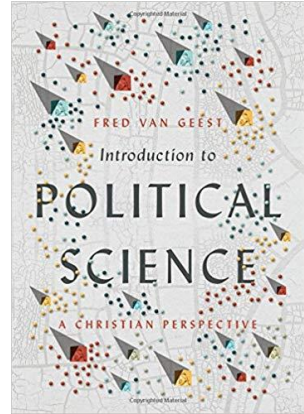


Fred Van Geest. *Introduction to Political Science: A Christian Perspective*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2017. Pp. xv + 315. ISBN 978-0830851805. Hardcover. \$40.00.

In Christian higher education, it is a common question of what to do with secular textbooks. There are very few Christian textbooks, or textbooks that are compatible with a Christian worldview, a fact which often leaves professors and instructors to supplement the secular textbook with faith-based readings. I remember my own undergraduate experience at a small, Christian liberal arts university, where as students in Political Science 101, we used a workbook written by our own professor.



Fred Van Geest, chairman of the political science department at Bethel University, attempts to provide a solution for Christian political science courses and the faculty who teach them with his textbook, *Introduction to Political Science: A Christian Perspective*. As one endorser of the book says, “[T]hinking about the study of politics from a Christian perspective usually entails holding a secular textbook in one hand and the Bible or your favorite ‘faith-and-politics’ book in the other. Van Geest offers students an introduction to political science...that highlights how various theological traditions within Christianity have weighed in on the same questions and concepts that attract the scholarly focus of our secular counterparts.”²

This is certainly Van Geest’s aim for the textbook, and he notes in the preface that “this book is designed to introduce you to the world of political science from a Christian perspective” (p. vi). However, the

² Peter Baker, American Studies Program, Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, as published on the front matter of the book

Christian perspective that he presents throughout the book is one that is decidedly pro-government and oddly anti-libertarian.

Not only is it obvious that Van Geest disagrees with those who would identify as libertarian, he goes so far as to intentionally criticize and belittle them throughout the book. His poorly-cited slights are sprinkled throughout the book, even in places where they are not relevant, and he included several factual errors about libertarianism and prominent libertarians. He undoubtedly is the type of Christian college faculty who would make libertarian students feel unwelcome, which is all too common, and is why my co-authors and I wrote *Called to Freedom: Why You Can Be Christian and Libertarian* (Wipf and Stock, 2017).

Chapter 1 is titled "What is Government? Why do we need it?," and immediately we see the author's pro-government bias. To answer the title's first question, the author explains in a very Obama-esque way, that "government is an institution that helps us make collective decisions" (p. 4). This is an insufficient answer, because obviously there are plenty of institutions that help us make decisions that are not government. Our churches help us make decisions about our spiritual and personal lives, our families help us make decision and plan for our futures, and our banks help us make decision about our money, just to name a few examples.

Political economist Max Weber identifies the following two characteristics of government that differentiate it from these other kinds of institutions: 1) it maintains a territorial monopoly over lawmaking and enforcement and 2) it collects revenue through compulsory taxation.³ This is the definition of government my co-author, Jason Hughey, uses in our book, as it clearly differentiates government from other social institutions.⁴ One doesn't have to be a libertarian to see the differences between this definition and the amorphous one offered by Van Geest.

³ Weber, Max. "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, pg 77. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946

⁴ Jason Hughey, "What Does The Bible Say About Government?" in *Called to Freedom: Why You Can Be Christian and Libertarian*, ed. by Elise Daniel (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 38.

However, his answer to the second question is more concerning. Without even entertaining a serious debate about whether or not we “need” government, he makes the bold claim that such questions are unbiblical, saying “anti-government rhetoric, the kind that disparages the idea of government in general, is inconsistent with the Christian view.” He even goes so far as to say, “government is a gift from God, even though it may not always feel that way!” (p. 5).

An odd thing about his pro-government position in this chapter is that he includes a brief discussion of rational choice theory, the idea that “political actors are good at pursuing their self-interest and will reliably do so” (p. 15). However, he attributes this behavior primarily to voters, and instead of looking at what happens when politicians or bureaucrats act selfishly, he asserts that these people “may also be motivated by less selfish desires such as a desire to seek justice” (p. 15). This would have been an excellent place to discuss that some Christians support limited government because of what can happen when sinful, selfish people are given the ability to use force over others. However, Van Geest passed on giving that position representation.

