

# CAN A CATHOLIC BE A LIBERAL? CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND COMMUNITARIANISM.<sup>1</sup>

John Haldane

*"As in the Church, God has established different grades of orders with diversity of function so that all should not be 'Apostles, nor all Doctors, nor all Prophets,' so also He has established in Civil Society many orders of varying dignity, right and power. And this to the end that the State, like the Church, should form one body comprising the many members, some excelling others in rank and importance but all alike necessary to one another and solicitous for the common good." Quod Apostolici Muneris.*

## I

The question posed in my title is meant to be thought-provoking, but it and the topics announced in the subtitle are broad and not altogether easy to discuss. Moreover the difficulty is not simply one of the scale of the subject matter. For it is by no means clear that there is any single political view that may claim the title "Liberalism", or that there is a definite set of historically articulated principles that can be set out as giving the content of something called "Catholic Social Teaching", or that there is one thing that deserves the label "Communitarianism". Fortunately, however, there is more that can be said, since there are elements and continuities

John Haldane is Reader in Moral Philosophy, and Director of the Centre for Philosophy and Public Affairs, University of St Andrews. He has published widely on issues in aesthetics, education, ethics, history of philosophy, and the philosophy of mind. He is Reviews Editor of *The Philosophical Quarterly*, a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, and one of the editors of the *International Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (in preparation). He has held visiting positions at the Universities of Edinburgh, Malta, Pittsburgh and Westminster and most recently he has been a Visiting Scholar at St John's College, Oxford and at the Social Philosophy and Policy Centre Bowling Green, Ohio.

1. This essay originated in a lecture of the same title delivered in the Mediterranean Institute in Valletta during the period of a Visiting Lectureship at the University of Malta in the Spring of 1992. I am grateful to my hosts, in particular to the Rector, Professor Fr Peter Serracino-Inglott and to Professor Joseph Friggieri of the Department of Philosophy, for their kind hospitality. The present text was written during the period of a Visiting Scholarship at the Social Philosophy and Policy Centre Bowling Green, Ohio, later in the same year. I am indebted to the Director and the staff of the Centre for their generous support. A shorter version was presented to a meeting on *Religious Identity and Political Community* held in Queen's University, Belfast in November 1992.

which these various terms properly suggest and which it may be of philosophical and practical interest to discuss.

My strategy, then, will be to say something first about the recent history of Roman Catholic social teachings and their relation to older sources and then to outline certain ideas in contemporary political philosophy associated with the phrase "the liberalism vs communitarianism debate". By that point certain connections between the topics will have become clear and I shall conclude by considering some implications of these. Perhaps I should add that political philosophy is currently in a state of considerable confusion over issues very close to some of those I shall be discussing and this fact may give a certain edge and relevance to what might otherwise seem, at least to some, to be a rather parochial interest. Finally I should add that my perspective on the title question is one which assumes the truth of Catholicism. That may seem to limit the interest of the discussion for those who do not share this belief, but whether the dominant version of Christianity is incompatible with the leading political ideology of the Western world is an issue that should be of general concern, and in any case part of what I have to say in criticism of liberalism is independent of any distinctly Catholic or even Christian doctrine.

## II

1991 saw the celebration, and not just in Roman Catholic circles, of the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In that document the Pope focussed his attention, that is to say in non-punning terms, focussed the mind of the Church, on the question of the contemporary condition of the working classes and produced a line of thought that wove its way between two opposing attitudes to private property: that of communism which denied that private ownership was or could be legitimate; and that of economic liberalism which rejected the idea that the state could be justified in constraining the operations of the market for the sake of the common good. Leo's *via media* allows that the acquisition of property is a legitimate aspiration for individuals but insists that ownership is responsible to wider moral and social interests and is thus answerable to the requirements of social justice. In this he was building on a philosophical tradition associated with Natural Law as that was interpreted and developed by the scholastics of the middle ages. This ancestry is important and I shall return to it later but for now I want to consider other aspects of Papal teaching in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

In 1864, under the Papacy of Pius IX, there was published the *Syllabus of Errors*, a compilation of ideas held to be dangerously false. Among these were such theses as that there should be a separation of Church and State (55); that morality is autonomous of Divine sanction and Natural Law (56); and that universal religious toleration does not imply indifference or lead to corruption (77). A proper appreci-

ation of the contrary claims upheld by the Church would need to take account of the historical setting of the *Syllabus*, including the fear of revolution and of atheistic humanism, and this would yield interpretations less narrow in respect, for example, of Church/State separation than an uninformed reading might suggest. All the same it is clear and undeniable that there is a strong anti-liberal current in this and other nineteenth century documents. In 1888, for example, Leo XIII, the author of *Rerum Novarum*, offered a further rejection of a central theme of liberal thinking about the relationship between religion and politics when he wrote:

“There are [those] who affirm that in public affairs the morality of God may be passed over and entirely disregarded in the framing of laws. Hence follows the fatal theory of the need of separation of Church and State”  
(*On Human Liberty*).

