New Blackfriars

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Catholic Theological Association 2011 Conference Papers

Catholic Social Teaching

Introduction

Geoffrey Turner

120 years after Pope Leo XIII published *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, which kicked the whole show off, the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain chose to have its annual conference on Catholic Social Teaching. A critical appraisal was timely because it is all too easy and perhaps complacent to keep calling it the Church's best kept secret (or 'best buried secret' as Michael Kirwan calls it) without seeing how it stacks up in the current global political and economic turmoil. What we have here then is an appreciative understanding and a critical assessment with clear implications of how CST might be developed, because it cannot afford to stand still. It is an exercise in what our colleagues on mainland Europe call 'scientific theology' and not just adulation of selected papal documents.

Within a few weeks of the conference, the Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice published an important contribution called Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority (24 October 2011), which takes CST into new areas. In an age when many think that ethics – and not least Christian ethics – is about how individuals deal with problems in their lives (with sexual problems at the forefront), it is interesting to note the concepts that stand out in this document: common good, community, solidarity. There is a repeated concern for the economic, spiritual and moral welfare of everyone throughout the world. The initial response has been to welcome the document but to suggest that its recommendations might be naive as they fail to take account of human weakness, i.e. sin. Yet the strength of the Council's document is that it does not point towards individual moral conversions – though it does condemn selfishness, collective greed and the hoarding of goods – but it focuses on structures: political and economic structures, the things that determine so much human behaviour, as we learnt from reading Marx, though the ones who get credit here are John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The main

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call is for a world political authority, which, while its emergence might not seem likely at a time when the European Union is in danger of breaking down into smaller fiscal and political units, is necessitated by the logic of globalization and international finance that is a free-for-all and apparently in free-fall. If it ever happens, one wonders how such a body might be different from the United Nations (it might have more teeth). Or does the Pontifical Council see this public authority as a sort of political Catholic Church: universal and authoritative? God forbid; it could easily become a monster. The Council's vision, however, is more nuanced and needs to be taken seriously:

> A supernational Authority of this kind should have a realistic structure and be set up gradually. It should be favourable to the existence of efficient and effective monetary and financial systems; that is, free and stable markets overseen by a suitable legal framework, well-functioning in support of sustainable development and social progress of all, and inspired by the values of charity and truth. It is a matter of an Authority with a global reach that cannot be imposed by force, coercion or violence, but should be the outcome of a free and shared agreement and a reflection of the permanent and historic needs of the world common good. It ought to arise from a process of progressive maturation of consciences and freedoms as well as the awareness of growing responsibilities. Consequently, reciprocal trust, autonomy and participation cannot be overlooked as if they were superfluous elements. The consent should involve an ever greater number of countries that adhere with conviction, through a sincere dialogue that values the minority opinions rather than marginalizing them. So the World Authority should consistently involve all peoples in a collaboration in which they are called to contribute, bringing to it the heritage of their virtues and their civilizations. (Zenit news agency's 'provisional English translation')

Even these few sentences from Cardinal Peter Turcson's document suggest that he might have started a new style in Pontifical writing. It is neither stilted nor constantly citing the Magisterium.

Donal Dorr's survey of the last fifty years of CST focuses on three areas: humanism and its consequences for an excessively anthropocentric ecology; women; and justice; and one of his criticisms is that the teaching is mainly contained within a series of papal encyclicals, in which the authors quote largely from their predecessors as the authorities on which they draw. It makes for a very enclosed world of thought. The teaching might also be based on a natural law morality, which in theory is open to all, but which in practice is preconditioned by traditional Church teaching.

If secular and even non-papal sources are cited only infrequently in CST encyclicals, David McLoughlin makes it clear that these encyclicals make little or no reference to the New Testament other than

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as occasional proof-texts. He shows how an imaginative engagement with the teaching of Jesus within the social context of his own time can open fresh and exciting political and moral vistas for us.

Michael Walsh's account of the historical background behind the publication of *Rerum Novarum* shows that, contrary to much opinion, it was never meant to be a justification for socialism. It is a myth that it was intended to be a 'workers' charter'; its aim was more narrowly religious.

Michael Kirwan has chosen to review CST from the perspective of a more radical tradition, that of liberation theology. He suggests that the two have a broad compatibility and reconnecting them with political and economic debates – as the Pontifical Council's recent document does – can take the Church beyond the post-Conciliar preoccupation with individualistic and sexual ethics that followed the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. Kirwan suggests two authors, Giorgio Agamben and Amartya Sen, who might provoke a development in CST that can contribute to those debates.

Drawing on her experience of working with asylum seekers in the UK, Anna Rowlands looks at what CST has to say about forced migration and the injustices that nation-states inflict on many migrants, who have had to seek refuge, through no fault of their own, outside their homeland. Rowlands looks at 'the neglected category of commutative justice' in issues of migration and draws on the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Charles Taylor.

Celia Deane-Drummond, through a detailed analysis of recent papal encyclicals, charts the development of what CST has to say about damage to our environment. She thinks this contribution to the debate has been under-appreciated but, as it is rooted in basic doctrines of the Church, it is not an optional extra for Christian practice. (Whatever an antipodean cardinal might think.)

Ashley Beck looks at a different facet of the Church's practical wisdom, not this time as expressed in official and authoritative documents, but as found in the life of the Christian Worker Movement. Beck argues the vision of this movement, founded in the United States by Dorothy Day, might provide a way of living Catholic Social Teaching practically, a way of life rooted in the sacraments and focussed on the poor and pacifism.

Finally, Frank Turner, who works at the Jesuit European Office in Brussels, shows how important it is for the Church's voice to be heard in Europe and he identifies specific areas where it needs to be heard. But he also explains how the magisterial style of that voice can make its hearers unreceptive, an authoritarian and sometimes immodest style that expects aquiescence rather than debate and assumes an expertise it does not necessarily possess. The problem here is how to make the virtues of CST accessible to a non-Catholic and non-Christian audience. However, if various criticisms are voiced in these

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papers, it is not with the intention of undermining CST, for every criticism has a positive implication for how CST might be developed and strengthened.

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