

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

Ayn Rand and Christianity

One of the heroes of some Republican conservatives and of radio/TV hosts such as Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh is philosopher, novelist and fervent anti-communist Ayn Rand. She is often cited at Tea Party rallies and other such gatherings as well. Congressmen Paul Ryan and Ron Paul cite Rand as one of their personal heroes and a reason why they got involved in politics. Former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, was a close associate of Ayn Rand. Although she died in 1982, her influence has grown and today is more pervasive than ever. How should we think about her? Do her ideas mesh with biblical Christianity? Ayn Rand is the subject of this first *Perspective*.

- First, a summary of a few of her salient ideas. She named her philosophy Objectivism, describing its essence as “the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.” As her philosophy developed, she stated that in terms of metaphysics she embraced atheism and stood opposed to anything she deemed mystical or supernatural, including all forms of religion. In terms of epistemology, she argued that all knowledge is based on sense perception, and reason as the “faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses.” As regards ethics, Rand maintained that rational egoism (rational self-interest) was the guiding moral principle. The individual exists “for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself.” Egoism is the “virtue of selfishness.” Politically, she argued strongly for individual rights and considered laissez-faire capitalism as the only moral social system because it was the only one that guarded property rights. She fiercely opposed all forms of collectivism, including communism, socialism, fascism and any form of the welfare state. Limited government best fit her rigid requirements. Arguably, her greatest written work was a novel entitled *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Rand detailed the theme of the novel as “the role of the mind in man’s existence—and, as a corollary, the demonstration of a new moral philosophy: the morality of rational self-interest.” The novel’s plot involves a dystopian United States in which the most creative industrialists, scientists and artists go on strike and retreat to a mountainous hideaway where they build an independent free economy. The novel’s hero is John Galt, who leads the strike and the effort to build a free society. To drive home her vision of the free, self-interested society she hoped to see, she has Galt replace the cross with a dollar sign. For Rand, without the rational and the productive, society would collapse. In other words, for Rand, there is no God, no absolute ethical standard, only rational creative-thinking humans who are self-centered, selfish and thoroughly non-altruistic.
- Second, how should we as Christians evaluate Ayn Rand? Several key thoughts:
 1. As a devout atheist, Rand argued that man is indeed the measure of all things, to borrow a phrase from the Renaissance. She argued for the “the concept of man as a noble being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his

noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.” But the Bible makes it clear that man is not the measure! Man is not the center of all things—God is. God therefore, as Creator and Sovereign, calls His creatures (and His children by faith in His Son) to a life of stewardship and charity, informed by love. The life of the believer is a life of self-sacrifice and generosity. For Ayn Rand, such virtues, so central to the Christian worldview, are actually vices!

2. Rand actually posits a complete reversal of biblical norms and values. Scott Ryan, whose book on Rand is most helpful, argues that her Objectivism is a “psychologically totalitarian personality cult that allowed Rand . . . to exercise personal power over [her] unwitting victims.” This is how she lived, including how she manipulated her husband and even justified an adulterous affair with his permission.
3. Rand was demonstrably anti-Christian. As an atheist, she wanted to be known as “the greatest enemy of religion.” The idea of God was “degrading to man,” she maintained. And because there is no God, humans have absolutely no ethical obligation to other human beings. She once said that the world was “perishing from an orgy of self-sacrifice.” For her the trinity was “I me mine.” She exalted the idolatry of “self and selfishness,” an abhorrent proposition that is in fact the very “antithesis of biblical Christianity.”

Those in the Republican Party especially that exalt the ideas of Ayn Rand should be ashamed of themselves. Those in the Tea Party movement who hold up signs, “Who is John Galt?,” are promoting a worldview that is actually farther from biblical Christianity than Karl Marx’s utopian vision. The name of Ayn Rand and Jesus Christ should never be used in the same sentence together. Ayn Rand does not offer a vision of what America could become. She offers a recipe for the collapse of our way of life and our values. Conservative Christians should stay as far away from Ayn Rand as possible. She and her worldview have nothing to offer.

See Stephen Prothero in *USA Today* (6 June 2011); the *Wikipedia* article on Rand; and “Breakpoint” (4 October 2010, 16 October 2007, and 11 May 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

Teachers and American Public Education

In 2008, as he was beginning his run for the presidency, Barack Obama said that “the single most important factor in determining [student] achievement is not the color of [students’] skin or where they come from. It’s not who their parents are or how much money they have. It’s who their teacher is.” Few would disagree with that statement. In fact, for most of us, we can remember that often it was a teacher that had the greatest impact in our personal/professional development or in major decisions we have made. For me, that I got involved in higher education was due to two teachers who deeply influenced me. For these reasons, I found Joel Klein’s recent essay in *The Atlantic* to be timely and much needed. Klein was the chancellor of New York City’s school system for eight years. He has much to say about recalcitrant teachers’ unions and mediocre teachers. His essay is of profound importance, and there are therefore several salient points that I want to summarize in this *Perspective*.

