

Review Essay

Jim Belcher, *Cold Civil War: Overcoming Polarization, Discovering Unity, and Healing the Nation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 349 pp. \$28.00

Reviewed by M. Anthony Seel

In *COLD CIVIL WAR: Overcoming Polarization, Discovering Unity, and Healing the Nation*, author Jim Belcher takes his readers on a search for a public philosophy for government grounded in the gospel and capable of drawing together the various and disparate elements of our current polarized electorate. The author's educational background, from two evangelical schools to Georgetown University, plays a prominent role in his search.

As an undergraduate at Gordon College, Belcher was introduced to Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and prime minister whose work centered on common grace. At Fuller Seminary, under the instruction of Richard Mouw, a professor and later president of Fuller, he learned about neo-Kuyperians, which is how he now identifies himself. At Georgetown, his horizon was broadened by the Roman Catholic natural law tradition. These foundations support Belcher's work as he envisions a public philosophy rooted in the special and general revelation of God.

As an evangelical, he notes that his tradition experiences the same divisions over politics and culture that challenge all of American society. He is dismayed not only by the divisions, but also by the inability of pastors and evangelical leaders to speak meaningfully to the current chaos. He highlights what he calls the "twin problems of accommodation and inflation." Accommodation refers to the tendency of evangelicals to tailor their understanding of Scripture to fit their political views (29). According to Belcher, this accommodation occurs among both conservative and liberal evangelicals. Inflation happens when evangelicals take portions of Scripture and expand their meaning beyond what the text warrants. He names Eric Metaxis and Franklin Graham as representatives of the conservative side and Rod Sider and Michael Gerson as representatives of the liberal side among those who use accommodation and inflation in constructing political philosophies (28).

As J. Budziszewski of the University of Texas points out, "The problem for evangelical thinkers is not that the Bible contains no political teaching (for it does), but that the Bible does not provide enough by itself for an adequate political the-

ory” (28). Lutherans have a basis for arguing against this viewpoint in our Two Kingdom approach to how God orders and rules over life, which aligns with the natural law tradition the author learned at Georgetown. Otherwise, evangelicals practice accommodation and inflation. In some instances, they find biblical support for their political views by taking biblical history and creating a template for our current times. Accommodation and inflation form the crux of what the author calls the “evangelical dilemma”(30). What is the solution to this problem? It is linking general revelation with special revelation as Belcher explains:

General revelation, or natural law, then, is the conviction that design permeates the natural realm in general, and human beings in particular, that our conscience bears witness to its existence; and that when we violate natural law we not only know it intellectually, often suppressing it, but we experience it with deep feelings of guilt and brokenness (30).

Following Budziszewski, Belcher asserts, “Without a natural-law doctrine, without these first principles, rooted in both special revelation and general revelation, evangelicals will never be able to work out a coherent public philosophy” (31). Having laid that groundwork, the author explains that his graduate studies at Georgetown still left him searching for a coherent public philosophy that balances liberty and freedom with order and responsibility. He observed that in the mid-2010s, “the Left was moving further left, and the Right seemed to become more radical as well...” (37). This led to what he calls “My Breakthrough.” At this point, Belcher introduces his conception of the American political landscape using a quadrant framework with two axes replacing the typical and inadequate left-right continuum. The two axes are a left-right axis and an order-freedom axis. The center of the quadrants is the “new vital center.” In part two of his book, Belcher offers chapters subdividing each quadrant, from moderate to extreme.

Following Christian Smith’s lead, Belcher uses the worldview narrative arc that Smith presents in his book, *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*, for each segment of Smith’s quadrant system. According to Smith, worldviews typically follow a storyline from “once upon a time” (a beginning), to a middle (“how we fell from the golden age”), to an end (“a plan for recovery”) (59).

