

NEITHER ANCIENT NOR MODERN: THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

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Contrary to what is sometimes suggested by Catholic thinkers influenced by the work of Leo Strauss, what I want to argue here is that Catholic social thought represents an intellectual tradition *sui generis* embodying a distinctive understanding of the nature of human social and political life and the principles governing its right ordering, a tradition that cannot be reduced—at least not without doing violence to its integrity—to the intellectual universe of “ancient” or “classical” political philosophy. Since the questions raised by the claim that Catholic social thought can be understood as a variant of the “ancient” understanding of politics are far too complex to be treated systematically here, I will limit myself to briefly sketching two ways in which Catholicism involves a fundamental break with the classical understanding of human society. Before doing so, however, a word or two is necessary about the vision of social life against whose backdrop classical political philosophy emerged, a vision that emerges vividly in the Greek idea of the polis.

The small and intimate society of the polis, as Ernest Barker observes “was something more than a political system”; its purposes “went far beyond the legal purpose of detailing and enforcing a body of rules for the control of legal relations.” In fact, the polis “was State and Society in one, without distinction or differentiation; it was a single system of order, or a fused society-state.” Thus, it was simultaneously “a church” and “an ethical society,” “an economic concern for the purpose of production and trade,” and “a cultural association for the common pursuit of beauty and truth.”¹ As “an integrated system of social ethics, which realizes to the full the capacity of its members and therefore claims their full allegiance,”² it was with a “sovereign and all-inclusive association “embracing and regulating” human life in all its dimensions: religious, moral, political, economic, familial, artistic, cultural, and scientific.”³ This compact and undifferentiated ontology of social life was characteristic of classical antiquity in general: while the empires of classical antiquity were certainly larger than the Greek polis, they shared its all-inclusive, all-embracing character.

The result was a vision of society whose most striking characteristic was its monism. To begin with, the loyalty owed to these orders was, as Francis Oakley notes, “in general conceived to be an ultimate loyalty from which there could be no appeal to any higher

norms.”⁷⁴ There was no truth beyond truth of the empire or polis; it alone was the authoritative interpreter of the human person’s nature and destiny, and the locus in which that destiny was achieved. If there was but one truth (the truth of the polis or empire) and one authorized interpreter of that truth (again, the polis or empire), there was only one community and one law. Inasmuch as society was but a single homogenous structure, all groups and associations were absorbed in its all-embracing, undifferentiated, unity. Just as they acknowledged no distinction between church and state, between the religion and the politics, so they acknowledged no distinction between the social and political, no independent sphere of social life standing outside of its direct control, beyond its jurisdiction. This monism found powerful expression in Roman law that, as Robert Nisbet notes, made “all groups . . . dependent upon the will of the state for the exercise of their functions and authorities.”⁷⁵

At the same time, the social orders of antiquity had what might be described as a strongly communitarian, even collectivistic character. In this dispensation, as Glenn Tinder notes, individuals were understood as “variable and ultimately insignificant, reflections of cosmic order”⁷⁶; and as tools to be employed by the social order for purposes of procreation, war and labor. As Peter Brown has shown, society was thus, “the arbiter of the body,” the “use and very right to exist [of which] was subject to predominately civic considerations of status and utility.”⁷⁷ This collectivism, in turn, was combined with what, for lack of a better term, might be called the “elitism” of the classical world, its insistence that some people are fundamentally more important than others, that some people and some lives just don’t matter very much. Closely linked with the classical tradition’s disparagement of what Charles Taylor calls “ordinary life,” its most visible sign is that tradition’s attitude toward slavery.⁸

Now, it is true that Platonic-Aristotelian political theory involved an intellectual revolution. It rejected the religious and metaphysical vision that informed the ancient empires—what Voegelin terms “cosmological myth”—in favor of its own radically different vision, in favor of what he calls “anthropological truth.”⁷⁹ Simultaneously, it altered the social ontology that undergirded the social orders of classical antiquity through its insistence that the philosopher and the enterprise of philosophy transcend the polis. Likewise, it to some extent relativized the claims of the polis to some extent by refusing to make the polis the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, true and false, by acknowledging a “higher truth” in accordance with which the truth of the polis is to be judged.

Yet, when all is said and done, rather than breaking fundamentally the social ontology that dominated the classical world, the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition only modified this social ontology: The elitism of classical culture remains untouched; and, with the partial exception of the philosopher and the enterprise of philosophy, the monism and collectivism persist. One thinks here of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy's fusion of Church and state, and of state and society; its absorption of the individual, the family, and all of human social life in the all-embracing, undifferentiated, unity of the polity; its advocacy of infanticide; and its relegation of large segments of the populace to the status not of "parts" of the city (partners in the polis, as it were), but mere "conditions" of its existence. Platonic-Aristotelian thought continues to bear what Voegelin called the mortgage of the polis.¹⁰ When all is said and done, Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy might modify—but it doesn't fundamentally break with—the collectivism and elitism of classical culture.

