

Left, Right and Christ: Evangelical Faith in Politics

Lisa Sharon Harper and David C. Innes. 2011. Boise, ID: Russell Media Web. ISBN 978-0-9829-3008-3, \$22.99.

Reviewed by Eric Schansberg, Indiana University Southeast

Harper and Innes have written a “balanced” book on politics and Christian faith. It is balanced by virtue of having two authors writing from different perspectives. Representing “the Left,” Harper is “Director of Mobilizing” for Sojourners. Representing “the Right,” Innes is Associate Professor of Politics at Kings College in New York City.

Christian economists can benefit from this book as an example of useful discussion about important public policy issues with a respectful tone. This can be difficult when, as is the case here, the dialogue occurs between two people with a different sense of the proper role of government and different estimates of the efficacy of market outcomes and government activism.

As for the framework, one can certainly quibble with the idea of a two-dimensional, left/right political spectrum. Harper does not seem aware of other possibilities—e.g., describing the Cato Institute as “conservative” (p. 164). And one might hope that a politics professor would insist on using a more realistic and helpful model. But of course, the two-dimensional approach is the dominant way of describing such things.

The book is also balanced in that both authors generally write with a moderate tone. At least in part, this is more likely because they are dialoguing with each other in the book. Having to interact with another author is a useful discipline for approaching “the other side” and its arguments with dignity and respect. Interestingly, the author of one of the forewords, Jim Wallis, is less measured. (Marvin Olasky writes the other.) Wallis (p. 11) accuses Innes of an “almost worshipful embrace of American individualism...[Innes] sounds much more like Ayn Rand... than he does Jesus Christ.” And in his praise of Harper, Wallis says that she “strongly endorses personal responsibility” (p. 12). But apparently, not in a worshipful, Randian sense.

Harper and Innes open with their backgrounds and how their past relates to their current views. It’s interesting and perhaps ironic that Innes was initially repelled by the idea of larger government in the context of a social/cultural issue—the debate over French vs. English in Canada (pp. 25-26). Harper’s story is largely based on her African-American heritage. In 1983, she converted to Christianity—and in her mind, necessarily to the Republican Party. But in 1990 she met Evangelical Democrats and “converted” to the other (political) side.

From there, the authors turn to their general views on government and markets. Harper speaks in broad terms about goals for economic outcomes and public policy. Innes is more specific, speaking to both means and ends. He exhorts that government “must not steal from its people” (p. 56). And he notes that government can commit sins of omission and commission. In this, he points to New York City in the 1980s (pp. 58-60). In sum, he says that government should deal with evil, but should only encourage individuals to “do good” rather trying to do the good itself.

Along the same lines, Harper’s approach to government is not nearly as clear as would be ideal—in terms of laying out an ethical/biblical case for government as a means to godly ends in the economic arena. Innes’ approach is biblical in its approach to matters of economic and social “justice”—when the rights of others have been directly and significantly violated. But it’s not at all clear how he would motivate government activism to encourage social “morality”—when the harm done is largely to oneself. Most conservative Christians find a role for government here, so it would have been useful for him to discuss this distinction.

More broadly, neither author is sufficiently thorough in explaining why the pursuit of government activism—in matters of economic justice, social morality, and social justice—by Christians, would be an ethical and practical means to godly ends. (This is what I try to do in Schansberg, 2003). Government activism is too complex and dangerous to be embraced without a more critical and analytical eye.

Harper and Innes are both relatively solid in their discussions of economic markets. Innes says that government’s role in the economic realm is about “preserving and expanding opportunity, not redistributing booty” (p. 71). And his discussion of health care and health insurance is impressive. (The only thing missing was an explanation for why health insurance is different from standard insurance.)

Harper writes that business activity is neutral and that money is a mere medium. She is forward in describing the potential damage caused by human depravity in the economic realm. Unfortunately, she doesn’t formally develop the same line of thinking in the political realm. She does cite specific examples of self-interested (and selfish) political activity by labor unions (the American Medical Association) and health insurers (pp. 96-97)—as well as corporate farming interests on corn subsidies (p. 162). But a general recognition of this problem and a discussion of its implications would have been appropriate.

