

**“‘Alternative’ Traditions in American Catholic Social Thought:
The New Deal Critics”**

Kevin E. Schmiesing
Research Fellow

Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty

John A. Ryan as Normative

Viewed as a whole, the historiography on American Catholic social thought during the 1930s focuses on one person: John A. Ryan (1865–1945). This phenomenon fits into the larger context of the story of American Catholic social thought from the time of *Rerum Novarum* to the present. To be sure, there are other important figures who receive extensive treatment in accounts dealing with social thought during this period, but the story nonetheless appears largely to be the ascendancy of Ryan’s thinking to become dominant among American Catholics.

It seems this was not always so. Among earlier works on the topic, Ryan shares time, sometimes equally, with other American Catholic social theorists. In Aaron Abell’s anthology, for instance (1968), while Ryan and his allies such as Peter Dietz and William Kerby figure prominently, alternative views such as those of Conde Pallen and other “conservatives” are not ignored. David O’Brien’s survey of American Catholic social thought (1968) similarly takes into account the diversity of views on issues such as labor and government intervention. Again, while Ryan is an important character, he is not the central figure around which all others revolve. Instead, O’Brien highlights the nuances of difference among New Deal advocates such as Ryan and Father Raymond McGowan, and points to alternatives to Ryan’s interpretation of papal social teaching in the American context,

such as those of Frederick Kenkel and Virgil Michel. Ryan is only part of the story of social thought in the historical surveys of American Catholicism by Thomas McAvoy (1969) and James Hennesey (1980). Finally, in Robert Trisco's collection of essays on Catholics in America, 1776-1976 (1976), Frederick Kenkel and John A. Ryan each receive a chapter.¹

Despite such even-handedness, more recent trends indicate a heightened regard for Ryan's place in the history of Catholic social thinking in the United States. For Margaret Mary Reher (1989), for instance, Ryan is the central social theorist of the first part of the century. While Reher admits that Ryan's reading of the encyclicals was colored by a "progressive" lens, Ryan's only serious contender in Reher's view was Charles Coughlin, who clearly lacked the intellectual stature that Ryan possessed. Ryan is at the center of Jay Dolan's *History of American Catholics* (1985), too. Dolan's story is one of a simple move among Catholics away from nineteenth-century conservatism (bad) and "Toward a Social Gospel" (good).²

Overall, then, the story emerging from the historiography is the following. The nineteenth century was dominated by a laissez-faire philosophy that Catholics did little to combat. It was only with the publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 that Catholics began to devote significant effort to addressing the social question. In the United States, specifically, while Catholic social thinkers did not embrace laissez-faire economics, they remained skeptical of the beneficent possibilities of the modern state. Beginning in the early twentieth century, buttressed in

1919 (Bishops' Program), and cemented in the New Deal, a new Catholic attitude took shape. With John Ryan as its primary spokesman, this view interpreted the social encyclicals as providing legitimacy to the ever-expanding intervention of the American government in the economy.

Meanwhile, the story continues, no serious alternative tradition of Catholic thinking on social issues kept pace with Ryan's. The positive assessment of the state's potential for implementing social teaching provided by Ryan remained dominant through the end of the century, manifested at the popular level by Catholic loyalty to the Democratic Party and at the official level by the pronouncements of the NCWC (later the USCC, now the USCCB). At the same time, the conservative impulse of the 1950s gave rise to a tradition of Catholic conservatism. This group was peripheral, however, to the main trajectory of Catholic thinking—they generally voted Republican and eventually found themselves issuing criticisms of statements made by the policy arm of their own bishops.

There is much to this story that is accurate. The Ryan approach did become dominant among Church officials affiliated with the structures of the bishops' conference and it remained so through the twentieth century.³ This view also reigned among the Catholic populace, who continued to vote Democratic through the 1960s (the monopoly of the Democratic Party on the Catholic vote began to break down in 1972 and Catholics have generally been split ever since).

