

AGAPE EXCORIATES THEFT

Ro 13:9; I K 21:1-24

I. SINCE PROPERTY PROVIDES for PERSONAL/SOCIAL WELL-BEING

- A. Because stuff's Good! Unlike Gnostics, Christians value stuff!
 - 1. As God-given, the material world good
 - 2. Property defined: what's "proper-to-thee"—material things we rightfully need and essential for our well being—a natural right to Founders ("pursuit of happiness" in *Declaration*)
- B. The "rule of law" secures property rights—England's Common Law rooted in Bible (NB Blackstone & Coke commentaries)

II. THEN STEALING STUFF IS WRONG, SINCE IT HARMS PERSONS (Ro 13:9)

- A. Hebrew *ganab*: "to take that which belongs to another without his consent or knowledge"—generally fueled by two of seven deadly sins: **envy** and **avarice/covetousness**
- B. Stealing's manifold aspects:
 - 1. By **Force**:
 - a. Pilfering—shoplifting, employees' workplace-theft; riot's opportunities
 - b. Burgling—breaking & entering another's property
 - c. Robbing—taking by threat or act
 - d. Taxing & Appropriating (stealing on massive scale)—governmental/State excesses—abolition of property central to utopian ideologies—all deadly when implemented
 - 1. Plato's *Republic* alluring pattern: Sparta-model (Left's inexorable totalitarianism); communal life—property & marriage & child-rearing; philosopher kings; equality of sexes; etc.
 - 2. Medieval/Renaissance/Reformation formulations (e.g. Joachim of Fiore & amoral "Brethren of the Free Spirit;" John Huss & Taborites; Thomas Muntzer—one-time Luther associate--& Peasants' Revolt); Pilgrims' folly at Plymouth Plantation; Oneida; Jim Jones & Jonestown)
 - 3. Socialistic ideologies, says Igor Shafarevich (in *The Socialist Phenomenon*) call for:
 - a. Abolition of private property: confiscation; graduated income tax; death tax;
 - b. Abolition of family: communes; state supervision of family life; requiring both sexes to work
 - c. Abolition of religion: restricting "worship" to private quarters; atheistic propaganda
 - d. Abolition of all hierarchies: "citizen" & "comrade"; deny sexual differences; "affirmative action"
 - 4. Socialistic experiments uniformly fail: from Robert Owen's New Harmony to Israeli *kibbutzim*; from Lenin's USSR to Hugo Chavez's Venezuela)
 - 5. Dostoevsky: "If God and immortality did not exist he would at once have become an atheist and a socialist. For socialism is not merely the labor question. It is before all things the atheistic question, the question of the form taken by atheism today, the question of the tower of Babel built without God, not to mount up to Heaven from earth but to set up Heaven on earth."
 - 6. Benjamin Wiker: *Worshipping the State: How Liberalism Became Our State Religion*
 - e. Kidnapping
 - 2. By **Fraud**:
 - a. Embezzlers
 - b. Swindlers, con-men—cf. Lupton's *Toxic Charity* & abuse of naïve donors
 - 1. Manhattan Island illus
 - 2. Ahab & Nabath's vinyard (I K 21:1-24) illuminating
 - 3. Recurrent Ponzi schemes—including Social Security & assorted welfare schemes
 - c. Inflating currency—rulers' favorite enriching strategy
 - 3. By **Exploitation**: cf. Codevilla's *Ruling Class* analysis of U.S. today
 - a. Enslaving—stealing another's freedom (from ancient Egypt to Antebellum South to USSR to Castro's Cuba) Slavery—Lincoln: "You till and work and earn bread, and I'll eat it."
 - b. Establishing/enforcing dependence—e.g. Indian Reservations; welfare recipients
 - c. Taking advantage of expertise—e.g. sales clerks, travel agents, doctors, lawyers
 - 4. By **Plagiarism**
 - a. Words—e.g. H.E. Fosdick; M.L. King, Joe Biden, *et al*
 - b. Music—e.g. composers; entertainers; church musicians *et al*

