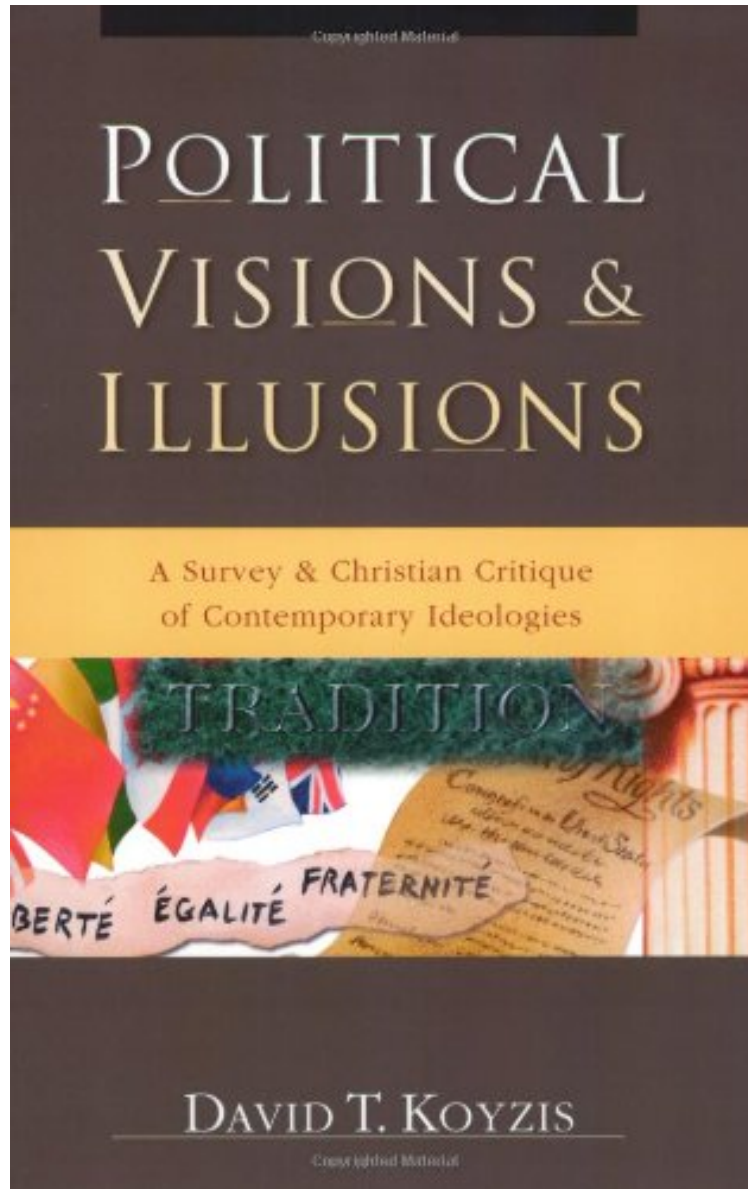


[FREE] Political Visions Illusions: A Survey Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies

Political Visions Illusions: A Survey Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies

David T. Koyzis

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David T. Koyzis : Political Visions Illusions: A Survey Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Political Visions Illusions: A Survey Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. The idolatry of ideology... and what to do about it By Kyle A. Dillon

