

A History of Christianity in America

A Lexicon of Key Terms

Anarchism. As a socio/political ideology, anarchism is at the opposite end of the spectrum from authoritarianism or totalitarianism. In reality, anarchism is merely an abstract theory and a temporary vacuum in social and political control that will quickly be filled by some form of established government.

Due to human nature and the noetic effects of the fall, the Bible consistently upholds the legitimacy of established government and condemns anarchism, implying that even an authoritarian government such as the Roman imperial state is preferable to no government at all. Although the allegiance of Christians is ultimately to God and his higher moral laws, the New Testament emphasizes responsible citizenship. As Jesus taught, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

Authoritarianism (and Totalitarianism). Authoritarianism is a maximalist socio/political ideology that seeks to justify the state’s comprehensive control over the lives of its citizens. Historically, most governments have been authoritarian, and it is the basis for everything from the deification of monarchs and emperors in ancient civilizations to the rule of Islamic caliphates and medieval political theories such as royal absolutism and “the divine right of kings.”

The 20th century, due to increasingly sophisticated technology and transportation and communication systems, witnessed the emergence of even more extreme forms of authoritarianism, often referred to as **Totalitarianism**. In a totalitarian state, the rule of law is merely the expression of the ruling elite, and the civil liberties and civil rights granted to its citizens are at best only arbitrary and tentative. The state assumes the right to regulate and control of all aspects of its citizens’ lives, as exemplified by ideologies such as Communism, Nazism, and various types of Fascism (including many military dictatorships, etc.). Since their perceived power is absolute, authoritarian and totalitarian states are innately ruthless, exploitative, and brutal, and have been responsible for the deaths of an estimated 100 million innocent people in the 20th century alone.

Prior to the 20th century, most authoritarian regimes have been sacralistic systems in which the political and religious establishments have co-ruled society, or theocracies in which the religious authorities exercised supreme control over the nation’s political and social life. In either case, religious authoritarianism – whether medieval Christendom, Islamic fundamentalism or so-called “Christian Reconstructionism” – can be as exploitative and oppressive as any secular authoritarian regime when it becomes coercive and violates the freedom of conscience of its citizens.

Christian. A person who believes the core doctrines of the historic Christian faith, has experienced a spiritual “conversion,” and has chosen to commit him/herself to living according to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the mandates of the Bible. A Christian is not someone who was simply born into a particular nation, culture, or family, nor is a Christian

necessarily someone who has been baptized, confirmed, and accepted into church membership or an active communicant.

Christian nation. To be defined in the context of this study.

Civil religion. Often linked to sacralism (see below), civil religion incorporates public displays of religious sentiments and symbols with ceremonial or symbolic displays of nationalism and patriotism. Civil religion blurs the distinction between religion and patriotism so that one becomes inextricably associated with the other.

Classical conservatism. Classical conservatism was the socio/political order that pre-dated the American and French revolutions. Historically, it was based on three great institutions and traditions: (1) monarchy; (2) An established state church (see “Christian sacralism”); and (3) a hierarchical class system derived from Europe’s medieval heritage. In 17th century England the foundations of classical conservatism were challenged by the emergence of Parliamentary government at the expense of royal absolutism, and in colonial America the class system was never institutionalized as it had been in the Mother Country and throughout Europe. Furthermore, although most of the thirteen colonies had established state churches, some did not, and American Christian sacralism was further weakened by the Great Awakening and the emergence of dynamic new denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists.

Classical liberalism. The ideology of classical liberalism is the product of Enlightenment rationalism and the theories of socio/political philosophers such as John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and others who challenged the traditional views on royal absolutism, Christian sacralism and the traditional class system. In terms of its fundamental beliefs about humanity, the philosophy of the Enlightenment was based on two premises: (1) Human beings are innately good (unless their social and political environment influences them otherwise); and (2) human beings are innately rational (or at least, capable of being educated to be rational). Based on these two dubious assumptions, Enlightenment political theorists sought to address the question, “What is the most humane, the most rational, and the most effective form of government?”

