

Fr. Perozich comments —

Fr. Schall reviews Jewish author David Goldman's work on social justice. Of particular note is that one must not make a universal out of a particular event that God has done in the history of salvation with the Jewish people. To try to create a utopian society requires a deformation of God's work with incoherent thoughts and plans,

Goldman writes, "When we read Exodus, we are to see particularity, not universality. We see what Yahweh did for the Jews, not what we would do if we were in His place. If we accept a universalist view of Exodus as a plan for the reform of the world, we "logically" repudiate the God of the Bible and ultimately the state of Israel."

He notes, "Without God, man ceases to be a co-creator, and becomes instead Dr. Frankenstein." The decline of public morality in our times undermines the family. Ideological science attempts to change man's physical make-up. Without God, man will not remain man.

"The perversion of the Jewish concept of creativity into an arbitrary expression of the human will 'brought chaos and disorder into the world.'" The primacy of will has been a disrupting intellectual heritage from Islam, Scotus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and to most modern thought. The perversion of "social justice" makes a strong religious tradition into a revolutionary movement to attainment of contemporary utopian political goals. In a striking statement, Goldman adds: "Jews have no obligation to fix the problems of the contemporary world." This statement is not a washing of hands of responsibility. It is a reaffirmation of Goldman's belief that the best thing the Jews can do for the world is to remain themselves, firmly based in their divine tradition.

Social justice, Judaism, and the primacy of the sacred

The perversion of “social justice” makes a strong religious tradition into a revolutionary movement to attainment of contemporary utopian political goals.

November 23, 2018 [James V. Schall, S.J. Sojourns with Schall 4](#)

[Print](#)



Pilgrims walk near the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, in the Old City of Jerusalem March 28, 2014. (CNS photo/Debbie Hill)

“You don’t have to be Jewish to be a Social Justice Warrior. Jacob Wolf, a life-long left-winger, dismissed tikkun olam (social justice) as ‘a strange and misunderstood notion...under which our petty moral concerns and political panaceas can come in out of the rain.’ Nonetheless, the notion of ‘healing the world,’ as the Jewish left

misunderstands that expression, has become a shibboleth for liberal politics.” — David Goldman, “When Social Justice Replaces Judaism.”¹

I.

On bemused but sober reflection, one is hard-pressed to think of who or what has done more long-range damage to reason or the Church: the recently retired Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, Gnosticism, the Reformation, the doctrine of modern natural rights, “Who am I to judge?”, or the vagaries of what is loosely called “social justice”?

Other candidates can be named, of course. We might cite the Jewish background of many Marxist thinkers, including Marx himself, all of whom wanted to institute “social justice”, wanted to make the world better. They had wide-ranging plans to establish “social justice” in the world. They mostly succeeded in making the world worse, though this is not generally held against them. Proponents of failed grandiose schemes usually blame the disasters they cause, not on their own incoherent ideas but on the dull world that was unwilling to accept their marvelous insights about how to cure all existing human ills.

After the relative demise of Marxism, the development of liberal theory and practice was based on an “end of history” narrative. National states were to be replaced by a world state in which everyone had citizenship and “rights” galore, implemented by a world political body with both compassionate and coercive powers. Everyone would be taken care of by everyone else. No borders were needed. Everyone would have a common passport and a common credit card. The prosperity of the global economy would pay for everything. We could abolish arms. We could “restore” the earth as our common task.

“Social justice” was seen as the moral justification of this revolutionary view. The phrase is modern, from the nineteenth century. It is not Aristotle’s distributive justice as Aristotle’s discussion of regime change was always much closer to how reality worked than to “social justice” theories. The latter were conceived as a collective overview to eradicate “sinful structures”. “Social justice” was not a personal virtue, as all justice theories must be. Sin and evil were collective and not located in the will of individuals, where Aristotle and Aquinas properly put them. Once these new structures were established, the ills of mankind could be eliminated. It was a heady doctrine.

II.

Few have given more thought to this issue than David Goldman, who is the “Spengler” of the *Asia Times*. In a June 27th column in *The*

Jerusalem Post, he asked: “What are Jews good for?” He noted that, aside from Orthodox Jews, most Jews marry outside their faith. His remarks were occasioned by Jonathan Neumann’s book *To Heal the World? How the Jewish Left Corrupts Judaism and Endangers Israel*. The abandonment of traditional Judaism for the pursuit of “social justice” has made things worse. Parallel issues from the same sources are found in Christian groups and movements.

