

# Cato's Letter

A QUARTERLY MESSAGE ON LIBERTY

## Faith, Commerce, and Freedom

**Daniel T. Griswold**

To read some Christian philosophers, you'd think promoting liberty to people of faith would be a tough sell. The liberal theologian Paul Tillich thought that anybody who is a Christian would obviously be a socialist. Christian hostility to capitalism is not a new phenomenon. For example, libertarians like to talk about the great social progress that occurred during the Industrial Revolution. Yet a lot of Christians of that time were very uncomfortable about those changes.

The British Christian poet William Blake wrote the poem "Jerusalem," which was turned into a hymn that's sung in British churches—you might remember hearing it in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. The second stanza reads

And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark Satanic mills?

I see those mills creating jobs and building a prosperous new future. William Blake saw them as dark and Satanic.

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Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Christian, expresses similar concerns in *The Idiot*. One character, Lebedyev, goes on and on about what's wrong with 19th-century Russia. He talks about "our age of depravity and railways." He talks about the railroads the way some people talk about television or the Internet today. He says, "Show me a force which binds today's humanity together with half the power it possessed in those centuries," (he was talk-

conflict with liberty. To the contrary, religious beliefs and values can flourish in a society of limited government and free markets. Liberty protects the right of people of faith to practice as they choose without interference from the state. Limited government defends parents' right to raise their children as they choose, by giving them control over important decisions, such as where they should go to school. Free markets reward personal

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ing about a time when religious faith was more important to people) "And don't try to browbeat me with your prosperity, your riches, the rarity of famine, and the speed of communications!" (this was 1868) "The riches are greater but the force is less. There is no more a binding principle. Everything has grown soft. Everything and everyone grown flabby. We've all grown flabby. All of us."

In the last century, we saw more radical critiques of capitalism from religious activists in Latin America preaching the social gospel of liberation theology.

## **SHARED BELIEFS**

I don't think those Christian scholars had it quite right. Religious faith is not in

responsibility and support a vibrant civil society in which fellowship and love for our fellow man flourish. And as I will explain shortly, a religious populace is conducive to a free society in important ways, too.

Let's examine a few shared beliefs. Both libertarians and Christians believe

- In the dignity and the worth of the individual. Unlike many socialists, we don't believe that people are faceless cogs in some vast machine.
- In the importance of individual conscience and of standing up to authority when your conscience calls you to do so.
- That freedom must be tempered

by personal responsibility.

- That there are objective standards of right and wrong, and that principles transcend the interests of the state and prevailing attitudes of the moment.
- That the state is not the highest authority of our activities—we are governed by laws rather than men.
- That men are fallible and can't be trusted with unlimited power.

## SHARED VALUES

As a Christian, I've read the Bible through several times, and I don't think there's anything in there that's a compelling argument for big government or the welfare state. The Bible is not primarily a political document, but it does offer general principles of social behavior that are compatible, and indeed reinforce, the libertarian vision of a free society.

Here are a few of those values:

- **Property rights:** The Bible says, "Thou shall not steal." Libertarians remind people that it's wrong to steal, whether the thief is an individual or a group of individuals under "majority rule."
- **Civil disobedience:** When challenged about their faith, Peter and the Apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men."
- **Welfare reform:** The Apostle Paul said, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: if a man will not work, he shall not eat."
- **Taking care of family:** In 1st Timothy, Paul writes that if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied

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the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. This is a very basic libertarian principle. Your responsibility to your family comes first. Each individual is responsible for that. Libertarians don't believe it takes a village to raise a child.

- **Voluntary support for charity:** The Bible talks about a 10 percent tithe to support the temple, which performed many of the functions performed by today's welfare state. Later, Paul says, "each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."
- **Peace and property rights:** The Old Testament prophet Micah had a vision of men beating their swords into plowshares. Micah also says, "Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and

no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.” I think that’s a beautiful picture of a free society with property rights.

## A CHILLING WARNING

A few years ago, Cato’s David Boaz edited *The Libertarian Reader*; a collection of libertarian writings. The first chapter of that volume is 1 Samuel 8, from the Old Testament. It tells a story about the Israelites. They had been ruled by judges, but all the countries around them had kings. And they asked Samuel to tell God, “Make us a king to judge us like all the other nations.”

Samuel goes to God, and God gives Samuel this message for the Israelites:

This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you; He will take your sons and appoint them for himself, for his chariots and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots. And he will appoint him captains over thousands and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.

It sounds an awful lot like a draft, doesn’t it? It gets worse:

He will take your daughters to be concubines, and to be cooks, and to be bakers . . . And he will take a tenth of your seed and a tenth of your vineyards . . . and a tenth of your sheep . . . And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king, which ye

shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day.

That’s a chilling warning about big government and the abuse of power.

Now, I don’t mean to say that the Bible is arguing that you need to vote for the Libertarian candidate or give the Cato Institute 10 percent of your salary. But if a Christian is aware of what the Bible says, he or she should at least be hesitant to jump on board with big government.

## THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC

There’s also a connection, I think, between Christianity and capitalism. The German sociologist Max Weber wrote a brilliant essay called “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.” He argued that religious belief fueled the rise of capitalism in certain Protestant countries, notably the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States.

His basic thesis was that when the Reformation took hold, certain theological ideas became embedded in the populace. One was that your work served God, that productive work was honorable. That gave people new motivation. Being a priest was

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not the only way to serve God; being a blacksmith was a calling too. Many Protestants believed that success in the marketplace was a sign of God's blessing and that religious commitment was not opposed to rational wealth creation but the irrational use of wealth.