Similarly, and as uncomfortable for many modern Catholics, Church teaching has exhibited a repeated hostility to radical socialism. In his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) celebrating, as the title indicates, the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI wrote that “Religious Socialism, Christian Socialism are expressions implying a contradiction in terms. No one can be at the same time a sincere Catholic and a sincere Socialist”. As before, a proper appreciation of these words would require an understanding of their context,<sup>2</sup> and in particular of what was meant by socialism. But it is important to see that there is an ineliminable opposition and to understand its basis. Pius writes:

“It follows from the twofold character of ownership, which we have termed individual and social, that men must take into account in this matter not only their own advantage but also that of the Common Good. To define in detail these duties [where that is not already done by the Natural Law] is the function of Government”.

A central element of Catholic social teaching which can be extracted from these various documents is the idea that the basic laws governing the relations between citizens should take account of the requirements of an objective moral order which, in respect of social justice, involves the protection and promotion of the common good. Before saying something about the philosophical justification of this, and going on to consider its relation to the contemporary ‘liberalism vs communitarianism’ debate, it is worth noting how the same idea as can be found in the encyclicals of Pius IX, Leo XIII and Pius XI, informs the social doctrine of a more recent Pope,

2. It is worth quoting the preceding text which runs as follows: “If, like all errors, socialism contains a certain element of truth (and this the Sovereign Pontiffs have never denied) it is nevertheless founded upon a doctrine of human society peculiarly its own which is opposed to true Christianity”.

viz. John XXIII. This bears upon the continuity of the teaching and ought to be noted particularly because it is commonly supposed that Pope John reversed the Church's attitude to liberalism. As will emerge, this is certainly not so.

One reason for thinking otherwise is that in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, the Pope adopted the, by then dominant, liberal rhetoric of rights:

“Every human being has the right to respect for his person; to his good reputation, the right to freedom in searching for truth and in expressing and communicating his opinions ...

Every human being has the right to honour God according to the dictates of an upright conscience and therefore the right to worship God privately and publicly ...

Human beings have the right to choose freely the state of life which they prefer and therefore the right to establish a family with equal rights and duties for man and woman and also the right to follow a vocation to the priesthood or religious life”.

Superficially this can look to be entirely at odds with earlier teaching, such as the rejection of universal religious toleration contained in the *Syllabus of Errors*. Certainly there is, as I remarked, a difference in the political vocabulary, and of course John XXIII made efforts not to speak with the authoritarian tones of his predecessors; but on closer inspection it becomes clear that while the teaching may have developed it has retained its original and essential orientation, *and its (presumed) authority*. Compare, for example, what I have quoted from *Pacem in Terris* with what the *Syllabus* implies about religious toleration:

“civil liberty for any religious sect whatever and the granting to all of full right to express any kind of opinion and thought whatever, openly and publicly, conduces to the easier corruption of the morals and minds of peoples and the spread of the disease of indifferentism”.

Note first that what is condemned is “liberty for any religious sect whatever”, and “full right to express any kind of opinion and thought whatever”, and then look again at John XXIII's declaration of rights. What he speaks of is “freedom in searching for truth”, “the right to honour God according to the dictates of an upright conscience”, “the right to establish a family ... and also the right to follow a [religious] vocation”. In short, John, no less than Pius, regards the legitimacy of the free pursuit of human activities as related to an objective moral and theological order. The difference is not one of substance but of application and presentation.

What lies behind this tradition of social teaching is a moral and political philosophy that originates in the weaving together, through the Patristic and medieval periods, of Greek theories of value and Judaeo-Christian moral codes.