Starting with what he calls the Freedom Left 2 position, Belcher says, “For those in the freedom left 2 position, America was founded on a secular, godless constitution, one that is under siege by conservative religious forces who want to turn it into a theocracy” (79). Would that this were a caricature, but Belcher cites enough sources to strongly document this analysis, including how Amy Coney Barrett was treated in her confirmation hearings for the Seventh Circuit and, three years later, for the U.S. Supreme Court. In her confirmation hearing for the Seventh Circuit, Barrett was vilified by Senator Diane Feinstein, who said about Barrett’s Roman

Catholic faith, “the dogma lives loudly within you, and that’s a concern” (63). The fear about Barrett’s ascension to our nation’s highest court was articulated by Peter Hammond Schwartz in an essay in the *New Republic*. He cautioned that Barrett was an adherent to what he labeled the “new natural law,” which he described as “a rigid, reactionary, punitive, and self-righteous propaganda platform for the most conservative elements of the Catholic Church and its intellectual apologists” (65).

Belcher believes that the “godless-constitution view” reached its zenith in 1980, when the religious right sounded the alarm against it. Richard John Neuhaus’ *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, first published in 1984, was a seminal work opposing this effort to remove religion from public discourse and to privatize it, thereby allowing the godless-constitution position that government should be neutral on the question of the ‘good,’ so that individuals are free to choose what good is for themselves.

For adherents of a godless constitution, questions of right and wrong and ultimate purpose should be left to individuals rather than dictated by the government or any other authority. For those in the Freedom Left 2 position, traditional authorities, such as the church, family, and local communities, give way to individual determinations.

The second position he describes is Freedom Left 3. Belcher writes, “For freedom left 3, there never was a golden age, as America was born into sin, a racist nation from the start – White supremacy was baked into the founding documents....” He illustrates this position by pointing to the Buffalo Public Schools in upstate New York, which “adopted a Black Lives Matter curriculum for its K-12 schools. Their stated goal is to educate their children in the tenets of BLM, including the dangers of Western civilization, the white supremacy of the nuclear family, and the justification of violence as an acceptable method of protest against injustice...” (93).

Belcher points to postmodern theory and asserts that we are now in the third phase of “pessimistic postmodernism,” which has “mutated into critical race theory” (81). In a primer on critical race theory, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write, “critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (87). From this position, it is argued that America is “uniquely racist” (87).

Belcher claims that

Far from a harmless philosophy in the academy, I see the ruling class using critical race theory to extinguish our grounding, delegitimizing the American project in the eyes of the public. They are utilizing critical race theory to wear away our view of the biological self, to transform our views on gender, to erode the structure of the nuclear family, and to pit the races against one another, all with the goal of chipping away at middle-class values. In the end, their goal is to centralize and consolidate their own power (88).

The author then turns to Order Left 2, which he dates to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose Economic Bill of Rights opened the door to “welfare-state liberalism” (92). Lyndon Johnson expanded on this with his Great Society plan. As Harvard professor Michael Sandel argues, by making legal rights into economic rights, the welfare state was built with the necessary big government structure to support it (100).

Belcher recognizes that Freedom Left 2 and Order Left 2 share “a common narrative,” but they differ on the issue of freedom (101). For Freedom Left 2, the individual decides his or her own good. For Order Left 2, the state imposes what is good on citizens. According to Sandel, this occurred through the New Deal and the Great Society government programs (101). These programs ushered in what Sandel calls the “Procedural Republic”:

A state that remains neutral, brackets out religion, doesn’t propose or legislate any particular good conception of the good or purpose of life, allowing the liberated individual to choose for themselves, free from the constraints that traditionally shaped the individual (75).

In this narrative, the New Deal and Great Society programs ushered in “the golden era,” but Ronald Reagan followed, and we can add Donald Trump and his Department of Government Efficiency. A dismantling of big government began with Reagan, and as President Bill Clinton proclaimed in his 1996 State of the Union address, “the era of big government is over.” Between Reagan and Trump, Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden said “not so fast” to this dismantling. Part of the political polarization in the United States is tied to this back-and-forth between two visions of government’s role in society.

Enter Order Left 3, which Belcher labels “the reified postmodernism of anti-racism” (110). James Lindsay identifies this as the third stage of postmodernism. He titles the first stage the “high destructive phase,” when the modern search for universal truth is upended. The second stage, the “applied postmodern phase,” is when theory moves into practice through social justice activism. In the third stage, the “reified” phase, “activists and scholars ... have come to take for granted a reification of the once abstract and self-doubtful postmodern knowledge principle and postmodern political principle” (111-112).

