine right of kings," which also was a claim of title or sovereignty, had only recently been vanquished during the War for Independence. Many of the early colonists believed that sovereignty rests with God alone. They

came to this country because of their opposition to the Erastianism [establishmentarianism or state-churchism] of the Church of England which made the king the Head of the Church. Generations later, the framers of the Constitution were still largely inspired by a Biblical world-view and had no desire to substitute King Numbers⁹ for King Bramble [Abimelech in Judges 9:8-15] or Aesop's King Stork.¹⁰ Indeed, many of the patriots had earlier fought under the slogan, "No king but King Jesus." Jesus himself had asserted sovereignty: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18).

e. Today, however, each person in America is jealous of his or her individual rights. We seem to believe in the sovereign individual. By way of contrast, the emphasis is on group rights in Communist countries. The ruling Communist parties still enjoy special privileges (private laws) as the "vanguard of the proletariat," that is, as the leading edge of the victorious working class, which alone enjoys rights.

f. The character of a political system -- whether individualist or collectivist, capitalist or Communist -- may be seen in sharper focus when we examine what individuals or groups are by definition excluded from the enjoyment of life, liberty, and property. Its character is best revealed in how it treats

⁹John Randolph, "King Numbers," in The Portable Conservative Reader, ed. Russell Kirk. New York: Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 131-54.

¹⁰"The Frogs Desiring a King," in The Harvard Classics, vol. 17: Folk-Lore and Fable, ed. Charles W. Eliot. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909, p. 15.

its widows, orphans, strangers, and servants of God.

2. Besides sovereignty, R. J. Rushdoony notes other "inescapable concepts" that have to do with constitutional sources. What he calls law or predestination raises another question: "What is the plan?" In conjunction with sovereignty, the question is legislative: "Who sets the agenda or the direction?" This is related to what Aristotle called the formal cause.

a. The Bible emphasizes that, despite the depravity of man, history is overruled by God's Providence. God chooses whom He will to serve His purposes. "Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou?" (Isa. 45:9b). When the Bible says that God created man in his own image, it means that God imprinted his stamp or character on man, who in turn was given dominion -- the power of attorney -- under God's authority. As a steward or trustee over creation, Adam's duties included the kingly function of naming the creatures and the priestly function of keeping the keys (guarding the garden). Man's sin entails an attempt to seize divine mastery over creation. By rejecting God's rule, man subjects himself to human misrule.

b. Planning: In this secular age, we profess a belief in the self-made man and believe that we are free. But our lives are continually shaped by the plans and expectations of others. Not only is our character stamped upon us from without but so is our destiny. C. S. Lewis recognized this in The Abolition of Man:

Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. There neither is nor can be any simple increase of power on Man's side. Each new power won by man is a power over man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows in the triumphal car.¹¹

c. Agenda: In politics, if you wish to know the purpose of a proposed law or rule, look at whose interests are served. Policies, like ideas, have consequences, so we must judge their fruits to see whether they match the original promises. There is always a hidden agenda. As in any shell game, appearances are deceiving. Vilfredo Pareto, the Italian political scientist, observed that power is always exercised by the few over the many. But the few usually frame their plans in terms of what they identify as the "public good." Socialists make a fetish of the planned economy; eugenicists [genetic engineers] of planned parenthood; and philanthropists of cradle to grave security.

3. This, in turn, raises another question: "What is the goal or purpose of it all?" If law or predestination raises the issue of means, what Rushdoony calls salvation or religion is a question about ends. "Who benefits ("cui bono")?" What is the "greatest good" (the "summum bonum")? Aristotle equated the good life with happiness, which in its highest form is the life of reason. Friedrich Nietzsche, by contrast, substituted the "will to power" for a fixed purpose, or what Aristotle called a final

¹¹C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms. New York: Macmillan, 1965 [1947], p. 71.

cause. Other questions might be raised: Does the law or plan serve the general welfare of the public ("pro bono publico") or does it serve an essentially private interest? Later we will consider how politics can be used to plunder some people for the benefit of others.