This paper looks more closely at the New Deal period (roughly, the 1930s) to determine whether it is true that the Ryan approach became dominant among American Catholic social thinkers in general. It proposes that Ryan and his allies offered an application of Catholic social teaching that in fact was only one option among many offered by American Catholics. Indeed, this paper will hint, though it is too brief to prove the case, that the way in which Ryan uncritically embraced active governmental intervention in the economic sphere was actually idiosyncratic among Catholic social thinkers; that is, conventional American Catholic thought was more skeptical about government solutions (especially at the federal level) and this tradition asserted itself more vigorously as the 1930s progressed

Ryan and the New Deal

Although John Ryan had already been working and writing for three decades when Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, the New Deal period saw Ryan attain his highpoint of visibility and prominence, both in Catholic and non-Catholic circles. Initially lukewarm in his appraisal of Roosevelt, Ryan quickly came to admire the author of the New Deal and became a stalwart defender of the president until Ryan's death in 1945.⁴

The legislation sponsored by Roosevelt, in Ryan's view, represented the best chance for social reform along the lines of the papal encyclicals that the nation had ever countenanced. Ryan viewed the industrial leagues as the instantiation of Pius XI's corporatist vision. He saw the increasingly activist role in the

economy that the state assumed in the course of the 1930s as a sign that the individualist, laissez-faire heritage of the American economic system was at last being challenged to conform to the dictates of social justice enunciated in Catholic social teaching.

Ryan's own work and commitments became tied up in Roosevelt's reform program. Under suspicion by various members of the American hierarchy for some time due to his sympathy for American progressivism, Ryan saw in Pius's 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, a vindication of his own positions. "I derived great comfort," he wrote in 1941, "from the implicit approval which the Holy Father's pronouncement gave to the socio-ethical doctrines which I had been defending for almost forty years."⁵ Seeing his own thought reflected in the pope's letter, Ryan was poised to serve as the Catholic spokesman for Roosevelt and his New Deal.

As Ryan became ever more entrenched in the administration and in his justification of its policies, he brooked no opposition. Critics of the president became foes of social progress. Referring to those Catholics opposed to the child labor amendment, a reform considered periodically in the 1920s and thirties, Ryan wrote privately that he hoped they "will some day realize to what a great extent they have permitted themselves to be misled by the dishonest propaganda emanating from the National Association of Manufacturers and other agents of social injustice."⁶ Ryan's enthusiasm for the president's policies continued unabated through the 1930s, and he even went so far as

to defend Roosevelt's court-packing scheme in 1937. "Practically all the reform measures enacted during the Roosevelt Administration," he reflected in his autobiography, "have met with my hearty approval."⁷

While Ryan remained certain that Catholic principles were being served well under Roosevelt's political leadership, other Catholic thinkers were more skeptical. Among Catholics interested in social issues, most were willing to give Roosevelt the opportunity to improve on his predecessor and attempt to ameliorate the distress and address the underlying causes of the depression. As the first term wore on and the second began, there emerged a growing chorus of Catholic voices objecting to what they saw as a dangerous trend toward state centralization. These were the New Deal critics mentioned in the title of the paper. Although they are dealt with as peripheral in many historical treatments because they were not allied with John Ryan or the NCWC, they represent positions more fully in continuity with the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

Frederick Kenkel

One of the oldest Catholic social institutions in the country was the German Catholic Central Verein (CCV), whose Central Bureau was headquartered in St. Louis. Founded in 1855, the CCV maintained a long tradition of charity and publication on social questions. Besides being utterly loyal to the teachings of the Church as expressed in papal encyclicals, the CCV was dependent on the legacy of German social thought emanating from

Bishop Ketteler and the corporatists of the late nineteenth century, particularly Heinrich Pesch. While the CCV never embraced laissez-faire capitalism and was generally critical of the U. S. economic system, it also insisted on the dangers of centralization of economic functions in government, especially at the national level. It was the latter concern that led to disillusionment with the New Deal.⁸

