

The Severed Flower: Conservatism Without God

By Rabbi Daniel Lapin

I believe that there is only one fundamental set of principles on which to base a functioning society, that the forces which accept these principles will often be tragically divided with regard to methods, priorities, etc., and that the forces which reject the fundamental principles will be united by their rejection. In practical terms, we might say that there are two types of faith: a constructive or positive faith, which accepts universal truths, and what we might call an anti-faith, whose defining characteristic is the rejection of those truths. The positive faith often produces conflict among its adherents, who disagree with one another for the very best of reasons. The anti-faith produces the unanimity of the lowest common denominator.

I now hypothesize that the Left does in fact represent such an anti-faith and that the ultimate principle being rejected is none other than God Himself. Of course, the scientific standard for the acceptance of any hypothesis is: how well does it explain certain phenomena? I believe my hypothesis does this very well, and in a particularly difficult case. The congruence of opinion on the Left is so remarkable, it resembles the rising of the sun: that is to say, were it not so regular and so common, it would cause men to prostrate themselves at the sight. Consider: why on earth should those people who support radical environmentalism, in all its bizarre manifestations, be exactly the same people who endorse the agenda of radical homosexuality? But they are! Why should the same group who enthusiastically advocate widespread abortion also embrace gun control? But they do! And so on, down the line of leftist causes.

This is too remarkable to be a mere set of coincidences; we must strip away the black magic and find the cause and effect. My hypothesis does just that. Restated simply, there are many, many ways to worship God, but only one way to reject Him. This, I think, best accounts both for the divisiveness of the conservative movement and for the congruence of the Left.

Some of you would readily agree with me that the Left is rejectionist but might hesitate over my assertion that it is God they oppose. Let me, then, further test my hypothesis in a more scientific way: I'll ask how the basic doctrines of the Left compare with their Scriptural counterparts. Scientifically, you would agree that if this were a random matter, if there were no anti-God theme to liberalism, then we ought to find that liberals sometimes agree with Biblical social policy and sometimes do not – perhaps we should see a fifty/fifty distribution. Let us examine a few of them with this purpose in mind.

Now the Bible has some interesting prohibitions; one of them you will notice on me right away. Strangely enough, I possess on my body no tattooing at all, in spite of the artistic themes that from time to time have occurred to me to place across my chest. It happens to be one of the Biblical injunctions that I find easier to obey than others – right up there with not sleeping with one's grandmother.

Nonetheless, the objection to tattooing is very significant. It ties in to a prohibition in the Bible against any self-mutilation of body. Let us see what drives this prohibition.

The fundamental idea here is stewardship and tenancy. The Bible tells me that my body doesn't belong to me. I have the use of it, and I must look after it. The tenant has much less freedom to paint the walls or change the plumbing than the landlord. Biblical law, therefore, severely restricts not just tattooing, but also such practices as abortion and euthanasia. The message is consistent: control over the body, including

life and death, must be left with God. Man should not interfere.

Of course, the position of the Left on these issues helps confirm our hypothesis. Liberals reject the notion that God gives life, yet God still seems to retain some control over death. So they would seize that power and make matters of life and death into questions of human choice. We now understand why abortion and euthanasia have to be such major themes in the Left's political landscape.

We also find that the exception proves the rule. The Bible does give society one measure of control over life: it authorizes capital punishment for certain crimes. If human control over life and death, generically understood, were the underlying principle in the Left's position on abortion and euthanasia, then wouldn't liberals fight for capital punishment as a logical extension of their principle? But instead they oppose it at every turn. And this moral repugnance for imposing capital punishment is best explained by our hypothesis. This resembles the peculiar ferocity that devotees of the Left reserve for the cigarette smoker in the face of their placid acceptance of the AIDS carrier. They fuel a national movement to prohibit smoking in any public building but resist the suggestion that known AIDS carriers should be excluded from food preparation occupations.

The only possible explanation I can find is that cigarette smoking is not Biblically proscribed. Since homosexuality is Biblically forbidden, any sanctions applied in that direction might look suspiciously like an endorsement of God so must be scrupulously avoided. Likewise, since capital punishment is Biblically mandated, the modernist must oppose it.

Let's look at another example. The Bible gives us a limited number of commandments, and Deuteronomy specifically prohibits adding to or modifying this relatively short list. Likewise, Aristotle said that laws should be few in number and seldom

changed. Compare that with the Niagara-like cascade of legislation that pours out incessantly from a governing bureaucracy that has become dominated by an anti-Godly vision.

Yet another example illustrates the Left's war on fundamental Biblical themes. Notice that the beginning of all beginnings, the opening chapters of Genesis, shows us a hierarchical universe. God puts Mineral at the bottom of the pyramid and proceeds, day by day, to add Vegetable. When Vegetable is created, we move one level up, to Animal. And when Animal is created, we go to one level above that, to Man. And when Man has been created, we go one level above that to – Woman.

Our tradition tells us that it is right for a man to dedicate himself to providing for a woman, just as there is nothing at all wrong with an animal, as it were, seeking it's ultimate fulfillment by being of service to the human race. For a man to see his fulfillment as an escape from selfishness, and the ability to start providing for a woman, is only recognizing a fundamental concept of hierarchy that God has imparted to the world.

Well, naturally, if God said "Yes" to hierarchy, then modern liberalism has to say "No" to hierarchy. And one of the very first victims of the war on hierarchy is education. Because what education used to mean was that someone who knew more than I would tell me what he knew. He would teach me how to relate to the world, and he would initiate me into my culture, into my people, into civilization. He could do this only because he occupied a niche above mine. What did the war on hierarchy accomplish? That, for the first time in the American experience, students grade teachers! What's more, students tell teachers what to teach! What on earth can account for this? It makes sense only in one context: the over-throwing of hierarchy.