Less satisfying, Harper makes vague reference to a “neo-liberal brand of free-market capitalism” and “free market fundamentalists” which she says were dominant from 1980-2008. But the terms are undefined and the implications are unexplained. She also exhibits the common confusion about marginal vs. average tax rates (p. 84), thinking that the wealthy paid

a much lower percentage of their income in taxes after the marginal tax rate cuts of the 1980s.

There were other disappointing sections. Innes engages in hyperbole—both by contrasting Republicans as “defenders of liberty” and labeling Democrats as proponents of “post-modern, progressive Statism.” He then concludes “that is why I’m a Republican” (p. 30). It would probably be more precise to label him a “conservative” (of some sort) rather than a Republican. But it is common for partisanship to get in the way of clearer thinking and cleaner communication.

On “War and Terrorism,” Harper’s view is more nuanced, including criticism of President Obama and both major political parties. Innes is sharp on unintended consequences in the economic realm, but he doesn’t follow that line of reasoning in this context. References to authors like Robert Pape (2006) on the “strategic logic of suicide terrorism” would have been instructive.

Harper’s section on abortion was deeply troubling. She argued that it was wrong, but she didn’t want to legislate against it based on her Christian faith. While potentially consistent, this approach would need to be teased out. And given her other positions, the argument holds no water. To note, she is quite willing to legislate her Christian faith on matters of economic justice. Likewise, it’s difficult to imagine Harper using the same reasoning on other issues—most notably, slavery. Moreover, one can refer to logic (if we don’t know, we should err on the side of life) and science (what does science say about when life begins?) as the basis for reasonable legal restrictions on abortion. She tries to poke Republicans on “other” life issues and for playing politics. But all of this rings hollow, since Democrats could easily propose their own “apolitical” reforms on abortion.

At times, the book is also “balanced” in the (surprising) sense that Harper and Innes agree quite a bit. On immigration and illegal immigration, both authors sound reasonable and find a lot of common ground. On the topic of homosexuality, so-called “same-sex marriage” was the policy proposal they considered. Innes was opposed; Harper was uneasy. A discussion of “civil unions” probably would have been more fruitful.

On the “environment,” Harper and Innes focus on “global warming” and largely agree. This isn’t too surprising since economic markets struggle to deal with externalities like pollution. So, most people find some role for government regulation. And the authors don’t have background in the relevant science or economics, so they’re thankfully reluctant to go very far in their discussion. Innes acknowledges this limitation (p. 219). Perhaps this topic was Harper’s idea?

I would have liked more discussion of “economic justice” sorts of issues, including topics where the government is the cause of injustice.

Of these, K-12 education is a huge omission. Is there any more important issue in terms of poverty and injustice? It would have been interesting to hear Innes argue for government “activism” that would result in freer markets (e.g., charter schools, vouchers, tax credit scholarships)—and to see whether Harper would have defended the *status quo* of heavy government involvement.

Another notable omission was the War on Drugs and the policy debate on decriminalization and legalization. Would Harper have been merely uncomfortable with the consequences of the War on Drugs—or willing to forcefully advocate legalization? Would Innes have been uncomfortable with current efforts? Or would he have looked to up the ante with a more militant approach and done his best to deflect the many serious injustices caused by our activism in this realm?

All in all, Harper and Innes have produced an interesting book that will promote reasonable dialogue on contentious topics. May we follow their example in setting a Christ-like tone within important discussions about the extent to which government is an ethical and practical means to godly ends.

References

- Pape, R.** (2006). *Dying to win: The strategic logic of suicide terrorism*. New York: Random House.
- Schansberg, D. E.** (2003). *Turn neither to the right nor to the left: A thinking Christian's guide to politics and public policy*. Greenville, SC: Alertness Books. ■