Although the political theories that eventually crystallized in classical liberalism came from a variety of sources, it was the English Whig tradition – specifically the writings of John Locke – that most influenced America’s Founding Fathers. The basic principles of classical liberalism included:

- (1) The rejection of royal absolutism.
- (2) A good government is a just and humane political system based on reason and the principles of republican government.
- (3) Legitimate government rests on the consent of the governed. This is the “compact theory of government” which holds that government is a creation of the people and subject to their wishes.
- (4) Citizens are entitled to certain “natural rights” including the right to life, liberty and property.
- (5) The principle of minimalist government – i.e., “That government is best which governs least.”
- (6) The rule of law based on a written constitution. A constitution guarantees individual civil liberties by limiting and restricting arbitrary government power.

- (7)The concept of “separation of powers” within the government itself, based on the premise that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”
- (8)The right of revolution. Any government that violates the natural rights of its citizens forfeits its legitimate right to govern. In such scenarios, the people have the right to alter or abolish that government.

Conservatism (i.e., contemporary conservatism). Contemporary conservatism is a hybrid socio/economic/political ideology that integrates some Biblical moral and ethical principles with Enlightenment political philosophy (i.e., classical liberalism), free market economic principles, and mild forms of socialism. As a result, there is always a degree of internal tension within conservatism.

Conservatism seeks a balance between preserving public order while guaranteeing basic civil liberties. In contrast to contemporary liberalism, conservatism is typically anti-secularistic and acknowledges America’s rich Judeo-Christian heritage and the positive influence of Christianity in our national life. Similarly, conservatism also accepts the idea of “American exceptionalism” as a unique nation in world history with a special mission. Conservatism generally celebrates America’s political traditions and adherence to the rule of law while emphasizing personal responsibility, civic-mindedness, and an equal opportunity society based on the principle of liberty and justice for all.

Deism. A amorphous term used for a variety of non-orthodox theological concepts that derived from general revelation and Enlightenment rationalism in the late-17th and 18th centuries. Considered by its proponents to be the generic natural religion of all mankind before it was institutionalized and dogmatized by Christianity, deism was based on a Supreme Being (often referred to as “Providence” or “the God of Nature”) who created the world but who does not actively superintend it. Deism rejected core Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the divine inspiration and authority of scripture, and constituted the foundational beliefs for later Unitarianism. In the 1700s deism incorporated a broad range of theological beliefs such that more moderate forms looked and sounded similar to traditional orthodox Christianity, while more liberal expressions of deism were an obvious departure from the historic Christian faith.

The Enlightenment. Sometimes called the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical revolution that began in England and Europe in the late 1600s and primarily addressed political and social issues. Enlightenment principles were based on the assumption that human reason should be the ultimate source of authority for all truth rather the Bible and Church tradition. In terms of the relationship between church and state, most Enlightenment theorists advocated separatism (see below), although some who were more radical tended toward secularism (see below).

Liberalism (i.e., contemporary liberalism). Like contemporary conservatism, contemporary liberalism is a hybrid socio/political ideology that integrates libertarian principles related to personal morality and socialistic ideals regarding governmental regulation of the economy. Based on secular humanistic values, liberalism is innately relativistic, holding that there are few (if any) absolute and transcendent moral and ethical values that are static and inviolable. As an evolutionary ideology, liberalism contends that social customs, public policies, and even morality and ethics are transitional and should reflect changing attitudes and values over time. Rather than basing social and political policies on absolute and inviolable principles

derived from traditional Christianity and the Bible, modern societies should be guided on the basis of the latest understanding in the social and natural sciences.

Liberals typically reject the concept of “American exceptionalism” and emphasize the darker side of American history, including the social injustices, racial bigotry, classism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, Puritanical sexual repression, and imperialism of the past. Liberals are the foremost proponents of a wide range of contemporary controversies over issues such as race- and sex-based identity politics, “politically-correct” speech and behavior codes, abortion-on-demand, homosexual marriage, amnesty for illegal aliens, judicial activism, higher taxes and more government regulation of the economy, increased governmental involvement in the private lives of citizens, an internationalist approach to foreign policy, etc. Although liberalism is sometimes confused with libertarianism, since the late 1960s it has become virtually indistinguishable from secular socialism.

