

# The Church, Social Ethics, and Politics

Although one should always be wary of binaries in the world of theology, two distinct alternatives have emerged within Catholic social thought regarding how best to live the Church's mission in the world. These two alternatives do not preclude the existence of subtle variations of each alternative, and they do not exclude the proverbial "third way." For the purposes of introduction, it will be helpful to highlight and contrast these competing accounts of the Church's redemptive encounter with an unjust world.

One alternative represents the mainstream of Roman Catholic thought in the United States and in the western world in general. According to this approach, secular society and the secular state exist in their own right quite apart from the Church. The Church is thereby free to engage the world and the state, but in order to do so, it must adopt the language and practices of the secular world and must cooperate with the state in order to achieve the common good for all members of society. The Church may have unique insights into the human condition, the plight of suffering, and the dignity of the human person, but according to this tradition, these insights must be phrased and pursued on the terms supplied by secular society and with deference to the state.

The other alternative views the emergence of the secular order and the secular state as dangerous to any authentic account of the common good and as powerfully invested in the marginalization of the Church. This marginalization of the Church does not merely involve its visible structures. It also entails a concerted effort to sideline the Church's claims regarding the origins and destiny of humanity, as these claims often threaten the modern understanding of the state and its place in society. According to this view, modern secular culture has employed a variety of strategies to reinforce the primacy of the state for defining "the common good" while at the same time making religion irrelevant, defining it solely as a matter of private or personal significance. The Church's potential to subvert the modern narrative of private religion and public government threatens the state, which relies on that narrative for its power and authority. As a result of this tension, Christians have been taught to privatize their religious convictions or to frame these convictions as universal principles to which all humans of sound reason and good will could agree. Though the upshot of all of this is the subtle yet thorough marginalization of the Church in contemporary society, Christians have the ability and the duty to recognize this perversion of the Gospel and recapture the political dimension of the Church. The staunchest advocate of this position is the Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas, whose work has attracted a significant following among many younger Roman Catholic theologians who have brought the critique of Hauerwas into dialogue with mainstream Catholic social ethics.

## Mainstream Catholic Social Ethics in the United States

Perhaps the most influential American theologian of the twentieth century was the Jesuit John Courtney Murray (1904–1968), the one person most responsible for the revision of the Church's teaching on religious freedom at the Second Vatican Council. Although Murray was regularly attacked by conservatives in Rome and in the United States in the years leading up to the council, he nonetheless argued powerfully from a Thomistic perspective for the distinction between the larger society and the state. Murray wrote:

The purposes of the state are not coextensive with the purposes of society. The state is only one order within society—the order of public law and political administration. The public powers, which are invested with the power of the state, are charged with the performance of certain limited functions for the benefit of society—such functions as can and must be performed by the coercive discipline of law and political power. These functions are defined



by constitutional law, in accord with the consent of the people. In general, “society” signifies an area of freedom, personal and corporate, whereas “state” signifies the area in which public powers may legitimately apply their coercive powers. To deny the distinction is to espouse the notion of the government as totalitarian. (“The Problem of Religious Freedom,” 520<sup>i</sup>)

Murray’s distinction limits the role of the state to maintaining public order and establishing civil administration. For Murray, the state has a circumscribed and limited role in securing the common good of the larger society. The Church and other social entities may debate and pursue the common good, so long as they do not run afoul of the state and its obligations in this regard.

Murray’s understanding of the role played by the Church in society is somewhat akin to that of the American philosopher John Rawls. For both Murray and Rawls, the Church (and religion in general) occupies a “free space” in civil society.<sup>ii</sup> Within this space, religions are afforded the opportunity, free from state interference, to conduct open debate about the common good and would be compelled to do so without making appeals to specific theological or doctrinal language. Of course, conflict will emerge, but these conflicts about the common good will find resolution without recourse to violence, because violence or coercive power is reserved to the state and can be used by the state only in defense of its limited interest.