All humans long for redemption. We cannot escape the feeling that the world is not as it should be, and things need to be set right. Christians find the answer in Jesus Christ, whose coming kingdom will one day bring an end to all sin and injustice. Unbelievers, on the other hand, tend to locate redemption within the unfolding of human history. The idea that salvation can be achieved through earthly means has given rise to the numerous political ideologies that David Koyzis helpfully examines in *Political Visions and Illusions*. Many Christians have unwittingly bought into these ideologies, failing to see the ways in which they run counter to the biblical worldview. Other Christians have given up on political engagement altogether, often in the name of the spiritual nature of the church's mission. Koyzis rejects both these approaches and proposes a uniquely Christian way of engaging the public sphere, avoiding the pitfalls of the various secular ideologies. His goal is not to offer yet another path to redemption through human effort, but rather to show how Christians, who live in light of the unique redemptive work of Christ, ought to think and act differently in political life. Koyzis makes the claim that all ideologies are essentially forms of idolatry, elevating some aspect of creation to the level of ultimate significance. This generally entails the demonization of some other aspect of creation, leading Koyzis to conclude that political ideologies are really just modern versions of the ancient heresy of gnosticism. Christians have traditionally affirmed that sin is an alien intruder in God's good creation, but Christ has entered into creation to redeem it. By contrast, gnostics find the source of both evil and salvation within the structure of creation itself. Throughout the course of the book, Koyzis examines the various ways in which modern political ideologies fall prey to this gnostic error. He singles out five such ideologies for critique: liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. In my opinion, Koyzis's chapter on liberalism alone is worth the price of the book. He defines liberalism essentially as the elevation of individual autonomy; it is not merely the opposite of conservatism. In fact, he argues that in our North American context, both those on the Left and those on the Right are liberals in their own way. This is due to some of the internal tensions within liberal ideology, which Koyzis describes in five historical stages: 1) the Hobbesian commonwealth, in which personal freedoms are yielded to the sovereign for the sake of protection from the state of nature (our primordial, brutish, pre-political condition); 2) the night watchman state (i.e. the classical liberalism to which many modern conservatives subscribe), resting on John Locke's social contract theory and Adam Smith's capitalist economics, in which individual rights extend to include the right to private property; 3) the regulatory state, in which the monopolies of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America were curbed by increasing government intervention and antitrust laws; 4) the equal opportunity state, exemplified in Keynesian economics and Roosevelt's New Deal, in which the state lends a helping hand to counterbalance market vicissitudes and extend opportunities to the socially disadvantaged; and 5) the choice enhancement state, in which radical individual autonomy is shielded from negative consequences by means of government subsidy. Each stage in its own way seeks to uphold the sovereignty of individual choice. However, Koyzis points out that there are numerous problems with liberalism so understood. First, it assumes that goods are determined solely by the individual; there is no concept of a common good, and the state therefore has no authority beyond the dictates of the aggregate wills of its citizens. Second, it fails to account for the broader social dimensions that shape and are shaped by the individual's choices (no man is an island). And third, it assumes that the state is capable of acting from a position of benign neutrality, as a spiritually vacant state. To return to Koyzis's basic thesis, liberalism falls prey to the gnostic error by locating evil in external authority and locating salvation in the autonomous will of the individual. In short, liberalism makes an idol out of private voluntary consent. The next ideology that Koyzis critiques is conservatism, which is in some ways the least ideological of those surveyed in the book. Rather, conservatism tends to feed off other ideologies, seeking to preserve or recover whichever traditions are present in a given social order. This makes conservatism a relative term: a conservative today would have been a revolutionary in America's founding years. But what unites all conservatives is a general aversion to radical social change, preferring instead the tried-and-true methods of the past. Conservatives tend to reject utopianisms of all stripes; they believe that if change is ever to succeed, it must be incremental and pragmatic. But this leaves us with the obvious question, exactly which traditions are worth preserving or recovering? What conservatism lacks is a transcendent standard by which to evaluate traditions, especially in regard to the role of the state. Moreover, conservatives may indulge in a sort of reverse utopianism, seeing the past through rose-colored glasses. One might say that the gnostic error of conservatives is to locate evil in the differentiation and development of society (which is actually a creational good; see below), and to locate salvation in the supposed wisdom of the static past. Overall, Koyzis is sympathetic to the conservative instinct, if not conservative ideology. And yet he also desires to wed this instinct with a cautious openness to reform; conserving and progressing do not have to be mutually exclusive. As Koyzis puts it, conservatives might be able to apply the brakes, but they cannot step on the gas or steer the vehicle. Koyzis then moves to nationalism, a particular temptation within American evangelical churches. He acknowledges the difficulty in defining precisely what a nation is (after all, it is a relatively modern phenomenon), but common features seem to be a community's self-awareness as a nation and an aspiration to self-government. To its credit, nationalism gives greater weight to the role of community than does either liberalism or conservatism. But the very idea of nation is necessarily exclusionary; it turns citizens into insiders and non-citizens into outsiders. Sometimes nationalism can take on overtly religious dimensions, as seen in a nation's anthems, parades,