Frederick Kenkel (1863-1952) directed the Central Verein from 1909-1952. While Kenkel was initially positive about the Roosevelt administration, by June 1933 he detected a drift toward "the bitter end of State Socialism."⁹ Indeed, Kenkel's hesitancy concerning governmental solutions to social problems was evident even before the New Deal. In 1930, he wrote to executive committee members urging against support of a bill under consideration by Congress, explaining that the Central Bureau opposed such legislation "primarily because it is unwilling the Federal government should engage in activities which, in their very nature, should be left to individuals, private organizations, municipalities, counties, and states."¹⁰ Kenkel thus demonstrated succinctly his commitment to the principle of subsidiarity that would be formulated explicitly in the following year by Pius XI. For similar reasons, Kenkel opposed the creation of a national department of education.¹¹

Kenkel's declamations against the dangers of state centralization took on added urgency in the context of the New Deal. In 1936, one of the most contentious issues among Catholics was the proposed child labor amendment (CLA). Kenkel attacked the

amendment and impugned the wisdom of supporters such as John Ryan. His views were preserved in a letter to Central Bureau members explaining the public support of the CLA offered by some Catholics:

Astonishing as the move may seem, it is a sign merely of a divergence of opinion, the existence of which has been no secret for many years. There are among us those, whom I shall call opportunists, anxious to obtain as quickly and successfully as possible certain reforms without due regard for the dangers they court.

An amendment to the Constitution which grants Congress the power to regulate the labor of every American up to his or her eighteenth birthday, implies a confidence in the views and integrity of coming generations of politicians I cannot contemplate except with trepidation. History has proven how dangerous it is to bestow so vast a power on either individuals or law-making bodies. In addition, the present trend toward a State vested with omnipotence should make us pause.¹²

In this way, Kenkel exemplified a typical Catholic suspicion toward lodging power in the state, a sentiment increasingly expressed in 1936 as the trend toward centralization in the Roosevelt administration became more evident. Particular reforms, Kenkel insisted, had to be assessed not only by their intended beneficial effects, but also by unintended effects whose damages might outweigh or even prevent the realization of the benefits.

Constitutionalist Critics

A number of prominent Catholics joined in Kenkel's cautionary view of the child labor amendment. The amendment had first been proposed in 1924 and it had evoked strong criticism from many Catholics at that time. While John Ryan supported the

CLA, other Catholics believed the initiative veered dangerously down the path of statism.

The lines of debate were elucidated in a 1928 exchange between Ryan and Moorhouse Millar, S. J., professor of philosophy at Fordham and an editor of the Jesuit journal *Thought*. That debate centered on the merits of a minimum wage law that passed Congress but was subsequently declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Millar defended the Court's ruling. The Jesuit agreed with Ryan on the necessity of the just wage, but his contention was "that the principles upon which these cases are decided are eminently sound and that their maintenance for the future of the country as a whole is of greater importance than the immediate solution of a particular economic problem." Millar believed dangerous precedent was set by sweeping legislation that established a minimum wage across industries and occupations, without regard to companies' relative abilities to pay it. Ryan replied that he agreed with Millar's "technical and legal reasoning," but not with his "ethical and industrial principles." Ryan was willing to circumvent what he admitted were sound constitutional principles in order to attain the end of a living wage for American workers.¹³

In the 1934 debate, as the CLA was again being considered, Ryan once again found himself fighting fellow Catholics. Clarence E. Martin, a former president of the American Bar Association, in a critique of the amendment in *Commonweal*, admitted that in principle government could legislate on the issue of child labor, but thought such legislation should occur at the state level. The

danger, he warned, was that Congress would interpret broadly the constitutional powers granted by an amendment. One possibility, in such an event, would be the federalization of the educational system and the prescribing, "through a federal bureau, [of] educational methods and standards." Adoption of the amendment, Martin cautioned, "is but a step in the destruction of our republican form of government and the substitution of a social democracy. Adopt it and other amendments, nationalizing and socializing our governmental structure, will follow."¹⁴