The revolution in human self-understanding inaugurated by Christianity precipitated a far-reaching transformation in the understanding of human social life. "It is an historical commonplace," as Murray has written,

to say that the essential political effect of Christianity is to destroy the classical view of society as a single homogeneous structure, within which the political power stood forth as the representative of society both in its religious and political aspects. Augustus was both *Summus Imperator and Pontifex Maximus*; the *ius divinum* was simply part of the *ius civile*. . . . "Two there are, August Emperor, by whom the world is ruled on title of original and sovereign right—the consecrated authority of the priesthood and the royal power." In this celebrated sentence of Gelasius I . . . the emphasis laid on the word "two" bespoke the revolutionary character of then Christian dispensation.¹¹

In sharp contrast to the monistic understanding of the structure of social life that prevailed prior to Christianity, in which the polis or empire was simultaneously state, society, and Church without distinction or differentiation, what emerged under the aegis of Christianity was a dyarchical understanding in which "the family of mankind . . . is to be organized in two societies, under two laws emanating from two authorities."¹²

Implicit in the Christian distinction between Church and state and insistence on the freedom of the Church to define itself and to discharge its divinely appointed mission was a revolution in our understanding of social life. The claims of the state were limited, relativized and secularized. The “polis” or “empire” now become the “state,” and was forced to share the stage with a new social actor, the Church, an actor that claimed both a greater dignity than it and a far-reaching and God-given freedom vis-à-vis it. As Voegelin notes, moreover, insofar “as the spiritual destiny of man in the Christian sense cannot be represented on earth by the power organization of a political society” but “can only be represented by the church,” the state is now “radically de-divinized”—it becomes “temporal.”¹³ Under the Christian dispensation, in short, the state ceases to be the ultimate milieu of human perfection or the authoritative interpreter or representative of man’s nature and destiny, of God’s will for humanity; it loses the responsibility for the care of souls, the responsibility for shepherding man to his ultimate destiny. Indeed, there now exist a wide array of human concerns that lie beyond the jurisdiction of the state.

To say that in contrast to the state whose proper concerns are temporal or secular in nature, the Church’s concerns are spiritual, furthermore, is not to suggest that the Church’s concerns are limited to purely “otherworldly” matters. From the Christian perspective, as Murray observes, there now exist “things which are part of the temporal life of man . . . that, by reason of their Christian mode of existence, or by reason of their finality,” are “invested with a certain sacredness.” Transcending “the limited purposes of the political order,” they must be “immune from profanation by the power of the state.”¹⁴ In Cardinal Stafford’s recent formulation, “the secular life of man is not completely secular, nor totally encompassed within the State as the highest social organism, and subject ultimately only to the political power.”¹⁵

Simultaneously, Christianity also pointed to a new understanding of the relationship of society and the individual. On the one hand, it broke what Fustel de Coulanges terms the “absolute empire” of the city over the individual: “To obey Caesar is [now] no longer the same thing as to obey God.” Indeed, “the first duty no longer consisted in giving one’s time, one’s strength and one’s life to the state. Politics . . . [was] no longer the whole of man; all virtues were no longer comprised in patriotism. . . . Man had. . . other duties than living and dying for the city.”¹⁶ Indeed, as Francis Oakley points out, inasmuch as “we must obey God rather than man’ (Acts 5:29),” the state can no longer “claim a final authority over the conscience of . . . man,” and the Christian “could not owe an absolute loyalty to any earthly society, even

if it be the state, for he believed in a higher loyalty, one which transcended the merely political.”¹⁷

On the other hand, there is Christianity’s exaltation of the individual. This exaltation is connected with the emergence under the impact of Christianity of “person” as a philosophical concept, and with the personalist understanding of human nature that emerges under the impact of Christian revelation in contrast to the cosmological understanding that prevailed in classical antiquity. Whereas the latter understanding sees human beings principally as objects and in categories derived from the philosophy of nature, the former understanding seeks to highlight what Wojtyla terms “the primordial uniqueness of the human person,” by focusing on our status as personal subjects.¹⁸