Murray, and contemporary supporters of his vision, sees the public space in which the Church operates as a place in which it can influence the work of the state. For example, U.S. bishops regularly use their bully pulpit to attempt to influence certain policy discussions (e.g., abortion, euthanasia, immigration, minimum wage, health care). By influencing public opinion, the Church can influence the state and its use of coercive power. Thus, in many ways, the state becomes the observer, the referee, and the target audience of religious discourse in the free space of society so that this free space is really constructed and maintained by the state.

For support of this understanding of the Church’s role in public life and in pursuit of justice, many look to the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Of particular interest is the admonition in *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, 1965)* that the Church’s redemptive mission is bound with politics and government for the common good:

The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. . . . Earthly progress, to the extent that it can contribute to the better ordering of human society, is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God. (39)

The Church, moreover, acknowledges the good to be found in the social dynamism of today, especially in progress towards unity, healthy socialization, and civil and economic cooperation. The encouragement of unity is in harmony with the deepest nature of the Church’s mission. (42)

These statements rest on a more positive evaluation of modern culture and society than had been made in the decades leading up to the Second Vatican Council, but Murray and others would contend that the attitude of the council was more in keeping with the ancient tradition of the Church. For within the Thomistic tradition, the goodness of the natural order was affirmed as potentially possessing elements conducive to the formation of human community even apart from the Church.<sup>iii</sup>

Murray and his supporters hold an optimistic account of the American political system, often labeled “liberal democracy,” in which the state and the larger society are related as described in this section. The role of the Church is to compete within the marketplace of ideas and to make a case for the Gospel in



terms intelligible to those who do not share Christian convictions. This position is not, however, naïve about the shortcomings of liberal democracy; society needs to be redemptively engaged, challenged, and critiqued. However, there is an abiding confidence in the goodness of the social order and its capacity to be engaged. In addition, it is the Church's mission in the modern world to locate the "tooth stones" (to borrow a phrase from Chenu) onto which it can continue to build a social order that reflects the most basic desires common to all humans. To this end, the Church has promoted constructive engagement with the political structures of the state.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has encouraged American Catholics to participate in the electoral process and regularly issues an election-year admonition to this end in a document titled "Faithful Citizenship." The bishops assume the positive role of the government in securing the common good. However, they are also careful to preserve the principle of subsidiarity that maintains that smaller forms of community or voluntary associations have a responsibility and a right in securing the common good and insisting that the state must not overstep its boundaries by making itself the sole arbiter or architect of the common good. In their advice to citizens of the United States, the bishops reiterate these assumptions and principles and try to apply them to the concrete issues that surface during political campaigns.

We hope American Catholics, as both believers and citizens, will use the resources of our faith and the opportunities of this democracy to help shape a society more respectful of the life, dignity, and rights of the human person, especially the poor and the vulnerable.  
(USCCB, "Political Responsibility," 375<sup>iv</sup>)

Thus, for the bishops, the Christian faith and the convictions it brings become the means by which the common good may be secured when these convictions are empowered by the structures of the democratic political system.

The experience of democracy and religious freedom in the American context has provided a model for thinking about the relationship among church, state, and the public domain, or the public square for Catholics in general. Many would argue that this situation has produced a far more engaged and socially conscious Catholic electorate and that it vindicates the vision adopted by the fathers at Vatican II. Others, however, take issue with this conclusion and would argue that although the U.S. bishops and the Vatican may occasionally come out with well-crafted policy statements designed to influence public debate, there is no evidence that this course of action is productive or appropriate. Rome and the bishops are concerned that the Roman Catholic Church should not identify itself with any particular political group or agenda, but would rather admonish and exhort Catholic Christians to political action based on the principles of Church teaching and the dictates of individual consciences.<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> John Courtney Murray, "The Problem of Religious Freedom," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964), 503–575.

<sup>ii</sup> See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Gaillardetz, "The Ecclesiological Foundations of Modern Catholic Social Teaching," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Michael Himes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 80.



<sup>iv</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Political Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good,” *Origins* 25, n. 22 (1995), 369–383.

<sup>v</sup> See John Sniegocki, “The Social Teaching of Pope Benedict XVI: Clergy, Laity, and the Church’s Mission for Justice,” in *Catholic Identity and the Laity*, College Theology Society Annual Volume, 54, Tim Muldoon, ed. (New York: Orbis, 2009), 120–133.

