

***A Distinctive Idea of Freedom:
Francis Canavan and Contemporary Catholic Social
Thought***

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Francis Canavan's writings on Catholic social thought have a less systematic character than the other aspects of his work explored by this symposium. In sharp contrast to his three books on Burke's political thought, his volume on the political theory of what the First Amendment terms "the freedom of speech," and his scores of essays exploring what might be termed contemporary America's quest for a public philosophy (a dozen or so of which were gathered in *The Pluralist Game*), his major writings on Catholic social thought consist of a half-dozen articles and book chapters published over the course of four decades.¹ If these writings have an occasional character, however, they are nevertheless united by certain broad themes, and certain broad lines of argument. For our purposes, it is by way of these themes that Canavan's work on Catholic social thought may best be approached.

The first of these themes is what might be termed the continuity of Catholic social teaching. It is no secret that in the course of the last five decades a number of far-reaching developments have taken place in the Church's social magisterium. One thinks immediately of the Church's movement from her initial rejection of the idea of religious liberty to Vatican II's embrace of a human right to religious liberty as a defining element of a rightly ordered polity. More broadly here, one thinks of the transition from the nineteenth-century Church's initial posture of suspicion towards "rights talk" to her contemporary affirmation of the existence of an order of human rights and insistence that protection and promotion of these rights lies at the very heart of the government's responsibilities. Similarly, one thinks of the transformation of the Church's initial skepticism about the institutions and practices of constitutional democracy into an embrace of this type of polity as the form of government most in keeping with the Catholic understanding of man and society. Finally, and most recently, one thinks of the transition from the Church's criticism of "unchecked liberalism" in the economic sphere to *Centesimus Annus's* embrace of a "market economy" and the right "to freedom in the economic sector."²

Not surprisingly, this development has raised a whole series of complex questions. How can the idea of religious freedom be reconciled with the Church's traditional self-understanding and what *Dignitatis Humanae* describes as "the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ"? How, moreover, can the idea of "natural

rights,” whose safeguarding is to be numbered among the state’s most basic responsibilities be reconciled with both Catholicism’s traditional natural law teaching which speaks not of rights but duties, and with the Catholic tradition’s communitarian understanding of politics, with its insistence that government exists not to protect the right of individuals to pursue their self-chosen goals but to promote the common good of the community? How, furthermore, can the Church’s embrace of constitutional democracy be reconciled with Catholicism’s perfectionist conception of the goals of politics, with its insistence that government’s mission is the fostering of human excellence through the inculcation of virtue? How, finally, how can the emphasis of contemporary Catholic social teachings on the importance of economic freedom be reconciled with its earlier criticisms of economic individualism? Indeed, a number of commentators—whose ranks, incidentally, include both supporters and critics of what George Weigel has aptly termed the Catholic human rights revolution³—have suggested that this far-reaching transformation in the Church’s social magisterium represents a break with the Catholic tradition, a rejection of the Church’s traditional teachings about the ordering of human life in society.

Canavan’s work embodies a very different reading of the Catholic human rights revolution. Invoking the Second Vatican Council’s affirmation that the Church’s “sacred tradition” and “doctrine” constitute a “treasury out of which” she “brings forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old,” he insists that what has taken place in the past fifty years is a far-reaching *development*—in the technical sense in which Newman employed the term in his classic work—in the Church’s social magisterium.⁴ The experiences of the modern era, he argues, have deepened the Church’s understanding of the implications of the deposit of faith entrusted to her for ordering of human life in society. If the conclusions about the right ordering of social life that constitute that Catholic human rights revolution are new, the premises from which these conclusions derive are thoroughly traditional.

