

Why We Think the Way We Think about Morality and Ethics Economic and Social Development: A Christian Construction

What I want to do is to address a question which occupies considerable theological, philosophical and ethical thought today. It is a question which has become incrementally more relevant, given widespread concern over the place of society and community in a globalized free-market, where governments appear reluctant to govern on behalf of the people they represent, while in the same breath, being attentive, even obsequious, to the market economy and those who champion its interests. This is not an attempt to present a stitched-up case against business, but rather, an effort to present the case for what in Christian social philosophy is called, “communitarianism. In what follows, I shall explain the meaning of the term, and the place of social and economic players within it. Then, I shall briefly point to priorities in economic policy that flow from such an understanding. Note, that the economics flows *from* the blue-print for society, not vice-versa. Society comes first, and economic policy and practice flows from the model of society adopted.

The Christian Social Vision of Communitarianism

Communitarianism is a term developed in Catholic social teaching. While all strains of Christian ethics carry similarities – Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – Catholics are the ones who document authoritative church teaching through what is referred to as the Magisterium or teaching authority of the Church. Catholic social teaching, a relatively recent development, is a jewel for not just the Catholic Church, but for all churches. It began during the industrial revolution of the late 19th century, when the Catholic Church became concerned for the situation of the masses as they were increasingly subject to draconian working and living conditions. Parallel to this, was the church’s fear of losing the working class to secular socialism – especially Marxism – as they awakened to the injustice of their exploitation by new powerful economic interests, sanctioned by governments, that increasingly governed for those interests. Since the first encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*New Things*) of Leo XIII, successive popes have made significant contributions to the Christian church’s understanding of society and the Christian response to it. Perhaps one of the most important contributions made in recent years to this body of teaching, has been the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*) by John Paul II, issued, May 16th, 1991.

Philosophical Vision of *Centesimus Annus*: How it differs from Philosophical Liberalism

Catholic social teaching has consciously developed its understanding of society, in contrast to philosophical liberalism, personified most of all in the figure of John Locke (1632-1704). In ‘liberal’ thought – and we are all pretty much liberals – society is understood as a collection of individuals, who come together to promote and protect their private rights and interests. People are seen atomistically, separately. Communitarianism, in contrast, holds that the human person is by nature social, not separate. In other words, just as we are born *from others*, from the community, we equally have a need *for others*, for community. This is a constitutive dimension of the human being in all Christian thought, Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox. This philosophical foundation of communitarianism, is the basis for much of John Paul II’s work, and in particular, his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. Communitarianism holds to a number of principles, which attempt to strike a practical balance between the individual and the community, avoiding both rampant individualism on the one hand, and oppressive collectivism on the other. *Centesimus Annus* subscribes to these communitarian ideas, which John Paul II believes, serve to make capitalism – a creed of which he is critical – more humane and more democratic. Let us remember that this encyclical was written not long after the collapse of the communist states of the USSR and Eastern Europe, when market capitalism was being promoted as the only way forward, and the academic Francis Fukuyama, declared, “the end of history”, meaning the end of the ideological struggle and the victory of the West. Below, as we consider Christian communitarianism, we look at rights, the market, the state, and the individual.

- **Rights, while important are not absolutes but are seen in the context of their role of promoting human dignity in community.**

Let’s look at two rights: private property and just wage.

Catholic social teaching recognizes the right to private property. This is in keeping with the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. That said, there is a diffidence about this idea, both in contemporary teaching and in Thomas himself. The reason for the diffidence, is that both Thomas and John Paul II, understand that private property has a way, not just of *being owned* by the owner, but of *owning* the owner. In other words, there is a bias in property that tends toward egoism. For this reason, Catholic social teaching and *Centesimus Annus* underscore the point that all property carries a proviso: that it serve the common

good, the good of all, not just the good of a few. John Paul perceptively includes within this discussion of property, something else as well, not just land and capital, but the power inherent in knowledge. He writes, "In our time...there exists another form of ownership, which is becoming no less important than land: the possession of know-how, technology and skill. The wealth of the industrialized nations is based much more on this kind of ownership than on natural resources" (CA 32). So, private property, even the right to technology and knowledge, is qualified as a right.

