

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### A Church of the Poor: Pope Francis and the Transformation of Orthodoxy

**Clemens Sedmak**

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2016 (208 pages)

Clemens Sedmak is a scholar with a global footprint. He currently holds the F. D. Maurice Chair in Moral and Social Theology at King's College, London; serves as a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana; and directs a center for social ethics in Austria. In the midst of these endeavors, he continues to publish on social ethics from a Roman Catholic perspective. His latest volume, *A Church of the Poor*, provides an analysis and basis for the shifts he sees in the theological stance of the Church.

This volume interacts with statements from Pope Francis in an attempt to present a case that the pope is softening the doctrinal heart of Roman Catholic orthodoxy and offering a more flexible approach to doctrine based on proper relationships rather than on correct propositional beliefs. A central theme in this volume is Sedmak's attempt to redefine orthodoxy as primarily concern for and identification with the economically impoverished.

The brief book consists of five chapters with an introduction and an epilogue. In chapter 1, Sedmak argues that Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* includes a call to reimagine the epistemic practices of the Church. He lays the groundwork for redefining orthodoxy away from a proper understanding of truth about God and the world to a proper relationship with God as evidenced by concern for the poor. Joy in the experience of the gospel is the foundation for the proposed redefinition of orthodoxy.

Chapter 2 continues to elaborate on the proposed revision of orthodoxy by defining orthodoxy as discipleship. This chapter focuses on Christ's role in building a church

of the poor. Helpfully, Sedmak presents a biblically balanced portrait of Christ who at times both lived without possessions and feasted with the wealthy. However, Sedmak also depicts Jesus as a doctrinally flexible teacher. This portrait is based on the evidence that Jesus wrote no theological texts but experienced solidarity with the poor, which, the author argues, shows that relationship is more important than truth.

In the third chapter, Sedmak argues that the right relationship with God depends on experiencing solidarity with the poor. This experiential knowledge is intended to encourage the Church to tolerate or accept propositionally questionable assertions if they have the aroma of charity. Sedmak does not completely abandon orthodoxy, but he sees orthopraxy as being a dominant influence on right standing before God. Notably, in this chapter Sedmak plainly asserts that his “project has more to do with humaneness than with justice” (67). In other words, what is right and true is less significant for Sedmak’s concept of orthodoxy than exhibited empathy and compassion.

Chapter 4 is a primarily historical chapter, in which Sedmak surveys the early Church’s teaching on poverty, uses Saint Francis’s idea of poverty to dialogue with other Roman Catholic theologians from the medieval era, and then reflects on what he calls the “epistemic implications” of poverty for the modern Church. This chapter is a helpful survey of a wide swath of literature on the Church’s approach to poverty.

The fifth chapter builds on the previous chapters to argue that propositional orthodoxy is not merely insufficient but warrants revision to Sedmak’s proposed relational version of orthodoxy. This chapter makes it clear that Sedmak is among those interpreters of Pope Francis who see him open to softening some of the unambiguous, long-standing doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Sedmak seeks to claim historical continuity in proposed revisions to doctrines of the Church by modifying the definition of orthodoxy. Establishing a vision for the Church that is centered around the experience of poverty rather than truth is the most significant step along that path.

The greatest strength of this volume is the historical analysis. Sedmak’s fourth chapter, with its overview of Roman Catholic teaching on poverty, is worth the price of the book. His balanced overview covers the most significant teachings of the major figures in church history in a digestible package. *A Church of the Poor* also clearly reveals the epistemological basis that some contemporary, revisionist voices rely on in calls for altering historically settled doctrines. If the reader accepts Sedmak’s experiential definition of orthodoxy, then his call for a softening of doctrinal truths is cogent and compelling.

Sedmak’s argument is weakest in his basic definition of orthodoxy as being a right relationship, which rests on his conflation of justification (being in a right relationship with God) with orthodoxy (having right beliefs about God) (e.g., 24–25). He correctly emphasizes the importance of a proper relationship with God but in doing so diminishes the reality that to know God truly requires knowing truths about God. The Church has historically viewed orthodox doctrine to be vitally important to the life of the Church because, for example, a Christian cannot properly relate to the Trinity without understanding the propositional doctrinal truth that there is one God in three persons—not three gods. By no means does Sedmak call for revising the doctrine of the Trinity, but calling

for an epistemic shift away from propositional orthodoxy to a relational definition lends itself to that end. Sedmak does not show how his definition of orthodoxy prevents such theological drift.

*A Church of the Poor* is a helpful volume at this point in history because it clearly articulates the drift among some Roman Catholics toward placing social ethics above doctrinal consistency at the head of the Church's concerns. Sedmak gracefully presents that position with helpful historical analysis that allows his readers to see the heart of his position and its implications. The volume makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation by making plain what is often assumed in discussions of orthodoxy and social ethics.

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## Render to Caesar? The Morality of Taxation

**Fr. Dennis J. Yu**

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Taxation, in all its forms and practices, is a technical and thorny *moral* subject. The Pharisees knew this when they tried to lure Jesus into saying something that would indict him against the imperial regime by asking if taxation was just tribute paid to Caesar. At the same time, taxes are also a simple ethical matter: except for anarchists, the bone of contention is not taxation *per se*. Not even Jesus categorically denied its validity.

Government administration, public infrastructure, the military, and their financing are inherent parts of civil society. Taxation, while not the only, is the main source of public revenue to maintain society. Passionate disagreement, however, occurs over the moral particulars of fiscal justice. For example, what type of taxes are good and for what specific purposes? How much should private citizens and businesses pay? Who should monitor fiscal compliance and enact spending procedures? Which tax exemptions are fair?

When push comes to shove, heated tax debates boil down to more fundamental questions such as legitimacy of rule, the goodness or evil of laws and lawmakers, and the duties of citizenship. If I have not participated in elections, do I have the right to protest fiscal policy? If a legislator illegally comes to power, can citizens reject fiscal policy passed under his mandate? What is a citizen's duty if a certain tax law is inherently evil?

In Fr. Dennis J. Yu's *Render to Caesar?* these are just a few of the challenging questions a young Catholic priest, theologian, and economist tackles with astute observations and critique. While an invaluable and original academic work, the author's tone is set by sincere pastoral concern for the everyday faithful mired in complex financial and fiscal transactions that not only have practical value but also have eternal weight for the salvation of souls and the common good. The author, therefore, carefully weaves arguments for and against certain critical fiscal policies in light of centuries of Judeo-Christian moral tradition. When clearly convinced, he opines as to which regimes and policies are evil or good. You must read to find out (no spoilers here).