

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### The True Wealth of Nations

**Daniel Finn (Editor)**

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010 (380 pages)

This book is the result of a conference held at the University of Southern California in 2008. The conference was sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies in the framework of its True Wealth of Nations (TWN) research project.

The relationship between Christian thinkers and economic life has not been especially fruitful for a long time. Catholic ethicists have usually been suspicious or critical of economic activities, whether from an ultraconservative or a liberationist perspective. Meanwhile, some free marketeers have proposed an economicist ethics instead of an ethics of economics. All three positions have quoted scattered passages of Catholic social teaching (CST) looking for support of their theses. The TWN project looks for reconciliation between economic and Christian thought, free from ideological preconceptions.

The basic proposition of the project analyzed in the California conference was that “the economic and cultural criteria identified in the tradition of Catholic social thought provide an effective path to prosperity for all” (4) now and for future generations. The TWN conceives of prosperity in a broad sense, including not only acquisition of wealth but also the achievement of certain standards of social life—happiness, culture, and good health.

The volume has three sections. Section 1 answers two questions: (1) What does CST recommend for the economy? (2) What are the standards of prosperity?

Albino Barrera tackles the first question. It is not an easy task because, *inter alia*, the answer must avoid an overspecification that, as Barrera clarifies, the Catholic Church does not want. This is a field of practical reason and thus, it is not susceptible to many

universal conclusions. Specifications are the responsibility of each community. This is what Barrera does in a table in which he lists concrete obligations and their measurement for a contemporary democratic society. He arrives at this interesting list by a thorough process of analysis of the guidance of CST and Scripture concerning the common good.

Andrew Yuengert's essay deals with the second question. He begins studying the consequences of human nature for prosperity. This study leads him to argue for four kinds of goods that characterize a prosperous community: goods of personal character, goods of personal initiative, social goods, and material goods. This ample perspective puts the relevance and usefulness of income in its proper place. Yuengert finally deals with the difficulties of implementation and measurement, given that these ends are incommensurable.

Section 2 of the book comprises historical accounts of the interaction between Christian faith and economic life. In the first essay, Stefano Zamagni shows, by the example of the interactions between Catholic thought and nascent capitalism in the thirteenth century, the possible synergies between CST and the economy. Through CST, a civil humanism inspired a civil economy aimed at the common good. Zamagni then presents a well-informed study on the Weber thesis about capitalism and Protestant ethics and about the rebirth of an interest in the influence of culture, and specifically religious beliefs, on the economy.

Vera Negri Zamagni's essay deals with CST's more recent historical influence on the economy: the teachings of the last 150 years and the rise of Christian Democratic parties after the end of World War II. Vincent Rougeau in the next chapter appraises the standards of justice of contracts according to Anglo-American contract law. He concludes that it reflects an increasingly materialistic and individualistic culture. Continuing on the same topic, Daniel Finn analyzes four Christian arguments against unjust contracts. He points out the need to consider the principles of general and distributive justice. Mary Hirschfeld appraises the teaching of Aquinas and the difficulties for receiving it in the contemporary secularized world, given the latter's lack of a metaphysical ethos. John Coleman investigates an interesting modern notion, namely, *social capital*, assessing it from the perspective of CST. He identifies points of mutual contribution. The economic situation of women constitutes a critical challenge for today's economic system. Simona Beretta analyzes in the next chapter the possible suggestions of CST to foster better policies in this area. Paulinus Odozor introduces the acute problems of Africa. A poor anthropology is at the root of these problems, and, thus, CST might greatly contribute to overcome them. Jon Gunnemann then presents an interesting proposal to consider capital as spirit. This proposal challenges the American concept of the corporation and its governance. In the final entry in this section, Maylin Biggadike takes up the perspective of poor women in the third world, picking up examples from Latin America.

In section 3, John Carr, director of the United States Bishops' Justice, Peace and Human Development office, proposes ways of moving from the academic teachings toward concrete actions.

One of the volume's merits is the authors' effort to link each contribution to the others. Although touching very different issues, the book is not disjointed. This is not an easy achievement, especially in an interdisciplinary work. The volume also outlines very

well the TWN project. The hypothesis of the project that CST contributes significantly to economic prosperity deserves deep elaboration, and this book constitutes an excellent point of departure.

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## Faith in Politics: Religion and Liberal Democracy

**Bryan T. McGraw**

Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press,  
2010 (320 pages)

While theorists and scholars come at liberal democracy from a variety of angles, it is a rare work that brings many of these disparate points of view into conversation with one another. That he has succeeded in doing so would be reason enough to be grateful to Bryan T. McGraw, Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations at Wheaton College.

McGraw magisterially weaves together a variety of strands of thought and scholarship, beginning with the work of the late John Rawls and his commentators and critics, perhaps the dominant voices in Anglo-American liberal political theory. The book also features careful engagements with proponents of “deliberative democracy” (most prominently Jürgen Habermas), neo-Calvinist political theory (e.g., Jonathan Chaplin), and empirical scholarship on consociationalism and Christian Democracy in Europe.

The focal point of McGraw’s investigation is the ways in which liberal democratic theory can and cannot accommodate religious groups whose members wish to organize their lives in “illiberal” ways. Believing as they do that God’s sovereignty extends to all spheres of human existence, these “religious integrationists” pose a challenge to the “liberal consensus,” which insists both upon the reformation of religious belief to cohere with concepts of individual autonomy and upon the predominance of “public reason” (as opposed to faith-based argumentation) in the public square.

McGraw is not the first to find fault with this liberal consensus, but he is perhaps one of its most thorough and perspicacious critics. While it is impossible in a brief review to do justice to the lines of reasoning he develops at great length, it is possible to offer a couple of examples of how he argues. Much of John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* is devoted to developing the argument on behalf of an overlapping consensus of “political, not metaphysical” principles, while McGraw contends that we should rest satisfied with a more modest “constitutional consensus,” in which citizens “maintain a sincere commitment to constitutional democracy” (141) based, not on “political reasons,” but rather on, say, a comprehensive religious concept of personhood. Rawls would regard such a consensus as dangerously unstable, but McGraw argues that, on the contrary, any insistence that religious believers abandon their core commitments when it comes to politics runs the risk of provoking a reaction against constitutional democracy *tout court*. In other words, if the stability of democratic republicanism is a principal concern of those contemporary