The Christian exaltation of the individual is also connected with the vision of humanity’s relationship to God that emerges in Christian revelation, its vision of individual human beings as beings created in the image and likeness of God, united to Him through the Incarnation and called to eternal participation in the life of the persons of the Trinity. What John Paul II once described as “the almost divine dignity” attributed to “every man”¹⁹ by Christianity had profound social consequences. As Jean Bethke Elshain has noted, whereas for classical antiquity human beings were understood as “instruments to be put to a civic purpose,” for Christianity, a human being was not “the mere creature of any government, any polis, any empire.”²⁰ For Christianity, individual human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves, never as mere means; human beings must always be treated with a respect commensurate with their dignity as persons; as Tinder writes, “no one, then belongs at the bottom, enslaved, irremediably poor, consigned to silence.”²¹

Implicit in Christianity was thus a revolution in our understanding of the relationship of the individual and society. “The profoundest . . . minds of Greece and Rome,” as Tocqueville pointed out, “never managed to grasp the . . . very simple conception of the likeness of men and their equal right to liberty. . . . Jesus Christ had to come down to earth to make all members of the human race understand that they were naturally similar and equal.”²² Resulting in an insistence that human social life must respect the subjectivity of the person, and that the well-being of each and every human beings matters, the Christian understanding of the person made freedom and equality defining attributes of a rightly ordered society.

Catholicism's dyarchical model of society and its insistence on the freedom of the Church as the basic normative principle governing the relationship between the Church and the whole temporal order combined with the new found dignity which it attributed to the individual to produce a new and revolutionary understanding of society and the state. While like Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy this understanding encompasses a metaphysical and moral realism, it combines this realism with an ontology of social life that is simultaneously pluralist and personalist. Insisting that man is an intrinsically social being, it affirms that, in John Paul II words, "the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups beginning with the family and including social, political and cultural groups." Neither creations of positive law nor the purely conventional products of the private desires of autonomous individuals, these groups "stem from human nature itself."²³ In this view, as Johannes Messner writes, a society "is composed of member communities relatively independent, or autonomous, since they have their own social ends, their own common good, and consequently their own functions."²⁴ A society, in this view, is a *communitatis communitatum*.

Simultaneously, Catholicism affirms that an adequate understanding of society must encompass an appreciation of the fact that by virtue of their status as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, human beings are persons—beings who are endowed with intelligence and free will, and who are thus responsible for ordering their material and spiritual lives in accordance with the divine law, both natural and revealed. Such an understanding must reflect a recognition of the fact that our dignity as persons is the source of an order of rights that must be respected by others, and demands the elevation of freedom to the status of the political method *per excellentiam*. It must reflect a recognition of the fact, as Jacques Maritain points out, that by virtue of our status as persons, "the human person is ordained directly to God as its ultimate end," and thus "transcends every created common good," including "the common good of the political society." It must reflect a recognition of the fact that by virtue of its status as the common good of a community of persons (as opposed to the common good of "a whole which . . . relates the parts to itself alone and sacrifices them to itself"), moreover, the common good of society is "common to both *the whole* and the parts" to which it must be redistributed and whose "dignity" it must "respect."²⁵ It must reflect a recognition that society exists for man not man for society, that, as John XXIII insisted, "individual men are the foundation, cause, and the end of all social institutions."²⁶

All of this, in turn, has profound implications for our understanding of the state and its role in the overall economy of social life. The demands of human dignity and the service-character of the state vis-à-vis the human person converge to create a strong preference for government by the consent of the governed, and for political orders in which the people are afforded an active role in the making of law and public policy. At the same time, it results in an insistence on the distinction between state and society. While government is a natural institution that plays an essential role in the overall economy of social life, it is nevertheless a limited instrument existing to serve limited purposes. On the one hand, its jurisdiction is limited to the order of terrestrial and temporal affairs. On the other hand, even here its role is limited. It is limited by its own intrinsic nature as a distinctive social institution and the specific and limited purposes that flow from this nature. It is limited by the distinctive responsibilities, the distinctive functions, of the other institutions and communities with which it shares the stage of social life. It is limited by the rights of individuals and of the groups in which our nature as social beings finds expression, as well as by the exigence for freedom inherent in our dignity as persons. It is limited by the principle of consent—by the right of the people to determine the specific structure and powers of government.

Against this backdrop, it is no accident that we speak of Catholic *social* thought and Platonic-Aristotelian *political* theory. At the heart of Catholic tradition we find a rejection of the classical insistence on the primacy of the political in favor of what might be called the primacy of the social. For the Catholic tradition, society is not only sharply distinguished from the state, but enjoys primacy over it. Government is not merely only one order in society, but is obligated to pursue its limited purposes under the latter's direction and correction. Rather than being seen as the unchallengeable ruler of the social world, the center of social gravity, the state is now understood to be limited in its jurisdiction, subject in its operations to the rule of law, responsible to those it governs, and required to share the stage of social life with a wide variety of other institutions whose integrity, autonomy, and distinctive responsibilities it must respect.

