

3. A reified “capitalism” as such does not exist; there are “capitalists,” there are free-market economies that require capital to fuel the engine of commerce, but it is a Gnostic notion of an “alien power” that serves as a rationale for speaking of “capitalism” as a “power” on its own. On the ideological dependence upon the notion of “alien power,” see Kenneth Minogue, *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

4. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1919), 339. I am indebted to Thomas Sowell for this citation, see *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 680–81; cited by Sowell, *Marxism*, 28.

6. See note 3 above.

7. John McMurty, *The Structure of Marx’s World-View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978),

22. The terminology is taken directly from the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*.

8. *Ibid.*, 88.

9. *Ibid.*, 81.

10. For a brief but clear summary of that tradition, see Michael Novak, *Freedom with Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), chap. 4.

11. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 24.

12. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 90.

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 509.

Reply to John Bolt’s “*Catena sive Umbilicus:* A Christian View of Social Institutions”

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A Brief Review

John Bolt dichotomizes opinions concerning the relevance of social institutions. There are the liberationists/Marxists who reject social institutions (especially traditional family values, community, organized religion, and capitalism) and those of the Christian/biblical view who hold the opinion that “strong social institutions are essential to liberty, human fulfillment, and prosperity.” Bolt’s essay also delineates opposing views of statism, offering a strong defense for subsidiarity.

As explained by Bolt, Marxists regard social institutions to be an “invisible alien power” that is at the root of racism, classism, and sexism. Thus, the destruction of these social institutions is necessary for man’s emancipation. But

the demise of the social institutions, Bolt warns, will cause individuals instead to forfeit their "... only possibility of living freely as human beings with dignity, value, and worth."

According to the tradition of Christian social teaching, Bolt states that there are two defining features: an enduring concern for "the plight of poor urban workers," and "a sharp repudiation of socialism." For example, *Rerum Novarum* points out the meaningful role of private property rights in improving economic and political outcomes for the masses. In addition, Bolt refers to writings by Abraham Kuyper and Pope Pius XI that caution us of the dangers to families, businesses, sciences, the arts, and religion when too much power is put into the hands of government. As Bolt explains, "key associations such as the family and the church ... serve as a buffer against state absolutism."

Suggestions

Citing John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*, Bolt entertains the possibility of a neutral view toward social institutions. It may be of interest to further explore the American Founders' vision of the relationship between social institutions and government. The American Founders envisioned a regime of individual rights and limited government with the presumption that such a republic required and would promote virtue in the citizenry. Religion, families, communities, and property rights were seen as basic conditions for a free and virtuous republic.

The Founders prescribe a neutral government in terms of religion, yet friendly toward religion and accommodating to individuals' private and social lives. Yet, beginning with F. D. Roosevelt, the United States government has become openly hostile to social institutions—religion has been run out of the public square by the courts and these court decisions have been upheld by Congress; numerous efforts have been made to legitimize homosexual unions by cities and states; the Federal government takeover of welfare programs has weakened private charities and associations; there have been increased regulations on private associations at all levels; distortionary taxes have been imposed to penalize marriages; and the list continues. To deepen his analysis, Bolt may want to examine how philosophical liberalism is seen to be compatible with the Christian view of social institutions.

Final Thoughts

Some contemporary liberals have extreme views on individualism and egalitarianism. Both share the liberationists' viewpoint on social institutions as "obstacles to a free and fulfilled life...." Egalitarians prefer no social authority except

the state. Their goal is to create economic not political equality through governmental means—socialism has always created an elite class of rulers. The expanded role of government reverses subsidiarity and thus damages social institutions. Individualists, however, share Bolt's view of subsidiarity but do not necessarily see the importance of social institutions, especially churches, heterosexual marriage, and the family.

It is surprising that theologians who are liberationists do not seem to recognize their support for the demise of social institutions or that their viewpoints end in "the apotheosis of the state." These theologians have an affinity with Marxism, but Marx is openly hostile to religion, as Bolt's citation clearly shows: "Alienation results from confusing these creations of the human imagination (e.g., religion, capitalism) with actual human reality and giving them power to have control over us."

Bolt provides an enlightening but simple message for Christians. We need to be wary of attempts by the government to empower itself through the erosion of social institutions. As the twenty-first century dawns, most of the intelligent world recognizes that the socialist promise of an improved economic and political life in return for allegiance to the state has proven to be disastrous. And yet, in the United States, the academy's affection for increased governmental regulation, control, and dependence is enduring, requiring us to be evermore vigilant and mindful of socialism's ultimate goal of taking away personal freedoms and of eliminating organized religion and the traditional family structure.

In conclusion, modern Western political systems, influenced by extreme tendencies in liberalism, have contributed to the decline of traditional social institutions and the public expression of religion, which supported them. How can this decline be arrested? Bolt insightfully draws on Christian social teaching, which has much to offer, but it must be brought to bear more widely in public intellectual life and more closely related to the American and Western political tradition.