The far-reaching development in the Church’s social magisterium that has taken place in the past five decades has its roots, Canavan insists, in a new and deeper understanding of the ideas that lie at the heart of the Catholic intellectual tradition. The teaching of *Dignitatis Humanae*, for example, is rooted not in a rejection of the Church’s traditional ecclesiology and self-understanding but in a new understanding of the implications of one of Catholic social thought’s foundational principles, namely, the principle of limited government. Indeed, its argument for religious liberty “is very much in the rational, natural-law tradition of Catholic thought.”⁵ And, as far as the Church’s teaching on natural rights is concerned, rather than breaking with Catholicism’s traditional natural law teaching, what the modern popes have done is to incorporate a theory of “human rights into their doctrine of natural law.” They have thus

made both the protection of the rights and the fulfillment of the obligations of the person the natural and God-given purposes of society. Both the rights and the obligations depend upon the teleology inherent in man’s nature and

supernatural destiny; the obligations are derived not from the rights but from the goods that are the goals of human nature.⁶

Nor is the Church's embrace of constitutional democracy rooted in some alleged "right of every individual in 'the state of nature' to govern himself," but rather in the recognition "that the power and activity of the state in the modern world is so extensive that reason requires democracy to control it."⁷ Lastly, the economic philosophy of *Centesimus Annus* is not so much a new teaching as a new "emphasis" on certain traditional principles—the right to private property, limited government, the need for "the energies of society" to flow "from below upwards, not from the top down."⁸

The second theme concerns the principle of limited government. One of Christianity's distinctive contributions to political life, this principle represents one of the central constitutive principles of Catholic social thought. Originating in the Christian distinction between Church and state, Canavan argues, the idea of limited government marks a fundamental break with the conception of the structure of human social life that informed the societies of classical antiquity. For the classical world, "society was a compact and undifferentiated unity whose functions were not only those we call political, but also those which we call religious." With Christianity, however, "there . . . appeared a distinct social body that called itself the ecclesia or church." Although the Church "acknowledged the authority of governments in temporal affairs, it claimed autonomy in all that pertained to man's relationship with God." Needless to say, the category of what "pertained to man's relationship with God" was a broad one.⁹

The distinction between "the proper spheres" of "Church" and of what came to be known as "state" had far-reaching and revolutionary consequences for the organization of human life in society. It leads, writes Canavan, to

a conception of society as organized in different ways for different purposes. Society is indeed composed of individuals, but not of individuals standing alone opposite the state. The family is a natural human grouping, and society is made up of families as much as of individuals. As society develops, it articulates itself into a multitude of economic, cultural and other groups.¹⁰

While "society overall is organized as the state," it is so organized "only for certain purposes and for the performances of certain functions relative to those purposes." Thus, "the state and its organs of government . . . come to have limited powers because they have limited goals and functions." The distinction between church and state thus "leads ultimately to the idea of constitutional government—that is, government limited in its powers."¹¹ It thus issues in the affirmation of limited government as a defining principle of a rightly ordered society.

The principle of limited government flows not only from the pluralistic structure of Catholicism's social ontology, but from its personalist anthropolo-

gy as well. The “natural and civil right to religious freedom” affirmed in *Dignitatis Humanae*, for example, “derives from [man’s] natural obligation to seek religious truth, to adhere to it when found and to order one’s whole life in accordance with its demands.” The right to religious freedom “follows from the obligation to seek and live by religious truth” in a “manner” consistent with man’s dignity as a person, that is, freely and responsibly. Man’s nature and dignity as a person—as “a free and responsible” being—are thus creative of rights and immunities from coercion that must be respected by others.¹²

Catholic social thought’s commitment to limited government is rooted in principle rather than prudential considerations, in a distinctive vision of the nature of man and society, rather than the prudential judgment that at a certain point governmental coercion becomes counterproductive. The state has limited powers because its goals and functions in the overall economy of human life in society are limited. Indeed, it is only when the principled character of the Catholic commitment to limited government is clearly recognized that it becomes possible to grasp continuity of the Catholic human rights revolution with the Catholic tradition.