Not one to let the moment pass, Ryan responded the following month, making clear his own involvement in the CLA movement and assuring readers of the purest intentions of all his fellow travelers. These observations, of course, did nothing to address the objections raised by opponents such as Martin. Ryan went on to imply, once again, that there could only be two possible explanations for those who opposed the amendment; they must be a) against social justice, or b) deceived by the National Association of Manufacturers or certain other "super-patriotic" organizations.¹⁵ Ryan simply denied that any of the fears voiced by Martin and others were substantive, though on the issue of the federalization of education he was less definitive, leaving open the possibility that the amendment could be construed in that way.

Martin got the last word in his June 8 rebuttal of Ryan's response. Taking umbrage at the suggestion that he was either socially insensitive or a tool of business interests, Martin repeated his claim: "my opposition lies in the fact that its

adoption would undermine our present system of government—the best system of government yet devised...”¹⁶ Martin noted Ryan’s willingness to trust Congress and the courts and take a risk as to whether the amendment would be construed to imply power over education. “What an argument!” he exclaimed, “Let us lay our heads on the block to determine whether the executioner’s axe is sharp.”¹⁷

Other Objections to the New Deal

Constitutional problems were not the only grounds on which objections to various pieces of the New Deal were raised. Catholic critics also enumerated reasons for concern ranging from the practical ineffectiveness of particular legislation to general warnings against the tendency of government to usurp too many functions of society.

Ernest Du Brul wrote in *Commonweal* of the “immorality” of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Du Brul objected on two grounds. He argued, first, that taxes should be levied on those most able to pay and, second, that taxes should be collected only for general purposes of government that benefit all citizens, and not for the enrichment of any particular group. The AAA, he argued, not only exploits wage earners in favor of farmers, but does so indiscriminately, benefiting the wealthy farmer even more than the poor one.¹⁸

From a wider political perspective, Du Brul explained, the AAA should also be considered dangerous. “For the principles underlying the AAA are essentially antagonistic to our whole

governmental system," he began. "This sort of legislation shifts the method of getting a living away from earning one's own bread by the sweat of one's brow, to a method of getting it by the sweat of other men's brows, through the exercise of political power."¹⁹ Du Brul thus presciently gave voice to a concern about what economists would come to call rent-seeking: the tendency of individuals and groups to utilize government for personal gain at the expense of the common good. If one of the legacies of the New Deal is the widespread concept of government as a tool for the redistribution of wealth, Du Brul was among those who sounded an early warning of the abuses to which such a concept naturally lent itself.

Although he did not indict the New Deal explicitly, the tendency of government expansion could readily be seen as the target of the Jesuit Samuel Wilson's article in *Thought* in 1937. Interpreting the crash of 1929 and the ensuing shift in popular attitudes toward government, Wilson claimed that "a prevailing materialistic concept of life was not dispelled. People were merely resentful that material benefits were denied to them."²⁰ With government viewed as the guarantor of prosperity, the citizenry were open to abuses of power. In the mood prevailing after 1929, Wilson observed, "the underprivileged many will listen to any scheme that promises economic security." Economic security guaranteed by government, he asserted, "has never proved successful in the past and is unlikely to prove successful in the future." The circumstances of a serious depression, however, ensures that people will "acquiesce in any governmental changes

which promise immediate material relief though such changes eventually may result in spiritual slavery."²¹ Wilson offered no further specifics about the danger of which he warned, its connection to the New Deal, or prescriptions for alternative modes of reform. The thrust of his article was clear, however: a nation in the throes of economic distress must be careful lest proposed solutions entail destructive long-term side effects.

