On Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: A Review Essay
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Among American intellectuals communitarianism has emerged as the most favored alternative to liberal individualism, and the truculence of contemporary interest-group politics that flows from its preoccupation with rights. Communitarians argue that liberals’ noble but often misguided promotion of the dignity and autonomy of the individual undermines the good of the communal life that enables and enhances human freedom and flourishing. Liberals retort with complaints about the ambiguity of communitarianism, especially its core tenet, the idea of community, which liberals view as an unwelcome encumbrance on the rights and freedoms of individuals. Indeed, it is one more thing to be liberated from.

To a certain extent, the charge of ambiguity can be turned back on liberals inasmuch as its core idea, rights, is imprecise, if not fictive. Ronald Dworkin, in *Taking Rights Seriously* (1976), a book written in defense of the Enlightenment conception of rights underpinning contemporary liberalism, conceded that he could not prove the existence of rights. And Alasdair MacIntyre, in his classic work *After Virtue* (1981), argued that “natural and human rights...are fictions,” grounded not in self-evident truths but in emotive insistence. At the end of the day, one sees that in the liberal-communitarian debate, liberals enjoy a highly privileged position because their language of “rights talks” resonates widely, and needs little or no deciphering for it to be understood by the American public. But, on the other hand, try to move a discussion on the common good beyond mere platitudes to some serious consideration of the ends of our political society; it either fizzles out or explodes in indignation when someone suspects that discussing the common good is the beginning of a slide into some form of authoritarianism. At best, most Americans understand the common good as the sum of individuals’ well-being, which today is best conveyed in the language of economics—the Gross National Product, unemployment rate, and money supply.

Still, liberal critics, and even critics friendly to communitarianism, have a point, the idea of community is a confusing one. For it means one thing for progressives, and quite another for conservatives. For today’s progressives—among them Amitai Etzioni, Robert Bellah, and E.J. Dionne—community has a profoundly Rousseauian quality; they champion egalitarian communities...
characterized by inclusiveness and consensus. Conservatives—in the line of Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, and even Paul Weyrich—envision a hierarchical social order, one bound together by common memories, tradition, and usually a particular place. Both progressive and conservative communitarians find the root of community in emotional and affective bonds, and in a common understanding and sense of obligation that are held so profoundly that they remain unspoken—"habits of the heart."

Exacerbating the confusion over the rational basis of communitarianism is its proponents’ unsettling silence about the decay of moral principles that have heretofore provided the foundation for Americans’ common life. As Christopher Lasch put it, “My strongest objection to the communitarian point of view is that it has too little to say about controversial issues like affirmative action, abortion, and family policy.” Indeed for the communitarians to engage these questions they would have to clarify their first principles, which they seem unwilling to do lest they be accused of smuggling in and imposing traditional morality under the cover of emotive pleas for community.

In truth, today’s more prominent communitarians are fundamentally liberals insofar as they refuse to admit what they secretly know to be true: that their program would to some extent impede individual rights and self-expression for reasons that remain mostly unconvincing. Moreover, without a clearly delineated tradition of their own—a useable past, they tend to draw sustenance from the liberal tradition, pointing to a history of fruitful intercourse between classical liberals and social liberals, or turn-of-the-century progressives, the latter being in effect proto-communitarians. As R. Bruce Douglass has written in Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy (1994), a collection of essays I will refer to often in this essay, “For better than a century, in fact, liberal theorists have been periodically engaged in a dialogue with one or another version of what is now coming to be thought of as ‘communitarian’ thinking, and there can be little doubt that liberals have benefitted greatly from the exchange. The ‘social’ liberalism pioneered by figures like Leonard Hobhouse in England and John Dewey in the USA helped prepare the way for the policy innovations that resolved the last liberal crisis, and it surely makes sense for liberals harboring comparable concerns today to seek the contemporary equivalent.”

It is therefore not surprising to find communitarians at this end of the twentieth-century trying to put down roots in the Progressivism at the other end. The running argument in E.J. Dionne’s popular book, They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era (1996), is “that the United States is on the verge of a second Progressive Era.” Amitai Etzioni’s The Spirit of Community (1993) attempts to recover a spirit of social responsibility that had always been a part of the liberal tradition in America. Etzioni’s object is to create a careful balance of duties and rights from which would flow a new, unifying morality shorn of any spirit of self-righteous moralizing.

