



Teaching Modern Political Philosophy with Joshua Gibbs

Lesson 5: The Social
Contract by Jean-
Jacque Rousseau, Pt. 4

Outline:

Rousseau's Social Contract

- Book 4, Chapter 8, The Civil Religion
 - Christianity is no good for the state and it never has been.
 - Rousseau argues that Christianity could be good for the state but some adjustments would need to be made.
 - In ancient times, gods were gods of the state. Theological and political war were one in the same.
 - Rousseau views all Christian political combinations as contrary to the gospel.
 - The King of England is more a minister than a priest. He is more a protector of the church rather than a cleric.
 - Rousseau does not want to dismiss religion entirely, nor does he believe Christianity is the best support. Get your students to debate this. The answer is that there is civil religion, a church-y state.
 - Is Christianity good for the government? This is a good place to allow for student discussion.
 - The religion of the heart is not understood in temples, hymnals, but intuitive and natural. The religion of the citizen is the religion established in a single country. The third religion is of the priest, both distinct from the state and yet practiced publicly (Catholic Christianity).
 - Everything that destroys social unity is useless. The ultimate good of society is society itself. Everything that builds social unity is good.
 - Whatever the state has to do to produce unity among itself is good.
 - The state has got to do whatever it takes to keep itself together. Religion has a way of subscribing people to higher laws and thus betraying the state and ruining social unity. There is nothing worth breaking community over. All things serve social unity.
 - Ask students to discuss what stands to tear society apart. Ask them if those things are indeed worthless. Is that the kind of claim that St. Paul would make?
 - Christians don't care enough about life on earth to make good citizens.
 - We see beginning to emerge is Rousseau the Romantic. He is worried that Christianity does not allow for revolution.



- The problem with Christianity is that it says you have to stay at home even though you can govern yourself.
- When the 19-20 public is abused by a tyrannical king, the Christian in us says “Honor thy father and mother.” Common sense says to run away.
- Christians aren’t willing to overthrow government when necessary.
- Rousseau: There is thus a profession of faith, a religion, which is purely civil and of which it is the sovereign’s function to determine the articles, not strictly as religious dogmas, but expressions of social conscience without which it is impossible either be a good citizen or loyal subject, the civil religion, the civic religion, the religion of the state.
 - The civil religion needs to be so simple that explanations are useless. He wants a religion which is completely unlike Christianity.
 - What the civil religion needs to be is sub-intellectual. They are not worth meditating on. It is entirely separate from the life of the mind. Powerful credos that defy questions.
 - Questioning the civil religion is the sign of a diseased mind. If you are going to question there is a problem with you not with the civil religion.
 - No intolerance. Inasmuch as you are willing to accept all people who accept the civil religion, you can live in peace and harmony. You cannot be intolerant of other people who accept the civil religion. The people decide what they want morally.
 - At the point that you begin putting forth a distinct morality, you have violated the civil religion, you are a threat to public peace and government would be in its rights to punish (incarcerate, expel) you.
 - A good citizen both thinks for himself and paradoxically simply goes along with what all people decide when they step into the voting booth.
- If a Christian, Muslim and Jew are going to live side by side they must relegate the extremes of their religion to a realm of inconsequence. Theological intolerance cannot help turning into civil intolerance. Preferential treatment will be granted to people of your own kind and sectional associations will be formed. “To love them would be to hate the god that punishes them.”
- Rousseau believes and thinks of religion as a thing of the heart. The state can kind of take over the value of religion provided that the state is placed higher in man’s heart than anything else.
- The man in the modern state believes that all of his countrymen are saved and are all on their way to heaven to be blessed by a benevolent



deity who smiles on the work of the state in a personal and transactional way.

The most important ideas in *The Social Contract*

- Rousseau's philosophy of time is such that that past is ever more irrelevant (primitive and savage) and the future matters everything.
- As time passes society becomes more sophisticated.
- The first society is not based on a relationship with God and man learns to govern from God, rather man invents society on his own. If man invents government then he is able to shape government into whatever form he likes. The monarchist's position is that government is a gift from God that he has initiated us in. It is not ours.
- For Rousseau society exists for its own sake, if there is a law higher than society then allegiance to that law might tear society apart (making that law useless).