a. Redemption: Religion is what binds people together. Most of us regard "salvation" as a religious concept and it is. It refers to health ("salus" in Latin) and, especially in a Christian context, to regeneration. The Bible says that God saves those He chooses by purchasing them -- redeeming them from sin, freeing them from the house of bondage -- through the blood of Jesus Christ which washes away their sins. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

b. But the ancient Romans had the health of the body politic in mind when they looked to their emperors for salvation. Instead of seeking grace from above, they sought it below: that is, from flesh and blood in the here and now. (The name of Romania's National Salvation Front reflects this tradition). This very worldly concept of salvation strongly resembles the Economic [libertarian] and Therapeutic [reform liberal] traditions¹² that largely define the American dream today.

c. The wisdom of the Epicureans was to "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The Apostle Paul alluded to this

¹²See Bruce L. Shelley, The Gospel and the American Dream. Portland, OR: The Multnomah Press, 1989, p. 47.

philosophy in his Epistles and regarded it as the natural view of those who lacked hope in Christ. In another passage, he wrote scornfully of those "whose God is their belly." The modern pursuit of happiness, as defined by the pleasure principle (the basis of hedonism and utilitarianism), clashes with the Biblical perspective.

d. But we moderns also tend to take a Manichaeian view. Marxists especially have elevated conflict to the status of a governing principle of reality. This is similar to the view of the ancient Manichaeans: good and evil are not simply moral categories but two metaphysical realities in conflict, either eternally or until one or the other finally triumphs. What is important is to be on the winning side. That is salvation.

e. Marxists and other utopians hold to what Rushdoony has called "the doctrine of selective depravity."¹³ Certain enemies of the people, like capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, or foreigners, or international conspirators, become evil incarnate. The Christian, on the other hand, "holds that depravity is universal. Thus, sin is located in the Christian as well as in other men."¹⁴ James Jordan notes:

In a world beset by evil, some adversary must always be identified as the cause of the evil. . . . Perversely, however, "the doctrine of selective depravity ensures conflict not against sin, but between man and man, class and class." The Christian salvation involves personal regeneration, the propagation of the gospel of transformation to others, and war against sin. The utopian

¹³Chalcedon Report, no. 132 (August 1976), p. 1.

¹⁴Ibid.

salvation entails the destruction of the evil group or structure and the enthronement of the (self-)righteous.¹⁵

The bad news of elimination or "liquidation" has all too often been substituted for the good news of transformation. Totalitarian ideologies -- nationalist as well as internationalist -- are best understood as anti-religions or false gospels. By mimicking or caricaturing the Gospel, utopian ideologues plunder the accumulated capital of centuries of Christian civilization. But it is borrowed capital they draw upon. Powerless to replenish what they can only squander many of them have already declared bankruptcy. Communism is already giving way to what is apt to be some new set of horrors. Having helped sack western civilization, the missionaries of deception continue to scurry across its grave. The headlines of the past century have been filled with innumerable horror stories about wars, pogroms, purges, liquidations, and genocide while stories about reconstructed lives are relegated to the religion and family sections. Idolatry -- with its false notions of salvation -- leads to destruction.

4. Two other inescapable concepts need to be mentioned. There is first the question of liability, accountability, or obligation: "Who is responsible?" Once the buck stops, who foots the bill? When we pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor -- incurring what might be termed a "covenant obligation" -

¹⁵James B. Jordan, "Anti-Utopianism in Modern Conservative Thought: Some Criticisms of Molnar and Voegelin," unpublished paper, p. 10.

- how will restitution be made for our failures or shortcomings?

a. The Bible teaches that only God may limit liability.

"Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (Jas. 2:10). So, then, who can be saved, as the disciples wondered after the rich young ruler turned away?