Later in 1937, Wilson's Jesuit confrere Paul Blakely issued a warning about the constitutional implications of New Deal reform. Blakely occupied a middle ground, admitting that the Supreme Court was justified in granting the federal government increasing powers over commerce, but warning that the danger in the future was likely to be too much legislation by Congress in that field.

The tendency to deal recklessly in the arena of economics was already evident among the political class, in Blakely's estimation. "In these days," he wrote, "politicians eagerly play with social experiments, heedless of the constitution, heedless of the unhappy result to the subject of their experimentation." Blakely enumerated the goals he shared with reformers of every stripe: "To crush rapacious capitalism, to give to everyman a free field and no favor, to insure to wage-earners adequate protection for the least of his rights..." To reach these goals, however, he insisted that "we need legislation with more to recommend it than the good intentions of its framers."²² Like Wilson, Blakely remained vague; he did not specify those pieces of current reform legislation that fit his description of being

ineffective though born of good intentions. It can be inferred, however, that Blakely, like Wilson, sought to alert his readers to a dangerous trend in federal lawmaking that he had detected.

Less than a year later another priest, T. J. Brennan, offered another criticism of the New Deal, this time as part of a general critique of the state of the social question in the United States. There was no answer to the social question, Brennan insisted, and in his view much of the contemporary agitation for reform arose out of a dangerous belief that there was. "The social problem is the sum of all the problems of everybody," he observed, and attempting to solve them all by means of relief programs is mistaken.²³

The country is littered with agencies, bureaus, departments, and societies, all ladling out remedies, relief and monthly allowances, and all calling for still further appropriations to continue their activities, all of which appropriations must come from charity or taxation. The natural consequence is that taxation has grown beyond human endurance, and charity is growing cold because it sees such poor results from previous benefactions.²⁴

Like Blakely, Brennan thought that many relief efforts were misguided, but Brennan widened the criticism to include not only governmental efforts but private charities as well. The most serious problem to solve at present, Brennan insisted, "is the number and variety and expense of the previous solutions and those who administer them."²⁵

Brennan did not advocate indifference in the face of need. His target was a secular utopian spirit that had conquered government and infiltrated private organizations as well. He called, instead, for the renewal of spiritual and corporal works

of mercy, by which suffering is alleviated but no delusions about the solution of mankind's problems are fostered.²⁶ In this way, Brennan trumpeted a traditional claim of Catholic social teaching: that there was no solution to social problems apart from the Church.

James Gillis

James Gillis, C. S. P. (1876-1957), was editor of the *Catholic World* from 1922 to 1948. As Roosevelt pushed reform, Gillis held out hope that it would be the kind of radical reform the nation needed: "I hope he doesn't mean merely that the cards are to be shuffled again for the same old game. What we really need is a new pack, new rules and indeed a new game."²⁷ Far from being a defender of the status quo, Gillis was pleased that "the present capitalistic, industrialistic, materialistic organism is dying and all but dead."²⁸ Capitalism could be purified, he thought ("there is no essential defect inherent in the capitalistic system"), but he believed the same could be said of Communism.²⁹

One of the problems with much of the Catholic commentary on the social order during this period was the failure to define the terms by which the arguments were conducted. Gillis made an attempt, asserting that the enemy he had in mind was "orthodox Capitalism—that of Jay Gould, Jim Fiske, ... Teapot Dome; the Capitalism that cornered gold, hoarded grain and built up huge monopolistic trusts; the Capitalism of 'God's Gold' and 'Mellon's Millions.'" ³⁰

That kind of capitalism, he insisted, must be "completely metamorphosed as to become unrecognizable."³¹ Gillis drew on a book by John Strachey, *The Coming Struggle for Power*, to show that Catholicism was not really compatible with capitalism; instead, Protestantism had given it rise and the individualism of the reformed ethic was more suitable to its thriving.³² Wary that Catholicism be too closely aligned with a particular economic system, Gillis reminded readers that the Church "does not stand or fall with Capitalism. She was here a long time before Capitalism was created and she intends to be—and will be—here when Capitalism is gone."³³

In Gillis's view, wealthy capitalists were primarily to blame for the depression in which the American economy wallowed. "At bottom all questions even economic questions are simple," he observed. "The Pope, for example, solved the problem of the depression, supposedly so intricate, with one word—greed."³⁴ Given this display of Gillis's views on the economy, it seemed that he was poised to celebrate the reforms recently enacted.

