CONTENDING WITH LIBERALISM

Some advice for Catholics

William Galston

What follows is an edited version of remarks by political philosopher William Galston made to a colloquium sponsored by Commonweal on "Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Pluralism." The colloquium is part of a project, titled "American Catholics in the Public Square," funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. One of the project's central interests is the relationship between Catholic social thought and political liberalism.

In the hope of exploring that relationship more fully, Commonweal asked Galston to contribute his reflections on the following proposition and accompanying questions: While Catholics have obviously worked out practical compromises with the liberal pluralism that has come to shape all aspects of American society, it is unclear whether Catholic social thought uses a moral vocabulary and indeed assumes a whole mindset alien to most Americans, including many Catholic Americans. Catholic social teaching seems to offer a comprehensive idea of the good and puts forth a vision of a harmonious social and political order. Liberalism eschews such comprehensive visions, is agnostic about the nature of the good, and accepts conflict and competition as more or less permanent, often productive features of society.

Where and to what extent does the Catholic tradition tend to mesh or clash with the various conceptions of liberal pluralism? Where can these traditions fruitfully engage each other? Where do certain aspects of one tradition or the other make cooperation unlikely or impossible?

THE EDITORS

I speak as someone who has gone through his own version of the experience of political homelessness, a sense of alienation from my own political party that many progressive pro-life Catholics talk about. I have spent the better part of two decades trying to remedy that situation within the Democratic Party. My counsel to Catholics is, go thou and do likewise. It is not easy. But wishing won't make it happen. To political problems there can only be a political remedy. To make the Democratic Party more responsive to Catholic social concerns will require that you really grapple with the very large changes occurring in society, the sorts of change that make any simple return the Democratic Party politics of the 1940s and 1950s impossible.

The politics of the 1940s and 1950s reflected the society and the economy and culture of the times, and those times are gone forever. The practical question is, how can the kind of moral understanding that Catholics found so attractive in that iron triangle of the Catholic church, the Democratic Party, and the labor unions be recreated in a manner that is appropriate to new circumstances? To deal with that question, several other questions must be raised and answered.

- How can a politics that was originated on behalf of an industrial working class be translated and updated for a new population where the growth sector is an upper-middle class based on the information economy? Demographic changes in American society point to an enormous shift in the past thirty years toward this new upper-middle class as the dominant force in American society and politics.

- How does Catholic social thought engage this new class?

- How does Catholic social thought deal with the dramatic shift in American social institutions away from notions of solidarity and toward expressive individualism?

The institutions characteristic of the 1940s and 1950s were

William Galston is professor at the School of Public Affairs and director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy at the University of Maryland. One of the nation's leading political philosophers, he is the author of Liberal Purposes (Cambridge) and Justice and the Human Good (University of Chicago). A longtime activist in the Democratic Party, Galston served as deputy assistant for domestic policy under President Bill Clinton, 1993-95. Professor Galston's full paper can be found at: www.catholicsinpublicsquare.org.

"I'm sorry to say you're not a free-think anything."
hierarchical and embodied principles of authority. The deconstruction of hierarchical institutions so characteristic of our age raises interesting questions, not only for a hierarchical church but also for a form of politics that looks back nostalgically to a concatenation of authoritative institutions that is no longer sustainable.

I don’t have an easy answer to those questions. In this regard, however, Alan Ehrenhalt’s wonderful book The Lost City (HarperCollins, 1996) is an essential text. One of the three exhibits is Ehrenhalt’s bill of particulars about the decline of so-called machine politics and the blue-collar Catholic neighborhood. If you ask what has been lost in the lost city, or what’s the most important thing that’s been lost, the answer is the idea of authority that constituted those institutions and society as a whole.

What is a sustainable idea of authority in contemporary circumstances? I’m not sure I know what the answer is, but I am sure what the answer isn’t. Social thought seeking an answer to that question must stand in the closest possible conjunction with empirical sociology. It must also be steeped in empirical political science and empirical economics (if there is any), as well as empirical psychology. We need to understand why the understanding of authority or the practice of authority characteristic of the 1940s and 1950s has eroded.

The acceptance of authority was related to very practical needs for goods—jobs, housing, sustaining urban working-class life—which only a certain kind of authority could provide. That practical need has diminished as a result of economic change and because of public assistance programs. Individuals are less dependent on both political machines and churches. In the eyes of those who benefitted from them, the older institutions have become less and less necessary. For example, aid is no longer funneled through the parish priest, or jobs through the ward committeeman. Our practical understanding of authority in modern circumstances has to be correlated with the concrete needs of people and how those needs can be satisfied under modern circumstances.