WORSHIPPING THE STATE

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and election clearly appealed to and elicited a strongly religious fervor. Devotees fainted at his rallies, messianic claims were attached to his agenda, and Obama promised a fundamental "transformation" of America. Celebrating his election, he grandiosely declared that peoples henceforth would see that "this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and the planet began to heal." Consequently, actor Jamie Foxx urged fans to "give an honor to God and our lord and savior Barack Obama." MSNBC commentator Chris Matthews enthused: "This is the New Testament" and "I feel this thrill going up my leg." Thus there is good reason to seriously ponder Benjamin Wiker's *Worshipping the State: How Liberalism Became Our State Religion*. He prefaces his treatise with a typically prescient statement by G. K. Chesterton: "It is only by believing in God that we can ever criticize the Government. Once abolish . . . God, and the Government becomes the God. That fact is written all across human history The truth is that Irreligion is the opium of the people. Wherever the people do not believe in something beyond the world, they will worship the world. But, above all, they will worship the strongest thing in the world" (p. 1).

The religious aspect to today's secular liberalism stands revealed in its many anti-Christian endeavors—the "war on Christmas" with efforts to enshrine alternatives such as "Winter Solstice;" the cleansing from public school curricula any Christian content (while simultaneously promoting Islam); the dogmatic support of naturalistic evolution rather than any form of intelligent design in the universities; the removal of crosses or nativity scenes on public lands; the desecration of Christian symbols by "artists" of various sorts; the assault on Christian ethics through programs such as Obamacare, etc. Systematically imposed by the federal courts (following the crucial 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision), "the federal government has acted as an instrument of secularization, that is, of disestablishing Christianity from American culture, and establishing in its place a different worldview" (p. 11).

Lest we restrict this process to America, however, we must understand some powerful historical developments in Western Civilization that have been unfolding for half-a-millennium. To Wiker, the triumph of Liberalism in these centuries enabled growing numbers of folks to liberate themselves from the curse of Christianity, to replace the Church with an enlightened and nurturing state. Consequently, "Christians today find themselves in a largely secularized society" quite akin to the ancient world with an easy-going sexual ethos; "it is as if Christianity is being erased from history, and things were being turned back to the cultural status quo of two thousand years ago" (p. 37).

During the past 500 years we've witnessed "the rise of liberalism and the re-paganization of the state." Fundamental to this progression was Niccolo Machiavelli, who published *The Prince* in 1512 and "invented the absolute separation of church and state that is the hallmark of liberalism" (p. 104). Machiavelli's moral nihilism fit nicely with newly-empowered nation-states which followed the *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose realm, his religion") to control the churches. Liberalism, consequently, insists the Church must accommodate the state, and to accomplish this, liberal thinkers during the Age of Reason determined to destroy the authority of Scripture; the "demotion of the Bible from revealed truth to mere myth is the result" (p. 58). Thus we are confronted, as H. Richard Niebuhr famously said, with theologians teaching that: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (p. 153).

Having carefully explained the views of secular liberalism's architects, Wiker shows how Leftists of various sorts implemented it in the centuries following the French Revolution, for "as the first attempt to incarnate the new liberal political order in a great state, the French revolution is iconic for liberalism" (p. 200). Importantly, a purely naturalistic worldview must be crafted and imposed. We must be persuaded that "we live in a purposeless universe, so that each person has just as much right as anyone else to pursue his or her arbitrarily defined goals or ends" (p. 187). Each person freely fabricates and follows whatever moral standards he desire. In effect, this has led to a resurgence of a pagan ethos comfortable with such practices as abortion, euthanasia, promiscuity, sodomy and pedophilia.

To accomplish this, liberals determined to deprive the Christian religion of any real power. Most importantly, they seized control of the educational system, making it an agency of the state. To Wiker one "cannot overestimate" this development, for it precipitated "a top-down revolution wherein a relatively small minority may impose its worldview upon the entire population using state power. And the education establishment in our own country, as was the case in France, is dominated by radicals and socialists from the Left, from the universities right down to the elementary schools" (p. 216).