Silent with regard to Roosevelt and the new legislation during the year of 1934, it appears Gillis was thoughtful, wondering in which directions the administration would move. In a July 1935 editorial comment on the Supreme Court's nullification of the National Recovery Act (NRA), there appeared the first hints that Gillis was not enthusiastic about Roosevelt's approach. "The N.R.A. is gone," he began. "With it, for the moment, has gone the hope of social and economic reform."³⁵ He forcefully argued that there must be reform, that a mere

recovery, a normalization of business in imitation of pre-1929 times was insufficient: "It will be as though a sinner were to get absolution without contrition."³⁶

Gillis argued that the president needed to move on, to try some other kind of reform—after all he had promised experimentation: "If this plan doesn't work, we shall try something else."³⁷ He expressed some dismay at Roosevelt's being so emotional and polemical about the loss of the NRA. Without explicitly stating so, he drew a comparison to Woodrow Wilson, intimating that it was not the case that "when the world needs a great man, God invariably sends one."³⁸

Indeed, Gillis displayed no particular love for the NRA. It was, he argued, "so obviously and absolutely unconstitutional as to warrant unanimous repudiation by the Supreme Court."³⁹ "I am one of those," he conceded, "who rejoiced at the vindication of the Constitution. To tell the truth, I have been alarmed at the recklessness with which the good old ship was being battered about."⁴⁰ While he continued to argue strenuously for economic reform, then, Gillis had begun to question the rectitude of Roosevelt's measures in that direction. The events of coming years, far from soothing Gillis's concerns, would raise heightened fears that the constitutional order on which the nation depended was being undermined.

Gillis's criticism of the president became explicit and charged with some emotion in February 1936. The occasion was Roosevelt's state of the union speech. The address, in Gillis's estimation, was laden with unnecessary rhetorical heat against

perceived enemies both foreign and domestic. Especially galling was Roosevelt's "assumption that none of his critics can possibly be sincere." He continued:

Every American who moves around among his fellow citizens could report to the President the existence of a fair number of advocates of social justice and economic reform who are beset with fears ... that some of the administration's devices are dangerous. There are genuine patriots, not a few, who have a reasonable apprehension about the fate of the Constitution and of the fundamental principles of democracy because of the startling measures employed to bring back prosperity. These are honest if timid folk. It were better to recognize their honesty than to castigate their timidity. I know because, as it happens, I am one of them.⁴¹

He had not entirely abandoned Roosevelt, however. "We still believe that he is emotionally at least, on the side of the angels, on the side of social reform. As for the Bourbons who were thrown out, we hope they will never get in again."⁴² Gillis simply wanted reassurance that the president was aware of the constitutional problems; he desired a "repudiation of the common allegation that he has veered too far to the left and that with reelection and more power he would rush even further into radicalism."⁴³ But Roosevelt offered no such reassurance; instead, as Gillis described it, "It is nothing less than calamitous that our President saw fit to ignore us, and in effect to jeer at us."⁴⁴

Gillis pointed out the venomous press attacks on the Supreme Court for its rulings, most lately its 6-3 decision against the AAA. He noted with concern the raising of the possibility that the Court might be circumvented by a Roosevelt-controlled legislature—by ignoring its decisions, perhaps, or by "packing"

it. He ended by wondering, indeed doubting, that three years after Roosevelt's first inauguration, after much trial and error, the country was any better off than it had been in 1932.⁴⁵

