

COMMENTARY

The Gingrich Who Stole Compassion: Why The Two C's Can't Teach the Three R's: A Commentary on Compassionate Conservatism and Teaching Social Justice

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In the democracy that exists in the United States all people are encouraged to rationalize their own personal points of view and are guaranteed the right to have, hold, and express their views. In addition, this democracy is bound, by common law, to respect, defend, and protect all of its citizens equally. Moreover, the government is charged with manifesting a *common good* by ensuring that all people are treated justly, i.e., they are charged with creating and maintaining a socially just society. There are inherent disagreements between differing personal views about the government's role as a protector of its citizens and the establishment of a socially just society. One of major areas of disagreement in US politics today is the role of government in providing for the material needs of citizens who are unable to participate in the mainstream of socio-economic well-being enjoyed by the majority of citizens.

In 1960, Barry Goldwater codified the "*conscience of a conservative*" in his book of the same name and stated that compassion was not the responsibility of the government, rather the government only had fiscal responsibility and to that end should apply standards of accountability for schools, agencies and individuals who looked to the government for assistance. Since Goldwater published his book, liberals and centrists have offered the criticism that conservatism is cold-hearted and insensitive to the needs of the governed. To make the perspective of conservatism more palatable, clever authors constructed an anchoring heuristic that attached and anchored the word conservative with the word compassion, thus establishing a connection between compassion and conservatism.

I suggest that the political views of a compassionate conservative are diametrically opposed to views of compassion and caring that are necessary to establish and maintain a socially just society. Moreover, the views of a compassionate conservative are antithetical to Catholic Social Teachings and topics of social justice.

I was with some friends the other evening (all Ph.D.'s, and all teaching at a university where "service" is the central component of the mission of the university). During the course of the conversation one friend boldly stated that homeless persons were drug addicts or alcoholics and in fact, *not homeless* as some had cars and were living in them. Moreover, these homeless did not deserve community support-- *from the government*-- as they chose to be homeless. The discussion continued, focusing on the demographics of the America's homeless population and the fact that a "home" needs to have certain amenities that Detroit has not yet added as options. These amenities include running water and indoor plumbing. Then the discussion turned, as always, to what I have come

to believe is the “*Compassionate Conservative*” (Wikipedia, 2007) diatribe about social issues and accountability. This conversation obviated the primary obstacle to developing topics of social justice in classrooms where the instructor holds the political view of a compassionate conservative.

Ideas about others typically include stereotypes that contain attitudes and beliefs about those others. These ideas are readily accessible due to frequency of use and ego investment in those ideas (Anderson, Glassman, & Chen, 1995). For example if an instructor holds the stereotype of the homeless that most people are homeless because of substance abuse (the myth) then the statistical observation that only 16% of homeless in America are abusers (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007) becomes disconfirming information to the myth. The myth becomes more accessible than the fact (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995)—the stereotype of drug addicted homeless persons becomes the example, ignoring 39% of the homeless population who are families, or the 13% that are currently employed (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007).

Examples and anecdotal information used by this instructor will be drawn from the stereotypic myth held by the instructor, and thus the most accessible information (Bargh, & Chartrand, 1999) available to the instructor. My friend maintains that many, if not most, homeless people choose—by their drug or alcohol abuse—to be homeless. In other words, they lack personal accountability and thus are not eligible for support or assistance from the government. This is most accessible—and ego defended ideation—that my friend will bring into classroom discussion of social justice that focuses on the needs of the homeless. The examples used in discussing homeless will not be about social justice, *per se*, but rather the lack of reasonability, and accountability, by persons that bring about their circumstance of homelessness.

The Compassionate Conservative’s mantra is accountability and Barry Goldwater anchored the ideas of personal, and governmental, accountability into the fabric of American conservatism when he wrote his conservative manifesto, the *Conscience of a Conservative* in 1960. Contained in this small volume were instructions for conservatives that covered topics such as reduction in size of the federal government, social services, welfare, access to education, and a reduction in taxation (Goldwater, 1960). Those instructions have become the foundation on which the modern compassionate conservative agenda stands. At the core of conservatism is the fundamental issue that smaller government is better than larger government. In this case government must also be accountable for how it spends taxpayer’s dollars and reduce spending in areas where personal responsibility—if implemented—would replace the requirement on government (hence the taxpayer) to provide services to the population of this country (Goldwater, 1960). The theme of accountability resonates strongly through social issues that are in focus on the present administrations’ website, Whitehouse.gov (Whitehouse.gov, 2007).

The idea of accountability becomes manifest when Goldwater discusses welfare and charity. He proposed that welfare and charity are better handled by religious organizations and that government play no role in the mediation of social issues. Goldwater’s rationale is that if the government stops providing benefits to the less fortunate in our communities taxes will be lowered thus providing extra monies that can be donated to charities by individuals. Moreover, providing assistance to those in need

prevents them from learning to be accountable (Goldwater, 1960). The present administration has made Faith Based Initiatives a central feature of their platform during the first year of executive tenure. The idea of personal accountability with respect to charitable giving is laudable but begs the issue about social justice. *Social justice*, in general, refers to the idea of a society which gives certain individuals and groups that have a greater share of the resources (hence power) in that society. This unequal distribution creates adversity for others in the society.

The term "social justice" itself tends to be used by those ideologies who believe that present day society is highly unjust - and these are usually left-wing ideologies, advocating a more extensive use of income redistribution, a more egalitarian society. The right wing has its own conception of social justice but generally believes that it is best achieved through the operation of a free market and the promotion of philanthropy and charity. Both right and left tend to agree on the importance of rule of law, human rights, and some form of a welfare safety net (though the left supports this latter element to a greater extent (e.g. to provide for capable individuals in society) than the right. (Wikipedia, 2007)

Social justice is also an ethical and political concept used to describe the movement towards a socially just community. In this context, *social justice* is grounded in the concepts of human rights and equality represented in the insights of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the social contract ideas of John Locke. All societies have a basic structure of social, economic, and political institutions based on agreement by the people who are subject to the regulation of the basic structure. The political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) proposed that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others." (Rawls, 1971).

This view is restated in *Political Liberalism* (1993), where society is seen "as a fair system of co-operation over time, from one generation to the next." (Rawls) This applies to individuals as it does to national governments, which are the ultimate trustees, holding representative powers *for the benefit* of all citizens within their societies. The general principle of justice should rise from the people and not be dictated by the law-making powers of governments (Wikipedia, 2007). It is difficult to reconcile the compassionate portion of the compassionate conservative ideology in light of the philosophies of social justice and the implicit social contract. In fact, instead of preaching personal and governmental accountability, as a compassionate conservative might do, a person who believes in the philosophy of social justice might preach the meaning of compassion as, "The feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines one to spare or to succour". (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007).

Two radically different definitions of compassion¹ have been presented; one, which says the population as expressed in the actions of the government has no responsibility to the less fortunate and vulnerable members of our communities while the other stipulates a moral and emotional duty to those less fortunate. If we personally hold the view that

collectively we have no responsibility except to teach accountability then we will teach that view in the classroom. That view and the attitudes and beliefs held within that view will permeate the memories that we access when providing examples or anecdotal material in the classroom. Thus the information given to the students will distance them from others in their communities and serve to make them more isolated. I believe that faculty who profess compassionate conservatism can not teach responsibility for others or the responsibility of a citizen in a community.

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