

THE CHRISTIAN POST

What's Behind Christians' Interest in Libertarianism?

Jamin Hübner

April 12, 2018

The 2017 U.S. Presidential election catalyzed a fresh, theological identity crisis for many Christians in America—especially those who identify as "evangelical." Several prominent leaders in conservative evangelicalism, such as Wayne Grudem, Franklin Graham, and Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr., called upon the entire church to support the Trump administration. This alignment generally comports to a long and notorious tradition of religious fundamentalism's marriage to the Republican party.

But other Christians, especially younger millennials who haven't taken part in last generation's "culture wars," dissent from both this alignment and the urgency of political action in general. The detachment from more accepted political identities has become acute with deeper focus on issues surrounding racism, sexism, and various forms of social inequality. The cynicism so characteristic of much of today's post-modern world has carried into record-low election participation. All of these dynamics continue and give birth to different vistas of inquiry.

One such vista that has emerged from these tumultuous dynamics (among other discontents that have been brewing) is "Christian Libertarianism."

"Libertarianism," according to some studies, is the fastest growing political movement of the twenty-first century. Its entrance into mainstream thought is visible in numerous spheres. In academia, for example, one can observe the release of such projects as *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* (SAGE), *The Routledge Handbook to Libertarianism* (2017), and other literary milestones. Libertarian's popular presence can be found in such places as ReasonTV (a popular Youtube channel), the Tom Woods Show (a podcast with over half a million views per month), and the 2009-2015 comedy sitcom, *Parks and Recreation* (which featured the outspoken libertarian, Ron Swanson). In the 2017 Presidential election, libertarian candidate Ron Paul achieved the same number of electoral votes (one) as Bernie Sanders. Some interpret this as irrelevant, while others, emblematic.

However, what really interests many is that libertarianism is gaining considerable traction in "post-evangelical" and Catholic Christian circles—at least enough to merit public outcry. Albert Mohler, the President of one of the largest seminaries in the world, has publicly criticized Christians for entertaining libertarianism as a viable political philosophy. Pope Francis did the same in September of 2017 during a plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

Christian libertarianism's abandonment of traditional social categories, political parties, and trust in political authority as a whole is viewed by some as a threat to both Western civilization and social stability. Despite these accusations, libertarian think-tanks with a strong theological presence, such as the Cato Institute, Acton Institute, and the Libertarian Christian Institute, continue to gain an audience through social media and alternative news outlets. January 2018 also saw the inaugural release of *Christian Libertarian Review*, a peer-reviewed journal produced by notable economists, theologians, and other scholars.

So, what is Christian libertarianism?

At the heart of it is a pre-modern, pre-Constantinian reading of the New Testament. The contemporary narratives about Jesus being a pro-gay socialist (on the left) or the great consumerist, pro-gun American (on the right) just don't seem to fit the Gospel accounts at all. The contemporary account about Christianity mindlessly approving whatever the government does (based on a misreading of Romans 13) is also a distorted picture. What fits the first-century picture best is that Jesus has a problem with political authority in general. *It simply isn't right for one human being to rule over another.* (This was a result of sin in Gen 3:16). This is precisely what politics is—it is a license to initiate force against your neighbor. This ruling happens regardless of the political structure, whether it is through a chieftain, pharaoh, emperor, king, republic, democracy, parliament, or congress. The relationship between an exploited group and the exploited group is fundamentally the same. And this ruling/ruled relationship stays in place regardless if it is done in the name of "the public good," "national security," "America first," or anything else. The problem with all of this should be obvious: neighbors (even "enemies") are to be *loved*, not exploited by politicians.

Christian libertarians also note that that Christ-event was the culmination of the entire history of Israel. And from the time of kingship to the Roman Empire, there is a constant critique of empire-building, nationalism, and power-grabs through politics. Gideon seemed like a good guy at first, but politics and the license to kill eventually corrupt him (Judges 6-8). David, despite being a man "after God's own heart," wasn't allowed to build the temple because he shed "too much blood." Solomon had a peaceful kingdom...until his bureaucracy grew out of control and split the kingdom (2 Chron 10-11). Of course, none of this should be a surprise: God had a problem with kingship to begin with (1 Sam 8).

In contrast, the kingdom God in Jesus didn't even involve violence in the name of some public good or great nation. *It didn't involve coercion at all.* Power itself is not something to pursue and selfishly wield, but rather give up and voluntarily distribute for the good of others (cf. Lk 22:25-26). In the end, Jesus died as an enemy of the state for "perverting our nation and forbidding payment of taxes to Caesar" (Lk 23:2). What a testimony this is for today! The greatest empires in the world were *threatened* by someone who changed the status quo—not through armies and violence—but through peace and forgiveness. How could this be so threatening? *Because no politician or dictator can do anything about it.* All the world knows is laws and guns. So they did what they knew: made him illegal, and then killed him. (Ironically, the Romans even failed this.) The world was never the same again.

The early church carried on this legacy until Constantine, and later made appearances in the Anabaptists and Quakers, and then made its way into the work of Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Walter Wink, and others like the equally obscure "Christian Libertarians."

So, the world *should* be alarmed: radical nonviolence is extremely disturbing. It disrupts the social order. It is political heresy to both liberals *and* conservatives. We're not allowed to just vote for some candidate and subcontract the gospel out to some up-and-coming "Christian politician." Instead, we actually have a responsibility as the church to restore the world with our own resources. A wild idea, indeed.