

**Democracy, Modernity and the Catholic Human Rights Revolution: Reflections on
*Christian Faith and Modern Democracy***

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Robert Kraynak's Christian Faith and Modern Democracy represents a frontal assault on the far-reaching development in Catholic social teaching that George Weigel terms the Catholic human rights revolution. But neither the major theorists whose work laid the intellectual groundwork for the Catholic human rights revolution nor the Church's social magisterium have ever asserted that democracy represents the only legitimate form of government. Kraynak's critique of the Catholic human rights revolution is inextricably intertwined with his treatment of "liberal democracy," a treatment I think is in important respects problematic.

In *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, Robert Kraynak has given us a courageous and penetrating work.¹ It is courageous because it doesn't hesitate to challenge the intellectual idols of our era, and to defend causes that are, to say the least, unpopular in the reigning climate of opinion. (When was the last time, for example, that you heard a contemporary author champion monarchy--albeit constitutional monarchy--championed as the best form of government?) It is a penetrating work because it raises and engages in a thoughtful fashion issues that are fundamental to any discussion of either the state of contemporary Christian social thought or the proper posture of Christians toward modern democracy. Anyone interested in these subjects needs to read and reflect seriously on this book.

There is, moreover much to admire about this volume. One thinks here of its uncompromising repudiation of the dominant ideology of our era--Enlightenment liberalism--and recognition of both this ideology's incompatibility with Christian truth and hegemonic ambitions; its rejection of the mindless egalitarianism, moral relativism and rights mania characteristic of contemporary Western culture; its willingness to raise and forthrightly explore the weaknesses of democratic government; its recognition that an acknowledgement of our fallen nature, an appreciation of the centrality of prudence, and a commitment to limited government, constitutionalism and social pluralism are essential to an authentically Christian understanding of

politics; its defense of such countercultural concepts as authority, obedience and hierarchy; and its insistence on the transpolitical character of Christianity and consequent refusal to allow it to be reduced to nothing more than another political program geared to the amelioration of humanity's temporal estate. Above all, one can only admire its steadfast commitment to fidelity to Christian truth.

At the same time, however, I have grave reservations about the portions of its argument that bear on Catholic social teaching. In essence, this volume represents a frontal assault on the far-reaching development in Catholic social teaching that George Weigel terms the Catholic human rights revolution. Crystallizing in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the effect of this revolution has been to transform the Church "from a bastion of the *ancien régime*" into a champion of democratic government and "perhaps the worlds foremost institutional defender of human rights."²

At the deepest level, my reservations concern his account of the Catholic understanding of the nature and dignity of the human person, as well as the conception of the relationship of nature and grace implicit in his argument. For our purposes here, however, I'll limit myself to offering some brief comments about his treatment of Catholicism and democracy, the Catholic tradition, and the relationship of modernity and Christianity.

To begin with, as far as forms of government are concerned, Kraynak argues that the Catholic human rights revolution issues in the identification of "liberal democracy" as "the sole regime consistent with the dignity of man" (Kraynak, 150). If in some cases (he mentions the work of Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray in this context) this identification is overt, in others it takes place more subtly. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for instance, affirms that a "diversity of political regimes is morally acceptable provided they serve the legitimate good of the community"³ while simultaneously defining that good in such a fashion as to elevate democracy to the status of the "only ... legitimate political regime in all circumstances" (Kraynak, 149).

In fact, neither the major theorists whose work laid the intellectual groundwork for the

Catholic human rights revolution nor the Church's social *magisterium* have ever asserted that democracy represents the only legitimate form of government. Maritain, for example, explicitly affirms that the principles of Catholic social thought "do not exclude *a priori* any of the ... 'forms of government' which were recognized as legitimate by [the] classical tradition." These principles "can adjust themselves to a (constitutional) system of monarchic or oligarchic government." "However, from the moment that historical circumstances lend themselves," he insists, the "dynamism" of Catholic social thought "leads, as though to its natural form of realization," to democratic government. It is thus to this form of government that the principles of Catholic social thought "tend as their most natural expression."⁴

Clearly, Maritain is not asserting that democracy represents the sole legitimate political order. On the contrary, he readily admits that there exists a variety of morally acceptable forms of government. What he is arguing is that democracy, properly understood, represents the best form of government--the system of government that is most in keeping with the Christian understanding of the human person and society and through which the demands of the common good can receive their most complete realization--and thus that it ought to be instituted whenever and wherever the preconditions for its actualization allow. This is essentially the same position adopted by Murray and the Church's social *magisterium*.⁵

Merely clarifying the Church's teaching on forms of government, of course, does not establish either that this teaching follows from the Catholic vision of the human person or that it is consistent with the Catholic tradition. But a correct understanding of precisely what the Church teaches on this subject, is a precondition of a serious discussion of either of these questions.

