
Pro Rege

Volume 46 | Number 3

Article 5

March 2018

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Recommended Citation

Walicord, Sacha (2018) "Reply to Dr. Chris Gousmett's Open Letter," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46: No. 3, 34 - 37.

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Reply to Dr. Chris Gousmett's Open Letter



by Sacha Walicord

Dear Dr. Gousmett,

Let me begin by thanking you for taking the time to write a review of my review, so to speak. I have to say that I find it a little difficult to reply to your extensive letter because it is filled with innuendos, platitudes, and very loose references to Scripture without cogent, exegetically-sound arguments. It is clear that you do not like the free-market view and that you prefer the approach of forced governmental redistribution when it comes to social issues. To answer all your claims and assumptions would require an extensive reply for which, frankly, I neither have time nor enough space in this publication. Therefore, I will try to reply in a more general way.

Please allow me to provide a short excerpt of my biography before I answer some of your con-

cerns to help you understand my views.

Raised in Europe, I was indoctrinated with statism and “big government socialism” from an early age. This happened in school, through the media, and through many other venues. We were constantly told how great it was to have government provide everything we needed. It was often added how evil the U.S. social system was and that people there were dying outside of hospitals due to lack of finances and the absence of public health insurance. Growing up, I believed all of this because it was all I had ever heard. Not once can I remember even hearing a critical view of such a worldview and essentially grew up a Marxist. I promoted and defended this view. When I was confronted with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ and became a believer in my mid-teens, I began to see the world and everything in it with new eyes. This was, of course, a long process, but essentially, I came to understand the *antithesis*, the incompatibility of light with darkness, of the world with the Kingdom of God. Through this, I learned that I had to rigorously re-think *everything* in biblical terms. I had been made new in the eyes of God through Jesus Christ, and this “newness” had to play out in every single area of my life and thinking—or to say it in Dr. Kuyper’s great words, in “every square inch” of my existence. As I went through university, law school, and later graduate school, this *antithesis* between the world and God’s Kingdom became even clearer to me, and I learned that classrooms are a battlefield for the minds of future generations. I was forced to decide either to push back or to abandon my Christian convictions. In line with

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my conscience, I decided to push back. Later, as an economics professor, I had to search for a biblical view of economics. I quickly understood that God's Word assigned very limited powers to government, but I still needed more clarity on the matter. To be perfectly honest, I did not find this clarity among colleagues of your persuasion—not at all. I found among them, what seemed to me, little to no commitment to *sola scriptura* and a strong presuppositional, faith-like commitment to both theological and political liberalism. This, of course, is only my very subjective perception, but I did not see them defending the integrity of Scripture against secular onslaughts. On the contrary, it seemed to me that for them the enemy was not theological liberalism but theologically conservative, Bible-believing Christians, whom they would often condescendingly call “fundamentalists,” “prooftexters,” or “biblicists.” It seemed to me that they would defend their views not with sound biblical exegesis but with lofty philosophical jargon, which the average Christian in the pew would never be able to follow. It looked as though they were seeking to constitute something like a “new priesthood” or a theological “uber-class,” which “ordinary” Christians and pastors *needed* in order to understand the complex teachings of Scripture. Reading your letter, and considering the derogatory emails that were written to my superiors and colleagues by your like-minded friends, without including me in the discussion, in reaction to my little book review, I have to admit that it certainly feels like the mindset I just described. It appears that a difference of opinion—especially publicly—is not taken well by proponents of your persuasion.