"The things which are impossible with men are possible with God" (Luke 18:27b). In our daily lives we incur obligations which we cannot fully pay. As we become slaves to debt we pray that God will forgive our debts even as we forgive our debtors. Legal immunity from liability is an attribute of sovereignty that may be delegated only as an act of God's grace. "For by grace [sovereignty] are ye saved [salvation, forgiveness of debts] through faith [infallibility]; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

b. Here limited liability as a secular legal concept raises a profound philosophical question: Who pays when an individual or corporation declares bankruptcy? Is it possible to forgive a debt without someone else paying the bill? What does modern society substitute for sovereign grace? Modern life increasingly revolves around the pyramiding of credit rather than the exchange of tangible goods. Rushdoony observes: "Today, the law penalizes the individual with almost unlimited liabilities, so that every kind of insurance is necessary for the individual as homeowner, driver, and parent (in the event his child blackens a bully's

eyes)." ¹⁶

c. On the other hand, corporate irresponsibility is fostered by limited liability laws which, over a period of time, separate property from control, ownership from management, and management from responsibility, all parts of what James Burnham called the managerial revolution. "Social irresponsibility is thus fostered, and the responsible man hamstrung." ¹⁷ Our economics has become highly impersonal, a fact which subverts wise stewardship. Schemes, frauds, scandals, and murders are every bit a part of this system as personal honesty, charity, and social responsibility, perhaps more so. They all come out in the same wash.

d. But this puts Gresham's law into operation. Sir Thomas Gresham, an adviser to Elizabeth I, warned the young queen in 1560 that "bad money drives out good. The same might be said of "bad company." Speculation or manipulation rather than production is now fueling our economic engine. Consider the current (1991) savings and loan crisis. Remember, someone always foots the bill. God may forgive our debts but the state cannot forgive their consequences.

5. Infallibility is another inescapable concept. It concerns our belief as to what is true. At the heart of faith lies a creed -- credo means "I believe." Faith is what enables

¹⁶Rousas John Rushdoony, Politics of Guilt and Pity. Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978 [1970], p. 252.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 252.

us to accept obligations: to pledge our troth -- our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor -- for the sake of a higher good. The concept of infallibility raises the question of final answers: "What is truth" (John 18:28)? "What does it all mean?" It seeks to discern by what standard the truth is represented to us. For Christians, it is the infallibility and integrity of God's word. Truth is relational and covenantal. It is synonymous with faithfulness and is modeled for us by the faithfulness of a true friend. Jesus said, "I am the Way [predestination], the Truth [infallibility], and the Life [salvation]" (John 14:6). In the First Commandment, however, God issues a warning: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). This applies not only to other concepts of sovereignty, providence, and salvation, but also to truth. Christians cannot be satisfied to see the truth held in unrighteousness because they seek the "things which cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:27). Others will turn away from truth and hide from the judgment it portends. Rushdoony notes that "if men refuse to ascribe infallibility to Scripture, it is because the concept has been transferred somewhere else."¹⁸ Here we must be cautious. The Bible repeatedly warns against perjury: that is, false testimony, false judgment, or false faith. "For with what judgment you judge, ye shall be judged" (Matt. 7:2a). What then are some of the consequences?

¹⁸Rousas John Rushdoony, Infallibility: An Inescapable Concept. Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1978, p. 2.

a. Failures of the Church: Churches that fail to teach the word of God breed dullness, joylessness, and ultimately faithlessness among their congregations. As Rushdoony points out, "men have lived confidently in darker eras than ours in the confidence and victory of . . . faith, whereas today the oppression and fear of evil are very near to men, and the force of God's word is very remote."¹⁹ For evidence, just consider the mounting divorce, murder, and suicide rates.

b. Idols for Destruction: Our governing philosophies are part of the problem. Infallibility, like immunity from liability, is an attribute of sovereignty that may, in some sense, be delegated. God has chosen to place others in authority over us, such as parents and rulers, who act as God's ministers -- servants or representatives -- to us for good. But when they exceed their authority they become false gods and come under judgment. Idols are not merely those made of silver and gold -- or even flesh and blood. Democracy, process philosophy, the Marxist dialectic, and even aesthetic experience [see below] are among the principalities and powers that have become substitute faiths. False gods and false prophets abound. Furthermore, some people try to escape the offense of Christianity by denying the existence of a problem. A generation ago, Chief Justice Fred Vinson remarked in Dennis v. United States, 341 U. S. 494 (1951), that "Nothing is more certain in modern society than the principle that there are no absolutes." This is a contradiction

¹⁹Ibid., p. 1.

in terms. We cannot help making assertions about reality and maintaining some with absolute conviction. A character in a Dostoevsky novel maintained that "if God is dead, everything is permitted." Just so. He was making a judgment about reality he professed to be absolutely true.