Kraynak's critique of the Catholic human rights revolution, furthermore, is inextricably intertwined with his treatment of "liberal democracy," a treatment I think is in important respects problematic. Before we can critically analyze the whole subject of Catholicism and liberal democracy, it's essential to recognize that liberal democracy is not a univocal concept. Sometimes this term is used to designate a particular set of political institutions and practices.

So understood, a number of different models of liberal democracy are imaginable animated by divergent political theories and grounded in conflicting understanding of the human person. Although superficially similar, the "liberal democracies" engendered by these competing theories will differ markedly in their spirit and substance. A model of liberal democracy that takes its bearings from the vision of the nature and destiny of the human person informing the thought of Maritain or Pope John Paul II, for example, will differ dramatically from one inspired by the vision of the person animating the thought of, say, John Rawls or Richard Rorty. Understood in this fashion, there would appear to be no inherent incompatibility between the idea of liberal democracy with Catholicism.

Sometimes, however, liberal democracy is employed to designate something more specific--a model of constitutional democracy rooted in a particular theory of politics that is sometimes termed Enlightenment liberalism. So understood, liberal democracy is indeed incompatible with Catholicism because it is informed by a vision of nature, reason, the human person and human flourishing incompatible with the constitutive commitments of the Catholic tradition.

The distinction between liberal democracy as constitutional democracy and liberal democracy as the political expression of Enlightenment liberalism has far-reaching implications. It opens the door to the possibility that in embracing "liberal democracy" the Church is not embracing the institutional expression of Enlightenment liberalism but a distinctive model of democracy rooted in the Catholic understanding of the nature and dignity of the human person and the ontological structure of human social life, a model that Maritain designates "personalist democracy."⁶

It opens the door to the possibility that the gulf between Catholicism and the ethos that today dominates our public life is not a function of our commitment to democracy per se, but the particular vision of the human person that we have enshrined as the basis of our democratic order. It opens the door to the possibility that the malaises that beset the contemporary West are not a function of "liberal democracy" as such but of the particular model of liberal democracy we

have chosen to embrace. Finally, it opens the door to the possibility that the Christian model of the best regime is not constitutional monarchy under God, but constitutional democracy under God, constitutional democracy rooted in the Catholic vision of the human person.

I do not want to be misunderstood here. I am not suggesting, that the distinction between liberal democracy *qua* constitutional democracy and liberal democracy *qua* the political expression of Enlightenment liberalism in itself proves either that a model of democracy rooted in the Catholic vision of man and society is possible or that such a model would constitute the Catholic understanding of the best form of government. Although I am convinced that both these propositions are defensible, vindicating them would require a much longer and more complicated argument than is possible here. All that I am claiming here is that this distinction creates certain possibilities that can't be dismissed *a priori*, possibilities that must be taken seriously because of their direct bearing on the whole question of Catholicism and democracy.

Unfortunately, Kraynak's handling of this whole subject isn't entirely satisfying. On the one hand, he seems ambivalent about the distinction itself. While seeming at some points to admit that the institutions and practices of constitutional democracy can be projected from premises other than those of Enlightenment liberalism, at other points he seems to implicitly deny it. On the other hand, he simply doesn't afford this distinction or the possibilities it creates the sort of the sustained and systematic attention they would seem to merit given their importance to the subject at hand. Why?

The answer appears to be that Kraynak believes that humanity's fallen nature and an intellectual climate dominated by Enlightenment liberalism combine to make it impossible to effectively communicate (much less successfully implement) Catholicism's distinctive vision of democratic government. Even if they are grounded in the Catholic vision of the human person rather than the anthropology of Enlightenment liberalism, rights will still "swallow up all higher ends and subvert all higher authorities." They will do so because once the existence of an order of rights is conceded, "the rights to personal satisfaction and personal identity--driven by the self-love that is part of our fallen nature--[will eventually] take over" (Kraynak, 171).

Indeed, any embrace by Catholic teaching of a politics in which the ideas of democracy and human rights figure prominently is inherently dangerous. It is dangerous because it will simultaneously reinforce the ethos of mindless egalitarianism and corrosive individualism that pervade the contemporary cultural scene, as well as generating demands by Catholics that the Church be reordered in accordance with this ethos.