Weber argues that many Protestants came to believe that there's nothing wrong with economic success. What matters is what you do with it, how you spend your money. Protestants were motivated to work hard and succeed and produce, but they were discouraged from living conspicuously or wasting their wealth on high living.

Those beliefs encouraged higher production and lower consumption. Weber said that when the limitation of consumption is combined with the release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable result is the accumulation of capital, which can be productively reinvested. If you read Protestant theologians like John Calvin from that era, they weren't against capitalism. They weren't against trade. They just taught people to use it responsibly and live responsibly. So the Protestant calling to work and to modest, sober living created "the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have called here the spirit of capitalism."

In the 18th century, the French philosopher Montesquieu looked over the English Channel at the British and observed that they "had progressed furthest of all the peoples of the world in three important things, in piety, in commerce and in freedom." Piety, commerce, and freedom go together.

## FAITH AND FREEDOM

Many of those same religious ideas laid the groundwork for limited government and political and civil freedoms in

the West. There was an understanding several centuries ago in Christian thinking of the two kingdoms—the church and the state, both answerable to God, but not to each other. That broke the close connection between the state and the church that prevailed at the time.

In the 1640s, a Scottish theologian named Samuel Rutherford wrote a book with a very short but explosive title, *Lex Rex*. In English, that means "the law is king." Of course, the reigning philosophy then was *rex lex*, "the king is the law." His book's title alone got Rutherford in a lot of trouble. But the whole book was a discussion about how we're all sinners, and therefore equal in the eyes of God. No man or group of men has a right to rule over others. Rutherford was pretty much on the run after writing that book and probably would have been executed if he hadn't died of natural causes first.

At Cato, we're often inspired by the values of the Founding Fathers—individual liberty, limited government, free markets. For the most part, the Founding Fathers were deeply religious men. There were a few exceptions—notably Jefferson and Franklin—but by and large, the Founders were religious men who read the Bible and went to church. They saw faith and liberty as complementary.

Prof. Donald Lutz of the University of Houston looked at all the citations in the writings of the Founders. Out of more than 3,000 citations he found that fully a third of them were from the Old and the New Testaments. A distant second were Montesquieu and Blackstone. Locke, Hume, and Plutarch were far behind.

The Founders saw America as a chosen land, as a kind of second Israel. Jefferson and Franklin proposed a seal for the United States in 1776 that said, "Rebellion to tyrants is obe-

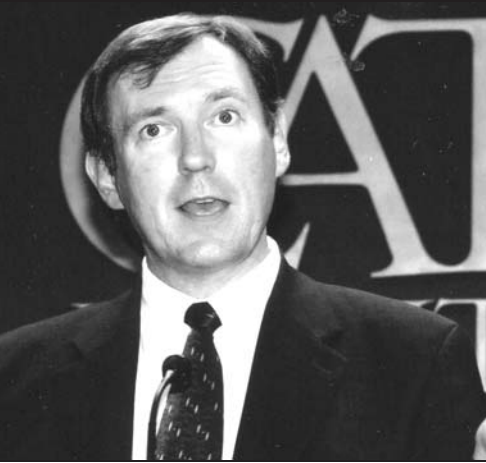
dience to God.” It showed the Egyptian army being swallowed up by the Red Sea to symbolize King George III’s oppressive army.

America was a profoundly religious country at its founding. By the 1740s, preachers were lacing sermons with references to Locke and natural rights. When was the last time you heard a minister cite Locke in a sermon? And they were also mentioning Trenchard and Gordon, authors of *Cato’s Letters*,

for restraint from without.

## PROMOTING PUBLIC VIRTUE

Of course, people can be moral and upright citizens without being religious. And some religious people aren’t very upright and moral. But most people are not highly educated philosophers. Their morality is not taught, but caught, from the prevailing moral culture. And religion has traditionally been



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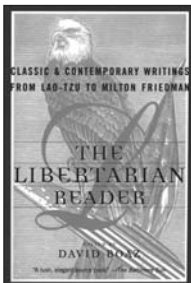
the libertarian essays from which *Cato* takes its name. So the religious leaders of the time cared deeply about liberty.

Historians speak of a three-part syllogism of the Founding Fathers. James Hutson was the author of a fine 1998 book published by the Library of Congress, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*. Hutson says it was a virtual cliché among the Founding Fathers that liberty is the object of the Republic, that liberty requires virtue in the population, and that virtue among the people is impossible without religion. According to the thinking of the Founding Fathers, religious belief among the people is the foundation leading to private and public virtue, which makes limited government possible. I think that connection still exists today. The more people govern themselves and their own behavior, the less demand there will be

the vessel through which that moral culture has been transmitted. Religion can lead people to do stupid things, but people are quite capable of doing stupid things without religion. And on the whole, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition today probably restrains more bad behavior than it causes. Advocates of a free society have long understood that religious belief among the people is not in fundamental conflict with a free society, but in fact supports it in important ways.

The great 20th-century philosopher and economist F. A. Hayek was not a religious man, but he clearly understood that. In *The Constitution of Liberty*, he made this intriguing observation: “Paradoxical as it may appear, it is probably true that a successful free society will always in a large measure be a tradition-bound society.” Liberty and religious virtues go hand in hand.

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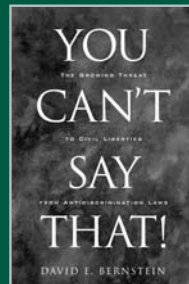
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