While in phases one and two postmodernism aimed to destroy metanarratives, in phase three it has created a new metanarrative. This metanarrative is a new “Theory of Everything” in “a set of unquestionable Truths with a capital ‘T,’ which becomes their new epistemology, their new theory of knowing and grounding reality, and become the basis for their new activism” (113). But what is the basis for this new metanarrative? It is the lived experience of “oppressed groups” (113). This is what fuels the antiracism activism of Order Left 3. Belcher summarizes, “Antiracism is now a faith, accepted with the certitude of dogmatic religion” (123).

Next is Freedom Right 2, described as libertarianism like that of Freedom Left 2, “affirming the voluntarist self, the procedural republic, the bracketing out of religion, the rejection of the natural law found in the Declaration of Independence, instead relying on secular pragmatism and a vision of social justice similar to the radical progressive view of order left 3” (140). His prime example of Freedom Right 2 libertarianism is Georgetown professor Jason Brennan. Brennan calls his viewpoint “bleeding-heart libertarianism,” which is based on a concern for social justice. Brink Lindsay of the Cato Institute urges libertarians of this stripe to find common ground with progressives “on personal freedom, civil liberties, and foreign policy issues.” One policy where common ground has been found is open immigration. For Freedom Right 2 adherents, this reflects all three of Lindsay’s urgings. In the end, is there much difference between Freedom Right 2 and Freedom Left 2? I don’t see it, and I am left to wonder whether distinguishing between these two positions, which look remarkably similar, is only for the sake of a balanced quadrant system. Then again, there are two forms of libertarianism, one on the left and one on the right, that could be deployed to strengthen the differences between these two positions. This could be illustrated by appeal to two well-known libertarians, the renowned Harvard Law School professor emeritus Alan Dershowitz, a libertarian on the left, and author and columnist John Stossel, a libertarian on the right.

Next up is Freedom Right 3, the “radical libertarians,” which Belcher traces back to Ayn Rand (145). As a Russian immigrant to the United States, Rand was highly attuned to the dangers of powerful governments. Her assault on the welfare state and support for capitalism engendered great sympathy from conservatives, while her atheism turned off religious conservatives. According to Rand, “man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself” (146).

This camp has two sections: the anarchists, who view government as “a moral evil” and would destroy it entirely (148-149), and the “minarchists,” who support a limited government (149). What is most important to Freedom Right 3 is unfettered free-market capitalism. The commitments of the Freedom Right 3 libertarians are “liberty, free trade, globalization, and the optimism of high-tech genetic engineering and a brighter future for the human race” (160). The downside is significant: “monopolistic high-tech corporations, who, along with weak governments, rig the system in their favor, moving us in the direction of a new type of oligarchy...” (160).

This leads to Order Right 2, “Poison Pill Conservatives” (161). Rod Dreher and Patrick Deneen are cited as examples of this position. Dreher believes that contemporary American society is so bad that it has turned into a “new soft totalitarianism,” and that the best solution is to create a Christian counter-culture outside the mainstream (165). Deneen arrives at a similar position to Dreher. Since it is believed that it is impossible to undo the damage that liberalism has done, “A better

course will consist in smaller, local forms of resistance: practice more than theories, the building of resilient new cultures against the anti-culture of liberalism” (171).

From Order Right 2, we move to Order Right 3, “The illiberal new right” (180). The narrative of Order Right 3 is “We are losing the culture, the people, the religion, the way of life that once characterized America, and the enemies are progressive elites on the left and right” (183). Belcher identifies three groups within the Order Right 3 position. First, the alt-right. Their solution is “White identity politics... utilizing the tactic of fascist control...” (187). The alt-right is “a mirror image of the radical left” (187). The violence of Antifa and BLM rioters is met by violence on the right from the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers.

Second are the Roman Catholic “integralists,” who advocate the merger of church and state “to return authority to the church” (189). Finally, there is a Protestant counterpart to the Roman Catholic integralists, the Protestant “dominionists,” who “would like to see an American theocracy...” (191).

This concludes Belcher’s description of the elements of his quadrant system. The final chapters of the book focus on “the new vital center.” The new vital center consists of what he calls “the four souls,” which are the center positions of each of the four quadrants, freedom left and right, and order left and right. In the center of each of these positions is a fine balance between creed (what is believed) and culture (the history and traditions that stand behind each position).