F. PHILOSOPHICAL OVERVIEW

Let us now apply these principles to the philosophies that have shaped the prevailing world-views of our times.

1. Naturalism: Ancient Greek philosophy began with the presupposition of brute factuality, or naturalism. Something is real only if it can be seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled. For the Greek animists, there was nothing beyond "nature," beyond what they could know or experience ultimately by experience. Their "gods" were anthropomorphic; that is, they were simply caricatures of humanity. Later, Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers developed the idea that the cosmos is governed by natural law.

2. The rise of Christianity injected the ideas of creation, revelation, and divine judgment into the dying pagan culture of Rome and began to transform it. God, who created the world, can change it through his Grace. For example, Prov. 21:1 says: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will." Rome became a deathbed convert to Christianity.

3. All the same, Rome died. The Church became increasingly

divided from within and entangled with worldly affairs without. The chief result was a cultural dualism. Christian supernaturalism based on God's revelation and pagan naturalism based on unaided human reason coexisted side by side in people's thinking. At one time, the Romans sought to domesticate Christianity by admitting the Biblical God to its pantheon of religions. But the early Church father, Tertullian, resisted any such compromise: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition."²⁰ This attitude changed once Christianity became the official religion of the Empire.

4. With the revival of Aristotle's naturalistic philosophy in the West, this cultural dualism or double-mindedness became well-entrenched in medieval Scholastic philosophy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, around a thousand years after Tertullian. An independent intellectual class -- a new secular clergy -- emerged with the rise of universities and the scientific method. For this new breed of intellectual, "nature [was] the starting point, and God the object to be proved."²¹ This dualism became so pronounced that two opposing tendencies --

²⁰Tertullian, "The Prescription Against Heretics," VII, quoted in E. R. Geehan, ed., Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971, p. vi.

²¹Rushdoony, Standard, p. 4.

realism and nominalism -- developed.

a. Realism, which emphasizes an intrinsic unity, is the doctrine that universal concepts have an objective existence apart from particular expressions of them. Thus the Good, the True, and the Beautiful exist in pure form. Such ideas are real and undiluted in their eternal aspect. We acquire knowledge of the world deductively from philosophy. Particular realizations of such ideal-types in the material world are merely fleeting and imperfect expressions of these perfect forms. Taken to an extreme, this rationalistic tendency to idealize generalities or universals has been associated with various utopian programs: that is, with millennial or chiliastic ideologies that envision a future golden age, a "manifest destiny," a global union, a world at peace, a race of supermen, or a classless society. Like the Gnosticism -- the mystery religions or cults of secret wisdom -- that challenged the early Church, modern ideologies that seek salvation in history and heaven on earth too often end in a bloodbath.

b. Nominalism, which emphasizes multiplicity and contingency, is the doctrine that universals -- like truth, goodness, and beauty -- are nothing more than names we give to subjective abstract concepts and do not stand for anything that objectively exists. Particulars are real; universals are not. For example, "politics" is simply a concept that gives us a common point of reference. We impose abstract principles on things and organize them into categories as a means of imposing

order on chaos. Since God is not bound by our theories, we must acquire our knowledge of the world through actual observation (empiricism). But the chaos that looms behind apparent order must also be given its due. Nature is intractable and must be continually and scientifically subdued "by the sweat of the brow." This empirical or inductive approach elevates skepticism to a first principle. It has given rise to a philosophical positivism that seeks to improve the condition of humanity through social science. It lies at the root of modern law, science, and bureaucracy.

c. Here once again we have the problem of the one and the many. We encounter this tension between unity and diversity in many guises, often expressed in pairs of antinomies: politics and economics, public and private, nationalism and individualism, universals and particulars, order and chaos, authority and liberty, the deductive and inductive methods of reasoning, and generic versus topical methods of teaching. At the center of the medieval curriculum -- the Trivium -- was the dialectic, the study of opposites or contradictions, which was sandwiched between grammar and rhetoric.

5. Rationalism: Both of these dispositions -- realism and nominalism -- gradually pushed toward the extremes where only universals or only particulars really matter. Beginning with Renaissance humanism in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, man's autonomous (or self-sufficient) reason became his chief and infallible source of authority about the world.

