

“Social Justice” is a Misnomer: Consider “Social Mercy” Instead

Those who dedicate their lives to certain social and political causes often refer to their genre of work as “social justice.” Especially for those who work on behalf of the homeless, immigrants, refugees, and the general down-and-out, social justice has become a catch phrase for various initiatives that often involves calls for redistribution of wealth, broad government programs, and a minimum if not living wage. “Social justice”, as a stream of political thought, seems to have picked up steam in the past decade or so (especially during the Bush administration) as many on the left feared “draconian” cuts to the budget were on the way. It turned out to be quite the contrary. But who’s counting?

When the most recent massive federal budget was passed by a Republican congress, mainline church denominations called the budget “immoral” because of its “cuts” to certain social programs. (I also agree the budget was immoral, but because the lack of substantive cuts allow dehumanizing dependency on the welfare state to persist.) The language goes something as follows: “By passing this immoral budget, Congress has made it clear that social justice is not a priority.” Or, “President Bush, who once touted ‘compassionate conservatism,’ has proved himself to be opposed to serious social justice fiscal policy.” Or some such sentiment. I won’t go into all of the reasons I think these sorts of statements are wrong, but I will start by saying that the word “justice” is poorly understood. And for the record, government clearly has a role in providing for the welfare of those who cannot provide for themselves. The question is not if, but how much.

“Social justice” in many circles means “equal outcome”. When I hear activists speak of “justice”, the ideas espoused are communistic to the core, and the speakers are interested more in guaranteeing equal distribution of wealth more than equal opportunity to earn. The etymology of “justice” never suggests, however, that equal outcome is a guarantee. To be “just” is not necessarily to be compassionate, kind, or to turn the other cheek. Being just is, by definition, an objective venture that may appear to be cold-hearted. Fairness by the rule of law is the only criteria. A judge in any courtroom is not in the compassion or forgiveness business. He (or she) is in the judgment business, which may mean he rules against a very nice man who unintentionally committed a crime as much as he rules in favor of a cold-blooded killer whose home was illegally searched. That’s justice: cold, unfeeling, legalistic.

But if justice comes to mean equal outcome, then we are in for a long haul when the shadow side of overusing this word comes to fruition: justice demands a monopoly because it acts in an objective manner. So when we attach “justice” to a cause, rightly or wrongly, we are tacitly recognizing that this call must get accomplished in the name of all that is right in the world. If “justice” calls for a welfare state, who are we to deny it? If “justice” calls for the top 5% of wage earners to foot the bill for the other 95%, who are we to say no?

Justice has a powerful voice that drowns out reason, logic, and desire. Actions must be taken, vows must be broken, change must occur in the name of justice. Justice works on a different level than our emotions, so it has the ability to call us to something higher. So when justice speaks, it carries a seemingly objective weight behind it that implies that if society doesn’t

listen, it is committing a grave sin. That's why pseudo-communists use the word: they are hanging onto an old understanding of the word that was appropriate at other times in history, but now is being perverted to tell us how unfair society is by not creating equal outcome.

So when I hear this phrase, "social justice," I toddle between irritation at the communistic values that underpin the phrase and laughter because of the complete lack of etymological sensitivity to what "justice" actually is. At a theological level, for example, I have no doubt that God is a just god. But Christians believe that God is more than merely just; God is also merciful. Mercy is a very different concept from justice. Mercy is full of compassion; it is grace incarnate. It is looking at your neighbor as one who may not deserve help, but should receive it anyway. If we looked at our neighbor from a perspective of justice, we could find many reasons not to help them. Justice might even demand that we don't. But hopefully, we look on others with mercy, not justice.

Mercy also only has as much power as the person doing it. Because it is voluntary, its power is limited to the person showing mercy. Mercy is hard to rally, politicize or generate votes. It's doing the right thing for its own sake. So I advocate the phrase "social mercy" over "social justice," because if nothing else, it is not so pompous as to assume that communism is the only way to achieve a loving society. If justice ruled our hearts more than mercy, none of us would come out alive.

A final thought on what this social mercy looks like. The father of "compassionate conservatism," Marvin Olasky, has written extensively on this, especially in "The Tragedy of American Compassion." In sum, mercy towards others is best achieved at a local level. It involves truly helping people by works of kindness, not merely federal money. And mercy involves an honest acknowledgement of the power of sin, instead of a steady paycheck that may enable bad behavior. I only ask that when we speak about justice, we be careful what we ask for. Justice may only be kind to us a long time from now.

posted by relieveddebtor @ 1:46 PM, TUESDAY, MAY 30, 2006

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