

# Charity Begins with Taxes!



by Theodore Dalrymple

**According to St. Paul, Jesus Christ said that it is more blessed to give than to receive: But we have changed all that. In the modern state, it is more blessed to receive than to give, and possibly more common too.**

Giving in the modern state is compulsory and the donors have no choice in the matter, either as to the quantity or the destination of their gifts, these perhaps better known as taxes. Of course, in the process of distribution, a proportion of their gifts do not reach their ostensible recipients, for distribution itself does not come as a gift but as an additional reason why the compulsory gifts must be so large. Assuming, for example, that the 87,000 proposed new IRS

officials in the United States themselves receive compulsory gifts of the taxpayers (also known as their salaries) of \$50,000 a year, a \$4,350,000,000 compulsory donation will have to take place in the United States just to meet the cost of them.

The situation is complicated by the fact that many of the recipients are also donors (or all of them are if you count indirect as well as direct taxes). Thus, many people cannot work out (if they think about it at all) whether they give or receive more, which confuses their view of things.

There are, however, people who clearly receive more than they give: those who exist entirely on gifts. Some of them could not possibly exist other than by such gifts, being incapable of looking after themselves: But they are not the majority of those who live entirely on gifts. Again, the distinction between those who are incapable and capable of looking after themselves is not absolute: There are shades of incapability between them, those who require partial but not complete help. The fact that there is a spectrum of need, from total to none, gives bureaucracies of welfare the pretext or excuse for expanding them *ad infinitum*, thus expanding also the requirement for further compulsory donations from the rest of the population. An incompetent population is the joy of bureaucrats.

As for the recipients of gifts, they do not really regard them as a blessing, but more as a right, certainly after they have become accustomed to receiving them, which they do very quickly, almost instantaneously. In Scotland, for example, menstruating women (or *menstruating people*, as I suppose we are now supposed to call them), now receive what are repeatedly called *free* sanitary supplies—free, that is to them, but not free to others, since such supplies are not a free gift of nature, descending like manna from heaven.

Whether or not this distribution of sanitary supplies is a

good idea in itself is beside the point, or at least beside my present point: for the fact is that, by instituting such "free" distribution, the government commits all future governments to continuing it, *de facto* if not *de jure*, for any attempt to reverse the policy will be seen by a large part of the population, voters all, as mean, vindictive, misogynistic, anti-egalitarian, undemocratic, elitist, and so forth. Although in constitutional theory no government can commit subsequent governments to any particular policy, in practice many policies, especially those bestowing "gifts" upon a population, are exceedingly difficult, politically, to reverse. Governments that come into power promising reduction of government expenditure often fail to do so, or even end up increasing it. They find that, in practice, it is more blessed to increase than to decrease.

Once a benefit is received, even if one has paid or continues to pay for it oneself through taxes, it is painful to have it withdrawn. I do not exclude myself from this strange phenomenon. For example, having reached a certain age, I am "entitled" to reduced fares on public transport. I am not economically in need of them: I can well afford to pay my own way, unlike many people who do not have this "entitlement." Millionaires have this entitlement as well as paupers, for apparently it is too difficult for the administrators to distinguish between the truly necessitous and the wealthy, let alone the prosperous.

Be that as it may, if the reduction in fares as a right were now withdrawn from me, I should feel aggrieved, as if I my fundamental rights had been breached. I have become accustomed to reduced fares; to me they have become normal, as much a part of the climate of my life as the weather. I count on them.

There is a further psychological effect that my right to reduced fares exerts on me, namely that they are a visible or tangible return for the taxes that I have paid all my life. I

feel that I am getting something back, some immediate return. The subsidy is, of course, very small, miniscule, by comparison with the total taxes that I have paid and continue to pay: But what is logical is not necessarily psychological, and the fact of an obvious benefit reconciles me, at least to some extent, to the taxation that I would otherwise resent more. Those who would tax, therefore, would be wise to litter the population with little benefits, especially those who do not need them but pay the taxes, as absolute monarchs used occasionally to scatter coins to the destitute multitudes.

In France, there is a great deal of propaganda—posters at every site of public works, lit-up signs, painted slogans on buses—informing the public of the benefits wrought by whichever of the many layers of government have conferred the benefit upon it.

In a sense, a good public administration *does* confer benefits, and public administration in France is far, far better than that, say, in England, being much more efficient and less morally and intellectually corrupt (for the moment).

But that is not what the propaganda is driving at. The impression that it is trying to give, and I think succeeds in giving, is that the government—whichever of its many layers is concerned—is conferring some almost undeserved benefit on the population from the goodness of its heart, because it is wise and beneficent, because it is shepherd to its sheep, because it is generous as well as solicitous. It is, as were, transparent, having no interests of its own to pursue.

You do not have to be a thoroughgoing economic determinist to suspect that this is not so.

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