The history of this construction is too lengthy and complex even to summarise here,<sup>3</sup> but its product is a general theory of Natural Law which holds that men and women should act in accord with certain values related to their nature as rational creatures. Just as a plant has a range of functions the operation of which conduces to, and in part constitutes, its flourishing as an entity of a certain sort, so human beings are equipped with various powers the proper operation of which promotes and realises their well-being as rational animals. Unlike plants, however, man is both rational and spiritual. That is to say, his well-being is not constituted organically, though bodily health is not unimportant, but in terms of a transcendent destiny: the attainment of union with his Maker, whose company he may hope to enjoy through an eternal and inexhaustible beatific vision. An important element in the Catholic version of this theory is the claim that, both in respect of the earlier mundane phase of their existence and of the later heavenly one, human beings are essentially social creatures. As Aquinas has it:

“It is natural for man to be a social and political animal, living in community; and this is more true of him than of any other animal, as is revealed by his natural necessities” (*De Regimine Principum*).

The fact that man is a social creature not by voluntary choice but through his created nature has an implication for the politics of society. The civic community, or the state, is not a product of individuals' chosen associations with one another; rather it is an 'organic' unity, the continuing existence and well-being of which depends upon morally guided government. And the primary duties of human governments are to protect and promote the common good. As the opening quotation from *Quod Apostolici Muneris* has it:

“the State, like the Church, should form one body comprising many members, some excelling others in rank and importance but all alike necessary to one another and solicitous for the common good”.

### III

Political philosophy in the English-speaking world has undergone a renaissance during the last twenty years. Arising from that rebirth is the current domination of the subject by one issue more than any other, that being what I shall call '*the question of liberalism*'. The dominance of this question has different aspects. One is simply *statistical*: in some guise or another it is the question most often addressed by writers in the field. A related but more fundamental aspect of its domination,

3. For a short account of it see J. Haldane, "Medieval and Renaissance Ethics" in P. Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991).

however, is *philosophical*. The question of liberalism exerts a gravitational pull attracting other issues to its surface and often drawing them deep into its core. The author who above all others has been the midwife of political philosophy's renaissance and has also been largely responsible for the current centrality of the question of liberalism is John Rawls. Just over twenty years ago Rawls published *A Theory of Justice*<sup>4</sup> in which he sought to articulate a conception of interpersonal justice adequate to found principles which might govern the political institutions of society. Rawls' theory is developed within certain self-imposed limits. These include restrictions on its *scope* and on its *structure*. As regards the first, it eschews any ambition to arrive at a general theory of morality, an overall account of how one ought to live; and as regards the second, it accords priority to the right over the good. I shall discuss both points. The first restriction arises from a view of the task and circumstances of contemporary Western political philosophy. This aims to provide legitimate forms of social organisation in a situation in which the members of society may hold quite different moral views about how best to live. Accordingly, no political philosophy should or could supplant morality as a guide to individual conduct. I shall return to this issue shortly. The second restriction has, in part, a similar origin in a view of what society is actually like, but it is also philosophically motivated by a consideration of other accounts of justice.

The idea of the priority of the *right* over the *good*, is that principles which direct conduct, i.e. which indicate what it would be right to do or to avoid, may over-ride considerations of what it would be good to be or to have. If one kind of reason has the power to 'trump' another it must have an independent grounding. By way of a parallel, considerations of taste may outweigh those of cost when a company is redecorating its boardroom; but if so it cannot be that taste is measured by expense, it must have a separate foundation. Likewise, if considerations of what is right, i.e. of what is required or prohibited, may outweigh those of what is desirable then it cannot be that the desirable is the measure of the right.

Here, however, one may ask why should the right have priority over the good, why can it not just be a function of it, in the way that price is a function of demand and supply? Rawls' argument on this point is direct and telling. Justice is, as he puts it, the first virtue of civil society. It is the norm or principle which governs the operation of the fundamental political institutions. It is, for example, what legitimizes law-making and warrants the enforcement of law through the courts. In civil society the state takes to itself the exclusive right of coercive power. Law-makers set patterns for the distribution of goods and the regulation of behaviour and law-enforcers push those who depart from these patterns back into position. What legitimizes these regulative and coercive activities is the claim that justice permits or requires them.

4. *A Theory of Justice* (OUP; Oxford 1971).

This suggestion has attracted quite general support but it leaves unspecified the nature of justice, and as soon as one begins to specify it certain difficulties arise. Consider, for example, a utilitarian theory of justice. The utilitarian regards an action, policy or practice as warranted to the extent that it maximizes overall welfare. On this basis, then, it seems possible to justify individual political rights, according to each person a protected zone of activity within which he or she may do as they please, compatible with non-infringement of the protected zones of others. Thereby, we can imagine, each maximizes his or her personal utility without interference (or the threat of it) from others and in that way overall welfare is also maximized.