The third theme is the incompatibility of the Catholic understanding of man and society with the understanding that informs liberal individualism. It is important to be clear on exactly what Canavan means by liberal individualism. He does not mean a broad political orientation supportive of the rule of law, limited government, including constitutional guarantees of human rights, government by the consent of the governed. Rather he means a particular model of man and man and society which emerged in the seventeenth century. The defining attributes of this tradition are twofold. The first is a “radical individualism,”¹³ which issues in an insistence on the “artificial, external and contractual” nature of human social relations, and on “the autonomy of the individual and his right to decide for himself which norms he will obey.”¹⁴ The second is nominalism which, by precluding in principle a knowledge of “the nature of anything,” makes it impossible to “understand a natural whole or appreciate a natural good.”¹⁵ Although a number of notable commentators have interpreted the far-reaching development that has taken place in Catholic social teaching in recent decades as representing some type of rapprochement with liberalism, Canavan, on the other hand, insists on the incompatibility of the two traditions, an incompatibility rooted in the fundamental irreconcilability of their respective conceptions of the nature and destiny of man.

There is indeed, he admits, “a certain individualism” in the Catholic vision of man, an individualism “that is implied by the Christian belief that every man is destined for eternal life or damnation on his individual merits or demerits.”¹⁶ This individualism, he believes, finds classic expression in John XXIII’s affirmation “that individual men are necessarily the foundation, cause and end of all social institutions.” This notion of individualism means, writes Canavan, that “institutions are for men, not men for institutions” and “the men for whom all [social] institutions exists are individuals, not a collective mass.”¹⁷

But this individualism differs fundamentally from that which informs liberal-

ism because it is rooted in a very different metaphysics of the person. The Catholic understanding of man takes shape against the backdrop of its vision of a divinely created and teleologically ordered universe, and in the context of the Catholic tradition's metaphysical and moral realism. "Catholic individualism," observes Canavan, "differs from liberal individualism precisely in that it" affirms that "our common human nature as created by God" is the source of "obligatory norms of human action."¹⁸ Since man "is intelligent, his free choice of action" ought "to be governed by his recognition of a moral law higher than his own mere will." Catholicism's individualism, therefore, does not see

man as a sovereign will free to make of itself and the world what it pleases. Rather, it envisions a person who is obliged to frame his life through free choices in accordance with a law built into our common human nature by the Creator, who is the first truth and supreme good, and by Christ's call to a higher, supernatural life.¹⁹

Thus, from the Catholic perspective "the self is not prior to the ends affirmed by it, as it is for John Rawls." Similarly, "choice does not constitute the good, but the true and objective good governs, without physically determining, choice."²⁰

This metaphysics of the person issues in a very different social ontology from that embedded in the liberal tradition. Catholic social thought emphatically rejects "the liberal assumption that the basic questions of political theory can be reduced to determining the proper relationship between the state and the individual."²¹ On the contrary, it insists that man is a social being who "realizes and develops himself through communion with other persons" in a wide array of institutions and associations that today have come to be known as intermediary groups.²² In sharp contrast with liberalism, the Catholic mind sees "human society as a community of communities . . . not as a collection of individuals who contracted with each other to set up a mutual-protection association called the state."²³ From the Catholic perspective, these communities, rather than the market or state, constitute the center of social gravity.

The final theme concerns the relation between Catholic social thought and the institutions and practices constitutive of what we have come to term "the free society." Inasmuch as the Catholic human rights revolution, taken as a whole, might fairly be described as an embrace by Catholic social thought of these institutions and practices, in a certain sense we return here to the whole question of the continuity of revolution with the Church's traditional social teaching.

Even today in some quarters the Catholic understanding of man and society is held to be incompatible with the institutions and practices constitutive of the free society. This is not surprising given what Canavan describes as "the deep skepticism" if not "outright hostility" with which the Church reacted to many of these institutions and practices.²⁴ The mixture of suspicion and hostility

with which the Church reacted to them must be seen, he contends, against the backdrop of “the philosophy” in “the name of which” the free society was defended, namely, liberal individualism. The liberal model of man and society not only supplied the premises from which the institutions and practices of the free society were projected, but decisively shaped the way in which they were understood. The liberal understanding of religious freedom, for example, was not only grounded in a “naturalism” and “radical individualism” but entailed in practice the privatization of religion. Under the circumstances, “it is not surprising that the Church’s initial reaction” to the free society “was one of energetic rejection.”²⁵

As time went on, however, the Church recognized that the connection between what Leo XIII had called “modern liberties” and liberal individualism was an historical accident, that a principled commitment to these liberties did not entail the acceptance of the liberal model of man and society, or the liberal understanding of content of these liberties. Contemporary Catholic social teaching and the work of thinkers like John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain demonstrate, Canavan contends, that the institutions and practices of the free society can be projected from a philosophy which differs fundamentally from liberal individualism.