When all is said and done, however, this line of argument isn't entirely convincing. To begin with, even if what Kraynak suggests about its possible realizability today is conceded, this has no bearing on the question of whether personalist democracy is, from a Catholic perspective, the best type of government. Our fallen nature, furthermore, effects the implementation of all political ideals. Surely, the historical embodiments of Christian monarchy have not been untouched by sin, and the primacy of the common good has been abused to justify a host of crimes.

Given the similar vocabularies they employ (e.g., the language of democracy, rights and human dignity), moreover, he is probably correct that the contemporary world will tend to conflate the vision of personalist democracy with the very different vision of Enlightenment liberalism. The problem is that the language Kraynak wishes us to speak poses problems of its own. If, in the contemporary context, the language of freedom and human dignity invites confusion, the language of the common good, authority, hierarchy, obedience and the "two cities" invites incomprehension.

It also seems to me that if Catholics can make the complex set of intellectual distinctions involved in differentiation of the temporal and spiritual realms--the recovery of which is central to Kraynak's plan for the revitalization of Catholic social thought--they should have no trouble handling the further distinction involved in embracing personalist democracy as the best form of government in the temporal sphere while embracing a very different form of organization in the spiritual sphere. Finally, and most importantly, there's the whole question of truth. Many Catholic doctrines are complex and frequently misunderstood. Should the Church stop speaking about original sin, the Trinity, and salvation simply because these teachings are sometimes

misunderstood?

This brings us to the whole subject of the accounts of both the Catholic tradition, and the relationship of Christianity and modernity that inform *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*. As far as the former is concerned, I'll limit myself to two brief observations. Kraynak tends to treat the formulations of Augustine and Aquinas (as he understands them) as final and definitive; and the mere fact that the theory of politics we've termed the personalist democracy, and the personalist anthropology that informs it, are new, as *prima facie* proof that they are incompatible with the tradition. What this ignores is the possibility that the Church's social *magisterium* might develop over time. Catholic teaching, after all, is clear that the Church's understanding of the deposit of faith entrusted to her deepens--develops--in the course of history, as does her understanding of the natural moral law.

Of course, the mere fact that the Catholic human rights revolution presents itself as an authentic development of the tradition doesn't prove that it is. But, the question of its continuity with the Catholic tradition--the possibility that the Catholic human rights revolution represents an authentic development of the tradition, a logical unfolding of ideas that inform patristic and scholastic thought and which are constitutive of Catholicism as such--can't even be engaged unless the possibility that the Church's social doctrine can develop is recognized and taken seriously.

On the other hand, I wonder whether Kraynak's account of the Catholic tradition does justice to its distinctiveness. The "only point" on which Christianity provides an "important" addition to the view of social life articulated by the classical philosophers, he contends, is its superior account of the "implications" of the "distinction between the spiritual and temporal realms" (Kraynak, 236). As far as its political effects are concerned, this would seem to reduce Christianity to little more than a fine-tuned version of Aristotelianism.

As important as this distinction is, it surely doesn't exhaust the revolutionary impact of Christianity on thought and culture. One thinks in this context of Christianity's exaltation of the value and dignity of each and every human person understood as a unique irreplaceable self; its

proclamation of human equality and freedom; its concern for the poor and the alleviation of suffering; its affirmation, of what Charles Taylor terms "ordinary life" (i.e., family and work)⁷; its call for man to assume dominion over the created world; and its insistence that an adequate anthropology of human nature must reckon with the implications both of original sin and the human person's transtemporal destiny to our understanding of human existence. Here again, without an adequate account of the Catholic tradition, how can we begin to address the whole subject of the relationship of the Catholic human rights revolution to that tradition?

As far as the whole subject of Christianity and modernity is concerned, Kraynak seems to view "modernity" as both utterly corrupt and constituting nothing less than a wholesale rejection of Christianity and the whole range of cultural values associated with it. One can't help but wonder if such an account of modernity is tenable.