holidays, etc. Further, nationalism is inherently idolatrous insofar as it elevates the nation to the level of ultimate loyalty and significance. Returning to Koyzis thesis, one can say that the gnostic error of nationalism is very similar to that of liberalism, except that it expands the sovereignty of the individual will to that of the nation, over against all authorities or perceived threats beyond the nations boundaries (and sometimes excluded groups within its boundaries). For the nationalist, the greatest evil is foreign rule. This tends to create a double standard of justice for citizens and non-citizens. It also tends to eclipse loyalties to intermediary institutions between the individual and the state (such as the church, the family, the labor union, etc.). None of this is meant to imply that there is no legitimate place for patriotic loyalty; it only means that such loyalty ought to be relativized. The next ideology examined is democracy. Koyzis begins by distinguishing democracy as structure from democracy as creed. As a structure, democracy is merely the means by which citizens can participate in the political process and allow all voices to be heard with equal weight in this sense, it is a creational good. But as a creed, democracy takes a turn for the worse, degenerating into a form of bare majoritarianism or mob rule. Democratic ideology has affinities with the gnostic errors of both liberalism and nationalism: it ascribes ontological ultimacy to the popular will, and it demonizes any authority over which the subject does not believe himself to have direct input. And like nationalism, it also tends to obscure the pluriformity of interests within a body politic (majority vs. minorities, local vs. federal, etc.), all in the name of some nebulous entity known as the people. Without proper limits, this kind of democracy becomes indistinguishable from totalitarianism, extending into nonstate institutions like the workplace, the school, and the family. Further, most people have neither the time nor the expertise to assume all the responsibilities involved in self-government. Repeating an argument as old as Platos Republic, Koyzis says that healthy government requires professionally trained leaders who know better than the people what is in the peoples own interests. What people think they want is not always the same as what is truly good for them, and for this reason democracy can easily devolve into a collective form of instant gratification. What healthy democracy needs, says Koyzis, is representatives who can function as competent trustees rather than as mere delegates slavishly following the will of the people. The final ideology surveyed is socialism. Although there are several variations, the common idea behind them all is communal ownership of a societys means of production and equal distribution of wealth. It can be said that the gnostic error of socialism is to locate evil in societys division of labor, and to locate salvation in economic equality. In its strongest forms, it is the most utopian ideology. Karl Marx, for example, taught that the proletariat revolution would lead to a radical transformation of human nature itself through the emergence of a classless society. Take away economic inequalities, so the reasoning goes, and you take away the root cause of all vice. Unfortunately, history has tended to prove otherwise. Wherever communism has been tried, it has been unable to create a classless society; quite the contrary, it has tended to concentrate power and resources in the hands of the elite members of the party establishment. As Koyzis describes it, Rule of the people inevitably becomes rule of the proletariat, which further narrows to become rule of a party on behalf of the proletariat (163). Now it should be acknowledged that there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea of communal ownership, a point which Koyzis stresses (Christians need look only as far as the early church in the book of Acts). But the danger lies in uncompromisingly totalizing such a principle and extending it to the highest levels of society, which invariably results in injustice. Nevertheless, Koyzis agrees with the socialist critique that a completely unfettered free market is also prone to injustice. The state does have a responsibility to enforce certain normative limits on the market, to protect public spaces, and to provide at least a minimal level of social safety nets. But the state is not a surrogate savior, and we should not expect any amount of economic regulation or redistribution to alter human nature. So what should be the Christian response to such ideologies? Koyzis favors neither total condemnation nor total affirmation, but rather recognizing their genuine creational underpinnings within the context of the biblical worldview. After all, if idolatry is defined as ascribing ontological ultimacy to created goods, then we should still expect to see elements of the good (however distorted) within each ideology. Thus Koyzis finds the key to Christian political engagement within the normative creation order not in the sense of mere reparation (its not about winding the clock back to untamed Eden), but rather in the cultivation and differentiation of creational structures. Politics so defined is not some unfortunate product of the fall or merely a necessary evil (contrary to much Lutheran political thought); it serves a positive purpose in Gods original design for the universe. A further aspect of Christian political engagement is an appreciation of pluralism, a term which Koyzis uses in three senses. First, there is pluralism in the sense of spiritual or directional diversity the empirical reality of religious differences within society. Given that politics is only capable of achieving penultimate justice rather than Gods final justice, this type of pluralism must be tolerated, even if it is not the ideal. We might wish that all unbelievers would bow the knee to Christ, but we cannot compel them to do so by force of arms (consider Jesus parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13). The second type is cultural pluralism the natural tendency of humans to develop their own unique customs, languages, and practices as they disperse geographically. Since this type of pluralism would have emerged even if there had been no fall, we can call it a creational good that ought to be protected. However, Koyzis is chiefly concerned with the third type of pluralism, which he labels societal pluriformity or structural pluralism. This means that all human activity can be divided into various institutional spheres (the family, the church, the state, etc.), each of which has its own norms and limits. We can pretty intuitively tell the difference between a family and a business corporation, for instance. And yet non-