The Jewish left has “cherry-picked” the Bible to justify its strategy. God’s intervention in history is seen, not in particular terms of the divine mission of Israel itself, but as a plan for an inner-worldly utopianism. The book of Genesis becomes a handbook for environmentalism. The Exodus is transformed, no longer an escape from Egyptian slavery but a call for a world-wide revolutionary movement “with Moses as a spiritual ancestor to Fidel Castro.” This leftist “reading in” has nothing to do with the actual text of the Hebrew Bible.

Goldman has a different take on the French philosopher Simone Weil, whom he calls an “apostate” and “a Catholic in all but name.” Weil could not accept the command of Yahweh to kill the first-born of the Egyptians. Goldman argues that Yahweh’s command is “existential”, like the command of Abraham about Isaac. “When God erupted into history to redeem a particular people, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, he did so with terrible acts, and for this reason we (Jews) and our progeny forever belong to him.” When we read Exodus, we are to see particularity, not universality. We see what Yahweh did for the Jews, not what we would do if we were in His place.

If we accept a universalist view of Exodus as a plan for the reform of the world, we “logically” repudiate the God of the Bible and ultimately the state of Israel. Those leftist Jews and others who rush to this universalism are the first to denounce Israel when it seeks to defend itself in the here and now. Such Jewish proponents do not return to the homeland, to Zion. What stands in opposition to the universalist, “social justice” view of the Bible is precisely the nation of Israel. Goldman remarked somewhere that the happiest people on earth are the believing citizens of Israel, not the Jews of New York. Modern Israel was founded by socialists and “Marxist Zionists”. They have gradually disappeared to be replaced by believing Jews. The “secular Zionists scoffed at religion,” but they “did God’s work.” Goldman argues that Israel “is the most religious country in the industrial world.”

Goldman distinguished between the “secular Zionists who risked everything to build the Jewish state” and the “smug” Jewish leftists who promote “social justice”. Goldman frankly acknowledged that he is himself

a “right-winger.” He holds that the State of Israel was a “divinely ordained miracle.” Jewish leftists were instruments in the hands of the Divine in its foundation. The Jewish right, however, by encouraging the overthrow of Saddam Hussain in Iraq endangered Israel’s security as Israel’s worst enemy is Iran.

III.

The divine “self-contraction” means that Yahweh did not do everything He might have. The Jewish answer to Parmenides’ problem with being and change consists in preserving both unity and plurality. The Rabbinic tradition held that God “deliberately left Creation unfinished.”² Goldman recalled the notion that a finished creation would imply no free will. If everything were given to us, we would have no risk or opportunity to choose or be responsible for anything. Actually, man remains free before his final object. He knows that he has no reason to choose anything better than the Godhead before him. Freedom of the will is also the major factor in our contingency, in whether we choose the good or reject it as a final statement of our personal being.

When asked, Paul Johnson, the Catholic historian of the Jewish people, observed that what is unique about the Jews is the “balance between individual and collective responsibility.” This is an analogy we often find in St. Paul. Goldman holds that the particularity of the Jewish people is key to the mission of Judaism before the nations. Judaism is not to disappear into egalitarian universalism. Rather, it is to retain its unique and separate identity. Israel need not be a great nation in size or population to be a factor in world history. It has its own vocation before the nations.

Goldman says the “balance between the creative gesture and loyalty to tradition” is the best way to sum up the effects of this abiding particularity. Jewish tradition is rooted both in “the past and in the future.” It re-lives the “revelation of Sinai (in its ritual) and embodies the World to Come in the minutiae of everyday life.” No-one can understand today without understanding many yesterdays. The “World to Come” is not out there somewhere, but incipient in the dealings of ordinary life.

IV.

At times, however, if it remains itself, Judaism can be the most “revolutionary of the religions.” Mortal men are assigned the task of completing the Creation that God deliberately left unfinished. Somethings remain undone in the world. God left the world incomplete so mankind could be “co-creators”—a word that often comes up in the works of Tolkien. Co-creation, referring back to “social justice”, means that what man has to do in the world presupposes that God, while remaining Himself, has

already done something, something that man's reason must strive discover.
3 Man thus does not "create" a world from nothing on the sole basis of whatever he wills it to be.⁴ Man's will is already limited (guided) by *what is* and by what the prophets have handed down.

