

The Two Progressive Impulses

David Carlin

Among cultural-political “progressives” (or liberals, if you prefer this label) there are found two apparently contradictory impulses: a libertarian impulse and a totalitarian impulse.

On the one hand, progressives are great believers in personal liberty and great haters of restrictions on personal liberty. They denounce, for instance, almost all restrictions on sexual liberty. They concede of course that there must be *some* social and even legal restrictions. Thus one must not commit rape or any other form of sexual assault. To be morally licit, as the progressive sees things, sex must be purely voluntary on the part of both partners.

Another restriction on sexual freedom that progressives agree with is that no adult should have sex with an underage child. However, progressives have no agreement as to where the line should be drawn between sexual adulthood and sexual childhood. Perhaps the line should be drawn wherever this or that state establishes the age of sexual consent? But this would mean that the line would vary from state to state, and it would ignore the fact that some children are sexually mature at an earlier age than other children. One girl might be able to give informed consent at the age of 14 while another girl might still be incapable of this at the age of 19.

At all events, all progressives agree on the abstract proposition that an adult should not have sex with a minor, but they cannot agree in telling us what a minor is.

It should be noted in passing that progressives have a very “mixed” attitude toward enforcement of the two restrictions mentioned above. They believe that colleges and universities should be very strict in enforcing rules against rape and sexual assault. But they don’t believe that Planned Parenthood or other abortion facilities should report to the police obvious cases of statutory rape – for instance, when a 15-year-old girl arrives to abort a pregnancy caused by her 25-year-old boyfriend.

Apart from these two restrictions – on sexual assault and sex with children – progressives favor complete sexual freedom: freedom of premarital sex, homosexual sex, same-sex marriage, casual sex, promiscuous sex, polyamory, and polygamy. They even approve of prostitution. But they don’t call prostitutes “prostitutes” (a dirty judgmental word). They call them “sex workers.” And while they deplore certain inessential aspects of sex work (e.g., pimping and violence and drug addiction), progressives have no objection in principle to sex work provided it is quite voluntary on the part of the sex worker. Ideally, it will be like any other commercial transaction, e.g., like selling a loaf of bread.

But sexual restrictions aren’t the only restrictions on personal liberty that progressives oppose. Restrictions on recreational drugs are another. Why shouldn’t an adult be free to use whatever drugs he or she wishes to use? If those drugs do harm, it’s only harm to the user. Shouldn’t a person be free to do that? Progressives

are at the moment pushing for legalization of marijuana. But unless you're not paying attention, you know where they mean to go after that: legalization of all "recreational" drugs.

And they believe there should be no restrictions on the right to euthanasia. At the moment, of course, they are not going quite that far in their demands. The country isn't ready for that right now – just as a few years ago the country wasn't ready for same-sex marriage. So progressives (e.g., President Obama) pretended to be opposed to same-sex marriage; but those who were not naïve knew where they were headed. At present progressives are demanding no more than physician-assisted suicide. But can anybody doubt that they will next demand voluntary euthanasia?

It goes without saying that if you're a liberty-loving progressive you have no love for institutions such as traditional marriage, religion, and the police, for all these institutions are in the restriction-of-liberty business. Nor would you have much sympathy with colleges that say that a student *must* study ancient history or Shakespeare or Newton's laws of motion. Who are school authorities to dictate what students, almost all of them legal adults, must learn? If this is not academic tyranny, what is? Why should I be forced to study something as boring as Wordsworth's poetry when I want to learn how to be a disk jockey on radio?

But then there is the opposite progressive impulse, the totalitarian impulse. Progressives believe that government, in particular the U.S. federal government, can solve all our problems. Maybe it cannot solve these problems overnight, but it can solve them in the long run, given enough time and money and good will – plus elections that give power to progressives.

What problems do we Americans have? Poverty, racism, bad schools, crime, mental illness, AIDS, drug addiction, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, misogyny, global warming, and a few more – well, if you're a progressive, you believe there must be some action by the federal government that can solve these problems: some law, some agency, some program.

Some of these problems are the result of progressive libertarianism – the most obvious of these being the consequences (e.g., crime, a poor work ethic, a poor school ethic, drug addiction) that follow from the destruction of the married two-parent family, a project of destruction progressives have been working at for decades now. We need a progressive totalitarian federal government to clean up the mess created by the other side of the progressive coin, progressive libertarianism.

For the progressive, personal liberty is not an end in itself. It is a good thing because it leads, or at all events is supposed to lead, to happiness. But in many cases it does not lead to happiness; it leads to the opposite. How then are we to be happy? By the action of an all-powerful federal government, a benign totalitarianism that will eliminate crime, poverty, AIDS, global warming, stupidity, and all the other ills that afflict Americans.

There you have it: the two (apparently contradictory, but not really contradictory) impulses of progressivism.