In regards to the content of your letter, I have to admit that I was taken aback by the incoherence of your argument and your almost disingenuous misrepresentations of Dr. North's and my own views. To give you an example, your claim that we were against taxes and government alto-

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gether is expressly wrong and a blatant misrepresentation of the truth. Furthermore, you claim that we were proponents of humanist libertarianism, which is utterly ludicrous because North states exactly the opposite at length in his book (see Preface, Introduction, and Chapter 1!), as do I expressly in my book review. North goes to great lengths to explain Hazlitt's weaknesses and the fallacy of humanist libertarianism. I have no problem with discussing opposing views, but I do not appreciate misrepresentations of views and strawman arguments. Moreover, I was quite surprised to read the following statement in your letter: “Frankly, the presuppositions and approach taken by libertarian economists are hardly compatible with a biblical view of life. Is this then not

another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanists views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay?” You are absolutely correct, but what is your purpose in telling me this? Both North and I (even in my short review) have in clearest terms distanced ourselves from a humanist libertarianism. In fact, that is what North's book is all about, to defend the free market as biblical and not from a humanist standpoint (have you really read the book?). And yet, I do have to ask you why you do not express a similar warning against statism/socialism in your letter. After all you seem to find it necessary to point out several times that you are not of the socialist persuasion. Help me understand how your own statist view, for which at no point you provide a coherent biblical defense, is not—to put it again in your own words—“another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanist views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay?”

It seems to me that your entire letter seeks to build a strawman argument, with secular “robber-baron-capitalism” on one side and an infallible “oh-so-compassionate and selfless” government on the other. Then you attack this made-up,

quasi-capitalist position and immediately claim victory. In agreement, I do not like the *straw-man-capitalism* that you describe, but the utopian statism/socialism that you present as a solution *cannot* exist as it is in stark conflict with human nature. Fallen man will not suddenly become perfect and selfless as soon as he becomes a government redistributor of other people's wealth. If you give fallen humans unbridled power of the sword, they *will* abuse it every time. Statism and socialism were never about compassion for the poor but about power for the elite and bureaucrats, who want to control every area of people's lives—or to say it in Gideon J. Tucker's famous words, "No man's life, liberty, or property is safe while the legislature is in session."

Also, your use of isolated passages of Scripture (prooftexting?) is quite troubling to me. In typical liberal manner you keep calling for "sound exegesis," but you do not provide any—even remotely sound—biblical exegesis yourself. In fact, you seem to quote Kuyper more than Scripture, and even then, you are more trying to *interpret* his views in your favor than actually quote him. You use Scripture where it fits your argument but revert to lofty philosophical jargon and appeal to emotion where Scripture does not support your views—when you repeatedly and in quite dramatic fashion refer to the plight of the poor, seeking to make your case for big government by appealing to the readers' emotions. Furthermore, you use Romans 13:4 to make the case for extensive government responsibility as government's being "God's minister to you for good" while not allowing the rest of the passage to explain just what precisely this "good" is—only because it does not seem to fit your argument. That is not exegesis but *eisegesis*—you are trying to force your own preferences unto the text of Scripture. Thereby you are neglecting a fundamental principle of Reformed biblical interpretation, namely to *let Scripture interpret Scripture*. It is this very passage (Romans 13) that explains what this "good" is, but you fill the term with your own preferences. If you want to allow a government to extend its power to whatever *government* thinks is "good," you have clearly opened the door to all sorts of tyranny. The argument of tyrannical gov-

ernments and dictatorships throughout history has always been, "*We* know what is good for you." You seem to make the opposite case, that the free market view with a very limited government is prone to oppression and tyranny. Accordingly, you write, "It has been said of some of the repressive anti-democratic dictatorships which imposed free-market ideology while engaged in brutality against unions or others who protested the actions of the government, that people had to be imprisoned so that the market could be free." Do you understand the self-defeating nature of your own argument here? Take note how your statement begins! It begins with the words "repressive anti-democratic dictatorships." Dictatorships are **governments...**the same institution that North and I say must be limited in its power and which you want empowered to run society for us.