Bereft of first principles and lacking in substance, new liberals have thus far had little trouble deflecting communitarians’ challenges to their hegemo-
ny. Richard Rorty, the dean of cultural liberalism, has devastated communitarianism by characterizing it in two words: “terminal wistfulness.”

Communitarianism’s pitiful intellectual state notwithstanding, it attracted a group of mostly Catholic intellectuals who cooperated to produce Catholicism and Liberalism. As I have already indicated, R. Bruce Douglass, a contributor and a coeditor of the book with David Hollenbach, S.J., recommends communitarianism as an alternative to liberalism. The twelve contributors to this volume of essays have commissioned themselves as representatives of Catholicism in an “encounter” between liberalism and Catholicism. Retiring contentious questions like abortion by viewing them in “historical perspective,” (emphasis in the original), their purpose is to shape this “encounter” into an “orderly conversation” on the American public philosophy. Not only will Catholic and liberals “learn” from each other in this “dialogue,” but it will set an example by which Americans can move beyond “the sort of antagonism and alienation that makes for culture wars.”

Their irenic posture aside, most of the contributors to the Douglass volume find the new liberalism associated with the writings of John Rawls and Richard Rorty quite unsavory for its “atomistic tendencies.” Most of them opt for a communitarianism grounded in neo-progressivism as the only other viable foundation for rebuilding an American public philosophy. (Predictably, one of their company, Mary C. Segers, rejects communitarianism as an undue restriction on women, who must “realize some degree of autonomy and assert some independence from social definition.”) What the writers in the Douglass book bring to communitarianism is a badly needed set of first principles drawn from the tradition of Catholic social teaching, in particular the principle of man’s intrinsic sociability, which they never tire of reiterating; indeed they almost chant it.

The contributors to the Douglass book, although not all of them Catholic, fit the description of most “Catholics on the left” given by Stanley Hauerwas in his wittily-titled essay, “The Importance of Being Catholic,” from another recent, more compelling book on the relation of Catholicism to liberalism and communitarianism: Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Moral Foundations of Democracy. The Catholic writers on the left, with whom Hauerwas has had a long association, argue energetically about issues of “war and economic justice,” but they equivocate on issues like “abortion, contraception, and divorce.” Thus their alliance with communitarians, who as Lasch points out also like to avoid these issues, is well made.

Thankfully, the failure of the Douglass collection to offer a substantive and thoroughly Catholic alternative to hegemonic liberalism has been rectified by Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism, edited by Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt. The Grasso volume, which is how I will refer to it hereafter, offers a muscular, full-bodied presentation of the Catholic intellectual tradition, indicating how it sheds new light on the
central questions confronting liberal democracies at the end of the twentieth century. In the words of Father Richard John Neuhaus's Foreword, “this book seeks to convince us that the principles and practices of the free society are made necessary by Catholic teaching.” Moreover, it invites the reader “to examine the claim that Catholic teaching proposes the most compelling understanding of a society that is both free and just”(ix-x). And it does so without underplaying any aspect of what the Church finds objectionable in the liberal Western Democracies.

The Douglass and Grasso volumes cry out for comparison, not the least reason being that they share in common Jean Bethke Elshtain's essay, “Catholic Social Thought, the City, and Liberal America.” The inclusion of this essay, which is brilliantly original in many respects, is nevertheless problematic with respect to one of the main objectives of the Grasso volume: transplanting the contemporary preoccupation with individual rights from the Enlightenment tradition to the Catholic intellectual tradition. Elshtain's essay is helpful in underscoring the importance of balancing rights and responsibilities in a civil society, in showing the corrosive effects of consumerism on civil society, and in pointing to the common ground underlying the work of Alexis de Tocqueville and Catholic social thought. But it is wide of the mark in its celebration of the United States Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on the American economy, Economic Justice for All (1986), as an advance in the “deadlocked ‘liberal/communitarian debate’”(105). As I wrote elsewhere, the Bishops’ letter (besides being made irrelevant by John Paul II’s more powerfully incisive encyclical letter, Centesimus Annus) discusses rights in such a way as to make the Catholic understanding of rights nearly indistinguishable from the “rights talk” that dominates American politics and jurisprudence.

Another commonality of the Douglass and Grasso volumes is the plea for the renewal of an American Public Philosophy, a concept revitalized in the post-World War II era by Walter Lippmann and John Courtney Murray, S.J. The public philosophy for Lippmann and Murray was “natural law,” without which they argued it would be nearly impossible to govern the liberal democracies of the Western world. The contributors to both Douglass’s and Grasso’s books also believe firmly in the efficacy of civil conversation toward building such a public philosophy.