Christian political ideologies tend to flatten these differences by elevating one element of society over the others. For example, the liberal deifies the individual at the expense of other authorities, while the nationalist deifies the state at the expense of individual rights. By contrast, the Christian doctrine of the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28) helps us to understand and respect the creational integrity of each sphere of life. True, God did not create the world with schools, dance troupes, and labor unions, but he did embed in creation the potential for us to develop such institutions through the historical process of societal differentiation. The concept is a bit difficult to grasp at first, but it is absolutely essential for healthy political engagement. Building on the idea of structural pluralism, Koyzis proceeds to examine two particular Christian traditions that offer nonideological approaches to politics: Catholic social teaching and neo-Calvinism. The former began with Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), whose teachings on the states relationship to nonstate communities laid the groundwork for one of the greatest contributions to modern Christian political thought: the principle of subsidiarity. Stated simply, subsidiarity means that tasks should whenever possible be fulfilled at the lowest level of a social hierarchy, and higher levels should intervene and provide assistance (subsidium) only as a last resort. For example, the federal government should not step in and provide direct material assistance to those in need if churches and private charities are capable of meeting this need. Neo-Calvinism (a favorite topic of this blog), which began in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth century with Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck, offers a very similar approach to political engagement. One of the core principles of neo-Calvinism is sphere sovereignty (Koyzis prefers the term differentiated responsibility), which views the authority of each social institution as deriving directly from God himself. Koyzis tends to favor sphere sovereignty over subsidiarity, since the former locates authority not in a fixed ontological hierarchy but rather in office, which varies according to institutional context. Koyzis gives the example of a student and teacher: the teacher has authority over the student in the classroom, but supposing that that same student were also a policeman and pulled the teacher over for speeding after school, the offices and institutional context have changed. Sphere sovereignty accounts for this dynamic better than does subsidiarity, although both traditions are at an advantage over the ideologies in avoiding the dangers of political reductionism. Koyzis concludes by reflecting on the nature of the states task, which has been variously defined in terms of power, authority, and justice. He does not attempt to arrive at an objective, universally acceptable definition of justice. In fact, he argues, such an attempt is impossible, due to the irreducible pretheoretical commitments (worldviews) that every person holds much to the chagrin of proponents of natural law. But given a Christian understanding of creational norms and differentiated responsibility, we can say that a states task is to adjudicate the pluriform interests of society (the family, the school, the market, etc.) in a balanced and consistent way. Given the reality of sin, this task will never solve all of lifes problems. Life is complex, and ideologies generally attempt to make things simpler than they really are. But a Christian view of politics enables us to work toward penultimate justice, even as we await Gods final justice. By way of evaluation, I would say that *Political Visions and Illusions* is essential reading for Christian political engagement. I think it would be ideally suited as an introductory political science textbook in Christian colleges. But I would also warn the reader that its content is very dense. The concepts described take a long time to digest, and many parts of the book may require a second reading to understand fully. Further, there are many concrete political issues that are left untreated (for example, how is a Christian to think about the minimum wage or immigration reform?). But Koyzis can hardly be faulted for that. The book is large enough as it is (281 pages), and his goal is rather to provide the theoretical foundations upon which we can develop such concrete policies and actions. In that goal, I believe he has succeeded. See my other reviews at Allkirk.net. 0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Three Stars By Betty D. Hughes Strong beginning but became weaker in the final chapters. 8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Essential reading for Christians who care about politics By E. Ritzema David T. Koyzis, who teaches political science at Redeemer University College in Ontario, has written an extremely helpful book for Christians who seek to understand the contemporary political climate. He begins by looking at the nature of ideologies, saying that they tend to locate sources of evil and salvation within the created order, and are therefore idolatrous from a Christian perspective. He then devotes a chapter each to five different ideologies: liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy and socialism. He closes the book with three "what next" chapters: First, there is a chapter on Christians rejecting the monisms of the ideologies and affirming social pluriformity. Second, he includes a chapter that looks at two nonideological Christian alternatives: subsidiarity, which is commonly associated with Catholic social teaching, and sphere-sovereignty (or differentiated responsibility), which is commonly associated with Dutch Reformed thinking. Koyzis does a good job at explaining both, and expresses a preference for the latter. Finally, there is a chapter looking at the state's role in fostering justice. There are two reasons why I would recommend this book: first, Koyzis is familiar with a wide range of ideas in the history of political thought. He is able to explain the history of the concept of ideology, as well as the histories of the various ideologies themselves. That ability to give context is invaluable in a culture that rarely gets beyond sound bites and slogans. Second, I appreciated that it is written from a Christian perspective. Of course, not all Christians will agree with everything Koyzis writes, but the fact that he writes as a Christian enables him to step back from the ideologies and evaluate them based on how they understand God's created world. A lot of political analysis is simply the adherent of one ideology critiquing some other ideology. Koyzis is able to critique them all from his standpoint as a Christian, and

