

Catena sive Umbilicus:
A Christian View of Social Institutions

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According to an old saw, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who do not. This is but another way of saying that one should be somewhat skeptical of simplistic bifurcations, of attempts to reduce the varied diversity and complexity of human social life into a neat twofold either/or. Nonetheless, I am still going to take the risk and suggest that there are fundamentally two postures that are taken with respect to social institutions.¹ First, a negative view that judges them to be alienating and oppressive and something from which we need to be liberated. This view is represented perfectly by the opening sentence of Rousseau's *Social Contract* ("Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains"²), and by Karl Marx's notion of alienation. In a different way, it is also the view of social thinkers in the tradition of the Radical Reformation such as Leo Tolstoy and John Howard Yoder. The other view, obviously, affirms social institutions as built into our very humanity as social beings (Aristotle: "Man is a political animal") so that we only achieve our full potential as human beings when we are well-connected with others in a variety of relationships that nourish and feed us. This view is found in modern Christian social teaching including the Roman Catholic tradition from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* to John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* as well as the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition of Abraham Kuiper. So, two options, chains or lifeline to the placenta, *catena* or *umbilicus*?

Though it is a debatable point, it seems to me that today's conventional wisdom clearly favors the liberationist viewpoint. Social institutions are regarded as obstacles to a free and fulfilled life as each individual person chooses to define the good life. So women need to be liberated from the slavery of marriage in which their roles are to some degree ascribed. Hence, a "woman's right to choose" so that she "has control over her own body" is such an essential plank in the women's liberation movement. Babies have this inconvenient way of making demands on us, thereby limiting our freedom. Heterosexuals need to be liberated from their homophobia; whites from their racism; men from their sexism; animals from humans, and so forth. Social conventions or institu-

tions are reified as active agents of repression. Liberationists are fond of ascribing an “-ism” label to all viewpoints different from theirs thus always arrogating to themselves the moral high road. After all, who wants to be a “sexist,” a “militarist,” or even a “speciesist?”

In this perspective all social reality is seen to be constructed, and so-called “traditional values” as only an imposition by the oppressor class to benefit themselves. (Cf. the bumper sticker that reads “Hatred is not a family value”). All social reality is viewed through the lens of a conflict between oppressors and oppressed, victims and victimizers. The Judeo-Christian understanding of sin and morality is transformed into social categories so that we no longer speak simply of justice or racism but target *institutional* racism and *social* justice (a redundancy at best; at worst a mischievous Orwellian abuse of language used to rationalize unjust actions in the name of justice or compassion as in the case of affirmative action). Our contemporary society is flush with attitudes that flow from this anti-institutional animus. This attitude is reflected in the following expressions: “I love God (Jesus), but I want to have nothing to do with organized religion (the church)”; “Why should we get married, we love each other, isn’t that the important thing and not some ceremony or piece of paper” (That’s all that public vows mean?); “What can possibly be wrong with two men or two women marrying each other if they truly love each other?” Common practices such as easy divorce, cohabitation before marriage, social disrespect for parents, teachers, policeman and various offices such as minister, judge, senator and the President (this includes those who show disrespect for their own office by their conduct as well as those who act disrespectfully toward persons in office); disrespect for place (backward baseball caps in church; cell phone conversations during funerals; public conversation about intimate, personal matters that used to be private [Oprah, et. al.]); all these are indicators that the individual person and his or her feelings, wants, needs, are king and that all social reality must accommodate that royal prerogative.

Now that our culture has been debased in the manner I described is one thing; what is even more troubling, in my judgment, is that those who traditionally were the custodians of our civilization, who passed on to succeeding generations the civilizing attitudes, habits, customs, and wisdom learned by the hard lessons of life over centuries and millennia (Moses, Plato, Augustine, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Lord Acton, Leo XIII, Abraham Kuyper, Winston Churchill, Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, Alasdair MacIntyre, Thomas Sowell, Ronald Reagan, and Robert Sirico), it is these custodians who are currently leading the charge of barbarian subversion of order and freedom. The academy has become, in my judgment, the most corrupt of our social institutions

and the task undertaken by many academics to deconstruct the wisdom of the past by reducing what used to be regarded as the “permanent things” to simple power struggles under the categories of race, class, and gender—all of this does not produce greater freedom as is commonly thought by the knowledge class. In fact, that is my one thesis in this paper: Those who seek to be liberated from the “tyranny” of social institutions end up forfeiting the only possibility of living freely as human beings with dignity, value, and worth. That goal can only be achieved by strengthening the bonds of associative life among a free and moral people. It may seem counterintuitive to the intelligentsia of our day, but strong social institutions are essential to liberty, human fulfillment, and prosperity. To prove that thesis, I will first take a brief look at Karl Marx’s notion of alienation, then summarize the alternative vision of social institutions articulated with increasing clarity and persuasiveness over the years of the twentieth century by the two (overlapping) traditions inspired by Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper. The paper will conclude with a reflection on contemporary issues and prospects.

