

The Good Society on American institutions. Religious responses

The Good Society, published in 1991, followed up Habits of the Heart by focusing not so much on the culture of individualism as on the institutions structured by that culture.

Institutions are patterned ways of living together. We live through institutions, TGS argued, and they shape our identities even as we shape our institutions through our own creative social practices, roles, and relationships. Americans have a hard time understanding institutions because we think we find individual freedom in escaping from their constraints. But freedom itself is only made possible by the institutions that form us. If they are not forming us well, however, then they need to be reformed if we are to live better lives.

Why aren't they forming us well? The moral vision underlying our major public institutions ultimately derives from the great 17th century English philosopher John Locke: Everyone has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But this is exemplified by the solitary individual's appropriation of property from the state of nature, unbound by moral responsibilities except those to which individuals freely consent in the social contract. Limited government exists to provide a minimal order of procedural rules and rights for free individuals to pursue their own interests and accumulate property. The problem today is that we cling to this Lockean vision in an un-Lockean social world of a complex global economy and administrative big government. Powerful corporations are defined as "individuals," yet they control our lives, acting to accumulate property and maximize profit for the good of the corporation itself, not for the people dependent on it. Government regulation either proves ineffective or colludes with those it is supposed to regulate in the name of free-market determinism.

Educational and religious institutions might criticize the direction of the American political economy and envision plausible alternatives, but The Good Society argued that these critical perspectives were largely "colonized" by the political economy. Schools at all levels, especially universities, subordinated their moral aim to help students more deeply understand the world to the task of preparing them to compete successfully in the job market. Religious institutions likewise downplayed moral witness for peace and justice to give their "consumers" what they wanted as personal consolation and social support. TGS proffered hope that the "public church" of mainline denominations and the American Catholic Church might offer a countervailing institutional vision, but internal division and sexual abuse scandals undermined their moral credibility.

The Lockean vision that the general pursuit of individual private interest would lead to a good society was not making moral sense. We were being dominated by big corporations

and a huge regulatory state staffed by educated elites whose technical training and concentrated wealth distanced them from hard-working yet increasingly insecure ordinary citizens. But what was the alternative? Soviet style socialism was certainly not. Instead *TGS* drew upon models of democratic accountability produced by a long line of American public intellectuals, people ranging from Josiah Royce and Herbert Croly to Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr, and John Courtney Murray. They certainly didn't agree entirely with one another, but they shared common concerns about the viability of democracy in a complex, commercially driven, interdependent modern society. *TGS* drew upon their insights to offer practical suggestions about ways forward, not so much to make expert policy recommendations as to frame moral perspectives for guiding reform.

The book's chapter on "the public church" focused on the role of religious institutions in guiding reform, but also in hindering reform. Religious institutions have been a vital part of the American public sphere from the beginning. The First Amendment to the Constitution prohibits the establishment of any state-supported religion for the sake of its equally free exercise by all citizens. No less a founding father than John Adams attested that the Constitution was "made only for a moral and religious People."

The constructive role that religion could play is summarized in the following paragraph. "For religious believers, religious loyalty transcends national loyalty. This does not mean that these loyalties necessarily must conflict; but when they do, the religious claim has priority. That they have indeed conflicted in America is evident from the history of conscientious objection and civil disobedience, but all the major religious communities have accepted the legitimacy of the American republic and have preferred deliberation to conflict, the latter being a last resort after witness and persuasion have failed. Believers have a qualified loyalty to the state but an unqualified loyalty to God, and this can ON occasion move them to respond in love to human need beyond the relativistic play of individuals, groups, or nations. In certain ways this gives them a larger opportunity to raise issues – about peace, about global ecology, about poverty in the Third World – than if their loyalties were purely national."

Follow up Readings

Works that explore the issues raised by *TGS*:

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

David E. Campbell and Robert D. Putnam, *American Grace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010)

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge & London: Harvard Belknap Press, 2007)