1. Politicians, especially Democratic politicians, generally do what teachers’ unions want, and, Klein argues, the unions are very clear about what they want: “They want, first, happy members, so that those who run the unions get reelected, and, second, more members, so their power,

money, and influence grow . . . [Teachers] want lifetime job security (tenure), better pay regardless of performance (seniority pay), less work (short days, long holidays, lots of sick days), and the opportunity to retire early (at, say, 55) with a good lifetime pension and full health benefits . . . whether you work hard or don't, or in a hard-to-staff school in a poor community or not, you get paid the same, unless you've been around for another year, in which case you get more." Arguably, Klein is talking about New York City, but many public school teachers represented by the National Education Association would fit this paradigm.

2. Klein comments on tenure: For the teachers' union, tenure is "merely due process." But, as Klein shows, firing a teacher for non-performance is virtually impossible. He details how in a system that employs over 55,000 teachers, during his time as chancellor they only fired 6 teachers for incompetence or nonperformance—over eight years!!
3. Klein also believes that the practice of calculating teacher's salaries must be challenged. For example, "consider the consequences of the ubiquitous practice of paying the same for math and physical-education teachers. Given the other job opportunities for talented mathematicians—but not for phys-ed teachers—the same salary will attract many more of the latter than the former." There is simply an acute shortage in some areas of qualified and competent math and science teachers. What if superintendents could compete with higher salaries for good math and science teachers? Teacher union contracts prohibit this. Who suffers? The children.
4. Klein also believes that in the US we must challenge the practice of having contracts for teachers that provide a mandatory salary increase each year, regardless of performance. Seniority drives salary, not performance. Virtually no other industry assigns compensation just to length of service. Accountability and performance should determine salary, not simply years of service or number of graduate credits earned.
5. Klein also believes that US public education must challenge the lifetime benefits scheme that flows from so many union contracts. He writes that "each dollar set aside to cover [lifetime benefits of retired teachers] must be taken from what would otherwise be current operating dollars."
6. Klein argues persuasively that accountability is desperately needed in public education. He writes that "Accountability, in most industries or professions, usually takes two forms: First and foremost, markets impose accountability: If people don't choose the goods or services you're offering, you go out of business. Second, high-performing companies develop internal accountability requirements keyed to market-based demands. Public education lacks both kinds of accountability. It is essentially a government-run monopoly. Whether a school does well or poorly, it will get the students it needs to stay in business, because most kids have no other choice. And that, in turn, creates no incentive for better performance, greater efficiency, or more innovation—all things as necessary as they are in any other field." Competition and choice are the two most-needed aspects of any meaningful reform of public education. As Klein observes, "time is running out. Without political leadership willing to take risks and build support for 'radical reform,' and without a citizenry willing to insist on those reforms, our schools will continue to decline."

Arguably, Joel Klein led one of the largest public school districts in the nation. But much of what he writes applies in one degree or another to many, if not most, of America's public schools. The unions that serve public school teachers (the AFT and the NEA) are powerful and deeply entrenched

in the political culture. The contracts they have negotiated in many of the urban areas of our nation are not sustainable. Further, typically they do not reward performance, only seniority. Our nation needs determined leadership to change this system, for our nation is losing one of its most valuable resources—its children. The system must change.

See Klein's powerful essay in *The Atlantic* (June 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

Unfaithful Men

Over the last few years, a surge of tragic stories about unfaithful men has inundated the media. A few examples:

- Arnold Schwarzenegger fathered a child with a longtime member of his household staff.
- Newt Gingrich led the impeachment against President Bill Clinton while carrying on an affair with a staff member.
- Tiger Woods had multiple mistresses.
- John Edwards fathered a child with Rielle Hunter, a video producer for his 2008 campaign for the presidency.
- New York Congressman Anthony Weiner's bizarre social networking immoralities are difficult to fathom.

One could go on!

To one degree or another, each one of these men is being held accountable, some more severely than others. But what should be our response as Christians? Two thoughts:

1. We must exhibit a measure of compassion, grace and mercy to such men. God can use each one of their indiscretions to break them of their hard-heartedness and bring them to faith. May God, who is rich in mercy, do so.
2. Such tragic lives must also drive us to Scripture. For example, Ephesians 5:22-33 stipulates the operative terms that define a husband's role in marriage. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. That kind of love is self-sacrificing, other-centered and completely consuming. If a man truly loves his wife in that manner, there will be no infidelity, no loose talking and no adultery. If the standard is "as Christ loved the church," can one imagine Jesus ever being unfaithful to His church? God is calling on men to do something radical in marriage — be utterly devoted and committed to the woman God gave him in marriage. The challenge is that our culture no longer believes this nor affirms this. We are thereby living with the consequences of abandoning this standard. God has designed the respective roles in marriage and empowers each partner to live according to His well-articulated standards. When culture no longer abides by these standards, unfaithfulness results. We are seeing increasing examples of the reluctance to hold men to the standard God holds them. Until and unless American men seek the face of God, there will be ongoing and persistent failures. God has "given us over" (see Romans 1:24-32) to the natural consequences of the failure to follow His norm for marriage. We should not be surprised!