In April 1936, John Ryan responded to Gillis's criticism of Roosevelt, and Gillis responded to Ryan in turn.⁴⁶ Gillis took exception to Ryan's insinuation that he might have been taken in by the propaganda of the American Liberty League, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and other representatives of plutocracy. He went on to assert his independence and immunity to propaganda, including that of the Liberty League and the NAM. He professed again his fundamental loyalty to the spirit of Roosevelt's reforms, and enumerated again his qualms about their substance—this time specifying the concerns of still-high unemployment, an increasing federal deficit (despite campaign promises to reduce federal spending), and the creation of an immense federal bureaucracy that "can be so easily transformed into a political machine."⁴⁷

It remained clear, however, that Gillis's difficulties with Roosevelt were not transforming him into a defender of the old order. In September, Gillis, commenting on Paul Hanly Furfey's book, *Fire on the Earth*, engaged in a polemic against those in the Church who hedged the teaching of the Church in order to curry favor with the wealthy and powerful. He proclaimed the preference of Church for the poor and castigated the Church for losing the proletariat because it failed to proclaim as much. "Something is wrong ... ," he wrote, "tragically wrong, with the Capitalistic system."⁴⁸ He noted with pleasure the beginnings of

the Catholic Worker movement and derided those who criticized it as communist or anticlerical.⁴⁹

Two months later, Gillis leveled another criticism at Roosevelt. Much along the same lines as before, he professed his "wish to continue to believe in you," but was troubled by the "unprecedented concentration of power in the federal administration and more particularly in the White House," and the continued rumors of a court-packing scheme.⁵⁰ Gillis did not seem unalterably opposed to fundamental constitutional change, but he did want the president to be honest about it.

Again in December, following Roosevelt's landslide re-election, Gillis urged the president to consider the threat of Communism and whether he played into the hands of those promoting it. He raised the specter that class conflict may have had an important part in the election. Gillis demonstrated cognizance of his ambivalence toward Roosevelt, and by extension, one might assume, of Roosevelt's method of reform. Some will say, Gillis wrote, "'The man doesn't know his own mind about Roosevelt.' The honest answer," he replied in his column, "is that I don't."⁵¹

In May, 1937, the president's court-packing plan was announced and Gillis went on the offensive. He first repeated earlier concerns that such a scheme would undermine checks and balances, abuse the Constitution, and establish Roosevelt as a dictator. "If the people and the President," he wrote, "are so eager for swift 'reform' that they are ready to justify any and all means to obtain it, if they think ... that in the circumstances in which the country now finds itself, a dictator is necessary,

then so be it, but let us not, like the Romans trick ourselves by calling an Emperor 'Consul,' or an Autocrat President."⁵²

Gillis's position on Roosevelt was summed up in an editorial later in 1937. He had voted for Roosevelt in 1936 and then he had rejoiced when the court-packing plan was scuttled; he hoped, however, that legislators would not overreact and reverse all the reforms of the New Deal.⁵³ Gillis articulated the ambivalence toward Roosevelt that characterized many socially-conscious Catholics through the course of the 1930s. On one hand, he hoped that the president, freed from a slavish devotion to the capitalism of the past, would set in motion reforms that would bring about a social order more in line with Catholic teaching. On the other hand, he feared that Roosevelt's openness to aggrandizement of power by government and his cunning methods of reaching his goals were pushing the United States down a path that led not to a just and humane social order but to statism.

The passage of time has shown that Gillis and others, while their fears of socialism in America proved unfulfilled, were correct in discerning the nature of the course charted by Roosevelt. The "social assistance state" criticized by Pope John Paul II in 1991 had by that time come to fruition in most Western nations and one of the key social questions remains how to extricate society from it without harming those who have come to depend on it. John Ryan and the Catholic New Deal critics mentioned here shared the goal of social justice. Yet, with respect to the question of whether or not Roosevelt's programs held the key to achieving that goal, the ambivalence of the

critics seems to have been a more astute response than was the full-throated defense offered by Ryan.