This challenge is made all the greater by the fact that in cultural matters we have moved increasingly toward what I call the “high-choice society.” On the theoretical level, Americans increasingly embrace an expansive notion of personal autonomy. On the practical level, that idea of autonomy becomes a hyper-expansive notion of individual choice, which is the closest thing to an inviolable norm that now exists in American culture. How does Catholic social thought engage this standard notion of individual choice and the concept of markets and capitalism that goes along with it? Catholic social theorists have to approach the new market forces more carefully and with greater understanding and precision. A simply moral engagement with an empirical phenomenon is not going to be very productive. A Catholic empirical economics must be developed.

In short, there’s a big distinction between embracing the proposition that man does not live by bread alone and not bothering to learn how a bakery operates in the modern world. There are new and improved ways of baking bread that make bread more available, more cheaply to more people. Without convicting myself of neo-liberalism, I think it’s important for Catholic social thought, having figured out how to engage productively with things such as representative democracy and modern notions of freedom of conscience, to work out an equally nuanced response to the modern market. A rejectionist stance won’t work. It didn’t work in the nineteenth century, and it won’t work now. In my judgment, Catholic social thought has a lot of work to do in that area. The categories of Catholic social thought can provide good frames, but those frames must be filled in with serious analysis—if I may be so bold, a much more serious economic analysis than the bishops undertook in preparing for and issuing their 1986 letter on the economy. As far as I was concerned, that letter was a weak contribution to public dialogue and deservedly neglected.

Similarly, the Catholic social critique of the American economy and political system ought to consider very carefully the relationship between the grounding commitments of the church’s teaching on the one hand, and the appropriate shape of a public welfare system on the other. I could make an argument that done right, pro-work welfare reform is more consistent with the dignity of the person than what it seeks to replace. A lot of Catholic social theorists adopted a stance of reflexive, knee-jerk opposition to welfare reform. But welfare reform was going to happen, and some more inventive thinking on the part of Catholics would have been helpful.
he appropriate response of Catholic social thought vis-à-vis the new global economy and the role of the state in that economy is a very complicated question that requires a great deal more thought. Though “New Democrats” such as myself identified with the need for economic growth, it is not our position that the state shouldn’t interfere with the market. Rather, we believe that as the economy changes, the form of the most appropriate and effective engagement of the state with the economy must also change. In some ways, the new economy drives toward a logic of greater state involvement rather than less. Let me give you just one example. It may be the case that economic trends over the next twenty years will put a great deal of pressure on the ability of employers to provide health care for their employees. If I’m right about that, the role of the state in provision of health care will increase dramatically. New Democrats are not opposed to that; it’s just a question of how best to do it.

On cultural issues, liberal orthodoxy on abortion, gay rights, and the absolute separation of church and state are especially neuralgic points in the dialogue with Catholicism. Recently, for example, an evangelical Christian society at Tufts University was disenfranchised by the university because it would not accept in its leadership a person who openly declared herself bisexual. That is a good example of what I call “exclusionary liberalism” or “liberal imperialism.” I am involved in a bipartisan interfaith group that’s trying to engage the question of gay rights and traditional religion. Of course, the fact that Tufts is a private university creates a different sort of constitutional and legal frame for discussion. But from the standpoint of a morally defensible understanding of liberalism, Tufts should not be in the position of, in effect, denying certain groups fundamental rights of association. I predict that as liberals think this one through they will come to the conclusion that Tufts and other universities are making a big mistake in telling associational groups what they must think or how they must organize themselves. The leading Supreme Court cases are clear on this point. To define the leadership of a voluntary organization is to define the soul of that organization. To tell the Boy Scouts or an evangelical club who can lead them is in effect to abolish the association. I think that’s a simple case theoretically, although it may turn out to be a hard and bitter one politically.

But theoretically and practically, the fact for Catholics to attend to is that there are some responsible liberal voices with whom many of these questions can be productively discussed. Let me be specific. Many of these conflicts revolve around the use of state mechanisms—and not just state mechanisms, but other institutions—to impose liberal norms on communities that are in disfavor. I speak as a liberal theorist here, when I say that liberals are almost always making a mistake even in their own terms when they do this. It’s important for Catholic social thinkers to understand that not all liberals are comfortable with liberal imperialism. Many of us believe that we’re violating our own principles in such situations. If you ask me, “Is it a good idea for public law to force Catholic hospitals to accept abortions contrary to the conscience of individual doctors and frequently contrary to the policies of the institutions?” my answer is no.

As a member of the Clinton administration, when I had any say at all in the laws and regulations tending in that direction, I tried to resist them. I did so not simply for prudential political reasons, although the Democratic Party is now in trouble with Catholic voters. More important, there is a principled liberal justification for defending Catholic hospitals and Catholic doctors in the face of public law that would coerce them on questions of conscience and public dispute. Everybody should understand that principle. For example, public laws that force individual homeowners to rent basement apartments to gays are wrong. There’s a fundamental distinction in liberal political philosophy between the public and the private. The boundary of that line will always be contested, but to abolish that line is to betray liberalism’s basic commitments. Any doctrine that says that everything is actually or potentially public is an antiliberal doctrine. Therefore fair housing laws have always distinguished in some rough-and-ready way between public accommodations and private dwellings. How one defines and acts upon that distinction is a complex matter, but no public housing law that I know of would declare a basement apartment in an individual’s home a public accommodation.