I found that very valuable.

Named Best Book (Culture) in the 2004 Word Guild Canadian Writing Awards! The end of the Cold War has brought about more than the triumph of some political ideologies and the disappearance of others. In fact, the collapse of communism has created a vacuum quickly being filled by various alternative visions, ranging from ethnic nationalism to individualistic liberalism. But political ideologies are not merely a matter of governmental efficacy. Rather, political ideologies are intrinsically and inescapably religious--each carries certain assumptions about the nature of reality, individuals and society, as well as a particular vision for the common good. These fundamental beliefs transcend the political sphere, and the astute Christian observer should thus discern the subtle ways in which ideologies are rooted in idolatrous worldviews. In this comprehensive study, political scientist David Koyzis surveys the key political ideologies of our era, including liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy and socialism. Each philosophy is given careful analysis and fair critique, unpacking the worldview issues inherent to each and pointing out essential strengths and weaknesses. Koyzis concludes by proposing alternative models that flow out of Christianity's historic engagement with the public square, retrieving approaches that hold promise for the complex political realities of the twenty-first century. Writing with broad, international perspective and keen analytical insight, Koyzis offers a sound guide for Christians working in the public square, culture watchers, political pundits and all students of modern political thought.

"Thankfully it is now common for Christians to believe that the gospel should shape our view not only of the goals but also of the nature of our politics, and that the theme of idolatry is key to understanding not only our personal but also our political life. But until David Koyzis's *Political Visions and Illusions*, this understanding has remained largely vague, tentative and intuitive. This book shows clearly and in detail how biblical insight into idolatry and ideology illuminate the most concrete dimensions of political life in a way rarely grasped by more secular political scientists." (Paul Marshall, Senior Fellow, Center for Religious Freedom, Washington, D.C.) "David Koyzis not only helps us to see the basic worldviews that give shape to a variety of political perspectives, he also makes a solid case for a uniquely Christian perspective on these matters. This excellent book is a much-needed 'discerning' tool for understanding the basic issues of political life." (Richard J. Mouw, President and Professor of Christian Philosophy, Fuller Theological Seminary) "David Koyzis has produced a truly original book illuminating the landscape of modern political ideologies. His approach is distinctively Christian, giving him a standpoint from which to critique liberal as well as totalitarian ideologies. Moreover, the book is up to date with the post-Cold War world. This is the place to start for anyone who wants to understand the dynamics of ideological conflict in the world today." (James W. Skillen, President, Center for Public Justice) "Political nostrums fly thick and fast in contemporary life--from print, radio, TV, pulpits and (perhaps most of all) casual conversation. David Koyzis's welcome effort uses wise biblical reasoning as well as the hard-won experience of Dutch Calvinists to winnow through the modern world's blizzard of competing political claims. Koyzis's analysis is both an effective survey of the world's contemporary political options and an encouraging Christian word on how to discern the critical differences. This book's combination of readable theory and wise Christian thinking is a first-order contribution to Christian political thought in its own right." (Mark A. Noll, McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College) About the Author Koyzis (Ph.D., University of Notre Dame) is professor of political science at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario.