**////Title: Critical Reflections on *The Theology of Liberalism***

**////Standfirst:**

Dr Eric Nelson, a political theorist and Professor of Government at Harvard University, recently published a book entitled ‘*The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*’. In this book, Nelson argues that liberal traditions in politics are ultimately a product of ancient theological disputes about freedom of the will. Dr Edward Andrew, a Professor Emeritus at University of Toronto, recently published a paper that questions some of the ideas introduced by Nelson in his recent work. His paper highlights the failure of Nelson’s ideas to reconcile differences between Christians and Jews or provide for religious toleration. Andrew also suggests that a liberalism based on utility rather than individual rights, or what Nelson calls ‘dignitarian liberalism’, would be less likely to generate social inequities.

**////Main text:**

In politics, the term ‘liberalism’ refers to a philosophy that promotes inclusion and religious toleration, individual rights, civil liberties, and free enterprise. Liberal political views are commonly associated with John Locke in the 17th century, and Montesquieu [mon-tuh-skyoo] and Adam Smith in the 18th century. However, Quentin Skinner holds that liberalism, as a doctrine or ideology, emerged in the 19th Century.

Many political theorists and academics have conducted studies re-tracing the origins of liberalism. One of these theorists is Dr Eric Nelson, one of the most renowned political theorists in the United States and Professor of Government at Harvard University.

Nelson’s research and earlier theoretical works explored Greek and Hebrew republics as a means to elucidate political thought in early modern Europe and America. In 2019, Nelson published a book called ‘*The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*’, which specifically relates the liberal political philosophy of the American philosopher John Rawls to his undergraduate thesis on theological debates within Christianity on the freedom of the will. Nelson favours the Pelagian [puh-**lay**-jee-uhn] side, emphasising human freedom to choose good or evil, and deprecates Rawls’ early Augustinianism, emphasising Christ’s saving grace over freedom of choice.

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Nelson’s book suggests that this connection between Rawls’ idea of liberalism and theological ideas led to a devaluation of merit and desert in Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* and in many contemporary political philosophic followers of Rawls. More specifically, Nelson asserts that Rawls’ belief that meritorious individuals do not deserve the rewards of hard work and intelligent application of their talents derives from Rawls’ youthful Augustinianism.

Nelson rejects the Augustinian premise that we are born sinners and need Jesus’s saving grace. Nelson asserts that Locke and other advocates of religious toleration were Socinian [suh-**sin**-ee-an] or Unitarian, rooted in Pelagian theology, a heterodox Christian notion proposing that human nature is not tainted by original sin and that God provided humans with free will. According to Nelson, many modern liberals minimise free will and human agency, and by doing so, undermine retributive and distributive justice. Criminals should be punished and the meritorious should be rewarded. Christian charity erodes the idea of desert and is intolerant towards those who are not Christians.

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Dr Edward Andrew, a Professor Emeritus at University of Toronto, recently wrote a paper commenting on Nelson’s book and reflecting on some of the ideas expressed in it. Andrew discusses the notion of akrasia [ack-**ray**-jah], as described by the ancient philosopher Aristotle. This term essentially refers to a moral impotence, or weakness of will, which can lead humans to disregard their better judgement, arising from passion or the appearance of immediate advantage.

Andrew highlights that the idea of akrasia was also discussed by Saint Augustine, one of the most influential Christian thinkers, who suggested that he, like all other humans, was often afflicted by this form of moral impotence. If he could have lived a virtuous life without saving grace, then Christ died in vain. This idea is in contrast with the theory introduced by Pelagius [puh-**lay**-jee-us], a theologian who lived in the same period of Saint Augustine, who emphasised the notion of free and human agency.

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In his book, Nelson closely examines Rawls’ undergraduate thesis, which the philosopher wrote while he identified himself as a Christian. He then draws connections between the ideas expressed in it and those expressed in Saint Augustine’s work. It is pagan pride to think that one deserves rewards or merits salvation.

In contrast, Nelson suggests that the theorists who introduced the theoretical basis of liberalism, such as Milton, Hobbes and Locke, were not constrained by the doctrine of original sin. They introduced the idea of individual rights, not subject to the common good or the general welfare.

Nelson concedes that Hobbes, Locke and Madison, in stressing the self-preserving, acquisitive and power-hungry nature of individuals, could be interpreted as having a remnant of original sin in their teachings. He also recognises that John Stuart Mill and others have found utility to be the basis of their liberal championship of liberty, toleration and inclusion. However, Nelson favours ‘dignitarian liberalism’, which respects the separateness and uniqueness of all individuals, which he thinks is threatened by utilitarianism and Augustinian Christianity.

Nelson thinks that Rawls discredited the idea of meritocracy in society. He never abandoned his youthful view that those thinking that one could earn salvation through good or worthy actions were fuelled by sinful pride. Instead, Nelson’s idea of ‘dignitarian liberalism’ suggests that people’s talents and efforts should be rewarded, as the American philosopher Robert Nozick, had earlier argued.

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Andrew’s paper also highlights the fact that Rawls, Nelson and Nozick all seem to agree on one idea, namely that there are innate individual differences in human intelligence and productivity. Yet the debate of ‘nature vs nurture’ is one of the most long-standing unresolved philosophical dilemmas, which has not yet been empirically resolved. In other words, this idea that differences in people’s intelligence and productivity are innate, and not due to people’s upbringing or environmental factors, is not based on evidence. Therefore, it is as unverifiable as the idea of free will or God’s justice.

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Andrew also criticises the lack of detailed information regarding tax policy in the United States in Nelson’s book, despite the author suggesting that states should not be entitled to tax their citizens’ pre-tax wealth. He then highlights that the wealthiest Americans are taxed a smaller percentage of their income than those with lower incomes. Finally, he ironically suggests that, perhaps, in Nelson’s idea of liberalism, people would have the right to use offshore accounts to avoid paying taxes.

Overall, Andrew is sceptical of the ideas presented in Nelson’s book and generally of similar American political theories. His paper highlights some of the flaws he perceives with the author’s idea of ‘dignitarian liberalism’, suggesting that utilitarian liberalism or even a liberalism based on the idea of original sin might be less likely to cause civil unrest and violent conflicts.

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For further information, you can connect with Dr Edward Andrew at eandrew@chass.utoronto.ca