Gospel and Law according to Ratzinger

Eduardo J. Echeverria

Recently, a prominent Italian Rabbi, Giuseppe Laras, criticized Pope Francis's homilies for their "resumption of the old polarization between the morality and theology of the Hebrew Bible and of pharisaism, and Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels."

Decades ago, Joseph Ratzinger wrote a chapter titled, "Israel, the Church, and the World," from his short study, *Many Religions – One Covenant* (1998). He argued there: "Jesus did not act as a liberal reformer recommending and presenting a more understanding interpretation of the Law. In Jesus' exchange with the Jewish authorities of his time, we are not dealing with a confrontation between a liberal reformer and an ossified traditionalist hierarchy. Such a view, though common, fundamentally misunderstands the conflict of the New Testament and does justice neither to Jesus nor to Israel."

This view of the relationship between the Gospel and the Law of Israel sounds familiar because Rabbi Laras is right: it is a steady drumbeat in Pope Francis' homilies.

I have already written here about Francis's oppositional interpretation of the Gospel and the Law. I won't repeat what I've said. Rather, I want to discuss Cardinal Ratzinger's *reasons* for rejecting such a "crass contrast" between the Gospel and the Law.

Ratzinger characterizes this contrast as a "cliché in modern and liberal descriptions where Pharisees and priests are portrayed as the representatives of a hardened legalism, as representatives of the eternal law of the establishment presided over by religious and political authorities who hinder freedom and live from the oppression of others. . . .In light of these interpretations, one sides with Jesus, fights his fight, by coming out against the power of priests in the Church."

Why does Ratzinger hold that this contrast fundamentally misconstrues the New Testament understanding of the relationship between the Gospel and the Law, and hence fails to do justice to Jesus and Israel?

The key Biblical principle that helps Ratzinger plumb the theological depth of the relationship between the Gospel and the Law is expressed in the words of Jesus: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Mt 5:17) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, 577-582) functions as the interpretive lens through which Ratzinger understands the words of Jesus. That the Law is fulfilled in Christ does not mean that the Gospel has no further relation to the Law. The moral Law remains God's will for the life of the Christian. How so?

Jesus fulfills the Law by bringing out its fullest and complete meaning. He also fulfills it by bringing the finishing or capstone revelation. He radicalizes the Law's demands by going to its heart and center. In Matthew 22:40, Jesus says, "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." Jesus neither replaces nor

adds to the moral teachings of the Law, but rather he exposes its true and positive, indeed, fullest meaning in light of the twofold yet single, central Commandment: that we love God completely and love our neighbor as ourselves. (Mt 7:12; 22:34-40; Mk 12:38-43; Lk 10:25-28; Jn 13:34; Rom 13:8-10)

In that sense, Jesus interiorizes the demands of the Law because fulfillment of the Law must be measured by that central commandment to love. Because love of God and neighbor is the heart of the Law, Jesus shows that the commandments prohibiting murder and adultery mean more than the letter of the Law states. Jesus is not an ethical minimalist, a view that associates the Law with mere formality and externalism in morals, but rather an ethical maximalist. A maximalist – and Christ was a maximalist – refers to the dimension of interiority. (cf. Mt 5) Christ appeals to the inner man because “the Law is led to its fullness through the renewal of the heart.” (CCC, 1964)

Indeed, CCC teaches that the central Commandment to love expresses the “fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” (1604). Ratzinger explains: “By saying Yes to the double commandment, man lives up to the call of his nature to be the image of God that was willed by the Creator and is realized as such in loving with the love of God.” The moral laws, whose core is the Ten Commandments, retain their direct and unchanging validity. Moreover, even these Commandments receive a new foundation in the Gospel. In short, “The Law of the Gospel ‘fulfills’, refines, surpasses, and leads the Old Law to its perfection.” (CCC, 1967)

Furthermore, Jesus’ perfect fulfillment of the Law includes his taking upon himself the “‘curse of the Law’ incurred by those who do not ‘abide by the things written in the book of the Law, and do them.’” (Gal 3:11) In this light, we can understand why CCC states that Jesus brings about “the perfect fulfillment of the Law by being the only Righteous One in place of all sinners.” (CCC 579)

Christ’s atonement is vicarious, that is, it is a substitutionary atonement. He was a substitute for others, taking their place by paying the penalty for their sins – sins that involved breaking the Law of God. When a law is broken, a punishment is incurred. That is, Jesus was made sin on our behalf so that he would satisfy God’s righteousness and hence we might become righteous. (2 Cor 5:21): “He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.” (Rom 4:25) Mercy and justice meet at the Cross.

In sum, “Jesus did not abolish the Law of Sinai, but rather fulfilled it (cf. Mt 5:17-19) with such perfection (cf. Jn 8:46) that he revealed its ultimate meaning (cf. Mt 5:33) and redeemed the transgressions against it (cf. Heb 9:15).” (CCC, 592)

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