Both books also quickly put to rest any suspicion that there is some sort of inherent incompatibility between Catholicism and the institutions of modern liberal democracies—constitutions, legislatures, elections. Indeed, Catholics have a more ancient claim on these institutions than liberals do. As Robert P. Hunt points out in his essay in the Grasso volume, Lockean liberalism, which requires individuals only to pursue their rational self-interest, is itself not integrally connected to constitutional government. “Absent from Locke’s theory,” argues Hunt, “is any concept of ordo iuris and it is only by piggybacking on the Western constitutional tradition (and its Medieval underpinnings) that he is able to supply one”(213). But contributors to both volumes agree that the Church is fundamentally at odds with anti-perfectionist liberalism, which holds that politi-
cal questions must be decided aside from particular ideas of the good life or a particular set of human values.

Like the Douglass volume, Grasso’s takes its inspiration principally from a postconciliar development in the Church. The writers in Douglass’s book rest their hopes for getting a sympathetic hearing for the Catholic voice in American politics on “the process of change” set off by the Second Vatican Council and the “coming of age of American Catholics” signaled by the Presidency of John F. Kennedy in 1961. The writers in Grasso’s book rest theirs on a more universal and substantive postconciliar development: the “Catholic human rights revolution.” Grasso himself sees in this “revolution” an opportunity to move beyond the prevailing and empty debate between liberals and communitarians. “The Catholic human rights revolution,” writes Grasso, “offers us the possibility of a theory of democratic government that can combine an insistence upon the importance of the individual human person as a focal point of political life [the concern of liberals] with an insistence upon man’s social nature and the primacy of the common good [the concern of communitarians]”(11). Rooted in a distinctive anthropology and an ancient intellectual tradition, “the Catholic human rights revolution has the potential of supplying our democratic experiment with the solid intellectual and moral affirmations that lie at the heart of democracy.” The Catholic human rights revolution is thus nothing less than the foundation for “the new and better public philosophy” America so urgently needs.

The fourteen essays in Grasso’s volume branch out in very different directions, treating, sometimes with extraordinary erudition, the elements that have informed the “Catholic human rights revolution”: the rich metaphysics of personhood, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, the meaning of the common good, the new natural law theory and the old, and the thinking of men who laid much of the foundation for the “Catholic human rights revolution”—preemminently John Courtney Murray, S.J., but also Jacques Maritain, Yves Simon, and the now nearly forgotten Thomist, Charles De Konink. Diverse as they are, the essays never entirely lose sight of certain distinctive qualities of Catholic social thinking: the idea of limited government, which sets boundaries on the range of government’s competence, and the demands that it can make on persons and the Church, the high dignity and value of the human person, and, finally, the innate sociability of man.

One burden of Grasso’s volume is not only to set a new foundation for American politics, but to do so without sacrificing the preconciliar Church to the postconciliar Church in the way that the essayists in Douglass’s volume sometimes do. To avoid this “pernicious notion that there are two Catholic churches, the preconciliar and the postconciliar (or the pre-John Paul II and John Paul II churches),” in Father Neuhaus’s words, the contributors to the Grasso book must show how the “Catholic human rights revolution” is consistent with the whole tradition of Catholic social teaching. Since even the appearance of the word, “rights,” in recent papal social teachings seems a departure from the Church’s historic insistence on personal self-sacrifice,
virtue, and duty—elements that seem to favor a concern for communal well-being. The proof of consistency is indispensable.

The reader finds this consistency foremost in the pervasive attention that many of the essayists pay to the Christian conception of the human person. And it is here that another difference emerges quite clearly between the Grasso and Douglass volumes; in the latter work, we find nothing that comes close to the sustained reflection on personhood that we find in the former work. The remainder of this essay considers the treatment of the human person that emerges from the Grasso volume, and the implications it has for the political order. In concentrating on the issue of personhood, I pass over with regret many other worthwhile questions which the contributors to the Grasso volume probe with great ingenuity and intellectual honesty.

