

a “meaningless culture” is, in fact, a contradiction in terms. The promotion of this chimera is only the endorsement of a culture’s destruction. The question is whether society can survive the obliteration of culture, and, if it is the case that ultimately a society exists because its citizens find it worth defending, then the elimination of cultural sources of meaning destroys society. In the meantime, to hold as an absolute truth that there are no absolute truths, as Rorty does, is to uphold the limitless power of the state. Without a rich cultural life, government cannot be limited.

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Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies

David T. Koyzis

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In this well-argued discussion, David Koyzis challenges readers to consider whether their political worldview is an accurate vision or whether it is susceptible to being classified as mere ideology. Following an opening chapter that sets forth his proposal, he then tries five competing modern political theories by that thesis. He discusses and critiques liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democratism, and socialism.

Koyzis displays his view of ideology in the first chapter. While doing so, he compares ideology to idolatry, noting that many modern ideologies reprise certain ancient idolatries. The assumption that an idol “has the capacity to save us from some real or perceived evil” (15) is then compared to ideologies that bear similar utopian expectations—and that are fatally flawed in their efficacy to deliver. The first chapter provides a valuable survey of the ways that various sociologists use or abuse ideology. Koyzis avers that “ideology is a type of false consciousness” and that as such it is “rooted in the biblical category of idolatry” (22). He identifies the characteristics of ideology as (1) inescapably religious, (2) immanentistic, (3) ineffective in providing salvation, and (4) ends-driven instead of principle-driven. Prior to analyzing the major ideologies, Koyzis announces the tests he will employ. In this work, he intends to try worldviews by their (1) creational basis, (2) treatment of correct aspects of nature—correct in themselves but perverted by deification, (3) inconsistencies, (4) explanations for the source of evil, (5) location of salvation, and (6) support for a proper role for politics in society.

In his opening critique of liberalism, also styled “the sovereignty of the individual,” Koyzis provides a fine history of the term. He is sensitive to modern tendencies to demonize “the *L* word” and thus shows that thinkers from Locke to Rawls may comfortably share this ideological den. Included in his discussion are both the recent, statist form of liberalism and economic liberalism (or capitalism). Koyzis is at his best in this chapter when he defines the stages of liberalism’s evolution, especially identifying

fifth-stage liberalism with “the choice enhancement state” (61). Koyzis astutely recognizes the privatization of spirituality as leading to a “spiritually vacant state” (65). His discussion is learned, wide-ranging, current, and sure to inform. He accurately sees liberalism, although not the totalitarian type, as bearing the “tendency to extend the voluntary principle too far” (70), a good example of the heuristic value of the concept of idolatry for the diagnosis of modern political incarnations.

Recognizing liberalism as a defective foundation, Koyzis turns his attention to conservatism, that ideology that uses history as its norm. Wisely, he does not pit conservatism as the mirror opposite of liberalism. Rather, conservatism is the attempt to hold to the past. Even though not all conservatives will agree on their tenets, the heart of conservatism—whether manifested in Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, or Ronald Reagan—is skepticism about novelty. This cautious worldview (Lincoln equated conservatism with “adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried”) is slightly miscast by Koyzis who believes that it is often opposed not only to liberalism but also to cosmopolitanism and globalistic approaches (79). This chapter is not as wide-ranging in its analysis nor as satisfying as the critique of liberalism. Though certainly correct in his conclusion—that secular conservatism is inadequate for a lasting political theory—Koyzis may be criticized both for not championing a stronger version of conservatism and also for not being scrupulous enough in his criticisms of weaker forms of it.

Nationalism, or the deification of the nation, is the fairly easy target of the fourth chapter of this work. Because few recent thinkers argue for robust political theory based on this notion, this ideology is discussed for the sake of comprehensiveness. Koyzis notes that nationalism is a rather modern invention (although some of the Greek philosophers might have thought otherwise), and, while perhaps the “creed for a century” (103), nationalism is probably the weakest of these five contenders. Notwithstanding, Koyzis does his readers a service by raising this issue and also by warning Christians not to confuse patriotism or nationalism with the best political service to God.

Chapter 5 exhibits and critiques democratism, the view that majority preference signifies divine right. Koyzis’ survey of this topic is very current and readable for a wide variety of audiences. He introduces us to the philosophical problems with enshrining majority rule as an idol. He views democracy, almost following the Aristotelian taxonomy, as a degenerative form of liberalism. Moreover, he warns that majoritarianism may further deteriorate into totalitarianism; thus, a constitutional democracy, a mixed form of government, is needed. In an absolute form, democratism becomes an idol or a defective ideology.

The final ideology discussed is socialism (“common ownership is salvific”). Here our author is at his best as he notes that socialism may take on destructive potential if “the idol of equality becomes a jealous god, demanding that worshipers go so far as to sacrifice their other, less egalitarian commitments and loyalties on its altar” (171). This chapter contains a good overview of classic Marxism, along with an exposé of its

harmful totalitarian forms. A government limited to the divinely appointed task of ensuring justice is the best preventative for viewing socialism as soteriological. Still, some readers may pause when Koyzis argues that government has some responsibility in alleviating poverty (180) because that is not one of the divinely appointed tasks in the most explicit biblical charter for government (Romans 13).

In the final chapters, the author seeks to reconstruct an enduring political theory. In chapter 7, Koyzis warns Christians not to hitch their wagons to any particular ideological star. Instead, he suggests that they test all things by three macro-theological variables, taking seriously (1) creation orders, (2) the fallenness of humanity, and (3) the redeeming power of regeneration. Koyzis correctly emphasizes the need for a coherent worldview and calls on Christians to differentiate among healthy and unhealthy forms of pluralism. While his pathology of pluralism is instructive, this reviewer was left with a nagging sense of incompleteness at this point. Many students still await a logically rigorous defense of pluralism. Indeed, one wonders why pluralism might not have been the sixth worldview critiqued. One might also ask on logical grounds: How can pluralism avoid the charge of having other gods before the demonstrably exclusivist God?

In chapter 8, Koyzis' search for a nonideological alternative continues with a short but well-informed survey of other theological traditions. Two primary Christian traditions are discussed: Roman Catholicism, with its emphasis on subsidiarity; and Reformed thought, ranging from Calvin and Johannes Althusius to Abraham Kuyper. Koyzis believes that Kuyper's work was completed by the twentieth-century Dutch thinker Herman Dooyeweerd and thus concludes his historical survey with highlights of the Dooyeweerdian view. Dooyeweerd is viewed sympathetically because his thought unabashedly constructs a worldview and because his philosophy avoids reductionism and hence idolatry. Koyzis closes this volume with a plea for the state to pursue justice; by that, he means to allow various agencies to put things in their proper places (258).

This is a helpful contribution that avoids concealing its ideas beneath a technical veneer. The approach of critiquing politics by worldviews can only be welcomed and the wide-ranging sources discussed will certainly provoke thought and debate. Most constructive is the author's challenge not to confuse the Creator with his creation—a notion that could certainly contribute to a saner political vision.

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