The author looks to James Creaser, who appeals to Alexis de Tocqueville’s understanding of the United States as resting on two foundings. The first founding came from the Pilgrims and Puritans who brought “customary history (tradition, culture, language, and religion)” (211). The second founding came with our nation’s founding fathers who brought a founding rooted in natural law and Enlightenment reasoning (211). From these two foundings comes a synthesis of creed and culture “between nature and history” (212).

The new vital center, composed of the four souls, “form a dynamic, synthesized whole—each needing the other to stay in the new vital center and avoid polarization” (212). This synthesis avoids the polarization that comes from the positions outside the new vital center. After this explanation, Belcher launches into a description of each of the four center positions.

Freedom Left 1 is described as “constitutional soul,” which comes from the mind and pen of James Madison. It was Madison who saw the strengths and weaknesses of republics and tempered the weaknesses with a legal system of checks and balances enumerated in a constitution. This synthesis was a tempering of the weaknesses of both republicanism and constitutionalism. A primary weakness of republicanism is the potential for tyranny from a majority. A primary weakness of constitutionalism is

the potential for undue authority vested in elites. Madison's vision is a compromise that offers limited government with protection of individual rights through the legal framework of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights (213-215).

Order Left 2, called "republican soul" is "grounded in a form of customary history in which 'the people' ruled by a majority, are committed to the ancient ways of the republic" (215). As Creaser explains,

For republicans, the most important factor that accounts for the health of the republic is not just its political institutions but the mores of its people ... without certain mores, a republic could not exist or endure (215).

Virtue is a necessary grounding for republicanism, but this raises the issue of how personal liberties are limited by social control. That balance was to be maintained by constitutional law that set boundaries for personal conduct. As Belcher acknowledges, this balance creates tensions that are not easily resolved.

This leads to Freedom Right 1, dubbed "middle class soul." Recognizing human nature for what it is, prone to "lower passions" (218), the "constrained vision" of Adam Smith, including the "invisible hand" that guides commerce through competition and cooperation based on "rival interests" and common interests, lead to "the best order." Constrained vision is a phrase from economist Thomas Sowell. This interpretation of Adam Smith is from Sowell and political philosopher Martin Diamond (218).

These three parts of the new vital center lack one critical element, Order Right 1, called "statesman soul." What holds our system together is leadership. The ideal leader is a statesman who injects wisdom into the political, economic, and social fray. The statesman raises the functioning of society by promoting virtue. The work of the statesman is "to constantly remind the other three quadrants of the need for balance, to warn them when they are polarizing, and to inspire the entire democratic republic vision to grandeur" (222-223). How does the statesman do this? By reminding "the other three souls that the American project is grounded on both reason and tradition, history and nature, creed and culture" (223).

The author summarizes the new vital center's work as teaching the citizenry "a healthy love of country, an instinctive patriotism, one that celebrates the heritage of the nation, promotes the bonds that unite us as a people, and holds a commitment to creed and culture" (226).

Belcher's case for a new vital center takes a religious turn in the chapter titled "Christianity," subtitled "The Second Constitution" (246). Following sociologist Robert Bellah, the author contends that "If the external covenant of constitutionalism (creed) is not continuously renewed by the 'internal covenant' of Christianity (culture), it will collapse" (247). To support this view, he cites Creaser: "For those of the faith, the adoption of the legal Constitution in no way abrogated" the impor-

tance of Christianity because “it has always been thought that there is a second and unwritten constitution meant to operate alongside of the legal one” (253). Belcher contends that Christianity holds the four souls of the new vital center together (254). Of course, the problem with this view is convincing secularists of its historical validity and its validity for our time.

Belcher admits that “our bipartisan cultural elites are not going to be convinced” (263). Given this, what hope is there for a new vital center that is sustainable? What hope is there for a grounding of constitutionalism on a foundation that can hold the new vital center together? Belcher posits that “without the church regaining its life-giving gospel and embracing the public philosophy of the new vital center, rooted as it is in general revelation, there is little chance to renew the external covenant that holds our democratic republic together” (269). Along with Robert Bellah, he sees the need for a third great awakening. In the final sentences of his book, he calls on the church to “rescue our republic” (274).