Now all the world became a stage and every man an actor playing to the galleries.

a. Enlightenment Skepticism: In its nominalistic form, rationalism -- the concept that reason unaided by revelation is the only source of knowledge -- was eventually used by the skeptics of the eighteenth century Enlightenment to judge whether or not God can be known.²² Denying the doctrine of original sin, Enlightenment literary figures like Voltaire and Diderot began taking an optimistic view of human nature and a critical attitude toward the Church. Man was no longer seen as a sinner but as a victim of circumstances who could be uplifted by taking control of his destiny. Willis Glover has written:

There were very few atheists, but the Enlightenment as a movement of the human spirit was essentially an exuberant experience of being emancipated from God and from the limitations of nature by Reason's capacity to know and make use of the laws of nature. There was a real ambiguity here: it was by the rational order of nature that nature was to be transcended and man's salvation achieved.²³

b. Religious skepticism had already given rise to deism, which relegated God to the role of an absentee landlord or a silent demiurge -- artificer or mechanic -- which had set the clockwork into motion. But as Glover has pointed out, the real faith of modern man is in himself.

²²In its realistic form, however, rationalism tends to beget utopian dreams. Francisco Goya understood where this led when he included a caption -- "The Dream of Reason Produces Nightmares" -- in one of his most famous drawings.

²³Willis B. Glover, Biblical Origins of Modern Secular Culture: An Essay in the Interpretation of Western History. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984, p. 10.

c. Voltaire, who was the central literary figure of the Enlightenment, attacked and sought to destroy the institutional Church as a corrupting influence on man and society.

d. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the first of the Romantics, dabbled with notions about original innocence, the noble savage, as well as an authoritative and infallible general will. It appears he regarded truth and justice as expressions of the purified will of the people (purified by an enlightened elite).

1) Both Voltaire and Rousseau sought to free men from what they regarded as the superstitions of Christianity and restore man to the natural order. Rousseau even urged that resisters -- often called "enemies of the people" -- be "forced to be free," a view that undergirds all the modern variants of "totalitarian democracy."

e. As Alexander Pope maintained in his "Essay on Man:"

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.

f. Meanwhile, the British empiricists, like John Locke and David Hume, moved in the direction of skepticism about the design of creation and, in the case of Hume, about the existence of a Creator.

g. The final step toward modern philosophy was taken by Immanuel Kant, who took this dualism between the material world of particulars (studied empirically and inductively) and the ideal realm of universals (studied rationally and deductively) to its "logical" conclusion by placing spiritual things beyond our human ken and confining science to the study of material causes

and whatever patterns may be abstracted from them.

1) Kant's "categorical imperative" or fundamental law of pure practical reason offers this counsel: "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing universal law"²⁴ [salvation]. More simply stated this means that we should act only according to principles we would want to see universally established. This means that man, the measurer, is now the standard or measure of all things.

2) Consequently, knowledge and moral principles are human conventions, not copies of reality [infallibility]. By implication, any unity, meaning, or purpose is defined or imposed by human reason alone. As Rushdoony has commented: "Nature itself join[ed] the ranks of objects and man alone is the presupposition"²⁵ [infallibility]. Instead of creation, then, the new process philosophies that flowed out of the Kantian synthesis drew upon the concept of a natural order that is continually evolving.

6. Atheist Humanism: Nineteenth century philosophers went even further in building on Kant's dualism. Finally, even man himself -- as part of the natural order -- came to be seen as an object that must be recast in the image of science.

a. The earlier cultural duality was now replaced by a dichotomy that totally divorced material from spiritual things. God is no longer seen as a source of either creation or

²⁴Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason (1788).

