

On Being a “Not Exactly” Religious Liberal

As a would-be follower of Jesus (aka a Christian), I find most secular and sectarian labels divisive and problematic. Take abortion, for example. I am decidedly pro-life and pro-choice. How can one be against either life or choice? Beats me.

I once thought of myself as conservative. It’s not a bad word, but it’s become tainted and almost meaningless because some of the most extreme, self-aggrandizing, right-wing elements in church and society now cloak themselves as such.

For better or worse, most folks nowadays would think of me as liberal. But I have bones to pick with liberalism, too.

This much is true: I believe in human free will. I don’t believe in original sin. I don’t believe in the utter depravity of humankind. I don’t regard the Bible as literally true, nor even necessarily always true as myth, symbol, or spiritual teaching. I believe in the universal and unconditional love of God. All this probably gives the impression I’m a religious liberal. Perhaps so, but not exactly.

On most things I agree with people who self-identify as liberals. But many liberals possess a kind of optimism and faith in their human capacity to accomplish good, make historical progress, and improve the world that taxes my credulity. In general, I think most liberals greatly underestimate the pervasiveness and depth of evil in this world.

By evil I don’t mean Satan or the Devil. I mean the mostly intractable realities that result in widespread cruelty and suffering for many if not most human beings (not to mention other species) on this planet. Some of these intractable realities result from “imperfections” in the created order. Many more stem from the individual and collective shortsightedness, foolishness, greed, insecurity, apathy, pride, and self-righteousness of the human species. Even with the best of intentions, sometimes precisely with the best of intentions, we often muck things up for one another.

Few of my “liberal” acquaintances seem able to fathom just how pernicious, harmful, and destructive are the actions of some of their fellow human beings. Fewer still seem able to acknowledge how feeble and inadequate, even if utterly indispensable, are their own efforts to make things better. It is extraordinarily difficult to contemplate the prospect that one has labored mostly (never entirely!) in vain. Following Jesus, I trust that only by an Ultimate Benevolence making good on our halting efforts can we be delivered from oblivion.

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