Karl Marx’s notion of alienation is not restricted to economics. It includes economics, of course, with his notion of “the surplus value of labor” along with Marx’s contention that in the modern industrial world the workers lack all control over what they produce—both in terms of initial capitalization of factories as well as profits made from the workers’ toil. Capital becomes an “alien power” of its own, controlling the workers.³ “It is no longer the laborer that employs the means of production, but the means of production that employ the laborer.”⁴ (Think of Charlie Chaplin’s magnificent assembly-line film vignette.) We can see how the notion of alienation is a metaphysical principle for Marx, extending far beyond work and economics because human beings are themselves the creators of the alien power that enslave them. “As in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalistic production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.”⁵

All social institutions, including religion, are human constructions, rather than metaphysically grounded entities. What is fascinating about this is that the invisible “alien power” (classism, sexism, racism) acquires metaphysical status even though one cannot identify it empirically, measure it, or discover when it has been defeated.⁶ What Marx does is to provide a certain status to social institutions with the notion of “property.” By “property” Marx has in mind more than land or tangible goods; included is the wide array of social institutions including marriage, family, science, art, and religion. For Marx, man is defined by his creative action, his production—he is *homo faber*. This must not be narrowly conceived in terms of toolmaking and productive industry alone, but in the broadest sense as the capacity for all creative work by which a man “raises a

structure in his imagination” and then “erects it in reality.”⁷ Alienation results from confusing these creations of human imagination (e.g., religion, capitalism) with actual human reality and giving them power to have control over us.

What is “actual human reality” for Marx? Here we need to come back to Marx’s concept of “property.” Marx argues that the fundamental alienation in a capitalist society boils down to the categorical division of “the whole of society ... into the two classes of property owners and the propertyless workers” (the “proletariat”). Recall that “property” for Marx includes the whole array of human social institutions. Alienation is overcome when private property is abolished and we are restored to full human life. In Marx’s words: “The positive abolition of private property and the appropriation of human life is therefore the positive abolition of all alienation, thus the return of man out of religion, family, state, etc. into his human, that is, social being.”⁸ Do not be misled by Marx’s use of the word *social* here. He is not referring positively to the whole range of social relationships in which we find ourselves (family, community, church, nation) but to *universal* humanity, to what Marx calls *species life*. It is to the extent that man is free from *particular* social relationships and “relates to himself as to the present living species,” that is, universal humanity, that he is truly emancipated.⁹ In the words of a *Peanuts* character: “I love humanity; it’s people I can’t stand.” Hence, the harsh attack by Marxist regimes on social institutions other than the state or the party. In particular, it is worth noting that monogamous marriage is usually the first target of revolutionaries. Exactly how we get there—the details of Marxist soteriology—are beyond the scope of this paper. Hegelian dialectics, even if I understood it, would take us far, far, afield.¹⁰

It is precisely on this issue that the tradition of Christian social teaching objects. In a tradition that goes back before Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, an alternative social vision began to take shape beginning with the work of Wilhelm von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz (1811-1877).¹¹ Two features stand out in this tradition: (1) a concern for the worker, particularly the plight of poor urban workers; (2) a sharp repudiation of socialism as the answer to (1). In *Rerum Novarum* there is a ringing defense of private property and a defense of, even encouragement for, workers to unite in labor associations (unions).

This emphasis on the right of association and rejection of statism arises from a profound sense that placing too much power in the state is dangerous. Abraham Kuyper knew this Catholic tradition well (in his 1891 address on poverty he cites von Ketteler and Leo with favor, even acknowledging that Protestants were way behind on this score)¹² and the right of association as well as the critique of socialism are common themes in the literature of the two traditions. That the dangers of growing state power was a major concern for both traditions is

clear from the signature terms that now identify their distinctive emphasis, *sphere sovereignty* and *subsidiarity*.

In his Stone Lectures on Calvinism, Kuyper defined sphere sovereignty thus: "In a Calvinistic sense we understand hereby, that the family, the business, science, art, and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the sovereignty of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority that rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the state does."¹³ Though implicit in earlier social declarations, the principle of subsidiarity first gets explicit mention in Pope Pius XI's encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them (no. 79).

