Catholicism, the Tea Party Movement, and American Civilization: Questions, Propositions, and Proposals

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Based on a paper presented, and the feedback received, at the 19th Annual Conference of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists held at Franciscan University, in Steubenville, Ohio, October 29th, 2011, this short article proposes to initiate what could be an important research project intended to study the relationship between Catholicism and, respectively, the Tea Party movement and American civilization. Given the generally accepted understanding that American civilization is in the midst of a deep crisis, such a study hopes to provide, among other important analyses, both a Catholic critique of the present crisis and a Catholic critique of the Tea Party movement and the latter’s proposed solutions to the contemporary dysfunctional transformation of the American democratic republic.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this short article is to present fundamental questions and offer up tentative propositions and proposals regarding the contemporary relationship between Catholicism and, respectively, the Tea Party movement and American civilization. Hopefully, this exercise will facilitate the research necessary for the eventual publication of a substantial essay or monograph on the topic that I hope to complete in the not-too-distant future.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the nature of the present crisis in American civilization as understood by the various sectors of the contemporary Tea Party movement? Is it primarily political or economic? What are the Tea Party’s solutions for the present crisis?
2. What is the nature of the present crisis in American civilization as understood by an orthodox understanding of Catholic social doctrine? While not ignoring the political and economic, is it primarily cultural and religious? What are the Catholic solutions to the present crisis?
3. What role does the structural movement in formal organization life toward monopoly, “bigness,” bureaucratization, and “the abstract” society play regarding the present crisis in American civilization? More specifically, what role does corporate capitalism, an expanding government sector, and the evolution of the two major political parties play in the contemporary crisis?

4. Conversely, what role does the secularization of the Judeo-Christian heritage and the increasing rejection of the natural law tradition and, conversely, the cultural movement toward the ideas of “autonomous individualism,” moral relativity, materialism, and utilitarianism play in the contemporary crisis?

5. Is the dominant and defining operant philosophy of the Tea Party movement a libertarianism ranging from the radical position of someone like Ayn Rand to a somewhat more moderate vision of libertarianism as espoused by Ron and Rand Paul? Or is it an understanding of what Robert Bellah means by the “American Civil Religion” or, relatedly, of what Will Herberg meant by the “American Way of Life” that are not in an utterly disjunctive relationship with the vision of the American Founding Fathers? Or is the Tea Party movement presently in flux, incorporating strong elements from both the former and the latter visions but, generally speaking, moving in the latter direction?

6. How would an authentic Catholic worldview evaluate the various sectors that make up the contemporary Tea Party movement?

7. Are the goals of the Tea Party movement restricted to the call for limited government—i.e., shrink government and cut government spending, reduce taxes, eliminate burdensome regulations on small businesses, reform and simplify the tax code, reduce the deficit, and institute a balanced budget? Or are the goals of the Tea Party movement broader, also including the call to religious and cultural regeneration? Put another way, does the Tea Party movement consist overwhelmingly of small government libertarians and free market capitalists or does it include also a not insignificant number of cultural conservatives and members of the religious right? Is it possible that a disproportionate percentage of the leaders of the Tea Party movement are either libertarian or libertarian-leaning while the base of the movement contains a higher percentage of Americans who defend the Judeo-Christian and natural law heritage and who accept a moderate role for positive government intervention in the lives of most Americans?

8. Does the Tea Party contain significant elements of racism and nativism? Or is it a movement basically advocating equal opportunity, individual responsibility, and responsible citizenship? Put another way,
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as an example of both an American “populist” and “revitalization” movement, does the Tea Party manifest, in any serious way, an extremism detrimental to the welfare and unity of the American democratic republic? Or, in fact, does it represent a movement representing a vision of what Catholics refer to as the “common good” that could actually promote the welfare of the country and unite the majority of Americans? Overall, just how representative is the Tea Party movement vis-à-vis the American population at large?

9. What are the practical and ethical possibilities of crafting a strategic alliance between an orthodox Catholicism and at least the significant sectors of the Tea Party in contemporary America as a way to save the American experiment from a radical transformation to a secular social welfare state?

