

Why Protestants Should Pay Attention to Catholic Economic Teaching

Handed the above topic, let me observe wryly that most Protestant and Catholic writers on Christian economic thought take little notice of what has been developed outside their individual tradition. There is an unfortunate, longstanding habit of drawing all that is necessary for salvation and justice from one's own well, plus a fear of putting off publishers and readers by noticing other springs. In this way both scholarship and ecumenism are poorly served.

At all events, invited to be provocative let me offer three reasons why Catholic economic teaching deserves study by Protestants, namely, the longer development and wider range of matters discussed, the combined use made of three necessary sources of such teaching (Scripture, the teaching church, and philosophical-theological reasoning), and the fact that the teaching in question now contains a well-rounded statement of principles properly on track in relation to applications. The chief omission is the (partial) reform of economic science, where I anticipate more from resolute Protestants than comfortable Catholics.

(1) Modern Catholic economic teaching grew during the 19th century as a reaction to industrialism and revolutionary socialism. There is a list of writers, conferences, reports, authoritative statements of bishops and popes, and so forth, much larger than the generally later and thinner Protestant contributions. To assess this judgment, you will need some acquaintance with what has appeared in the chief European languages over some 150 years (see Cronin, and Calvez and Perrin, for example), while remembering that one Troeltsch did not make a summer. Moreover, this material reaches to the beginnings of Christianity, with names and items still cited. Of course, Protestants are fully entitled to call on as much of this tradition as they wish, but usually cut directly to the Bible.

The range of issues dealt with has been influenced by this history, a wide geographical setting, and an extensive moral theology (due, some say, to the practice of confession). For instance, certain property rights have been argued over for centuries, the Catholic trade union movement dug into labor-employer questions, and socialism has been only one phase in the conflict of church and state. Also, the relation of Christian teaching to the philosophy and science of the day has been tackled, with its vicissitudes, since the first confrontations with "pagan" learning.

(2) Coming to my second reason, the economic teaching in question reflects the mutually supportive use of three sources, indispensable it seems to me for a

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reasonably authoritative and unified social doctrine. While the Bible is a necessary foundation for Christian living and any church, on its own it remains an insufficient guide for practical and theoretical economics (see my remarks in *ACE Bulletin*, Fall 1989, p. 5). Certainly it gives many vignettes of economic life as part of a rounded relationship with God, but one must get to modern institutions and their working. Can the Biblical ambivalences on interest and lending be closely related to mortgage and financial markets today? Further, at some point one must grapple with economic science, distinguishing what may and may not be reconciled with the Christian mind, such as maximizations and equilibria of various sorts. My conclusion is the Scripture needs to be supplemented by a teaching church, leading its injunctions forward to present situations, and by philosophical-theological reasoning able to confront effectively the premises, epistemology and paradigms of the social sciences.

Affirming that the Bible needs the assistance of an interpreting church is obviously divisive. Presumably all Christians accept that the early church and then Reformers selected and gave their approval to the books composing the Bible, but the crux is the correction of personal inspiration by authority. Stepping around this as I must, let me hold out for Protestant consideration that the structural and teaching characteristics of the Catholic church give a certain strength and unity to its economic teaching. Normally individual bishops, their conferences, and popes consult widely before issuing pastoral statements on economic matters, which hopefully command the respect of the faithful. True, criticism is rampant, and the picture of a single, developing teaching is flawed; but the rather smaller reliance on church authority by Protestants makes the building up of a systematic economic teaching more difficult.

Perhaps even more controversial is the

place of philosophical-theological reasoning in Catholic teaching, particularly the natural law and Thomist thought until about 1960 followed by more diversity. While an intellectual approach to religious ethics has always known its dissensions, it is difficult to see how one can come closely to grips with modern economic life and science without a sufficiently developed Christian "philosophy." Many Protestant writings ostensibly base their economic critique on Biblical principles; in some cases (e.g. Hay, Tiemstra), I suggest it is more the product of reasoned analysis, with the Bible cited in support.

While this combined use of Scripture, the teaching church and reason underpinned by faith is, I say, a necessary source of strength, it does open itself up to attack from those rigorous intellectuals ever on the prowl. Jumping from Biblical citation to ecclesiastical authority to briefly reasoned argument, Catholic economic teaching can appear a simplistic presentation, especially as formulated for popularisation. Hence outsiders, including Protestant readers, must exercise some care if they are not to brush over the underlying strength. For example, the presentation of the nature and role of human work in *Laborem Exercens*, then *Centesimus Annus*, draws on all three sources in varied measure along with a certain Polish circumlocution, while building up a marvelous Christian view of labor very different from that found in microeconomics.

(3) My third reason for studying Catholic teaching is that, as a set of principles, it is filled out, coherent, and reasonably well understood in relation to applications. This I could not have affirmed before *Centesimus Annus*; but now there is a sound approach to the foundations of the economic system (property, freedom, entrepreneurship, role of markets), place of government, how developing economies need to help themselves and be helped, dignity of work and place of unions, special care for the poor, role of

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the social virtues, and so on. Which is not to say that social principles will not be further developed (the place of "solidarity" for instance), but their current presentation is well-rounded.

In moving from principles to applied matters, clearly intermediate criteria intervene and the details of economic implementation are normally contingent (a just wage has various requirements and ends in specifics that could be this or that). In this economic science collaborates, without dominating (ending in the contingent itself, of course, such as the details of efficiency or correcting market failures). By now Catholic thought has developed a relatively clear awareness of this process, though many proponents still hasten to identify social justice with their particular solutions and their political preferences. In *Centesimus Annus* (13) John Paul writes finely that the Church's economic teaching provides an "indispensable and ideal orientation," implying that the Christian optic differs from a secular approach to society and social science and will result in a distinctive standpoint.

Coming to the issue of reforming economic science, Christians divide between those acquiescing in reigning paradigms as necessary for scientific solidarity and personal advancement, and the few opting for some radical changes. Clearly Christian thought and practice are handicapped by the unChristian formation in economic science given generations of students and professors. Here Catholic teaching remains ambivalent, frequently professing respect for the due place and methods of the social sciences, but advertising regularly to their false presentation of man made in the image of God. When John Paul condemns atheistic rationalism for viewing human and social reality in a mechanistic way (*Centesimus Annus*, 13), he is close to rejecting dominant characteristics of current economic theorising. For this work Catholic economists (in English language countries, anyway) are neither as numerous nor as prominent as their

denominational size would suggest, due partly to their social history but also their distaste for much contemporary social theorising. Applied social and economic work proves more attractive.

Hence one may hope for more from committed Protestant intellectuals, clutching their Bibles resolutely and less disposed to compromise. Their own handicap is a general lack of the kind of fundamental Christian "philosophy" necessary to recast certain premises and methods in economic science for more concordance with the Christian mind.

In conclusion, for various reasons the movement of the Christian churches towards more unity has proved fitful, though differences have been studied and understanding improved. In Christian economic thought, similarly, the present bounds of mutual awareness and tolerance need to be considerably extended. Catholics are easily impatient with Protestant writing, feeling that the latter is only catching up in its own way on what has already been elaborated; while Protestants can readily treat Catholic writing with both mistrust and a touch of that old "effortless superiority complex" towards their country cousins. For my part I must confess to having written and rewritten this short article like one walking on eggs, and hope to have said something useful without too much offence towards that rather disparate body termed Protestant Christians. ■

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