

Catholic Social Teaching: Not-so-secret anymore?

Anna Rowlands

Is Catholic Social Teaching starting to capture the political imagination? Dr Anna Rowlands explores the increasing interest of UK politicians in the Church's 'best-kept secret', and discusses many initiatives that are already underway to bring politicians and advocates of Catholic Social Teaching into conversation with one another.

It is increasingly acknowledged, indeed by some surprising sources, that Catholic Social Teaching offers one of the most persuasive and morally interesting responses to the recent financial crisis. Figures including Labour peer and Jewish advocate of Catholic Social Teaching, Lord Glasman, and Jon Cruddas, MP for Dagenham and Rainham and head of Labour's policy review, have found themselves drawn to the resources of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on themes as wide ranging as the dignity of labour, the right to a living wage and the vision of a civil economy. For these politicians, and a growing number of economic figures who speak of their interest in these ideas more privately, CST envisions a world of value, relationship and social creativity beyond the narrow confines of a framework couched primarily in the language of profit, marketization, choice and endless consumption. The opportunity to make the case for a Catholic vision of economic life is currently great: many of the alternative narratives have run into moral cul-de-sacs and there is a greater openness to a degree of reflection on the last three or four decades of policy-making, its social impact and the model of the human person at its heart.

This thesis was at the heart of an edition of the BBC Radio 4 public policy programme, *Analysis*, broadcast (perhaps ironically) on 5 November 2012. Matthew Taylor, former Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit under Tony Blair and not himself a Catholic, explained that he was intrigued that the secular Left was turning towards the resources of CST. For advocates on the Left it appears to offer a comprehensive vision of a



Photo by slices of light at flickr.com

politics that once again places a vision of the human person and an account of the human relationships at the heart of social institutions. It also offers a three-fold emphasis that is helping the Left to re-orient its politics: a set of reasons why talking about morality and justice in economic life is a necessity; the need for a constructive account of the role of the state that does not see the State as bearer of *all* responsibility for the common good; and finally a vision of broad-based

participation to build a much stronger civil society – a base condition for social flourishing and political renewal. This was put in more straightforward and everyday language by Jon Cruddas: 'You can't park the way you live at the door of the office or business. It has to be maintained into all aspects of your civic duties: patterns of employment, the tax you pay and the way we care for the environment'.

When I was interviewed for the broadcast I was taken aback somewhat by the strength of concern regarding the capability of CST to interact in the public square. I was asked several questions (which were not aired) which explored the line of thought that promoting CST is really just a clever media ploy to cover up bad news stories about the Church. Following along these lines I was asked to explore whether drawing on CST now was an attempt to put forward the acceptable face of the Church. One accusation was that (to quote Taylor), 'You've put all the controversial personal morality stuff in the naughty drawer, but at some point you'll be asking these politicians and business leaders to take all this, too, as the price for the "gift" of Catholic Social Teaching'. The benefit of being interviewed by

someone who stands in a very different space is that their concerns and thought processes are challenging: some people find the notion of a ‘Catholic’ social teaching very difficult to stomach, and it is important to understand how something that we consider to be a ‘gift’ can be perceived by others. Conspiracy theories aside, the deeper questions underlying this line of interviewing were actually about the fitness of CST to be a genuine partner in a context marked by plurality. This is not to be mistaken for a desire to relativise truth or morality, but it expressed (I think) a genuine concern for a form of dialogue that makes possible the negotiation of goods and truths in a truly complex age. This is an important and interesting question. Both Glasman and Cruddas had interesting thoughts on how we face this challenge. Glasman, influenced by the interaction of CST with community organising ventures ([Citizens UK](#) in particular) suggests that CST, in rejecting a revolutionary path, manifests a slow and patient theory of change. Whilst this takes time and can seem laborious, in fact it opens a space for change that can be genuinely plural: incarnated and practised into being within institutions, networks and organisations; and made more powerful and sustainable by its willingness to bridge and negotiate across groups and institutions. In turn, Cruddas suggests that we need to think about a gradual process in which ‘exiled traditions’ (of which CST is one) are brought back into play at all levels of political community. Such exiled traditions do not arrive to dictate the terms, but are speakers of truth and value, and embodiments of desire and virtue, necessarily set within a pluralist architecture of political practices – and, we might add, CST needs to be committed to speak, act and listen with humility as well as confidence. And of course, CST will not remain unchanged by this encounter.

Taylor concluded the programme with the challenging thought that two factors could inhibit the chances of CST contributing to the moment: firstly, that a desire for episcopal control would fail to let a necessarily complex and creative lay flowering of CST unfold across professions and sectors. Secondly, that politicians and economists would give in to the temptation to instrumentalise CST, picking the elements that suited and ignoring the ones that did not, thus undermining its fundamental coherence. On this latter question, Taylor seems to have had in mind the tendency of each political party to adopt sections of CST enthusiastically, yet struggle to treat it as a whole. The Labour tradition

has tended to feel more at home with the structural elements of CST on work, wages and social solidarity. It has not done so well on war and peace, on protecting a space for civil society, and New Labour continued with a heavy dose of a procedural rights and duties liberalism without an equal focus on the relational character of the political.