Of course, hatred of hierarchy also explains, better than any other notion, the unarguable enmity that the Left has for the

military. Because if there is one thing upon which military success rests, it is the concept of hierarchy. Just in case we didn't understand that, the Book of Exodus explicitly calls God a Man of War. War is admissible, the Bible tells us; there are certain things which can only be resolved by war. When war does come, you'd better have a hierarchy in place, because nothing else will work.

There is still more evidence for our hypothesis. Whether one considers the Bible as light bedtime reading or regards it as the Word of God, nobody, but nobody, can miss this fundamental rule: every single human being has been granted the power of moral choice. Abel's murderer, Cain, is not gently excused on account of traumatic potty training. The population of Sodom is not the victim of its environment. Everyone is accountable for his actions. Not, perhaps for his thoughts and motivations – only God can know these – but certainly for his behavior.

Well, what is the position of the opposition? Absolutely predictable! They give us an unbelievable proliferation of mental and social disorders, because they want reasons other than free moral choice to account for why people behave the way they do. If God said "personal accountability" the Left has to say "No personal accountability." Look at the social disorder that inevitably results from such a seemingly small decision.

Let's look at a final, and most significant, conflict between the Bible and the Left. The Mishna, a part of the Jewish Oral Tradition, which was put in writing just before the time Augustus ruled Rome, says that there are only two answers to a grouping of three fundamental questions of life. The questions are: Where did we come from, where are we going, and what are we supposed to be doing in between?

Have you noticed that any innocent little child always asks you these questions if you have the good fortune to be seated

next to one on an airplane? "Where did you come from? Where are you going?" And, "What's your name, and how old are you?" In other words, tell me about what you are; what are you doing?

Adults say, "What do you do?" It doesn't just mean, "How do you put bread on your table?" They are trying to relate to the spiritual reality of you.

And as to where we came from, again, there are only two possibilities. I characterize them as: we came from the apes or we came from the angels. That's it. Pay your money and take your choice. You want to wait for proof? I'm afraid that life calls upon you to make a commitment before the proof is in. Just as it always does. We marry before we know every last knowable detail of the intended. We invest often before knowing every possible knowable fact about the fiscal outcome of our decision. In exactly the same way, we must decide, where are we going? The choices, again, only two: the Godly choice and the anti-Godly choice. Either there is something after death or not.

To clarify the practical implications of this dilemma, let me tell you what happened to one of my teachers, a great rabbi. On a trip to Israel, he found himself seated next to the head of the Israeli socialist movement. As the plane took off, my teacher's son, sitting several rows behind, came forward and said, "Father, let me take your shoes; I have your slippers here. You know how your feet swell on the airplane." A few minutes later, he came and said, "Here are the sandwiches Mother sent; I know you don't like the airline food."

This went on in similar fashion for some time, and finally, the head of Israel's socialist movement turned to my teacher and said, "I don't get this. I have four sons. They're grown now. But in all my life I don't recall them ever offering to do anything at all for me. Why is your son doing all of this?"

And the rabbi said, "You have to understand. You mustn't blame yourself. Your sons are faithful to your teachings, and my sons are faithful to my teachings. It's simple, you see. You made the decision to teach your sons that they are descended from apes. That means that you are one generation closer to the ape than they. And that means that it is only proper and appropriate that you acknowledge their status and that you serve them. But, you see, I chose to teach my sons that we came from God Himself. And that puts me one generation closer to the ultimate truth, and that means it's only appropriate that they treat me accordingly."

On the other hand, with respect to the question of where we are going, we shouldn't be surprised that the Left tells us that we are hopelessly doomed, whether because of environmental catastrophe, nuclear war, overpopulation, or what-have-you. Tell the Left that man's God-given ingenuity creates solutions, and what is the answer? Only apocalyptic measures will save us: from elimination of aerosols to banning human beings entirely from the open wastes – we've got to save the planet, which is in imminent peril of destruction.

Well, I think we've amassed more than enough evidence to prove our hypothesis. To summarize: it's quite clear that the power and unity of the Left come not from any intrinsic merit of their policy ideas or from any well-considered public philosophy. That power and unity could only come from a religious faith: what I call Anti-Godism. And this truth brings us face to face with an even more terrifying fact: that the Left's goal in the current culture war is not a negotiated peace, but unconditional surrender. The enemy is intent on capturing our capital city, nothing less.

It follows that only a similar effort on our side can possibly succeed. Conservatives cannot fight this powerful and all-encompassing religious faith with a few good policy ideas; we must reach back to God's word, the ultimate source of our convictions, if we are to prevail. I do not believe that a

superior system can be developed than that which we have inherited, and to which our founding fathers so faithfully subscribed. I refer to the Judea-Christian value system, and I believe that we have no choice but to adopt it as the unifying theory of existence for our side of the great American culture war. To some extent, we have little choice, because the other side has already chosen Scripture as the battlefield.

They have made the abolition of transcendent value the centerpiece of their struggle. For us to ignore Judea-Christian thought is to abandon the main battleground of this war to the political enemy.

This article is excerpted, with permission, from an address that Rabbi Daniel Lapin gave at The Heritage Foundation last Winter. Rabbi Lapin is President of "Toward Tradition" a Seattle-based organization uniting Jews and Christians in an effort to restore a more traditional vision of culture, economy, and politics.