To make it clear that a correct understanding of the human person is the necessary foundation for a rehabilitated American Public Philosophy, the Grasso volume’s first essay is a reflection on “The Image of Man in Catholic Thought” by Father Francis Canavan, S.J. Father Canavan underscores the continuity of Catholic thinking on the human person as reflected in the Papal social encyclicals of the past century; thus challenging liberalism at its core, in its conception of man. Liberalism, as Grasso points out, begins with a certain view of the individual—the unencumbered, imperial self, and from there spins out “a whole theory of politics.” Moreover, as Grasso, following Maritain and others, says, liberalism, in effect, hijacked a crucial victory of Christianity over the civilizations of Antiquity: the exaltation of the person. Under Christianity the person was no longer an instrument for the higher purposes of the polis, but something of incalculable value. Liberalism latched onto the new exalted position of the person, but diluted considerably the Christian metaphysical foundation of personhood, which, among other things obliges the person to use his freedom to pursue the truth, and conform himself to its demands. In a certain sense then the “Catholic human rights revolution” is an effort to reclaim and re-present a patrimony that has been denied to the modern Western democracies.

The dignity of the person, which one hears so much about in liberal discourse, takes on new meaning in the light of this lost patrimony. The origin of the person’s dignity, as Kenneth R. Craycraft writes in his essay, is not located “in the autonomy of human conscience,” as liberals would have it, but rather “in the truth that obliges conscience.” In perhaps the book’s clearest explication of the relation of the personal duty to pursue the truth, and human rights and the religious freedom that is inseparable from such rights, Craycraft explains that, while the Church acknowledges human dignity and its attendant necessary freedom, it grounds this dignity in the “obligation to seek and to know the truth. Dignity is rooted not in freedom, but in obligation and responsibility. And because every person is bound by this obligation, every person’s dignity is to be respected by all earthly powers.” In short: “Man’s obligation is the source of his dignity; his dignity in turn is the basis for his political or civic right to religious liberty”(62).
Let it be said that this view of the human person is not wholly unique to the Catholic Church; it has a certain resonance with Judaism according Matthew Berke, who writes in this volume on Catholic social teaching from a Jewish perspective. Without Craycraft's great stress on the foundational obligation to truth, Berke nevertheless finds "an underlying similarity between the two religions in the search for and commitment to truth, combined with a will to subordinate one's own immediate impulses and desires to that truth" (240).

The political order built on this conception of the person's dignity would, among other things, provide "a zone of personal freedom," writes Grasso, "within which human beings can confront [their] responsibilities in a manner consistent with their nature as persons. Man's moral responsibilities, in other words, are creative of rights vis-a-vis government, and demand that constitutional limits be placed on the scope of government" (39). The limitations on the government also relieve it from bearing the whole burden for bringing about the common good. To be sure government has a "moral mission," but government does not make men moral, as Robert P. George has argued elsewhere. It bears the responsibility of shaping the common good with the individual person and the many subsidiary communities that are prior to government, not the least of which is the natural community of the family.

As Christopher Wolfe points out in his charming and provocative essay on subsidiarity, we are so used to seeing the much-discussed principle of subsidiarity as providing us freedom from the coercive tendencies of governments too far removed from our immediate circumstances. Hence, we often overlook the creative power of subsidiarity. Wolfe argues for the educative power of subsidiarity inasmuch as the limitation it places on government—no bigger than necessary—"helps us to develop our own abilities and talents rather than to rely on others to do things for us" (93).

Obviously the Catholic conception of human freedom with its obligation to seek the truth free from government obstructions and coercion stands opposed to the liberal theory of the individual's right to freedom. As Hunt writes, following Murray, the modern liberal order is based on "the absolute autonomy of the individual human reason" whereby each is "a law unto himself, and there is no higher law than that which he individually gives to himself." Murray called this the freedom of the "outlaw conscience"—"conscientia exlex"—"a conscience," says Hunt, "that makes itself the arbiter of truth and error, of right and wrong, with no reference to anything higher than its own sense of justice." The political order that proceeds from such a view of the person at best is a procedural republic where the government remains allegedly neutral, trying to keep some order amid the fiercely conflicting claims of its people. To many political theorists, Catholic or not, a procedural democracy is an anemic political existence, highly susceptible to debilitating infections.

Against the present impoverished state of American democracy, where increasingly the main actors are self-determining individuals and an expansive state, the contributors to *Catholicism, Liberalism, and
Communitarianism offer a robust vision of a democracy where, as George Weigel says, free persons discover their duties, and consequently their rights, in the various subsidiary communities of the civil order—the family, churches, and voluntary associations. We can only hope that Americans recall this great promise of democracy.

Notes