

What's a Government to Do?

A recent article in *The Christian Century* magazine observes that many people react negatively to the idea of any government redistribution of wealth. But, as author Benjamin Dueholm points out, redistributing wealth is what all governments do! In the US, the biggest redistributions of wealth are from the young and middle-aged to the elderly (now including yours truly) in the form of Social Security and Medicare, and from those who work outside the defense industry to those who work inside it, in such forms as military expenditures, weapons development, and veterans affairs.

These are just the most obvious examples. All taxes redistribute wealth from those who pay to those who are paid by the governments in question. The real question is not whether governments should redistribute wealth, but how they should do so and, as Dueholm puts it, “for what purpose?”

Most folks on the religious right, along with Tea Party-ers and libertarians, seem to oppose taxes and government spending, in the name of free-market economics. The best economic policy, they say, is a “hands off” policy of keeping regulations and taxes to an absolute minimum and eliminating most social spending. Strangely, however, most people on the religious right accept the huge transfers of wealth represented by military spending, not to mention their Social Security and Medicare insurance. And they seem all-too-accepting of the increasingly heavy hand of government in our political life, as civil liberties and human rights are curtailed and corporate power is privileged over that of the individual.

From my religious perspective, the religious right has it backwards. What we really need is less government intrusion in our political life, while maintaining and refining government regulation and taxation in our economic life, coupled with reduced military and increased social spending -- precisely for the purposes of checking corporate powers (which now dominate much of government) and providing the economic means for ordinary people and especially those on the margins to flourish and to become fully politically empowered citizens.

Great disparities of wealth lead to great disparities of political power. Democracy cannot survive without major checks on the power that comes with aggregated wealth, nor can it function without a citizenry that is sufficiently economically secure, healthy, and educated to participate meaningfully in political self-governance. Wealth (and power) should be shared for the sake of those human lives that will otherwise founder, and for the sake of true democracy.

Copyright 2012 by Byron C. Bangert