The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly.... Therefore those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of "subsidiary function," the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State (no. 80).

The two concerns here are worries about the growing power of the state and the health of the various associative communities that make up society, with emphasis, it seems to me, on the latter. Key associations such as the family and the church have metaphysical grounding as well as serve as a buffer against state absolutism. The person who recognized the uniqueness of the level of associative life in the United States and that this flourishing of associations was a necessary check against tyranny, was Alexis de Tocqueville. As usual, Tocqueville captures this in a wonderful nugget of insight:

Despotism, by its very nature is suspicious, it sees the isolation of men as the best guarantee of its own permanence. So it usually does all it can to isolate them. Of all the vices of the human heart egoism is that which suits it best. A despot will lightly forgive his subjects for not loving him, provided they do not love each other.¹⁴

Statists, in other words, do not want us to give our loyalty to anything but the state. Be suspicious, therefore, of those who would take away parental rights and give them to the “village.”

It is for this reason that I said at the beginning that though it is counter-intuitive to conventional wisdom about liberation, emancipation *from* social institutions leads to chains. After the twentieth century we have empirical proof of that maxim. The destruction of associational life leaves only the naked individual person over against the almost illimitable power of the state. The path away from tyranny and toward liberty is the path of encouraging, nourishing, and defending a rich associational life with healthy social institutions. I think that this is a metaphysical truth rooted in our very nature as human beings created in the image of God, with inherent dignity, worth, and responsibility. So, *catena sive umbilicus*? Marriage and family are *not* chains inhibiting our self-development.

One quick concluding word: My subtitle says “Christian View of Social Institutions.” Why is the positive view of social institutions particularly Christian or biblical? It is not possible, I believe, to draw a model for contemporary society directly from biblical examples or biblical teaching. What I would say is that the perspective I sketched in this paper is *consistent* with a biblical worldview in at least three respects. First, it affirms the dignity and worth of humans as image bearers of God. Second, it is consistent with the biblical pattern of separating throne and altar and placing the monarch under divine and prophetic judgment (Samuel/Saul; David/Nathan; Elijah/Ahab; Amos/Amaziah; Peter before the Sanhedrin). Third, subsidiarity is consistent with the biblical pattern that responsibility for justice and compassion begins with the family (Jacob and Levi; Levirate marriage, the right of redemption [Ruth and Boaz]). Fourth, it is a bulwark against the apotheosis of the state and the moral-religious obligation of the first commandment.

Notes

1. Theoretically, it is possible to consider a third option that is neutral toward or indifferent to social institutions. John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* describes only two social realities: the individual and the state (civil society). Communities are formed when reasonable people subordinate their rights to the greater communal good. Even when Locke discusses marriage and family, he only does so in order to solve the problem of legitimating parental authority when “by nature” even children have the right to freedom. Social institutions have no ontological status in Locke, with the possible exception of “property,” which is a part of a human’s “natural right.” John Locke, *A Second Treatise on Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), chaps. 6–7.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1968), 49.

3. A reified “capitalism” as such does not exist; there are “capitalists,” there are free-market economies that require capital to fuel the engine of commerce, but it is a Gnostic notion of an “alien power” that serves as a rationale for speaking of “capitalism” as a “power” on its own. On the ideological dependence upon the notion of “alien power,” see Kenneth Minogue, *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

4. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1919), 339. I am indebted to Thomas Sowell for this citation, see *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics* (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 27.

5. *Ibid.*, 680–81; cited by Sowell, *Marxism*, 28.

6. See note 3 above.

7. John McMurty, *The Structure of Marx’s World-View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978),

22. The terminology is taken directly from the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*.

8. *Ibid.*, 88.

9. *Ibid.*, 81.

10. For a brief but clear summary of that tradition, see Michael Novak, *Freedom with Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), chap. 4.

11. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 24.

12. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 90.

13. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 509.

Reply to John Bolt’s “*Catena sive Umbilicus:* A Christian View of Social Institutions”

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A Brief Review

John Bolt dichotomizes opinions concerning the relevance of social institutions. There are the liberationists/Marxists who reject social institutions (especially traditional family values, community, organized religion, and capitalism) and those of the Christian/biblical view who hold the opinion that “strong social institutions are essential to liberty, human fulfillment, and prosperity.” Bolt’s essay also delineates opposing views of statism, offering a strong defense for subsidiarity.

As explained by Bolt, Marxists regard social institutions to be an “invisible alien power” that is at the root of racism, classism, and sexism. Thus, the destruction of these social institutions is necessary for man’s emancipation. But