

LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT – A LOOK AT VALUES

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A Shift in Values

Liberals feel they have been accused of having no values. And some conservatives have unfairly made that claim. I believe there has been a shift, not a rejection, of values by many modern liberals. Some argue that a loss of values is evidenced by the Left's acceptance of characters such as Michael Moore. For example, he was seated in the place of high honor at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Critics view people like him as Marxists, demagogues or simply foolish. Support and praise for people like this seem to contradict traditional values.

Following are examples of what some believe represent a shift in values:

- General disfavor for abortion among all groups has evolved to strong liberal support for the right to have an abortion.
- Freedom of speech has in some quarters given way to “political correctness”.
- American military and soldiers have become less valued over recent decades.
- One report stated that the “tree” has started to replace, for some radical environmentalists, the U.S. flag as our most venerated symbol.
- Schools have evolved from bastions of discipline and learning, to more teaching about diversity and environmental or social activism.
- Teenage sex has become increasingly accepted.
- A patriotic American identity has started to be replaced by a “world citizen” identity. Anti-war values have replaced a view of nationalism and national security. Multiculturalism is believed by some to have contributed to this change.
- Secularism has partially replaced our former respect for “In God We Trust”; and certain causes, especially environmentalism/global warming concerns have replaced some of our former religious enthusiasm and traditions.
- Changing the content of history textbooks, the importance of political correctness, etc., are cited as evidence of truth, as a value, losing importance – falling behind priorities such as equality, opposition to war, secularism, etc.
- The traditional concept of humans having “dominion over the earth” has, for some, given way to “animals-and-humans-are-equivalent” beliefs.
- Satisfaction with the traditional concept of marriage has been challenged by movements to redefine marriage.
- The tradition of seeking fierce independence and self-reliance has been weakened by the “self-esteem movement”. Compare liberal politicians’ messages of “taking care of our citizens” to JFK’s famous inaugural quote: “...ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country”.
- Historical reliance on the mantra “the proof is in the pudding” has given way to a philosophy that purity of motive is what matters, not results. What matters most is having good intentions. To liberals, goodness and good intentions are the important thing, while conservatives would say goodness and good intentions, without wisdom, can be harmful.

Conservatives believe that liberals have more enthusiastically embraced this gradual evolution than has the Right. Conservatives claim to have tried to hold on to a more traditional set of values.

Contrasts and Comparisons

Freedom – Most on the Right and the Left are enthusiastically in favor of the concept of “freedom”. However, many conservatives believe the Left is in favor of things that are incompatible with freedom – as conservatives define freedom. One example is the innocent requirement by some schools and colleges for mandatory “community service” by students. What could be offensive about that? The fundamental question is: What qualifies teachers and college admissions committees to define what qualifies as good for society as a whole and thereby acceptable for fulfilling this requirement? Those who favor “community service” requirements would better understand the principle behind the objections if, for example, high school military exercises were required. Most on the Left would be opposed to even voluntary military training in schools. And the Right would regard military service as “community service” of the highest order.

Another example is the reaction by the far Left to the recent rejection by California voters of so-called “gay marriage”. Did they feel they had the right to win? Blacks and Mormons became targets of blame because of their solid opposition to changing the definition of marriage. These groups experienced verbal and physical attacks. The Left would clearly deny these groups the freedom to vote as they choose – and just because of their opposition to changing the definition of marriage.

Do people on the Left want the right to impose their idea of what is good for society on others? Do they want to deny that to those whose idea of what is good for society differs from their own? The essence of bigotry is refusing to others the rights that you demand for yourself. Such bigotry is inherently incompatible with freedom.

Equality – The definition of equality for a person on the Right would emphasize the concept of equal opportunity. The Left focuses on equality of the result. Liberals tend to infer unequal opportunities when observing unequal outcomes – i.e. they believe equal outcomes result if people truly have equal opportunity. This is known as egalitarianism. Cynics might claim that liberalism seeks to deliver equality in the form of “equal dependence” on government by more and more people, for more and more things. Critics would say the Left values equality (of outcome) above other values because it yearns for an America in which all people have similar amounts of material possessions. That may be what compels the Left to advocate laws that they themselves describe as “redistributive”. The Left wants to “divvy” up the pie. The Right contends that their policies would more effectively “expand the pie” and they sincerely believe that by doing so, everyone gets more. The Right would argue that differences are inherent in our world, and occur in situations where discrimination is neither present nor possible – and that liberty and other values are far more important than equality of outcome.