More specifically, the Catholic theory of the free society has its roots in a new emphasis upon, and deeper appreciation of the implications of, two of Catholic social thought’s foundational ideas: man’s nature and dignity as a person and the pluralist structure of society. As we have seen, these ideas combine to produce a commitment to constitutional government, to, in Canavan’s words, government that “is limited in its powers and . . . responsible to those whom it governs.”²⁶ They also issue in a new found emphasis “on freedom and self-development both individual and social” as essential elements in a truly human social order.²⁷ “One must be struck,” Canavan remarks, “by the centrality” that twentieth century Catholic social teaching “attributes to the freedom of the human person.”²⁸

In a rightly ordered society, the Church’s social magisterium affirms, “the energies of society . . . well up from below as persons freely organize themselves,” into a wide multiplicity of communities “to pursue a wide variety of common goals.”²⁹ This insistence on what Canavan calls “the self-organization of society” finds “classic expression in the principle of subsidiarity.”³⁰ Although it “is a purely formal principle that does not answer substantive [policy] questions,” subsidiarity “inculcates a steady bias toward decentralization, freedom, and initiative.”³¹

The Church’s social teaching does not merely offer a justification for the institutions and practices of the free society that differs fundamentally from that provided by liberalism. It simultaneously offers us an alternative to the liberal model of the free society—a model that, if loosely similar in its institutional framework to that which issues from liberalism, nevertheless differs dramatically from it in spirit and substance. What emerges in contemporary Catholic social teaching, he observes, “is a distinctive idea of freedom” which

“stands in sharp contrast” to the “conception of liberty” championed by the proponents of the liberal model of man and society.³² As Canavan’s discussions of religious liberty in contemporary Catholic social thought makes clear, for example, the human right of religious freedom affirmed by contemporary Catholic social teachings differs from that affirmed by the liberal tradition, not only in its foundations, that is, in the premises from which it is projected, but in its content as well; the Catholic concept of religious liberty as a human right, for instance, does not necessitate the complete secularization of public life which follows from the liberal understanding of that right. Similarly, the economic freedom defended by John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* differs in spirit and substance from the economic freedom championed by, say, Ludwig von Mises or Milton Friedman.

No one familiar with Canavan’s other work will be surprised to discover that these essays cast important light on the subjects they address. Their occasional character notwithstanding, taken as a whole, they represent a significant contribution to the literature of contemporary Catholic social thought. They possess a particular importance, furthermore, for younger scholars in the area of Catholic social thought. On the one hand, these essays offer us something of a model of what serious Catholic social thought today should look like. They do so by combining intellectual attributes that today are far too often separated. Specifically, they combine an extraordinary grasp of the history of Western political thought with an equally impressive grasp of the Catholic intellectual tradition, a profound fidelity to the Church’s *Magisterium* with the intellectual creativity (and grasp of the Catholic tradition) necessary to develop the Church’s teaching—to deepen her understanding of the truth entrusted to her—in the light of the experience and new problems of our day.

On the other hand, they offer us not merely a model to be emulated but an intellectual agenda to be pursued. The development in the Church’s social teaching that crystallized in the documents of the Second Vatican Council is, in certain important respects, Canavan suggests, incomplete. While embracing without equivocation the conclusions of *Dignitatis Humanae*, for instance, Canavan contends that the argument advanced there in support of “a natural and civil right” to religious freedom is not fully satisfactory and, in the final analysis, cannot “really bear the full weight that is put on it.” Its weakness, he insists, stems from its failure to deal in a more systematic way with the whole question of “the nature of a just political and legal order in human society.”³³