One only has to understand the structure of utilitarian theory, however, to realize that it is incapable of generating inviolable rights. It is committed to maximizing welfare and given this fact we can easily imagine how any pattern of distributed rights could, under changed circumstances, become an obstacle to welfare rather than a means to it. Then, of course, the rights lapse, the zone of personal activity is entered for the benefit of others. But that is just to say it never was an inviolable zone as such, only a contingently protected one. In addition, and as Rawls was among the first of recent philosophers to observe, utilitarianism fails to respect the *distinctness of persons* — treating the interests and aims of each as if they were items in the desire-stock of a single agent to be weighed without consideration of their different ownership.

Rights, then, seem to need a different kind of foundation to well-being if they are to resist its claims to be promoted. Rights are part of what justice accords the citizen and hence the principles of justice, if they are to generate trumping but untrumpable entitlements, must involve the priority of the right over the good. As I said, this is a direct and telling argument, but we shall soon see that in the context of liberal assumptions it runs into difficulties.

Before coming to these, however, let me return to the question of the scope of justice, for this too is interesting but ultimately problematic. Rawls has given greater emphasis in recent writings to what he calls 'the circumstances of justice', that is the social conditions in which principles of justice must operate. These conditions induce the existence of different and incompatible systems of belief and value. At some level it was always so, but whereas in the middle-ages Western Europe formed a broadly Christian culture, and more specifically a Catholic one, religious homogeneity then gave way to Christian disunity which in turn became part of a greater diversity of belief and disbelief. Likewise, the broadly Judaeo-Christian-cum-Hellenic-Roman natural law morality came to be questioned and often rejected in favour of other ethical theories and of moral nihilism. So, by stages, the West moved from a condition of ideological unity to one of pluralism.

That transition was neither continuous nor smooth. Rearguard actions on behalf of ruling orthodoxies are a familiar and recurrent feature of its history. In this century and in the last, the focus of dispute has been of a sort which invites the description 'belief against unbelief' — theists defending religion against atheism, objectivists fighting on behalf of moral realism against the onslaught of subjectivism. In previous centuries, however, the battles were between religious believers and between advocates of different forms of moral objectivism. Doubtless moral theorists have come to blows, but the metaphor of ideological battles has most often had a literal counterpart in the area of religion.

This fact is often adverted to by Rawls in his criticisms of those who look for a more wide-ranging political and social philosophy. He sees the modern political consciousness, upon which his own theory builds and to which it makes appeal, as deeply (if now indirectly) influenced by the religious wars of Europe. Whatever view one takes of the truth of rival Catholic and Protestant doctrines, and of the Christian Creed more generally, we are not now disposed to take arms on behalf of any party to theological debates. This disengagement from religious warfare has not been the result simply of seeing people die, or of loss of all conviction in the truth of claims in this area; rather it represents an advance in our thinking about the relationship between religious and moral doctrines on the one hand, and collective public life on the other. Recognition of the reality of irreconcilable differences in belief has produced a separation of aspects of life into different spheres. The general scheme of division into *public* and *private* realms arises from, and gives principled expression to, the division between the political order and the moral and religious ones.

Thus, the *scope* restriction on a liberal theory of justice is the claim that, given the condition of pluralism, political philosophy must eschew comprehensive doctrines of value and conduct and concern itself with principles which can govern the public interaction of persons holding radically different basic beliefs. As it is now often put, more under the influence of Dworkin<sup>5</sup> than of Rawls, liberalism aims to regulate political life without reference to any particular conception of the good for human beings as such. More strongly, it has to proceed on a neutral basis if it is to gain the allegiance of persons committed to different philosophies of life. In this connection Rawls speaks of the '*principle of toleration*' and extends the range of its application. Not only must a theory of justice adequate for the modern world remain free of deep moral commitments of a comprehensive sort, it must also be independent of controversial philosophical assumptions and, one may add, styles of argument. For, as before, the theory has to be acknowledged as yielding authoritative principles of political life by all participants in the political order

5. See R. Dworkin, "Liberalism" in S. Hampshire (ed.) *Public and Private Morality* (CUP; Cambridge 1978), reprinted in Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (OUP; Oxford 1985).

