

RECONCILING VISIONS

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Sometimes it seems that our society is entrenched in two camps: the “conservative/rigid” and the “liberal/progressive.” We need only turn on or click on the news to see this being played out daily.

In his book “A Conflict of Visions,” Thomas Sowell outlines many of the differences between experience and reason, between what a scientist may recognize as the empirical/experimental and theoretical, and what Mr. Sowell categorizes as “constrained” and “unconstrained” visions

The constrained vision stems from a reliance on “the norm”—the collective experience of a society and people, such as in cultures, rules of conduct, etc., and tested in the crucible of time by the survival of that which is most workable and practical. This view recognizes the obvious selfish limitations in our human nature, such as greed, lust, etc.—often characterized partially in the “seven deadly sins.”

The pure unconstrained vision, however, depends on reason alone—placing no restriction on the potential of humanity to follow that reason, envisioning and anticipating an idyllic state to which the greatest thinkers could guide the masses, like the “philosopher-king” concept in Plato’s “The Republic.”

Yet, in its strictest form, the constrained “conservative” vision can place undue restrictions on potential: Mankind is this way, and nothing can be done about it; live with it! Conversely, the unconstrained “liberal” vision may place unlimited trust in the innate goodness and potential of Mankind to follow reason—to selflessly seek what is best for self and neighbor.

Take the “defund the police” movement, which began a couple of years ago and is now being backpedaled due to a drastic increase in crime rates in cities that partially implemented such policies. The constrained vision might say: “Well, of course crime rose; what did you expect?”; the unconstrained visionary might retort: “I’m not so cynical; I have faith in Man’s potential!” Is one right and the other wrong? Or, rather, is there truth in both their positions?

Those divisions we experience in our society would make it seem as though “never the twain shall meet.” But both visions have merit, and if they can work together in measured fashion, society may be—often IS—improved. After all, the constrained visionary need that every system of behavior has been hammered out through trial and error with various approaches, settling on what seemed to work, albeit imperfectly. We might point to the combatting of slavery and racial and cultural hatred as modern societal advances that were almost unimagined only a few hundred years ago, though still being wrestled with.

With the unconstrained, one might reason that the experience of millennia has indeed worked out many failures that initially seemed to be good ideas and of the proven adage that those ignorant of history are destined to repeat it. As historical experience has demonstrated countless times, for example, one person or oligarchy entrusted with power is wont to misuse and abuse it, no matter how good their apparent initial intentions might have been. One might remember “saviors” such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Zedong (or Tse-Tung). They each ostensibly began “for the people” but ended up directing the slaughter of tens of millions.

Of course, in the Christian outlook, there is none who blended, or even could have blended, both of these visions more perfectly than Jesus. While emphasizing the commandments of the old law, He nonetheless taught and urged the expansion (or greater observance) of those laws by the faithful practicing greater charity toward others—toward each of one’s neighbors—essentially toward anyone whom we encounter who is in real need. Jesus emphasized that the law was not a list of “thou shalt nots,” but more completely fulfilled with “thou shalt”—to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, to heal and visit the sick, to visit those who are lonely or in prison, to welcome strangers. (cf. Matthew 25:31-46)

To “... aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.” (1 Timothy 6:11) To “... not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled ...” (Titus 1:7-8) To be humble, poor in spirit, peacemakers, comforters of the sad and dejected, merciful, pure of heart, steadfast in goodness, generous. (cf. Matthew 5) All of these are encapsulated in a single doublet phrase: To “... love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... [and] love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

The funny thing is: all of those virtuous behaviors summarized by that precept of loving God and neighbor were already in the old law because, as Jesus points out: “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:40) Indeed, those two short phrases are found essentially verbatim in the early law: Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, with the first repeated daily by Jews in their Shema prayer—a prayer as applicable for Christians and, in principle, by Muslims as well.

So, let us not be so rigid as to completely discard new and good ideas, nor dismiss the experience which has come down through ages—to be prudent but not reckless, neither unquestioning the old nor blindly trusting of the new. Let us simply be “reason-able”, being anchored in the experience of ages, yet recognizing the inevitable need for improvement—not only in society but in our very selves. After all, the firmness of society’s structure is dependent upon the soundness of its building blocks—its people.