Inasmuch as the Catholic human rights revolution represents a development in the Church’s teaching about the right ordering of human life in society and the role (and limits) of the state in the overall scheme of human social life, it must necessarily encompass a systematically elaborated “political philosophy” embodying “a sound concept of the common good [of the political community] and of the nature and functions of the state.”³⁴ The Council left the task of forging such a political philosophy to the future, and today this task remains among the most important pieces of unfinished business confronting the Church today. Implicit in these essays, I would suggest, is a call to younger

scholars to bring to completion the far-reaching development that has taken place in the Church's social magisterium over the past five decades by elaborating in a systematic fashion the theory of state and society implicit in it.

In the ecclesiastical silly season that followed Vatican II, many aspects of the Catholic tradition all but disappeared from the collective consciousness of the American Catholic community. The Catholic tradition in social thought was abandoned in favor of various intellectual fads, among the more widespread, Marxian liberation theology. If in the decades prior to Council thinkers like Maritain, Murray, and Yves Simon helped lay the groundwork for the type of political theory presupposed by the Council's teaching, after the Council their work largely disappeared from view, and, until quite recently, little has been done to build on the foundations they so ably laid. During these dark post-conciliar days, Francis Canavan, S.J., was one the very few thinkers who kept the authentic tradition of Catholic social thought—and the intellectual project with which the Council charged Catholic social thinkers—alive. For this we owe him an immense debt of gratitude.

Notes

1. "Subordination of the State to the Church According to Suarez," *Theological Studies* XII (September 1951): 354-364; "Church, State and Council" in *Ecumenism and Vatican II*, ed. Charles O'Neill, S.J. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1964), 44-62; "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom as a Human right" in *Religious Liberty: An End and a Beginning*, ed. John Courtney Murray, S.J. (New York: MacMillan, 1966), 65-80; "Religious Liberty: John Courtney Murray and Vatican II" in *John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation*, ed. Robert P. Hunt and Kenneth L. Grasso (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 167-180; "The Popes and Economy," *First Things* 16 (October 1991): 35-41; and "The Image of Man in Catholic Thought" in *Catholicism, Liberalism and Communitarianism*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 15-27. Not surprisingly, Father Canavan's corpus includes several briefer pieces on various aspects of Catholic social thought, and he does on occasion touch in passing on Catholic social thought in writings on other subjects. In preparing this essay, I relied almost exclusively on the major pieces cited above.

2. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (Boston: St. Paul's Books and Media, n.d. [1994]), section 24, p. 34.

3. See George Weigel, "Catholicism and Democracy," *The Washington Quarterly* 12 (Autumn 1985): 5.

4. *Dignitatis Humane* in *Religious Liberty: An End and a Beginning*, section 1, p. 163. See "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom," 66-68.

5. "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom," 71.

6. "The Image of Man," 20.

7. *Ibid.*, 17.

8. "The Popes and the Economy," 30.

9. "Religious Liberty: John Courtney Murray and Vatican II," 167-168.
10. *Ibid.*, 168.
11. *Ibid.*
12. "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom," 69-71. Cf. "Religious Liberty: John Courtney Murray and Vatican II," 176.
13. "Church, State and Council," 46.
14. *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 130, 134.
15. *Ibid.*, 120.
16. "The Image of Man," 17.
17. *Ibid.*, 19. The passage Canavan cites from John XXIII is from *Mater et Magistra*, section 219.
18. "The Popes and the Economy," 38.
19. "The Image of Man," 18.
20. *Ibid.*, 19.
21. *The Pluralist Game*, 98.
22. "The Image of Man," 22.
23. "The Popes and the Economy," 39.
24. "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom," 67.
25. "Church, State and Council," 46-47.
26. "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom," 77.
27. "The Popes and the Economy," 38.
28. "The Image of Man," 25.
29. *Ibid.*, 24.
30. "The Popes and the Economy," 38, 39.
31. *Ibid.*, 39.
32. "The Image of Man," 25.
33. "The Catholic Concept of Religious Freedom," 78-79.
34. "Church, State and Council," 61.