whatever their philosophical viewpoints. If a disagreement between individuals over a matter of property, say, should reach the point of requiring legal settlement, then one of the parties to the dispute would have grounds for complaint if it should transpire that the principles of public justice rest upon controversial philosophical ideas subscribed to by his opponent. It is out of this way of thinking that emerged a phrase and almost a slogan which Rawls uses to characterize his theory: Justice as Fairness: *political not metaphysical*. As he writes:

“[The] public conception of justice should be, so far as possible, independent of controversial philosophical and religious doctrines. Thus, to formulate [it], we apply the principle of toleration to philosophy itself: the public conception of justice is to be political not metaphysical . . . No political view that depends on [such] deep and unresolved matters [as, questions of philosophical psychology or a metaphysical doctrine of the self] can serve as a public conception of justice in a constitutional democratic state.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus the restrictions on *structure* and *scope* now come together in the idea that a liberal theory of politics is, and can only be, concerned with such principles and procedures for regulating social life as give priority to the right over the good and do not invoke any comprehensive theory of value or controversial philosophical doctrines.

Two questions now suggest themselves. Given these restrictions, can liberalism deliver a satisfactory political system? and if it cannot, is there a viable alternative? As one might expect, there are lines of criticism proceeding from two opposing directions: from the side of those who think that liberalism offers too little in the way of guidance for social life, and from the wing of those who regard it as enlarging the area of public interest beyond what is legitimate. Here I shall not be concerned with this latter ‘libertarian’ critique. I know of no philosophical anarchist who argues that the domain of human life is exhausted by the private sphere, i.e. who holds that there is no public realm over which governance by political principles is required. That being so, the anarchist can be seen for what increasingly he takes himself to be, viz., a radical (or, as it has become fashionable to say, a ‘classical’) liberal.

It is for this reason among others that the most significant challenges to Rawlsian liberalism have come from those who think it is too weak a structure to hold political society together. This thought is linked with a more general claim to the effect that Rawls, Dworkin and others make a series of assumptions about the nature of persons and the constitution of value which are misconceived and which,

6. See J. Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping consensus”, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* (1987).

if acted upon, can only result in persons becoming alienated from the kinds of things that give human life its meaning. Here philosophical and empirical considerations are taken to converge. If one looks at contemporary Western Society the alienation from common values and traditions is presumed to be evident and evidently damaging to both public and private interests. And if one reviews the theoretical presuppositions of liberal politics, then an incoherent individualism is taken to be apparent. Obviously these anti-individualists' criticisms address the first question — that of whether liberalism can deliver an adequate politics; but the 'communitarian critique', so called, is intended simultaneously to indicate an alternative and better theoretical foundation for thinking about the conduct of social life. Before considering this, however, let me offer a few remarks about the negative criticisms of philosophical liberalism.

These criticisms, delivered by authors such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor,<sup>7</sup> have two targets: a theory of *persons* and a theory of *value*. The occasion does not permit of more than an outline sketch of the arguments but this should be sufficient.<sup>8</sup> Liberalism requires that the various participants in social life agree to be bound by principles of a strictly impartial sort in which no reference is made to the identity-constituting facts of particular individuals and communities. Justice, as we say, is blind. Accordingly, its principles must be such as would be affirmed by someone who knew nothing of the contingent circumstances of their own life-history. In that sense justice as fairness is the virtue affirmed by the anonymous chooser who knows only that he or she will have some or other values and projects which they will want to pursue. But the identity and specific nature of these goals may not inform the principles of social life; and nor may the fact, if it is one, that any values and projects may be shared and pursued with others. Similarly, the particular values which one may come to affirm must be held in abeyance when questions of public policy arise, for then only the transcendent requirements of Justice can be recognized to have universal authority.

The communitarian objections are easy to anticipate given these descriptions. Liberalism requires that we think of ourselves as characterless, atom-like agents constituted as subjects of one or another political community without reference to the distinctive circumstances and histories which have influenced us. However this ignores the empirical dependency of self-consciousness upon social environment.

7. See especially A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Duckworth; London 1981); C. Taylor, "The Diversity of Goods" in A. Sen & B. Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (C.U.P.; Cambridge 1982); and M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (C.U.P.; Cambridge 1982). A useful source of readings is M. Sandel (ed.), *Liberalism and its Critics* (Blackwell; Oxford 1984).
8. For further discussions see J. Haldane, "Individuals and the Theory of Justice" *Ratio*, (1985); and "Political Theory and the Nature of Persons" *Philosophical Papers*, (1991). A clear account of the main issues can be found in G. Graham, *An Introduction to Contemporary Social Philosophy* (Blackwell; Oxford 1989).