Libertarianism. Libertarianism is a minimalist political ideology based on the belief that human beings are innately good and therefore require little governmental regulation of their lives. While recognizing the legitimate role of government in terms of protecting the lives and property of its citizens, libertarians fear that government is intrinsically prone to tyranny and that public institutions such as police and military forces should be kept as small as possible. Libertarians celebrate individualism and oppose governmental regulation of the economy or interference in the private lives of citizens, including laws that seek to limit unrestricted free speech, abortions, and the production and distribution of drugs and pornography. In terms of American foreign policy, libertarians tend to be isolationists.

There was a time in early American history when libertarian government was considered a viable alternative to authoritarianism, but the failure of the Articles of Confederation proved how unrealistic such a system would be given the realities of human nature. Therefore, the Founding Fathers saw the need to create a political structure under the U. S. Constitution that granted more legitimate power to the federal government in order to provide for the “general welfare” of the nation and its people.

Considering the great multi-cultural diversity in contemporary America and the breakdown of a natural law-based moral consensus and public civility in general, libertarianism is more than merely a risky political ideology: it is abjectly irresponsible.

Natural (moral) Law. Derived from the Biblical understanding of general revelation, natural law theory holds that there are certain universal moral and ethical truths that are trans-cultural and knowable to all people. These foundational moral and ethical principles, which are “self-evident” and “inalienable” (or God-given), govern inter-personal relations and can be derived through reason and moral philosophy. As such, natural law should serve as the foundation for the legal system of any nation that values justice and promotes the general welfare of its citizens.

Sabbatical and Jubilee Laws. Under the Mosaic Law that governed theocratic Israel, these laws promoted social justice and the periodic redistribution of wealth. Sabbatical laws specified the cancellation of debts and the emancipation of slaves every seven years, and following every seven Sabbaticals, in the Year of Jubilee, all land reverted back to its original tribal or family owners.

Sacralism. The alliance or union of church (or religion) and state, which co-rule society. In a sacralistic system, citizens (or subjects) are expected to pay allegiance to both the civil government and the established state religion. In such a system the religious institutions and clerical salaries are funded through tax revenues, and citizens may even be fined for failure to attend religious services on a mandated basis. In its milder form, sacralism maintains an officially-established religion (or church) but tolerates others, although they are denied public funding and may be subject to special restrictions. Sacralism is the counter-opposite of secularism.

Secularism. The total exclusion of religion (even generic civil religion) and religious influences from public life. As promoted by radical secularists, this concept reflects not just official neutrality on the part of government but an explicitly anti-religious (or in the case of American history, an anti-Christian) agenda. Secularism is the counter-opposite of sacralism.

Separatism (or Separationalism). Neither sacralism nor secularism, separatism is the concept of the official separation of church (or religion) and state. In American history the original intent of this principle was to protect religion from governmental interference and to declare the federal government's official neutrality on matters of religion. Separatism prohibits the government from regulating or controlling religious beliefs or practices with the corollary that the religious establishment has no official civil authority.

Until recent decades, the principle of separation of church and state did not prohibit displays of civil religion in public life such as generic references to God and the celebration of Christian holidays because the Christian religion had so obviously influenced American life and institutions since the founding of the colonies. Since the 1960s, however, cultural liberals have sought to co-opt the original intent of separatism in order to promote a radical secularist public agenda.

Socialism. Traditional utopian or democratic socialism (as opposed to Marxist socialism, or communism) is an anti-capitalist ideology that calls for government regulation – and in some cases, government ownership – of major industries in the interest of the general public and the common good. In American history, the Populist and Progressive reform movements of a century ago were mildly socialistic, and during the Great Depression of the 1930s the New Deal substantially expanded the size and scope of government, its oversight and regulation of the economy, and its direct involvement in the lives of the American people. In the 1960s Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs further socialized key components of American life, and since then the extent of government regulation and control has steadily increased under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Due to its emphasis on "social justice" and "equality," socialism appeals to many as the solution to the age-old problems of social injustice and economic inequality. Some Christians gravitate toward socialism because they equate it with the social and economic practices of Old Testament Israel and the early church. In reality, of course, socialism is not so benign. Even in democratic socialistic systems, there is an authoritarian impulse because socialism must rely upon the coercive power of the state to manage the economy and redistribute the wealth according to the preferences of the governing elite and the most vocal and demanding voting blocs.