Finally, in the chapter’s “Study and Discussion Questions” he asks students to respond to the question, “[W]hat might happen if we were to have no government at all? What does your answer imply about the specific functions of government?” This is interesting because the idea of “no government” was not really addressed in the chapter. The primary examples he gives throughout the chapter of what services government provides are road-building and public education. The conclusion the question is leading students toward is that if there were no government, there would be no roads and no schools. Hopefully some students reading this textbook have pointed out in their class discussions that just because the government currently builds the roads and runs the education system doesn’t mean they always have or should or that no one else could do so.

Chapter 3 introduces different “political ideologies,” starting with classical liberalism. While he points out that “the root concept in liberalism

is liberty or freedom," (p. 47) he gives no discussion to what the Bible has to say about liberty. He also correctly points out that "classical liberals tend to have a minimalist view of government. According to them, government should simply do its best to get out of the way of individuals and should only intervene if other individuals threaten citizens' basic rights, such as, for example, the right to private property" (p. 52). However, he again gives no conversation to what the Bible would have to say about these ideas, and offers only disparaging remarks about how classical liberals used to think that freedom only applied to "white, property-owning men" and that they currently think government should not be concerned with wealth inequality or race, although he provides no citations for any of these.

To add insult to injury, Van Geest goes on to make some bizarre and inaccurate remarks about libertarians. Particularly interesting was his comment that, "Ayn Rand (1905-1982), an avowed atheist, is one of the intellectual heroes for many libertarians today. In fact, libertarian US congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul named his son Rand Paul after Ayn Rand" (p. 53). The younger Paul's full name is Randal Howard Paul, which is easily discoverable from a quick internet search, and is not named after Ayn Rand.

Since he was on the topic of libertarians, he added, "some of the positions taken by the libertarian party of the United States might be unpopular with many Christians (see sidebar)" (p. 53). In the sidebar which spans two full pages, he included some of the 2016 positions of the Libertarian Party. At no point does he explain that libertarian philosophy is not synonymous with the Libertarian Party, nor does he explain why some of these positions would be "unpopular" with many Christians.

While he does go on to briefly discuss other ideologies such as socialism, communism, and nationalism, he returns to classical liberalism with his closing thoughts for the chapter:

In short, secular ideologies are based on a flawed understanding of the world, how it was created, and how God is redeeming it. For instance, liberalism, the most dominant ideology in many places in the world today, is based on the principle of the sovereignty of the individual. Clearly this principle is directly at odds with the idea of God's sovereignty, which is at the very core of a Christian perspective. (p. 61)

Again, he provides no citations for these claims and no discussion of why it is at odds with Christianity. It is a reasonable position for a person to hold that God is sovereign, but that as far as government is concerned, human beings who are made in God's image are of utmost importance.

Chapter 4 provides a fairly straightforward explanation of how different democracies are structured. However, he chose to include another little jab at a couple prominent libertarians in the chapter's "For Further Exploration" section with the following prompt:

Watch the movie *Citizen Koch*. Do you think the political influence of the Koch brothers is a threat to democracy? What might be significant about the fact that the Koch brothers are financial contributors to PBS, and PBS chose not to air the film after it was complete? (p. 85)

While the Koch brothers and their political involvement are certainly fair game for analysis, this prompt is remarkably misleading. Could students not be given examples from a variety of political backgrounds? There are certainly plenty of billionaires to go around. Are we supposed to understand the prompt as saying that the Koch brothers are a "threat" to our country? This sort of singling-out of prominent Christian libertarians is concerning for a textbook claiming to offer a Christian perspective.

Chapter 5 is supposed to be an explanation of the different institutions that make up governments, but much of it is spent defending government employees from negative stereotypes. "Bureaucracy" he notes, "has often come to connote a corrupt, unresponsive, rule-bound, inflexible group of people who don't care much about their work" (p. 90). This is unfortunate,

he says, because “many government employees, rightly called *civil servants* or *public servants*, are extremely devoted to providing services in a responsive and efficient way” (pp. 90-91, emphasis original). He argues that we should use the term “public service” rather than bureaucracy, because it “more effectively convey the wide range of opportunities Christians have to demonstrate their love to their fellow neighbors” (p. 91).