None of this should be understood to suggest that there are no points of contact between Catholic social thought and classical political theory. In this connection, one thinks of their shared commitment to metaphysical and moral realism and to the existence of an order of human and political ends that obliges us prior to and independently of consent as well their shared affirmations of our nature as intrinsically social beings, the naturalness of political life, the ethical character of the political enterprise, etc.

As important as they are, however, these areas of agreement exist side by side with areas of profound and fundamental disagreement. The monism, collectivism, and elitism that pervade the ancient understanding of society and what might be called the cosmological character of classical thought's anthropology stand in sharp contrast with the pluralism and personalism of Catholic thought and implicate foundational issues in political theory. The question of whether we are to understand human beings in personalistic or purely cosmological terms, from example, is a fundamental one. The pluralism and personalism that loom so large in Catholic social thought, in short, serve to fundamentally differentiate its understanding of society from that which informs Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, and to establish it, not as a long and somewhat idiosyncratic footnote to the classical tradition, but as intellectual tradition in its own right.

While it is, of course, true that Catholic thought learned much from its encounters with Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, this does not make Catholic social thought "ancient" any more than the fact that Catholic thought has learned much from modern thought—as John Paul II so frequently reminds us²⁷—makes Catholic social thought "modern." The Church did not simply uncritically embrace the thought of either Plato or Aristotle (or the classical heritage more broadly): it critically engaged them, assimilating (and adapting to its own purposes) what was true and valid in them, while rejecting those aspects that are incompatible with Christian truth.²⁸ While learning from both ancient and modern thought, when all is said and done, Catholic social thought is neither "ancient" or "modern": it is simply Catholic, and when we try to force it to fit the procrustean bed of these categories, we end up by distorting it. This, in turn, suggests that thinkers interested in both doing justice to Catholic social thought as a distinctive intellectual tradition and relating it to the broader conversation about the ordering of human social life that is Western political theory will need a richer conceptual framework than is found in the thought of Leo Strauss.

Notes

1. *Principles of Social and Political Theory* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951), 5.
2. *Introduction to The Politics of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), xviii.
3. *Principles of Social and Political Theory*, 5.
4. *Kingship and the Western Apostasy*, 1968 Smith History Lecture (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1968), 19.
5. *The Quest for Community* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953; reprint, San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Affairs, 1990), 101.
6. *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 31.
7. *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 437
8. See *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 211-213 and *passim*.
9. For Voegelin's understanding of cosmological myth, see, *The New Science Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 53-59; and *Israel and Revelation*, vol. 1, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 13-110. For his account of anthropological and the revolution inaugurated by the rise of philosophy, see *The New Science of Politics*, 59-75; and *The World of the Polis and Plato and Aristotle*, vols. 2 & 3, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957).
10. See *The World of the Polis*, 169-170; and *Plato and Aristotle*, 90.
11. *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960; reprint, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 187.
12. Murray, "On the Structure of the Church-State Problem," in *The Catholic Church in World Affairs*, ed. Waldemar Gurian and M.A. Fitzsimmons (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1954), 12.
13. *The New Science of Politics*, 186.
14. *We Hold These Truths*, 188.
15. J. Francis Cardinal Stafford, "Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II: 'Being True with Body and Soul,'" at <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2008/nov/08112101.html> (accessed December 18, 2008).
16. *The Ancient City* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, n.d.), 394.
17. *Kingship and the Gods*, 29-30.
18. Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 210. Wojtyła

argues that an adequate philosophy of the person must incorporate the insights of both these approaches.

19. *Evangelium Vitae* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, n.d. [1995]), section 24.

20. “In Common Together: Unity, Diversity and Civic Virtue,” in “*The Constitution of the People*”: *Reflections on Citizens and Civic Society*, ed. Robert E. Calvert (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 70-71.

21. *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, 32-33.

22. *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), Volume Two, Part II, Chapter 4, 439.

23. *Centesimus Annus* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, n.d. [1991]), section 13.

24. *Social Ethics* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1949), 140.

25. *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. J.J. Fitzgerald (New York: Scribner's Sons 1947), 15, 50-51, 61.

26. *Mater et Magistra* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1961), section 219.

27. See, for example, *Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1998), especially sections 5, 48, and 91. Among other things, he speaks in section 48 of “the precious and seminal insights” of modern thought.

28. On the whole subject of the Church’s critical engagement with classical culture and how Christian thought altered and adapted what it received from then classical tradition, see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).