Just wages, on the other hand, are seen more positively, taking clear precedence over an employer's right to bargain the cheapest wage possible. Setting wages below a just or *living wage*, simply because the market wants it and will tolerate it, is censured as "thoroughgoing individualism...contrary to the double nature of work as a personal and necessary reality" (CA 8). In other words, in communitarian thinking, labour enjoys priority over capital. This is also reflected in John Paul's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (*On Human Work*, 1981)

- ***The market has an important though limited function in society***

Catholic social teaching has been subdued in its view of free market capitalism, with some significant voices of the Catholic Left, condemning it (Gregory Baum: *The Priority of Labour*, New York, Paulist Press, 1982). *Centesimus Annus*, however, actually endorses the market system, but does so not because it believes the market is a good in and of itself, but because it proposes that the market economy has a purpose *beyond itself*, beyond simply producing goods and services. The purpose of the market economy in Christian ethical teaching, is the development of people, enabling people to follow their unique personal vocation, to be creative, to participate in "responding to God's call" (CA 29). The danger, is that the market becomes an end in itself, an idol (CA 40). Another way of putting it, is this: that the market has legitimacy only when it serves the common good, the good of all, when it serves lives in such a way that people may be freed in the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and relationship with others.

- ***The state has an important though limited function in society***

While *Centesimus Annus* affirms the market more than Catholic social teaching ever has, it adds a significant qualification, which goes to the core of Christian teaching on economic matters: scepticism about the capacity or even interest on the part of free market mechanisms to address one of the greatest challenges before us - the problem of inequality, the gap between rich and poor. Christian teaching in general, and John Paul in particular, distinguish between an illegitimate market system that serves to make the rich richer, and one that is legitimate, set within the rule of law, which respects human freedom set in the framework of the common good (CA 42). It is here, that Christian teaching sees the role of the state, as a moderating force upon the free market. This is not to suggest that Christian teaching is naïve about the state. The question "who minds the minders" (*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* - the Roman satirist Juvenal snatched the expression from Plato's Republic) always remains present. However, it falls to the state, within limits, to regulate the market economy when the common good is being violated. Central to this role, is for government to foster and encourage, what are called, "mediating institutions" that mediate between the individual and the state, institutions that foster freedom: for example, professional associations, churches, trade unions, universities, families etc. In this way, the state does not have all-power, but works in consultation with these groups to ensure the common good.

- ***The individual is shaped by social institutions: fighting alienation***

Marxist thinking has spoken much of the human condition of alienation. Christianity, also uses the term, but in a much broader way. John Paul, explains human alienation as when we mix up means for ends and ends for means. This, he says, is so in two senses: first our passion for consumption, where we assume that happiness can be found in acquisition. Secondly, at work, where people find the place where they are potentially creative, meaningless. Here he calls for the humanization of the work place. Beyond that however, he also invites the Church, schools, universities and other humanist institutions, including government, to involve themselves in actually developing character and virtue, so people may meaningfully take their place in the world (CA 41)

Priorities for Economic Policy and Practice

Finally, to the question of priorities for economic policy that flow from a communitarian understanding, I

list four: first, adequate production so that wealth can be generated; second, equity and security through fairness in wages and prices and progressive tax reform, including meaningful corporate tax; third, educational and employment opportunity, with the former, not largely dependent upon market forces; and conservation of the environment in which we all live and upon which we all depend.

Discussion

1. **As an opener: what is your general sense about the state of the current world order?**
2. **Is the idea of Catholic communitarianism new to you? How do you think it stacks up against the usual perspective of philosophical liberalism?**
3. **Where should the market fit in today's world?**
4. **Where should the state fit in today's world?**
5. **Do you share or disagree with the listed priorities for economic policy and practice?**

Reading

Jaime Castillo: "Natural Law and Communitarianism" in Paul E. Sigmund (ed & trans), *St Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*. Translated from the Spanish, "Propiedad y Sociedad Comunitaria, Instituto de Estudios Políticos, Santiago de Chile, 1966 (New York, WW Norton & Co, 1988), pp, 176-178.

William T. Cavanaugh: *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, (New York, Eerdmans, 2008), esp pp, 115f

Oliver F. Williams CFC: "Catholic Social Teaching: A Communitarian Democratic Capitalism for the New World Order" in Paul T Jersild, Dale A Johnson, Patricia Beattie Jung and Shannon Jung, (eds.) *Moral Issues: A Christian Response*, (New York, Harcourt Brace College, 1998), pp 302-309.

J. Philip Wogamon: *Economics and Ethics: A Christian Enquiry* (London, SCM Press, 1986)