TOXIC CHARITY

In *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)*, Robert D. Lupton offers invaluable advice regarding compassionate ministries. Having worked for more than 40 years in inner-city Atlanta and studied projects around the world, he is determined to discover how best to help the needy. Early in his work he joined a group of sincere believers giving Christmas gifts to a needy family. While the gifts were being opened he noticed the father of the family quietly slipping away, obviously humiliated by the fact he was unable to buy toys and clothes for his own family. To Lupton that incident provided a key to ministry: giving care without providing a cure cannot be right. Providing momentary assistance without orchestrating lasting development cannot be wise.

Unfortunately, though we Americans are quite charitable, “much of that money is either wasted or actually harms the people it is targeted to help” (p. 1). “Take Haiti, for example. No other country in the Western Hemisphere has received more charitable aid and services from governments and nonprofits. Yet its poverty and dysfunction continue to deepen” (p. 36). So too in America: “For all our efforts to eliminate poverty—our entitlements, our programs, our charities—we have succeeded only in creating a permanent underclass, dismantling their family structures, and eroding their ethic of work. And our poor continue to become poorer” (p. 3) as we promote “disempowering charity through our kindhearted giving. And religiously motivated charity is often the most irresponsible” (p. 4).

This is particularly evident in many “mission trips”—sending groups of teenagers or young adults to impoverished areas around the globe. In 2006, 1.6 American Christians took such trips, spending \$2.4 billion. However: “The money spent by one campus ministry to cover the costs of their Central American mission trip to repaint an orphanage would have been sufficient to hire two local painters and two new full-time teachers and purchase new uniforms for every student in the school” (p. 5). Clearly these folks sought to uplift the impoverished. Without question they learned something from their endeavor. But the ultimate, too often unasked and unanswered question is this: did they actually help the people they “helped”? Lupton insists they do not. They effectively harm the poor (discouraging their work ethic) and promote a demeaning dependency. In fact, they do little more than polish the helpers’ self-image! Too easily we forget this axiom: “Little affirms human dignity more than honest work. One of the surest ways to destroy self-worth is subsidizing the idleness of able-bodied people” (p. 151).

Lupton records a conversation with Juan, the Nicaraguan director of Opportunity International, who lamented that “entrepreneurship declines as dollars and free resources flood in, how people become conditioned to wait for the next mission group to arrive instead of building their businesses through their own efforts. He talked about how dignity is eroded as people come to view themselves as charity cases for wealthy visitors, how they pose with smiling faces for pictures to be taken back for the marketing of the next group. ‘They are turning my people into beggars,’ Juan said” (p. 21). He discovered what Jacques Ellul declared, in *Money and Power*: “It is important that giving be truly free. It must never degenerate into charity, in the pejorative sense. Almsgiving is Mammon’s perversion of giving. It affirms the superiority of the giver, who thus gains a point on the recipient, binds him, demands gratitude, humiliates him and reduces him to a lower state than he had before” (p. 34).

The same occurs in poverty-stricken neighborhoods in America. In 1991, Jimmy Carter launched the Atlanta Project, “the largest private antipoverty initiative in Atlanta and the boldest effort of its kind in the country” (p. 87). A massive organization, relying on the best the brightest scholars, promised to transform the city. Hundreds of folks were hired and dozens of offices were opened, offering various kinds of training and financial aid. But in a few years little remained of the Carter initiative. Its “greatest achievement,” a Stanford University analysis concluded, was “consolidating application forms for social services from sixty-four pages to eight. All of this for \$33.6 million” (p. 92). An alternate approach was taken by some entrepreneurs who bought an aging golf course adjacent to an impoverished section of Atlanta. Investing wisely and rebuilding shrewdly they developed a world-class course, attracting well-heeled competitors. In the process, small businesses opened in the adjoining neighborhood, scores of jobs were afforded residents, and a thriving eddy of prosperity spread its goodness.

Given the problem of toxic charity, Lupton suggests benevolent organizations take “The Oath for Compassionate Service: Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves. Limit one-way giving to emergency situations. Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements. Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served. Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said—unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service. Above all, do no harm” (p. 9).