This would have been a great opportunity to return to the discussion of rational choice theory, and look at what happens when government employees do not act in the best interest of the people they serve, intentionally or unintentionally. Instead of a thoughtful discussion, he briefly acknowledges that “we need virtuous public servants,” because “when they lack democratic values, things can go horribly awry” (p. 102). However he only uses two examples of politicians who lacked democratic values and they are Richard Nixon and disgraced former South Carolina governor, Mark Sanford—two examples which are neither timely nor the most obvious, yet are both Republican. The latter is often identified as a libertarian for his free-market positions. These two men certainly had their public scandals, but they are not alone. They are just alone in being criticized by Van Geest as lacking democratic values.

Chapter 8 deals with funding governments, and specifically addresses libertarians again, saying, “many people have strong feelings about taxation - some libertarians even call it theft, a position clearly at odds with scriptural teaching.” Instead of pointing to scripture, he explains this by saying that “taxation is essential if we wish to pay for services such as national defense, healthcare, social security, parks, garbage collection, police services, education, and so on” (p.156).

While it should be obvious that there are many ways to fund these kinds of activities, Van Geest doubles down on his claims in his discussion of social policy in Chapter 9. Focusing on education, he says,

From a Christian point of view, failing to provide education for all would also be a tremendous loss because citizens with God-given abilities would be unable to develop and use those abilities for the benefit of others. In the Christian tradition, believers are told in Genesis 1:22, 28 to “be fruitful,” and in today’s modern world, it is extremely difficult to do this without an adequate education. (p. 182)

This is particularly odd because education is one area where we see a variety of funding strategies, such as private education, homeschooling tax credits, and private scholarships. One of the other areas he mentioned, such as national defense, may have made his case better, but still would have been noticeably biased.

Continuing to support government spending, Chapter 10 on economic policy includes a lengthy introduction to the theories of John Maynard Keynes. He so takes for granted that Keynesian economics is correct that he says, “in difficult economic times, it is tempting for governments to do the opposite of what is recommended under Keynesian economic theory because government revenues also declined in bad economic times, motivating governments to lower spending or raise taxes to improve worsening deficit situations” (p. 198, 200). Concerningly, there is neither equal treatment of opposing theories nor an equally robust explanation of laissez-faire economics. He merely waves off capitalism saying that “while capitalism has quickly become the dominant type of economic system in the world, it can’t survive without government” (p. 202). This statement ought to have been accompanied by an explanation, or at least a citation, about why capitalism has dominated and why he claims it can’t survive without government, yet the chapter includes neither.

While he begrudgingly admits that capitalist economies “are clearly superior to communist, planned economies,” he laments that they are “based on the idea of self-interest” (p. 210). He goes on to say, “it is not an economic system that has at its heart a concern for meeting human needs and creating opportunities for people to flourish. It is not an economic

system based on human love and compassion” (p. 210). There are many Christian economists at places like the Acton Institute and the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics who would disagree, and who regularly make thoughtful and compelling cases for how free markets do in fact promote human flourishing, but they aren’t given a voice here.

Chapters 11 and 12 look at international relations, the United Nations, and other international organizations meeting the needs of the world’s poor. The presentation of the different institutions is pretty straightforward, except there are a couple of glaring omissions: there is no discussion of how access to the global free market has raised billions of people out of destitute poverty, nor is there an acknowledgement that corrupt governments in many countries limit human flourishing. Van Geest’s focus is entirely on promoting governmental bodies and the not-for-profit organizations that work with them.

In conclusion, Van Geest’s textbook provides one Christian perspective—one that happens to be considerably pro-government and negative towards libertarians. Given its evangelical orientation, this textbook suffers from insufficient citations, especially from scripture. There were far too many places where Van Geest claims to speak for the Bible, or all Christians, without referencing a particular passage when it would have been appropriate to do so. For this reason, he certainly has failed in his goal of providing a solution to the problem of holding a secular textbook in one hand and the Bible in the other. Any Christian college faculty wanting to use this textbook in their political science course, will still need to hold the Bible in their other hand to make up for the lack of scripture. They may also want to supplement with free market and Christian libertarian readings so their students get a fair presentation of that viable Christian perspective which is unfairly maligned in Van Geest’s textbook.

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