To begin with, it ignores the very real intellectual insights and accomplishments of modern thought, and the very real social and political achievements of modern society. The former, as John Paul II observes in *Fides et Ratio*, include a new and deeper understanding of human subjectivity, a new and deeper understanding of "perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history."⁸ The latter include the enshrinement at the very heart of social life of the idea of "the inestimable dignity and value of man"; and the quest for freedom and acknowledgement of an order of human rights, that arise from the recognition of this dignity.⁹ Intellectual honesty, as John Paul insists, demands that Christians acknowledge and assimilate these achievements.¹⁰

Simultaneously, a host of Catholic thinkers--one thinks here immediately of Christopher Dawson, Romano Guardini, Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray, and John Paul (to mention just a few)--have contended that a reading of modernity as nothing less than the wholesale rejection of Christianity and its cultural effects is simplistic. Insisting that it is no accident that modernity arose on the soil of what had once been Christendom, they argue that what modernity did was to reject historic Christianity while selectively adopting, in Guardini's words, "its human and cultural effects" as "its own foundation."¹¹

Modernity, however, transformed the very Christian values it embraced. They were transformed, to begin with, by the one-sided character of modernity's embrace of them. The modern world, as Chesterton remarks, is full of the "old Christian virtues gone mad" because "they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone."¹² They were further transformed by being transplanted to the soil of modernity's very different metaphysics of the person. Niebuhr, for example, points out that transplanted to the soil of modern "rationalism," the Christian affirmation of the dignity of the individual human person was transmuted into "a new concept of individual autonomy, which is known in neither classicism nor Christianity," a concept that takes "the idea of individuality beyond the limits set for it in the faith by the law of love on the one hand and by the idea of the creatureliness of man on the other."¹³

What emerges here is an understanding of modernity and its relationship to Christianity whose hallmark is its ambiguity, an understanding which insists that an adequate account of modernity must take account of both the ways in which it embodies ideas and values rooted in Christian truth *and* the way in which it departs from that truth. This, in turn, points toward a rather different posture toward the modern world than that which Kraynak champions. It points toward a stance that steers a middle course between the Scylla of wholesale rejection and the Charbydis of uncritical acceptance, a stance that might be called critical engagement. This posture demands a work of discernment be undertaken regarding modernity analogous to that which the Church once undertook with reference to the classical world. Modern thought and culture, this is to say, must be carefully scrutinized so as to distinguish those elements in it that can be assimilated by the Catholic mind from those which require purification or outright rejection.

Once again, the mere recognition that an alternative understanding of modernity exists doesn't in itself establish that Kraynak's understanding of it is mistaken. But it does establish that it is controversial. And, this means that for his argument to be convincing, he needs to do something he fails to do: systematically present and defend the account of modernity his analysis presupposes, and systematically critique the account of modernity that undergirds the Catholic

human rights revolution. This in turn, will involve a serious and sustained engagement with the intellectual giants and key texts of modern Catholic thought.

There can be no question that *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* is an important book that addresses serious and often neglected issues. Indeed, it performs a valuable service by forcefully reminding us of the need for Catholics to be clear about how the understandings of democracy and human rights that inform Church social teaching differ from those which dominate the contemporary cultural scene.

Like all developments of Catholic doctrine, the Catholic human rights revolution doesn't only resolve old questions--it raises fresh problems and generates new intellectual projects. Unfortunately, since the conclusion of Vatican II little work has been done to complete what might be called the unfinished agenda of the Catholic human rights revolution. Although it doesn't ultimately succeed in establishing that this revolution is either ill-advised or inconsistent with the Catholic tradition, one hopes that this volume will inspire scholars to begin work on this important and long overdue task.¹⁴

Notes

1. Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001). Further references to this work will be noted in the text with the following abbreviation: Kraynak.
2. George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 84, 98.
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1901.
4. Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 22, 46.
5. For a more extended discussion of this point and related matters, see Kenneth L. Grasso, "Beyond Liberalism: Human Dignity, the Free Society and the second Vatican Council" in *Catholicism, Liberalism and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Moral Foundations of Democracy*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 29-58.
6. Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics* (NY: The MacMillan Co., 1940), 86 and *passim*.
7. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 211.
8. *On the Relationship Between Faith and Reason [Fides et Ratio]* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1998), section 64, p. 112, and *passim*.
9. "Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations," in *Making Room for God: Visit of John Paul II to the USA 1995* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1995), 21.

10. For an overview of John Paul's thinking on the subject of Catholicism and modernity, see Kenneth L. Grasso, "Saving Modernity From Itself: John Paul II on Human Dignity, 'the Whole Truth About Man,' and the Modern Quest for Freedom," in *In Defense of Human Dignity*, eds. Robert P. Kraynak and Glenn Tinder (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 193-206.

11. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998), 105, 97.

12. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1959), 30.

13. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), I:61, 57.

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