¹ David J. O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years* (New York: Oxford, 1968); Thomas T. McAvoy, C. S. C., *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame, 1969); James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* (New York: Oxford, 1981); *Catholics in America, 1776-1976*, ed. Robert Trisco (Washington, DC: NCCB, 1976).

² Margaret Mary Reher, *Catholic Intellectual Life in America: A Historical Study of Persons and Movements* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985). David O'Brien, on the other hand, maintained his balanced approach to the period in *Public Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

³ This is an oversimplification of the latter half of the century, which glosses over the important changes that occurred both in American society generally and among USCC officials specifically over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. For a summary of this transformation, see Michael Warner, *Changing Witness: Catholic Bishops and Public Policy, 1917-1994* (Washington, D. C./Grand Rapids, Mich.: Ethics and Public Policy Center/William B. Eerdmans, 1995). The point of continuity between Ryan and his later successors in the social action department, however, is the tendency to focus on governmental solutions, especially at the national level, to economic and social problems.

⁴ Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 208 ff.

⁵ Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action: A Personal History* (New York: Harper, 1941), 242.

⁶ Ryan to Dorothy Day, January 29, 1934, John Ryan Papers, Catholic University of America Archives, box 8.

⁷ Ryan, *Social Doctrine*, 248.

⁸ For the story of the CCV, see Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers: German American Catholics and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame, 1968).

⁹ Gleason, 207.

¹⁰ Kenkel to Members of the Major Executive Committee of the Catholic Central Verein of America, April 28, 1930, Catholic Central Verein Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives (hereafter CCVP), box 1.

¹¹ See Kenkel to Members of the Major Executive Committee of the CCV, May 6, 1930, CCVP, box 1.

¹² Kenkel to Members of the Major Executive Committee of the CCV, March 5, 1936, CCVP, box 1.

¹³ Moorhouse F.X. Millar, "Declining Liberty and Other Papers," with Ryan's reply and Millar's rejoinder, *Catholic World* (hereafter CW) 127 (April 1928): 70-75.

¹⁴ Clarence E. Martin, "Shall Americansim [sic] Remain?" *Commonweal*, April 13, 1934, 650, 651.

¹⁵ Ryan, Letter to Editor, *Commonweal*, May 25, 1934, 104-105.

¹⁶ Martin, Letter to Editor, *Commonweal*, June 8, 1934, 160.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁸ Ernest Du Brul, "The Immorality of the AAA," *Commonweal*, January 24, 1936, 341.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 342.

²⁰ Samuel K. Wilson, S. J., "State Materialism in the United States," *Thought* 12 (March 1937): 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Paul L. Blakely, S. J., "The Constitution and Industrial Reform," *Thought* 12 (December 1937): 566.

²³ Rev. T. J. Brennan, "Will Things Ever Be Right?" *American Ecclesiastical Review* 99 (October 1938): 353

²⁴ Ibid., 354.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 355.

²⁷ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 137 (August 1933): 615.

²⁸ Ibid., 614.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 137 (October 1933): 2.

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² This argument, of course, has a long pedigree. Recent decades have seen a concerted effort to revise the view that Protestantism is singularly suitable to market economics. See, for instance, Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

³³ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 137 (October 1933): 6.

³⁴ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 138 (October 1933): 261.

³⁵ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 141 (July 1935): 385.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 386.

³⁸ Ibid., 388.

³⁹ Ibid., 386.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 386-387.

⁴¹ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 142 (February 1936): 515.

⁴² Ibid., 519.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 520.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 520-523.

⁴⁶ John A. Ryan, "An Open Letter to the Editor," CW 143 (April 1936): 22-27.

⁴⁷ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 143 (April 1936): 9.

⁴⁸ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," 143 (September 1936): 651.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 652.

⁵⁰ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," 144 (November 1936): 133, 131.

⁵¹ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 144 (December 1936): 265.

⁵² Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 145 (May 1937): 136.

⁵³ Gillis, "Editorial Comment," CW 145 (September 1937): 646-647.