In turn, Conservatives have tended to approve of CST’s critique of socialism; they are drawn to the language of subsidiarity and to the prior political integrity of the family, and have felt more comfortable than their Labour or Liberal Democrat neighbours in reading Catholic moral theology alongside CST. However, they have fallen increasingly out of love with the idea that the State has a substantial and active role to play in establishing the common good, a tendency more dramatic in the US than in Britain at present. The Liberals, whilst drawn to the language of human dignity, the positive appraisal of human rights and the unceasing emphasis on social justice and subsidiarity in CST, have struggled more with the notion of a common good – indeed at times with the very language of the common good as the moral basis for politics. And frankly each party has fought shy of the profoundly challenging teaching of CST on immigration. Historically, there has been no party completely at ease with the full spread of CST: Taylor was surely right to highlight such challenges.

Part of the impetus for the *Analysis* programme were a series of lectures held in Cambridge in February and March 2012; a major international symposium on the Crisis of Capitalism and the Common Good held in late November; and the related but separate ‘A Blueprint for Better Business?’ initiative supported by the Archbishop of Westminster.

The aim of the Margaret Beaufort lectures was three-fold: to better acquaint a public audience in Cambridge and beyond with the content of CST on economic life; to test our theory that CST really is a useful analytic and pastoral tool for economic renewal; and to push CST to develop a more mature analysis where we felt it needed some good, lay expert prodding. The lectures, delivered in February and March 2012 and serialised in brief in *The Tablet*, threw up more questions than answers – but this was perhaps exactly what taking CST seriously required. These questions included: if CST talks of ‘structures of sin’, does it make sense to

think of the need for ‘structures of virtue’ in economic life – or even of virtuous institutions? CST’s response to the economic crisis is structural and is not primarily about an individualist morality: it goes well beyond a call for ‘moral’ bankers. What is the place of money in understandings of the common good – and, particularly, is CST as clear as it might be about whether money (and particularly the monetary system) is thought of as a public or private good? Catherine Cowley argued in the final lecture of the series that CST has avoided addressing this question directly, and yet it must. Given the power of money to generate well-being or misery, to enable or frustrate the conditions for solidarity, is it not almost self-evident that the monetary system is a public not a private good? Whilst Pope Benedict’s encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* spoke directly to the earlier stages of the financial crisis, it did not deal so clearly with these issues as they were manifest in the subsequent sovereign debt crisis.

The Symposium took on these questions, exploring them at what we called the ‘mezzo level’, the mid-level often ignored by CST between the macro/global and the micro/personal. For example, Professor Geoff Moore from Durham looked at practices of virtue and excellence inside businesses, drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre to comment on an area largely neglected by CST. The conversation was dominated by the idea of a civil economy, [a vision of which was developed in *Caritas in Veritate*](#). Civil economy advocates argue that we must consciously address markets as part of a wider moral economy, and root a new economic model in a commitment to substantive justice in prices, wages and rates of interest. They promote a vocational economy based on apprenticeships, professional associations, and the sharing of risk and profit through mutualised banking, finance and cooperative arrangements. Professor Stefano Zamagni and Dr Adrian Pabst spoke on this, exploring the role of mutuality and trust in building economic renewal. The final core thread to civil economy perspectives is the emphasis placed on the role of the State as a moral rather than neutral actor. In this role, the State should rewrite company law to foster the internal ethos of firms and reward businesses that deliver both social benefit and modest profit. Jon Cruddas and Maurice Glasman explored a version of this in their vision of a new economic model for the Labour movement, including a living wage, a cap on interest payments and worker representation on remuneration committees. Their foundational cat-

egories for economic renewal are decentralised institutions, vocational training and a commitment to labour value. John Pugh MP explored the thinking of T.H. Green, a neglected strand within the Liberal tradition, and the tantalising potential for a renewal of a Liberal Christian contribution. These ideas were heard alongside rich theological input on the role of natural law, the place of spirituality and silence, and the parallel contributions of the Anglican tradition.

I will end with a postscript on the importance of the political. Catholic Social Teaching is praised for its ability to move up and down the ethical order, to speak to the international and global as much as to the local and personal. Perhaps where it is rather weaker is at the level of conversations about the shape and commitments of the national political community. CST has found it harder to develop an account of democracy or to respond to the challenges of negotiating public policy at the level of the nation-state. And yet politicians and policy makers are keen for CST to step up to this mark. If it is to grasp the full extent of the crisis of capitalism, it will need to develop a greater degree of comfort when it comes to engaging in questions of public policy-making at the national level, and develop a language for talking about the shifting character of the State and its practices. This is likely to be particularly true in relation to pressing policy developments in welfare, immigration, education, criminal justice, housing and healthcare as well as narrower economic matters. (This is to say nothing of the related and pressing climate and environmental matters at micro, mezzo and global level.)

The steps to brokering the relationships necessary to have fruitful conversations are often small: as one of our symposium participants commented, too often Catholics have the conversation about economic life and practices without the politicians in the room as participants and responsible agents. Brokering a wide-ranging conversation along these lines is exactly what the initiatives described above have sought to do. Those who do not often sit down together around a table and listen to one another have been brought into dialogue and relationship, sharing perspectives, burdens and solutions. In my estimation that experience has been as valuable a contribution to the common good as the many ideas we have generated and shared.

Dr Anna Rowlands is a Lecturer in Theology and Ministry at King's College, London; Research Associate at the Von Hugel Institute, St Edmund's College, Cambridge; and co-founder of a new network for Catholic Social Teaching and Practice.