²⁵Rushdoony, Standard, p. 4.

revelation. G. W. F. Hegel substituted a World Spirit which grows and changes dialectically -- that is, advancing in a ratcheting or zigzag fashion -- through historical evolution. Karl Marx took this dialectic, removed God from history, and substituted the historical struggle of economic classes toward communism [salvation].

b. If deism expelled and silenced God from a direct concern with human affairs, Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection finally broke with Biblical concept of creation altogether. The idea of Nature as a self-existing and evolving reality [predestination] had once again triumphed after a long interlude. Christians began yielding ground in the cultural realm to the new evolutionary or process thought.

c. In politics, this public silence about spiritual things has become confused with the notion of a constitutional separation of church and state. In an earlier time, the Church held up the standard of God's law and often publicly opposed kings and emperors [infallibility]. Today, pastors tend to confine themselves to preaching homilies to their congregations. One result is that an overriding secularism fills what Richard Neuhaus calls "the naked public square" and a crisis of faith that continues unabated.

d. Soon after Darwin published The Origin of Species in 1859 the ranks of atheistic humanism were filled by Promethean skeptics like Karl Marx in economics, Friedrich Nietzsche in philosophy, Wilhelm Wundt and Sigmund Freud in psychology, Lester

Ward in sociology, and John Dewey in education. These process philosophers borrowed from Christianity in order to overcome it. Having stolen the divine fire, as in Shelley's poem, "Prometheus Unbound," they sought to remake man and his world according to a new vision or ideology [predestination]. In this, they were like founders of new religions. But even these newer creeds are perishing in what Nietzsche termed "the twilight of idols."

We will periodically examine the impact of some of these giants of modern thought as we encounter the influences of this intellectual revolution on politics and society.

7. What is behind all this, then? The standard of modern man's thought -- the be-all and end-all of his existence (the summum bonum or "greatest good") -- is his own happiness. This is the basis of philosophical hedonism, which lies at the root of our modern fixation on commercialized eroticism and aestheticism, as symbolized by Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and MTV.

a. Sigmund Freud dealt with it in psychology by identifying the "pleasure principle" (eros or desire) as the chief driving force in our lives [predestination].

b. Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher of utilitarianism whose work influenced John Stuart Mill, sought the "greatest good for the greatest number" [salvation], a notion we tend to equate with liberal democracy. Like Kant's "categorical imperative," this could be described as a nominalistic substitute for a universal principle associated with realism.

8. Biblical Critique: But the danger is the tendency of

these views to equate mankind with its appetites. From a Biblical standpoint, modern man has consequently shut himself off from the wellsprings of life: that is, from a reliance on God. Rushdoony notes that "the temptation of man is 'To be as God,' knowing, that is, determining for himself what shall be good and what shall be evil. Man establishes his own law and decrees his own righteousness and is not bound to a point of reference beyond himself."²⁶ Our self-absorption blinds us to the larger circumstances of our lives and cuts us off from a source of power that lies beyond our little world and beyond our control. "This is the original sin of man. . . . Man sees himself not as a creature but as a god, not as dependent but as an independent and autonomous being." If the first question in politics is "Who is in Charge?," then our natural tendency is to point to ourselves [sovereignty].

a. Theonomy [God's Law]: Yet if we are creatures, as the Bible teaches, the true standard or source of authority is independent of us. God has condescended to reveal himself to us -- in his enscripturated Word, the Bible, and in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. This is the standard by which we are called to live as Christians. It is our infallible textbook for life.

G. IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

1. Political Philosophy: Faith rules in politics as it does in religion. Those who know what they believe and why are better

²⁶Ibid., p. 5.

equipped to exercise power over those who do not. When we talk about truth, sovereignty, predestination, and responsibility we are entering the arena of theology, including the theology of the state, otherwise known as political philosophy. In the arena of political philosophy, we face the question of what is the role of the state or civil government in our lives today. Much of the talk about the separation of church and state seems to assume that religion can be divorced from politics. What can we say from a consciously Christian perspective?

In classical antiquity, the state was always seen as the ultimate order and the essential environment of man. From the Biblical perspective, the state is and must be a religious, i.e. under God, and acting as God's ministry of justice (Romans 13:1-6). It has a strictly limited sphere and is under law, God's law, and it is under God's order, not itself the source of order. While the ancient city-states located divinity variously in relation to the state (i.e. in the state, the ruler, the office, etc.). In essence they held in some form that the state was god walking on earth.