THE RULING CLASS VS. THE COUNTRY CLASS

Angelo M. Codevilla, professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University, thinks battle raging in America that will determine the nation's destiny. He discerns a class conflict dividing America, but it is not the one Marx envisioned; it is essentially moral rather than economic, spiritual rather than material. In *The Ruling Class: How They Corrupted America and What We Can Do About It*, he analyzes the basic reality "that underlies all these issues and makes each a battlefield on which vie partisans of radically different Americas" (p. xv). The battling partisans are the Ruling Class and the Country Class, and they are waging a *Kulturkampf* involving marriage and family, sexual orientation and values, as well as political and economic questions.

The Ruling Class congealed as the 19th century closed, embracing Progressivism as its ideology, confident "that because man is a mere part of evolutionary nature, man could be improved, and that they, the most highly evolved of all, were the improvers" (p. 17). *Professionals*—educated *experts*—are needed to orchestrate the development of the modern, bureaucratic state. Progressive leaders, generally upper class intellectuals such as Woodrow Wilson, "imagined themselves to be the world's examples and the world's reformers dreamed big dreams of establishing order, justice, and peace at home and abroad" (p. 17). They favored "making the world safe for democracy" abroad and social reform (e.g. a graduated income tax, women's suffrage, prohibition etc.) at home. Doing so, as Wilson recognized, meant the government must expand far beyond the clear limits of the Constitution, fabricating a "'living' Constitution that does not so much restrict government as it confers 'positive rights'—meaning charters of government power. Thus they slowly buried eighteenth-century words with twentieth-century practice" (p. 37).

With FDR's New Deal progressives gained firm control of the federal government and determined to further Wilson's agenda, fundamentally changing the nation. In short order, Codevilla declares: "The America described in civics books—in which no one could be convicted or fined except by a jury of his peers for having violated laws passed by elected representatives—started disappearing when the New Deal inaugurated today's administrative state, in which bureaucrats make, enforce, and adjudicate nearly all the rules" (p. 41). Illustrating the culmination of this process was Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi who, in 2010, when asked where the Constitution permits the federal government to "force every American to purchase health insurance . . . replied: 'Are you kidding? Are you kidding?' It's no surprise, then, that lower court judges and bureaucrats take liberties with laws, regulations, and contracts" (p. 45).

Our Ruling Class (whether Republican or Democrat), Codevilla insists, "does not like the rest of America" (p. 25). Rather, they look down on ordinary folks. They do pity—feel "compassion" for—their inferiors. But they find the masses too backward and ignorant and religious—too enamored of God and guns and heterosexuality—to know what's really good for them. He cites an illuminating anecdote from Mikhail Gorbachev, who recalled "that in 1987, then-Vice President George H. W. Bush distanced himself from his own administration by telling Gorbachev, 'Reagan is a conservative, an extreme conservative. All the dummies and blockheads are with him.' This," Codevilla concludes, "is all about a class of Americans distinguishing itself from its inferiors" (p. 25). These inferior folks need to be led (or coerced) by their betters through the mechanism of a strong, centralized government. Dexterously pulling the strings of power (as Aristotle feared would transpire in democracies), our rulers transfer "money or jobs or privileges—civic as well as economic—to themselves and their favored special interest groups (p. 28). One aspect of this is the "crony capitalism" evident in the close alliance between politicians and financial institutions. "The regulators and the regulated become indistinguishable, and they prosper together because they have the power to restrict the public's choices in ways that channel money to themselves and their political supporters" (p. 31).

Battling the Ruling Class is a Country Class that resents the "ever-higher taxes and expanding government, subsidizing political favorites, social engineering, approval of abortion, etc." (p. 52). It's distinguished by a commitment to "marriage, children, and religious practice" (p. 53). Individuals, not officials, should make decisions regarding what constitutes the good life, and churches, not bureaucracies, should determine ultimate truths. The Country Class believes in self-government and shares Thomas Jefferson's notion that "good government" never takes "from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned" (p. 69). Codevilla obviously sides with the Country Class and concludes his essay with practical suggestions regarding battle strategies—reducing taxes, returning schools to local control, restoring citizens to their rightful place in the republic, etc. As Michael Barone says: "Angelo Codevilla puts into words what has been troubling an increasing number of Americans about our politics and our government. It's a *cri de coeur* that needs to be read by anyone trying to understand what's happening in public life in America today."