"No concept has motivated human accomplishment more powerfully than the Jewish concept of creativity." In economics, most "social justice" theories fail to understand the terms of abiding productivity.⁵ And Goldman adds these sobering words: **"Without God, man ceases to be a co-creator, and becomes instead Dr. Frankenstein." The decline of public morality in our times undermines the family. Ideological science attempts to change man's physical make-up. Without God, man will not remain man.**

"The perversion of the Jewish concept of creativity into an arbitrary expression of the human will 'brought chaos and disorder into the world.'" The primacy of will has been a disrupting intellectual heritage from Islam, Scotus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and to most modern thought. The perversion of "social justice" makes a strong religious tradition into a revolutionary movement to attainment of contemporary utopian political goals. In a striking statement, Goldman adds: "Jews have no obligation to fix the problems of the contemporary world." This statement is not a washing of hands of responsibility. It is a reaffirmation of Goldman's belief that the best thing the Jews can do for the world is to remain themselves, firmly based in their divine tradition.

Tribes do not produce nations; they produce inter-tribal struggles. In an idea he shares with Aristotle, Goldman writes: "The nation is the bearer of immortality."⁶ Though he does not touch on this aspect, immortality must finally be considered in terms of a personal soul and subsequent resurrection of the body.⁷ Goldman is a believing Jew. Though he is quite familiar with Christian theology, he reads the Hebrew Bible as if Christian revelation did not exist. If he thought a logical, coherent, and divinely established relation between the two Testaments existed, he would no doubt be a Christian.

"In human history the human hope of eternity has a specific embodiment, namely Israel, the essential nation." Christians would probably read this passage in terms of Augustine's *City of God*. In a brief history, Goldman holds that the modern nation-states, in their founding, looked back to the Davidic kingdom. "Western history cannot be understood without the revolutionary creative aspect of Judaism." From

the fall of Rome to the medieval kingships, “It is the uniqueness of our (Jewish) particularity that makes Israel ‘the exemplar and paragon of a nation.’” It cannot exist as something other than its own founding. “To reduce Judaism to a ‘social justice’ program eliminates our uniqueness and vitiates the reason to be Jewish in the first place.”

V.

In conclusion, I have taken care to present David Goldman’s reflections on Israel in some detail. In another recent comment (June 28), Goldman noted that both Prince William and President Trump had gone to Israel in part as pilgrims, where they prayed at the Temple Mount. Their actions, in Goldman’s opinion, underscored “the most important pillar of Western governance, namely, that the government itself depends on a sense of the sacred.” Something higher than man or cosmos exists. This theme is echoed by Catholic historians and philosophers such as Christopher Dawson and Josef Pieper. The primacy of the sacred has both natural law and revelational origins. It also recalls Aristotle’s concern that world-sized states would have to be ruled by a divine intelligence. When run by human beings, they quickly become tyrannies, which is what concerns Goldman about “social justice”.

The modern “social justice” and “healing the whole world” movements are contrary to the nation-state localism that is required for sane human living. We need to avoid the Dr. Frankenstein biological results of our tampering with human nature. We need to preserve the particularity of the divine revelation found in the Hebrew Bible and, I would add, in the Christian Gospels. Goldman’s reflections remind us that to know Christianity we must also know what the revelation to the Hebrews meant. That Goldman takes Hebrew revelation seriously is also a light to Christians who, as they affirm, are inheritors of both Testaments.

Endnotes:

1 David Goldman, “Torah Musings,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 27, 2018.

2 This is a theme spelled out in Robert Spitzer, S. J., *The Light Shines in the Darkness: Happiness, Suffering, and Transformation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2017; see Schall review of this book in February 27, 2018, Catholic World Report).

3 See James V. Schall, “Why Do Minds Exist in the Universe?,” *The Universe We Think In* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2018), 67-80.

4 See James V. Schall, *The Modern Age* (South Bend, In.: St. Augustine’s Press 2011).

5 See John McNerney, *The Wealth of Persons* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books 2016); John Mueller, *Redeeming Economics* (Wilmington: ISI Books 2010); Michael Novak & Paul Adams, *Social Justice Isn't What You Think It Is* (New York: Encounter Books 2015); Jennifer Roback Morse, *Love and Economics* (Dallas: Spence 2001); James V. Schall, *Christians and Prosperity* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Acton Institute 2015).

6 See James V. Schall, "The Reality of Society according to St. Thomas," *The Politics of Heaven & Hell* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America 1984), 235-52; "Aristotelian Political Theory: Immortality and Happiness," *Reason, Revelation and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1987), 59-62; "Is the Nation-State Obsolete?" www.mercatornet.com, October 29, 2018.

7 See James V. Schall, "Revelation and Political Philosophy," *Political Philosophy & Revelation* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2013), 240-52.



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James V. Schall, S.J. taught political philosophy at Georgetown University for many years until recently retiring. He is the author of numerous books and countless essays on philosophy, theology, education, morality, and other topics. His most recent book is *On Islam: A Chronological Record, 2002-2018* (Ignatius Press, 2018). Visit his site, "Another Sort of Learning", for more about his writings and work.