As against this, Biblical faith asserted that the source of ultimate order is not the state but God. Ultimacy and ultimate order transcendent rather immanent. For the state to claim jurisdiction beyond its realm is sin. The Bible gives us numerous examples of what constitutes signal evil on the part of the state. Drafting youth for non-military services to the state and taxing beyond the head tax to as much as 10% (a tithe) of a man's wealth is cited as evil (I Sam. 8). For the state to claim a priestly role, and the control of religion, is evil (II Chron. 26:16-21). Expropriation of property by the state is a very serious transgression (I Kings 21). Debasing the coinage is charged against Judah as part of God's indictment ("Thy silver is become dross," Isa. 1:22). Much, much more could be cited. Suffice it to say that the state is at every point under the law, God's law.

The state thus is not the source of the law but an administrator of one aspect of God's law. This difference between Biblical faith and the doctrine of the state antiquity and today is of critical importance.

To understand the significance of this difference, let us note, first of all, that the source of law in any society

of thought is the working and actual god of that structure. Where man is the ultimate source of law, there man is god. Where Nature is seen as the ultimate source of law, there nature has been deified. Where the state is the ultimate source of law, there the state is the actual god of man and society.

For the Christian, God is the highest good, and man is a creature of God, created in His image. For Aristotle, "the state or political community . . . is the highest good of all, . . . and embraces all the rest." Man is a "political animal," a creature of the state whose life is defined by the state. "Neither must we suppose that any one of citizens belongs to himself, for they all belong to the state, and are each of them a part of the state." For Aristotle, therefore law and morality have a social reference and statist purposes. When Aristotle wrote his Nicomachean Ethics he made it very clear that ethics is a branch of politics because private good can only be secondary to the statist good. Moreover, "what is good for a nation or a city has a higher, diviner, quality." Education thus in morality or goodness is best undertaken by the state and should be a function of the state.

Clearly, the modern state follows the classical model rather than the Biblical one. It controls education, has largely taken it over, and it defines law, not ministerially but legislatively. The difference is fundamental. Where law is ministerial, the premise is that a higher law exists, and that it is the duty of man and the state to know and apply that higher law. Man cannot create law, because he is under law, and, in every area of his life, physical, biological, economic, moral, and political, moves under the law, and in every area of his life, physical, biological, economic, moral, and political, moves under the law that has its origin beyond man and the natural order. Law is thus transcendental in its source and immanent in its application. It requires study, application, and amendment so that the truth of God's law can be approximated. To cite a specific example, the Ten Commandments declare, among other things, that "Thou shalt not steal." This means that private property has God's sanction as the legitimate means of ownership, and that all violations of the various God-given norms of property, as set forth in the Torah, and illustrated throughout the Scripture, are violations of a standard which has its validity grounded in the very nature of things by God's creative act. The ministerial function of the state is then to expedite the freedom of private property and to protect it. If however, we deny a transcendental source for law and ground law (and property) in custom, mores, or the will of the state, then there is no moral mandate for the state to respect private property. Then the function of the state with respect to law is legislative, i.e., law is what the state declares it is.

Instead of the state using its legislative powers ministerially, it uses them legislatively. the state then, instead of passing laws to conform with ultimate, transcendental law, creates law. There is no possible appeal against the legislative state if its premise is true. Right is what the state does.

Moreover, where God's absolute law is denied, the ability of man to criticize the state is diminished and denied. If there is no absolute God and His law, then there is no absolute standard of right and wrong that I can appeal to against the tyranny of other men and the state. If I deny God, I also deny to myself the logical right to make any judgment about the state, for I have then no law or standard that transcends the power of the state. Thus, I may resent being arrested and sentenced to death for political dissent, but, without a transcendental norm, I have no absolute ground for any objection.²⁷

Is there another way of understanding all this? The question is ultimately one of sovereignty: Who is in charge here? If the answer eludes us, perhaps it is because we have ignored the question -- like fish in water -- and forgotten the starting point. Even Archimedes missed the point. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn stated the central issue of our day very succinctly in his Templeton lecture: "Men have forgotten God."²⁸

²⁷Rousas John Rushdoony, "Towards a Theology of Politics," Imprimis, 2 (February 1973).

²⁸Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Men Have Forgotten God," National Review (July 22, 1983), pp. 872-76.