10. If such a coalition were to crystallize, what would be its prospects in the attempt to save the American experiment?

PROPOSITIONS

1. The American democratic republic, following Stephen M. Krason, is close to completing a fundamental transformation to an advanced and dysfunctional social welfare state (see Krason, *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*).

2. The nature of the transformation of the American democratic republic is one that violates the Catholic conception of a healthy and wholesome society as depicted, for instance, in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), ignoring such fundamental Catholic principles as “subsidiarity” and “solidarity” and the right to life from the moment of conception until natural death.

3. Given the massive “secularization from within,” following Joseph A. Varacalli (see Varacalli, *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order*), that has occurred within Catholicism in the United States—involving institutionalized dissent; a general widespread assimilation into a societal worldview at odds, in many respects, with an authentic Catholicism; an over-bureaucratized set of social institutions, and a generally failed or, at best, lackluster leadership—the Church, viewed as a human collectivity, is not presently in a situation, in and by herself, to either stop, slow, or redirect this deleterious transformation of American civilization.

4. Effectively opposing this dysfunctional transformation at this particular moment in time and space requires that the orthodox sectors of laity within the Catholic Church create coalitions with other groups in American civilization that are opposed to this transformation, even if
their reasons and philosophies aren’t identical to those of an orthodox Catholic worldview. However, it is imperative that a Catholic coalition with any other non-Catholic groups must not involve an unqualified or uncritical cooperation with ideas and social policies that violate any of the non-negotiable principles of the Church and of her social doctrine.

5. One such important group opposed to the present dysfunctional transformation of American civilization is the present-day Tea Party movement.

6. While the Catholic worldview is not coterminous in many respects with that of the Tea Party, within the corpus of Catholic social thought and that of a general Catholic sensibility are found certain ideas that are consistent with or can complement the many healthy features of the Tea Party movement or can correct its deficiencies.

7. There stands a natural “elective affinity” between Catholic social thought and American populism that could, theoretically, sweep up major sections of American civilization. Catholic involvement with the contemporary Tea Party movement is predicated on the understanding that America must be saved from its present trajectory not only for future generations of Americans, but for world civilization and, ironically, to protect the ability of Catholicism to perform an evangelizing function both nationally and globally. Just as America needs American Catholicism to continue to reform herself, Catholicism needs American know-how, organizational skills, and global presence to fulfill her non-negotiable evangelizing function. The irony is that American civilization, once so very Protestant in its roots and today so secular in its public discourse, could ultimately provide the most important “carrier” of the Catholic message on the contemporary scene, both at home and throughout world civilization.

**PROPOSALS**

1. The Church, *qua official institution*, should resist any temptation to play a direct partisan role with the Tea Party movement, or for that matter, with any recognized political party or other social movement, in the attempt to right the American democratic republic. Rather, the Church’s official role regarding internal political developments within the United States is to serve, for those willing to listen, as a neutral and fair-minded arbiter between competing factions, objecting to specific social policy proposals and cultural and institutional realities that violate the natural law. Without putting too fine a point to it, the task of the bishops of the Church is more to say “no” to certain policy proposals that are clearly unacceptable morally than to endorse any policy
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that involves a legitimate range of debatable prudential judgments, applications, and potential unintended consequences.

2. In the attempt to “Christianize the temporal sphere,” orthodox Catholics, *qua* laypeople, should involve themselves in a sympathetic yet critical engagement with those sectors of the Tea Party that do not violate the essentials of the Catholic faith in the attempt to save American civilization from a further descent away from the good society. The goals of Catholic engagement here are to bring a Catholic sensibility into the American public square from where social policy is forged and to provide an opportunity to offer an important evangelizing witness within the Tea Party movement and throughout American civilization.

**CONCLUSION**

The questions, propositions, and proposals offered in this short article are tentatively presented. Hopefully, they will serve as a catalyst for intelligent reflection and revision and lead ultimately to a completed and published research project making a substantial contribution to the important issues mentioned briefly in this short article.