

Progressivism as Religion: Dworkin's Flawed Belief

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - October 6, 2013

The Tea Party's enthusiastic response to Republicans' willingness to shut down the government rather than fund Obamacare returned attention to a counterproductive instinct among conservatism's rambunctious grassroots -- namely, the notion that political compromise in itself is a bad thing.

On the right, however, conservative elites were the ones -- as is usually the case -- counseling caution, prudence, and political moderation.

In contrast, progressive elites were the ones -- as is usually the case -- leading the way in escalating matters. E.J. Dionne, for example, characterized Tea Party members as not merely misguided in their determination to condition continuing government funding on delaying the Affordable Care Act, but as "deeply radical" and "crazy" destroyers of the Constitution. Following in the footsteps of liberal writer Sam Tanenhaus, Dionne smeared Tea Party activists and conservative officeholders by comparing them to antebellum Southern nullifier and secessionist John C. Calhoun.

This is all of a piece. Whether its scientist Richard Dawkins or HBO talk show host Bill Maher, a prevalent theme among modern progressives is that traditional religious faith is not only devoid of truth but politically harmful.

For the most part, America's leading universities have fallen in line. For decades, their faculties have been largely conservative-ideas-free zones. Professors have shunted aside the wise conviction at the heart of classical liberalism that moral and political knowledge depends on appreciating the many-sidedness of the issues in favor of the smug conviction that progressivism is the truth, truth is progressivism, and that is all that students really need to know.

In his short, posthumously published book, "Religion Without God," Ronald Dworkin, one of the outstanding progressive scholars of constitutional law and leading public intellectuals of his generation, appears to break with this orthodoxy. Differing with many of his colleagues on the left, Dworkin undertakes to promote conciliation in the cultural and political wars.

A professor of law and philosophy at New York University until his death in February 2013, Dworkin seems an unlikely figure to build bridges across the political divide.

Over the course of several decades, he expounded an influential progressive interpretation of American constitutional law. His was a view expressly committed to the notion that in the divisive moral and political matters of the day, reason yielded one correct answer and always of the same valence. Both in major scholarly works and as a regular contributor to the New York Review of Books, Dworkin argued that on issues such as abortion, affirmative action, assisted suicide, and same-sex marriage, fidelity to the Constitution would unequivocally result in left-liberal outcomes.

Nevertheless, in his final book (which is based on the Einstein Lectures he delivered at the University of Bern in 2011) Dworkin offered a pleasant surprise. “If,” he wrote, “we can separate God from religion -- if we can come to understand what the religious point of view really is and why it does not require or assume a supernatural person -- then we may be able to lower, at least, the temperature of these battles by separating questions of science from questions of value.”

When religion is rightly understood, Dworkin contends, theists and atheists (such as himself) have more in common than is generally supposed. But Dworkin is not content to stop there. With his customary philosophical dexterity, his analysis culminates in the suggestion that “religious atheists” such as himself may be the most pious of human beings.

To make this provocative suggestion plausible, Dworkin redefines religion to conform to his progressive sensibilities. What he presents as the offering of an olive branch to believers may seem to a person of faith, with justice, as a hostile takeover attempt. The steps by which Dworkin appropriates the religious label for his own left-liberal and atheistic outlook provide a case study in how the progressive mind, under the guise of conciliation, seeks to command the moral high ground exclusively and discredit that which differs from it.

For most people, religion means the worship of God or gods. Dictionaries tend to reflect the common understanding. Their more elaborate definitions present religion as a set of beliefs about the cause, structure, and purpose of the world that involve an institutionalized system of beliefs, practices, and rituals and are devoted to worshiping gods or one god.

Standard usage today is in accordance with the understanding of religion at the time of the American founding. In his 1785 “Memorial and Remonstrance” -- which successfully argued against a proposed bill in the Virginia state legislature to levy taxes to support “Teachers of the Christian Religion” -- James Madison adopted the common understanding of religion as “the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it.” That the Supreme Court has extended the protection of religious freedom to “a sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that” which God fills in the lives of believers does not alter the core meaning of religion for most people.

Social scientists have sought a more functional definition, one that does not restrict religion to revealed religion based on the Bible. The most influential such definition was provided by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in a seminal essay, "Religion as a Cultural System." Religion, he argued, should be understood as (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

Based on Geertz's functional definition, belief in a divine being is not essential to religion. It is also a morally neutral definition, which covers systems of belief and ways of life that differ profoundly from both progressivism and conservatism in America, including those that involve idol worship, child sacrifice, and self-immolation.

With Geertz, Dworkin denies that belief in gods or God is essential to the religious perspective. But in contrast to Geertz, Dworkin suffuses his definition of religion with moral and political content.

For Dworkin, the meaning of religion consists in "two central judgments about value" that he believes religious people -- theists and some atheists -- regard as objectively true. First, "each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one: that means living well, accepting ethical responsibilities to oneself as well as moral responsibilities to others, not just if we happen to think this important but because it is in itself important whether we think so or not." Second, "what we call 'nature' -- the universe as a whole and in all its parts -- is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder."

Dworkin's definition of religion both reveals and conceals. By insisting that belief in the inherent dignity of each individual life is part of a religious outlook, Dworkin reveals his conviction that one of progressivism's bedrock assumptions is a matter of faith and not a truth of reason.

At the same time, Dworkin conceals his disparagement of traditional biblical faith. He purports to put forward a neutral conception of religion that captures the experience and axioms of believers and many non-believers, even as he decisively tilts the playing field against biblical faith by disconnecting the dignity of the individual and the value and wonder of the world from belief in God.

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