As one reads your letter, you sound increasingly hostile to wealthy/productive people. At some point you write "[Y]ou suggest that compassion for the poor and distribution of funds should be voluntary. Unfortunately, this is not what we find with the massively wealthy—they do not support the poor." May I ask how you justify such a blank statement? Is there any sound data to back up such a conclusion, or is this just another speculation on your behalf? Furthermore, I wonder why the default mode in your circles seems to be to call on Caesar to help the poor and not to call the church to pick up her God-ordained diaconal duty. I think this is quite telling. God calls **us**, as Christians, to care for the poor. *He does not call us to call on the government* to care for the poor. As one reads your letter, one cannot help but observe that you revert more and more into a language of class warfare with "the (evil) wealthy" on one side and "the (good) poor" on the other. This is, of course, a false dichotomy and seeks to stir up emotions rather than state facts. Such an emotionalized argument builds on a breach of the Tenth Commandment and seeks to stir people's emotions against a group of people based on their income and not based on their moral quality. This strategy is highly divisive and wrong.

In your letter you continuously mention the names of your favorite scholars and criticize me

for not mentioning them. This is a rather strange criticism since I was reviewing a book by Gary North. Why would I then mention Goudzwaard, Skillen, Storkey, and others? I like much of Dr. Goudzwaard's criticism of Marxism in his 1972 ICS lectures, but these men are not the ones I would go to for sound biblical economic solutions. Also, since you are complaining about my ignoring them, let me ask you why these and other like-minded thinkers have never (at least to my knowledge) published an objection to Gary North's extensive publications on the topic of biblical economics? North has published a comprehensive economic commentary on the Bible, which is available free of charge on the internet. He has been criticizing these men's economic approach in print for over 50 years. Where is the response? I am not aware of any, but I might be wrong.

Let me unequivocally express that I will continue to teach my students whatever approach I find in God's Word. At the end of the day it is not Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, or North that we will all be accountable to but to the God of the Bible. Over the years it has become clear to me without a shadow of a doubt that the Bible teaches a very limited role of civil government (Rom. 13:1-7 etc.) and a strong protection of private property (Ex. 20:15, Matt. 20:15, Acts 5:4 etc.). Furthermore, I *do* believe in the validity of taxes as long as they are under 10 percent (1 Sam. 8:10, 14) and as long as they are used for tasks assigned to the civil government in God's Word. Therefore, whatever civil government is authorized to take according to God's Word is *not theft* and whatever civil government is authorized and called to do according to God's Word is *not sinful intrusion*. My question for you would be this: can the government *ever* steal, or is this by your definition of government impossible because it is, well, . . . the government? In that case we will have to change the commandment from "Thou shalt not steal" to "Thou shalt not steal—with the exception of government" or "Thou shalt not steal—except by majority vote."

I am always stunned that as some colleagues in academia seem to be more than willing to accept grants, donations, and salaries from capitalist donors and parents, while at the same time they try to indoctrinate the very same capitalists' children with statist and socialist ideas—especially those from biblically conservative families. That, to me, is the peak of hypocrisy and dishonesty. It has become so *en vogue* to push socialism and other liberal causes in academia that not being inclined to do such often means not to be taken seriously as an academic. Everyone, it seems, who dares to object will be shouted down, intimidated, and slandered. I learned that again with my short book review in *Pro Rege*, and yet I will not be intimidated.

In closing, I would like to leave you with my most important appeal. Critical to our families, churches, schools, and cherished institutions is the fact that our Reformed heritage, which stems from an unwavering faithfulness to the Word of God, must be renewed in every generation. Constantly, we must battle against compromise in regards to our historic faith, lest liberalism creep in, which, unabated will always end in apostasy in the next generation. Our very college is named after the great Dutch synod of 1618, when our Christian ancestors valiantly stood against the theological errors of their day. Four hundred years later, the battle has remained unchanged for us.

Thank you again, for interacting with me through *Pro Rege*. I am afraid that this exchange could easily develop into an endless back-and-forth between us. Therefore, in case you insist on continuing this exchange, I would be open to a friendly formal debate with you on our campus if a sponsor for such a debate can be found. Whatever disagreements you might have with Dr. North, I encourage you to take up with him. Considering that we are talking only about a simple book review, we have already invested a lot of time and words.

Every blessing!

Rev. Sacha Walicord, Ph.D.