Moreover, philosophical reflection reveals that social influence is not a contingent fact about our actual identities, additional to a necessary truth about the essences individuals possess as persons. Rather, the original social context of a human life shapes it — in the sense in which we might speak of sphericity shaping a ball — it makes it to be the kind of thing it is. The very idea that we can conceive of ourselves as agents entering into a scheme of political association independently of knowing ourselves to have a particular, socially-constituted nature is incoherent. As incoherent, indeed, as supposing that one could think of oneself as entering into a commercial transaction as a banker independently of locating oneself within a pre-existing order of financial exchange. The very acts of lending money — of being a *financier*, and of borrowing it — of being a *debtor*, presuppose a complex system of social relationships in terms of which these particular roles, as of that of *money* itself, can be defined. The charge, then, is that liberalism is committed to a philosophical theory of social agents as constituted independently of societies — as pre-social individuals — and that this theory is incoherent.

Just as there are several variations on the basic themes of liberalism so there are a variety of communitarian theories. Abstracting from the differences, however, the 'communitarian challenges' all attack the individualism of liberalism and give an alternative account of persons as being to some degree socially constituted and of political virtues as depending upon wider, shared moral values. Thus it is generally argued that Rawls' way of thinking about justice as protective of rights rather than as productive of well-being, and Dworkin's insistence that the state may not promote any distinctive idea of the good life for human beings but must be neutral as between rival moralities, both rest upon a view of citizens as autonomous and atomic moral agents. Rather than seeing society as an organic entity into which human beings are born and within which they find their identities, the liberal views it as a voluntary association, rather like a club. This, it is claimed, is both descriptively false and morally and politically harmful inasmuch as it denies people a true understanding of themselves and of the means of their fulfillment. Where there could, and should, be a morally-informed social existence what liberalism has produced is moral anarchy and political disaffection.

#### IV

By now it should be very clear how the elements within Catholic social teaching which I identified in section II connect with the central issue of contemporary political philosophy as outlined in section III. The tradition, deriving from the synthesis of Catholic Christian thought and Greek philosophy, which has informed the encyclicals of the last and present centuries is a version of communitarianism. When, in the thirteenth century, Aquinas wrote on *Princely Government* and produced his great *Summa* his opponents were heathen or ungodly tyrants and

Augustinean pessimists, liberalism not then having been invented. But the individualism that was a factor in the reformation found its political expression in a tradition conceived by Locke, nurtured by Kant and Mill and developed by Rawls and Dworkin. It is, I believe, a tribute to the prescience of the Popes whose encyclicals I have quoted that from the middle of the nineteenth century they saw liberal individualism, even more than socialism, as one of the major ideas standing in opposition to Catholic social teaching. That opposition is faced on two fronts: concerning the place of morality in politics, and the status of the community and the common good.

It would take far more space than is available here to pursue the arguments in favour of Catholic social teaching and to advance to any satisfactory conclusion the general debate between liberalism and communitarianism. Rather than embark upon that now it may be more useful to anticipate some worries of an objector arguing from the side of secular liberalism. Two concerns are likely to be to the fore. Firstly, that the Catholic view as set out above implies an extensive role for the Church in the determination of government policy; and secondly and relatedly that allowing moral considerations into the shaping of legislation is certain to prove intrusive in areas where individuals should be free to act as they please. In short, the Catholic view is illiberal and oppressive.

As regards the first point, it should by now be clear from my comments on the encyclical texts that what the Popes were arguing is that a truly just political order will, by that very fact, be in accord with the Natural Law which is the Law of God promulgated to mankind through reason. From the point of view of religious concerns and theological understanding one should certainly recognise that the moral law is an aspect of Divine Law, but from the perspective of social philosophy it is not necessary that moral considerations be invoked as Divine Commands. The claim on behalf of the Church as a moral authority, therefore, is not for quasi-theocratic rule but only for a right to be heard and for the moral opinions voiced to be attended to in the shaping of policy. A recent and still topical example of this claim is that made by the British Archbishops in their statement on abortion:

“We live in a society where many differing moral and political opinions are conscientiously held and pursued in practice. We make no attempt to override the consciences of our fellow-citizens. We do not seek to have all Catholic moral teaching imposed by law, or even adopted as public policy. But we too have the right, as members of this pluralistic society, to appeal to the consciences not only of our fellow Catholics, but also of our fellow citizens and our political leaders and representatives”.<sup>9</sup>

9. *Abortion and the Right to Life* (CTS; London 1980).