Throughout his work, he cites the naysayers who doubt that there is much hope for the enterprise he advocates. These naysayers include James Davison Hunter, who coined the phrase “culture wars” in his 1991 book by that name. The naysayers have a strong case, and in the end, Belcher is stronger on description than on prescription. His approach is like the Sydney Harris cartoon of a scientist at a blackboard working out a mathematical problem. He starts the equation and ends it, but in the middle of the equation are the words “Then a Miracle Happens.” A colleague looks at the equation on the blackboard and says “*I think you should be more explicit here in step two.*”

That’s the problem. Belcher does excellent work identifying the sources of our current polarization. He offers outstanding descriptive analysis. In the end, he offers “Then a Miracle Happens.” Of course, the God of Christianity does miracles. The question this book raises is whether the God of Christianity will work through His church to “rescue our republic.” As sophisticated as Belcher’s analysis is, there isn’t an accompanying sophisticated solution to our national dilemma. Where is that solution? I believe the solution lies in our Lutheran Two Kingdom approach.

In 1535, in the preface to his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther wrote,

This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits.¹

The Two Kingdoms doctrine is an extension of the two kinds of righteousness that Luther found in Paul’s epistle to the Galatians. This is often referred to as left-handed power and right-handed power. God rules this world with left-handed power to

preserve society through human institutions. His right-handed power is exercised through the Kingdom of God, which is also present in this world. God's right-handed and left-handed powers correspond to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life. As those who have faith in Jesus Christ, Christians are joined to God and His Kingdom. As members of human society, they have relationships that correspond to how God exercises His left-handed power. As Robert Kolb explains,

The horizontal relationship has bound us to the rest of creation as people who are held accountable for exercising God-given responsibilities in an adult manner toward other creatures, human but also animal, mineral, and vegetable. God's human creatures are right—really human—in their vertical relationship because their faith embraces the God who loves them through Jesus Christ with the reckless trust of total dependence and reliance on him which constitutes their identity.²

God works to preserve society, that is, the earthly, temporal realm, through human institutions like the family, civil government (including law enforcement and in our country, our legal system of courts with magistrates, our legislatures, and our executive branches of government at all levels—local, state, and federal), and workplaces with employers, management, and workers.

So, the Augsburg Confession teaches,

For civil government deals with other things than does the Gospel. The civil rulers defend not minds, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice and peace.³

In our system, we understand this to mean that government exists within a constitutional framework that says that God has granted us inalienable rights for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁴ The founder James Madison appealed to Luther's Two Kingdoms doctrine in a letter to F.L. Schaeffer, saying that this approach

illustrates the excellence of a system which, by a due distinction, to which the genius and courage of Luther led the way, between what is due to Caesar and what is due God, best promotes the discharge of both obligations.⁵

There, in the words of Madison, we find the Two Kingdoms doctrine undergirding the U.S. Constitution. As citizens of the United States, we have duties to God and to others.

In an assessment of the achievement of Luther at the time of the 500th anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses, Professor Joseph LeConte wrote in *National Geographic*,

If Luther was a flawed prophet of human freedom, his voice was nonetheless vital in the long march toward a more just and pluralistic society. In Luther,

we find an advocate for human dignity who defied the forces of religious oppression and reimagined the political ideals of medieval Europe.⁶

The Lutheran Two Kingdoms doctrine would have strengthened Belcher's work immeasurably by adding substance to his prescription for moving our nation back to civility and common purpose for the flourishing of all Americans, as well as a way forward for our role as a superpower in the wider world.

M. Anthony Seel is Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chenango Bridge (Binghamton), New York.

Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26:7 in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–).

2. Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness; Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 453.

3. Augsburg Confession, 28.11 in *Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921; Reprint edition: Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 85.

4. From the U.S. Declaration of Independence. See <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

5. Letter by James Madison to F.L. Schaeffer, dated 1821. See <https://witness.lcms.org/2015/genius-and-courage/>.

6. Joseph Leconte, "Martin Luther and the Long March to Freedom of Conscience" (*National Geographic*, October 27, 2017), found at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/martin-luther-freedom-protestant-reformation-500>.



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