The Right has contended that the Left hates inequality even more than it hates evil. Perhaps they consider inequality as the ultimate evil. The Right would accuse the Left of making law subservient to achieving what liberals would define as equality. Liberal economist J. Bradford DeLong writes: “An unequal society cannot help but be an unjust society Any society that justifies itself on a hope of equality of opportunity cannot help but be undermined by too great a degree of inequality of result”. The Left envisions an egalitarian society. The Right finds this concept “scary”.

Moral Equivalence – Liberals accuse conservatives of being too judgmental about other countries, cultures, and individuals. Conservatives observe that there has been a dramatic increase in criticism of the U.S. and a similar increase in quiet tolerance for other countries with which we have serious political and moral differences. Some believe this came from the opposition to the war in Vietnam, which led to a continuing anti-war sentiment, to a form of isolationism, and ultimately to a cozy philosophy of moral equivalence (more “live and let live”).

For example, the late, eminent, liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger, was asked if America was, all things considered, more moral than the Soviet society. He said America is not. Another example is a 2006 interview with Howard Zinn – professor emeritus of political science at Boston University, and author of “A People’s History of the United States”. His book was lauded by The New York Times as “required reading for all American students”. In the interview, he was asked if America has done more good for humanity than bad. His reply: “probably more bad than good.”

Moral Relativism – “Moral relativism” is defined by conservatives as the ability to determine right and wrong based on one’s feelings – and suggestions are preferred over commandments. Therefore absolute measures for good and evil disappear and the role of one’s religion, one’s God, or any transcending moral code is diminished. In America, the traditional determination of right or wrong, good or evil, was based in Judeo-Christian values. The left is accused of being opposed to many applications of this tradition, and any consistent or universal definition of ethics. Ethics and morality are therefore “relative” to..... “something”. Liberals are recognized as having religious beliefs, but are accused of relying on them as a source of personal inspiration, rather than dogmatic direction.

Relativism can have close ties to charges of racism if one group is judged by another race or culture. A good example is the statement by Michael Moore: “And I do not believe, as a white guy, that I am in any position to judge a black man who had to live through that (growing up as a minority)”. He was criticizing the concern Americans were showing about statements by Jeremiah Wright.

Conservatives contend that the Achilles’ heel of liberals is losing the ability to identify and confront evil.

Multiculturalism – I recently read that a new value of the Left is multiculturalism. Since the 1960s, conservatives would contend, a major goal of the Left has been to weaken American national identity and replace it with other cultural, national, racial and ethnic identities. Many on the Left feel that no culture is inherently superior to another, just different. Embedded in this is

the resistance by the Left to English being declared the national language. Because the Left uses compassion for the children as one justification for their position, anyone supporting English immersion is either racist or lacking compassion – and probably both. The Right sincerely believes that comprehensive assimilation is a positive and that declaring a national language, and promoting English immersion in schools, is by far the best way for new citizens and their families to prosper.

Secularism – Some conservatives believe the Left not only wants America to have a secular government, but also to have a secular society. This philosophy honors the right to be religious, but claims it should be a private thing for home and church, and should never try to inject religious values into society. The Right wants America to continue being a Judeo-Christian society with a largely secular government – but one not indifferent to religion. These differing visions may explain the opposing views about prayer in school. The Right tends to look to themselves, family, and religion for answers. The Left looks to the state – i.e. a government that “listens” or “feels your pain”.

Marriage – Many on the Left want to redefine marriage to include same-sex couples for the first time in history. The Right wants gays to have equal rights, but to keep marriage defined as between a man and a woman. The Left views marriage in secular terms, while the Right views the union of two adults in a religious context.

Next I will take a look at the relationship between the government, its citizens, and the international community.