The charge of illiberal intrusion into the sphere of private choice invites two responses. First, the critic may simply be begging the question against the Catholic view. In everyday parlance "illiberal" is a pejorative term implying bigotedness or narrow-mindedness. But the only sense in which what I have been arguing shows Catholic social teaching to be 'illiberal' is the technical one, meaning contrary to liberal doctrines. What the critic has to show is that this is a bad thing, and it will not do to insist that an illiberal (in the technical sense) social philosophy is, *ipso facto*, erroneous. Some independent argument has to be given.

A familiar candidate for such an argument appeals to the disagreeableness of external constraint, such as in the case of censorship. According to liberalism each should be free to pursue his or her own chosen interests so long as thereby harm is not caused to others. The implication of Catholic social teaching, however, would seem to be that in formulating law government should attend to moral requirements, including those relating to the conduct of personal life; but this will lead to illegitimate intrusion into the private sphere. Once again there is a drift towards *petitio principii*, for the question as to whether legislation on censorship is 'illegitimate' is precisely what is at issue. A more subtle 'begging of the question' lurks in the use of the expression "private sphere", as if it were an uncontroversial matter what does and does not fall within it. Each of these matters deserves attention, but for now I want to end by directing attention towards some features of the liberal social order.

In the last twenty to thirty years, that is to say during the period in which advanced Western Societies have legislated themselves into a liberal political order, there has been a considerable development in the supply of pornography, in the scale of abortions and in the dissolution of marriages. I choose these examples because the facts are undisputed and the cases are ones of deep concern to Catholics and, more widely, traditional Christians. To their credit, I doubt that those who reformed the laws in respect of censorship, abortion and marriage had any idea of how far practice would have moved in so short a time. But the fact is that in the United Kingdom deviant and fetishist pornography is now available in high street shops in every major city, millions of foetuses are killed and one in three marriages ends in divorce.

Of course, grossly obscene material has always been produced, abortions performed and marriages ended. That is not the issue; nor indeed is it the increased scale of these phenomena as such, though what is to the point is related to this increase. The issue is that things which in the reflective view of most people are social evils, are regarded by liberal theory as not being the business of government to remedy. There is certainly the recourse to the avoidance of harm, and it is to be hoped that policy makers will become more attentive to harms caused by the factors I have mentioned. But the liberal's grounds for social action are both too narrow and too shallow. Injury is not the only evil, there is offence to the common decencies

of civilised life; and there are harms that are not injuries, in the sense of independent consequences of exposure to evils, but moral evils in themselves. The liberal makes much of the idea of social tolerance but risks overlooking the possibility that an attitude of toleration may itself be an expression of corruption. Furthermore, in fixing one's attention on the liberties of individuals one may fail to see what is happening to society. The claim of Catholic social teaching is that government has a duty to protect and promote the common good, and to legislate in accord with the fundamental precepts of the moral law. That outlook is not antagonistic to individual interests, but unlike liberalism it sees them as partly constituted by the political order and conditioned by its moral character. Writing in 1991 in celebration of the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* Pope John Paul II puts the point as follows:

“there is a growing inability to situate particular interests within the framework of a coherent vision of the common good. The latter is not simply the sum of particular interests; rather it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values; ultimately, it demands a correct understanding of the dignity and rights of the person” (*Centesimus Annus*).

Finally, then, my answer to the question posed in the title is that someone who follows the social teaching of the Catholic Church, as this has been developed out of the dominant ‘Thomistic’ trend in scholastic natural law theory and promulgated through the relevant Papal encyclicals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cannot accept the central doctrines of philosophical liberalism as these have been characterised above. Viewed more positively, the Catholic has reason to reflect upon the course of recent political theory and history — including the collapse of totalitarian socialism — and take satisfaction from the fact that the world seems to be learning what the Church has long been teaching. We need a truly social philosophy, in which the goods of communal life are combined with the legitimate liberties of private interests.

Department of Moral Philosophy  
University of St Andrews  
St Andrews  
Fife  
Scotland