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American Government Article Review

1 May 2014

Social Justice Agenda

Social Justice is often talked about as the Catholic churches “best kept secret”. It is something most Catholics know a little about but are not extremely knowledgeable of the topic. It is a phrase that is often used to describe the injustices done not to just one person but to the society as a whole. Often things like racism, hunger, poverty etc. fall under this category of social injustices. These injustices have recently come to the forefront of political awareness. No matter what part or ideologies one identifies themselves with; there will most likely be an emphasis on social justice. “Be Open-Handed toward Your Brothers’” an article written by Arthur C. Brooks in February 2014 discusses some of these injustices and the stance the Conservative ideology takes on most of them.

“There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land”. This is a passage from Deuteronomy chapter fifteen verse eleven. The article opens with this quote. Here we are immediately confronted with the religious tone of the article. Oftentimes conservatives are more likely to participate religiously than liberals. Right from the beginning, the conservative tone is set. It then begins giving statistics about how poor the poor are and how rich the rich are. He explains that as the rich have become wealthier, the poor have become even poorer. The number of people receiving food stamps has increased by fifty percent since January of 2009. He also presents a staggering statistic. Only sixty-three percent of Americans are in the workforce. This is the lowest percent since Jimmy Carter was president. If this doesn’t call for some sort of change, what does?

The author presents readers with three structural pillars on which conservatives can build their social justice agenda. These pillars make up what poor people say they need to lead successful lives. The pillars Brooks includes are transformation, relief and opportunity in that order. He begins his explanation with the first pillar; transformation. Oftentimes poverty is connected with crime, domestic violence and substance abuse issues. The author states that for there to be any successful social justice agenda there has got to be transformation among the country’s poorest. For people to be successful there are four criteria they must obtain; faith, family, community and work. The happiest people in America report having all four of these things. People in poverty do not have these things, thus they are unable to pull themselves out of their situation.

The second pillar Brooks develops is relief. In the article he titles it “Material Relief”. Brooks states “To deny that some Americans are genuinely needy requires willful blindness”. This quote is central to how America is run today. Often the idea that people are in need is denied and put on the back burner. Because of this, people suffer. The article goes on to talk about a safety net that is necessary not only for people who are struggling financially but all citizens! It is in place for those who have been overcome by tragedy and have lost their financial foot hold. Without a safety net, citizens are not being protected by their government in any way. At this point in the article, the author makes a point to discuss the participation of conservatives in religion. He also states that conservatives are known to give more when it comes to charitable donations. Brooks makes this point yet later decides the world cannot survive on charity and donations alone. This is a very interesting conclusion.

The third and final pillar suggested by Brooks is Opportunity. This could quite possibly be the most important of the three. Without opportunity, it is very hard for one to become successful. At this point in time, there is not a whole lot of change in socio economic status from generation to generation. Brooks suggests this is due to lack of opportunity. He also brings up the touchy subject of education and education reform. Without this, he suggests, there will be no change and no opportunity for those who are currently struggling. If one cannot make it through school, there will be little opportunity for the future. He explains several suggestions as to how to keep kids in school and eventually send them on to higher education. Without these three pillars, there is no successful social justice agenda in the near future.

I found this article extremely interesting. As a Theology major, I am very fascinated with the area of social justice. I feel I am fairly knowledgeable of the subject as I have taken several classes dealing with it and spent numerous hours researching it on my own. I also align myself with the conservative ideology. However, there are liberal tendencies in me that made me second guess a few of the points discussed in this article. I found things in this article that surprised me as well as things I was well aware of. This was a challenging article to read and understand yet I really enjoyed reading and annotating over it.

There were a few things that completely stunned me in this article and several parts where I was thoroughly surprised. The first of these came shortly after I began reading. The author included a very strong quotation from President Obama

“The lack of a positive plan makes it feasible for a president whose own tenure has proven disastrous for the poor to assail his Republican opponents with these extraordinary words: ‘Their philosophy is simple: You’re on your own. You’re on your own if you’re out of work, can’t find a job. Tough luck, you’re on your own. You don’t have health care: That’s your problem. You’re on your own. If you’re born into poverty, lift yourself up with your own bootstraps, even if you don’t have boots. You’re on your own.”

This statement really struck me. I was shocked that such strong words came out of the president of the United State’s mouth. It is just unusual for someone who holds such power to make such a statement. I also found it extremely interesting that the author brought up Greece and their economic downfall. I thought it was a bit of an over statement when he said “In short, Greece’s poor bore the brunt of the bankruptcy that government profligacy invites. And so it will be here in America if we do not change course”. The idea that the United States will end up like Greece is somewhat extreme. It is true that the United States will suffer greatly but I don’t think it would be to the extent the author suggests. I do however think it serves as a pretty good warning to Americans. A social justice agenda is definitely in need for a successful country to take into account all of its citizens. One final thing I found to be interesting and somewhat unsettling in the article was its stance on education and the motivation of teachers. One statement says “In one recent study, prominent economists from Harvard, the University of Chicago, San Diego, found that linking teacher pay to student performance pushed up test scores among working class students near Chicago”. I found this statement extremely alarming. The way teachers are paid should not determine how well they teach their students! It is obvious that teachers need to earn a living as well but the pay should not correlate to how well students do in school.

It is obvious the United States needs a somewhat new social justice agenda. Without it, people living in the lower middle class will suffer. The article puts into perspective just how important this is. It presented several ways to achieve this agenda and suggests things to improve the lives of future generations. Although not well known among citizens, advocates for social justice are tirelessly working to improve the lives of those who are less fortunate in this country. Brook’s article works to prove that the conservatives do have a social justice agenda and that they are working towards a better tomorrow for America.