On the question of aid to Catholic schools, I think it is possible to say yes, but carefully and with qualifications. The Supreme Court is steering back toward the view that when done with care, public aid to parochial schools within the framework of general public purposes is to be welcomed. Al Gore, as you know, startled a number of people in his own party during the presidential campaign when he made a major speech not only endorsing the principle of “charitable choice” but also favoring its expansion.

Some liberals are absolutely closed-minded on the issue of the relationship between faith communities and public purposes. But I can tell you, as someone who was part of the dialogue leading up to Gore’s speech, that this is not a hopeless dialogue. I speak as someone who took a great deal of heat when I published an article about five years ago recommending a carefully monitored national voucher experiment.

Finally, I know how affronted not only conservative Catholics

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but also moderate and liberal Catholics feel by the exclusionary stance of the Democratic Party on the abortion question. Let me say frankly, I was horrified by the Democratic Party’s treatment of Pennsylvania Governor Bob Casey at the 1992 Democratic Convention. I protested against it to no avail. I believe the Democratic Party has made a serious and indeed historic mistake in turning Roe v. Wade into a litmus test for party leadership. I can’t say it any more flatly than that. Regrettably, I do not expect this to change any time soon. But there are people in positions of leadership in the party who believe it was a mistake.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the gap between Catholic social thought and liberal theory is much narrower than it was in the mid-nineteenth century, or even in the mid-twentieth. Catholicism has made its peace with constitutional democracy, individual rights, freedom of religious conscience, and the separation of church and state. At the same time, liberals are less inclined than they once were to emphasize self-interest at the expense of moral motivation, negative liberty at the expense of social justice, or rights to the exclusion of natural duties. Liberals are happy to reject “atomism” in favor of the social embeddedness of individuals—that is, as long as the social nature of personhood, as Catholic social thought conceives it, is not employed to deprive individuals of personal and political liberties.

Today, there is a real possibility that a fruitful dialogue and mutual learning can take place between liberal political and social philosophy rightly understood and Catholic social thought rightly understood. That judgment reflects my own particular theoretical and practical proclivities. I have never believed that the concept of rights made sense without the concept of responsibilities. I have never believed in the atomism that is sometimes ascribed to liberals. Liberal theory and liberal social philosophy can be construed in a way that most “liberal” Catholics would be pretty comfortable with them.

The terms of that engagement now have to be made more specific. Theoretically, it seems to me, it would make a lot of sense for Catholic social thinkers to grapple with the following issues:

- First, they should critique the expansive and unnuanced account of personal autonomy that is the long pole in a number of liberal theoretical tents these days.

- Second, Catholic social thought ought to grapple with what I’ve called “exclusionary” norms of public discourse. I’m thinking of controversies like those between the gay community and the Boy Scouts, and between abortion-rights advocates and Catholic hospitals that serve the public at large. I think it is extremely important to nail this one down, and to make common cause with liberals and people of goodwill around the proposition that an inclusive concept of public discourse allows people to say in public what they really believe, without being forced to filter their thought through a secular screen.

- Third, it’s important for Catholic social thinkers to engage with forms of moral thought that are neither relativistic nor harmonistic. And there are such forms. In some of my recent writings I have concentrated on the moral thought of Isaiah Berlin, and what I’ve discovered is that there is a substantial contemporary movement of what might be called “value pluralism.” Like Catholic moral thought, value pluralism holds that the distinction between good and bad or good and evil is objective and inscribed in the nature of things. But unlike Catholic moral thought, value pluralism holds that there is no single, binding, rationally compelling account of the hierarchy of goods leading to a summun bonum. I am increasingly inclined toward that plural objective view of the moral universe. I would suggest that such views are widely held among liberals and in the culture generally. What does Catholic social thought think about a form of pluralism that is both objective and nonhierarchical? How does that affect anything Catholics care about? I think that is worth thinking about.

Important differences remain, however. Some liberals embrace skepticism or relativism about the human good; some downplay the moral role of the state or seek to exclude faith-based arguments from public discourse; some emphasize the civic prerogatives of the state at the expense of family and associational autonomy. Clearly Catholics must reject these versions of liberalism. Liberals for their part must resist the use of theology and natural law as a basis of coercive state policy. It is one thing for Catholics, reasoning within the premises of their community, to reach conclusions about abortion, assisted suicide, and homosexuality that are held to be binding on the faithful; quite another to impose those views on others. Catholics may be confronted by a legal code that permits acts they view as abominable. But in circumstances of deep moral diversity, the alternative to enduring these affronts is even worse.