

GOVERNMENT, THE COMMON GOOD AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Politics, Religion and Society seminar

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This should be read with reference to the main seminar paper by Nicholas Townsend:

“Social Infrastructure: A Christian Theological View of the Role of Government”,

together with the second response, by Jenny Sinclair

Catholic social teaching in recent years has had a lot to say about the specifics of what governments should and should not do. *Caritas in veritate*, for example, authored by Pope Benedict, and published in 2009 suggested that the government should regulate the economy to a greater degree. *Laudato si*, Pope Francis' recent encyclical on the environment, made similar arguments. However, there has been relatively little reflection on the role and limits of the state in principle. In turn, there has been very little reflection on the theological and anthropological rationale for what government should (or should not) do. This is a pity, because without consideration of these first principles, it is quite dangerous to speculate on the specifics. It wasn't always like this. The early Church encyclicals and also *Centesimus annus* in 1991, drawing on natural law and the insights of those such as Thomas Aquinas, discussed these issues and laid the foundations for decades of fruitful philosophical discussion.

Nick has done us a great favour by filling in some of the gaps that have been left. I want to add to Nick's analysis by adding some points based on our human anthropology. Pope John Paul II, in *Centesimus annus*, pointed out that in economic systems with substantial amounts of governmental control, the basic nature of the human person was suppressed – we became depersonalised, unable to act out of our own free will, a cog in a wheel as he put it.

Now, there is an important debate about what kind of freedom we should want as Christians. We do not simply want freedom from constraints, but the freedom to choose what is right. Thus, we want to see a society in which we have the virtuous exercise of freedom. And this is why, within a free society, we need other checks and balances that shape our culture, help form our decisions and provide vehicles for promoting the common good. I shall come back to this later.

The second anthropological point relates to our human ignorance – the limitations of human cognition. It is human ignorance and the nature of knowledge which actually makes economic planning by governments very difficult, if not impossible. This is an insight of Austrian economics, but one which should easily be comprehensible to Christians. We might believe that we know what is good for people in an abstract sense. But, the idea that we can design, for example, global systems of financial regulation, as has been proposed in some Vatican documents, seems quite difficult to reconcile with what we know about the limitations of the human condition. And, it should be added, such systems existed before the crash and almost certainly exacerbated the effects of the crash. And, when it comes to dealing with real human poverty, which is not only the lack of material things, but often involves a complex set of conditions that led to the lack of material things, surely Pope Benedict got this right in *Deus caritas est* when he said:

There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable.^[20] The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern.

Then the third anthropological point is to recognise human sinfulness. Sinfulness is one of the important reasons why we need government in the first place. To deal, as Nick has said, with 'sins of

omission' such as lack of charity and 'sins of commission' such as theft or murder. Evidence of sinfulness in the private sphere of economic life is not very difficult to find. Whether we think of unethical behaviour in the financial sector, corporate excesses or executives putting themselves before obligations to the company pension fund, we can all cite examples. However, there is ultimately a constraint on corporate excess. It has limits.

There seems to be a logic in some currents in Catholic social teaching that markets go wrong because of human sinfulness markets, therefore they need regulating by governments. The problem with that line of argument is that when you recognise that human sinfulness is also a characteristic of those who are designing and implementing regulation you have literally reached a dead end. Regulatory structures get captured by the firms they are intending to regulate. Regulators have their own inherent tendencies to fail in various ways. And to return to the previous point, they simply do not have the knowledge to guarantee that regulation can improve outcomes. In the extreme, human sinfulness combined with government power can give rise to mass murder, policies that induce famine and constraints on human freedom that are totally unacceptable. We all want our kind of good guy running the government, but once we vest power within structures of government, we have to accept that we might get a Trump, a Mugabe or President Mobutu of the Congo who amassed \$5 billion as president of one of the world's poorest countries.

So far, these arguments reinforce Nick's, though approaching the question from a slightly different angle. However, I think there is a gap in Nick's analysis. And there is a similar gap in Catholic social teaching in general. We have this desire to create the infrastructure in which all can flourish and in which the world can be brought closer to perfection. But, it would be both wrong and impossible for government to do that directly. At the same time, the promotion of the common good is clearly a social endeavour. We are social beings. We have to solve problems together. We cannot simply rely on the market in its crude form to satisfy all needs – certainly not in the sense that it is generally understood. And we are not simply a collection of individuals.

The bit that I think is missing is a deeper consideration of civil society institutions and culture. It was such institutions (mixed with both philanthropy and commercial institutions) that led to the thriving arts culture that developed in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It is within civil society that the whole of the Catholic education sector, most of the private education sector and institutions such as free schools find themselves. Institutions developed in the seventeenth century which until 1986 were also very effective regulators of financial markets (such as stock exchanges).

Whole swathes of the financial sector in the UK were made up of mutual membership organisations, many of which were also vehicles for fraternal support. In Germany much of health and social care is provided by organisations which, though private, are not profit-making marketised institutions.

One of the frustrating things about *Laudato si* is that it totally ignored a huge stream of work, some of which was undertaken by Elinor Ostrom still the only female winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, looking at the role of communities and civil society in protecting the environment, especially in poor countries. Ostrom's work shows how communities from the bottom up develop forms of regulation to control the use of environmental resources such as fish and forests. They develop their own systems of enforcement and governance to ensure conservation and sustainability. Not only were they effective at promoting conservation, they were much more effective than either individualised systems of property rights or government control (not least because of the problem of government corruption in many of the affected areas). Ostrom's study of these mechanisms involved examining how people in the real world actually solve their own problems, given the realities of human nature and the imperfections inherent in political institutions. But they should not surprise a student of nineteenth century and early twentieth century Catholic social teaching.

Related to all these issues is the responsibility on all Christians to promote a healthy and virtuous culture in economic and social life which helps others choose the good and within which civil society institutions operate.

So, I agree with Nick's basic thesis and I think it is a very important contribution to get us thinking about the first principles. However, there is then a set of questions about how that social infrastructure is delivered how the common good is promoted and how solidarity is brought into effect.

The government has a very particular role. However, I think we need to renew a tradition that also looks at that huge range of social, civil society institutions that can solve social and economic problems and promote the conditions for a flourishing society. These institutions are not strictly philanthropic and are not generally commercial. They have been squeezed out by the state (and some would argue by the market) and we need Catholic social teaching to speak up for them.

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