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Promoting what we Oppose - Part 2

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Promoting what we Oppose - Part 2

Abstract

In the first part of this series it was argued that there is an inextricable bond between economic and cultural liberalism such that when Catholics identify the faith with the defence of neoliberal economics, even though they may oppose abortion, they end up promoting exactly that which they oppose. In this the second part this point is expanded upon and the argument made more explicit and that by reference to Pope Francis' recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudium Evangelii*. The Exhortation evidences a view of matters economic that sits ill with capitalism, a point understood by Catholic commentators who champion Neoliberalism. This essay argues that Francis' comments are nothing new, especially when compared to what John Paul II and Benedict XVI have written on the subject; indeed, that Francis' Exhortation can be seen as a tempering of their critique of economic liberalism. The essay attempts to tease out what it is that informs the critique of the popes and shows that it has to do with what flows out from the rejection of metaphysics proper, a rejection that defines Modernity, and which ends in the deracination of all things such that even the very concept of 'substance' is dissolved and, thereby, all is made plastic and malleable, including human life. The important point the essay wishes to make is this: the popes are quite clear that the form a culture's economy takes can both ground and exacerbate this anti-essentialist logic, what's more *the* economy above all others that does this is the one they identify with neoliberal capitalism. As a consequence, Catholics who champion this form of economic theory must think seriously as to whether or not they or the popes are wrong on this matter.

The Substance of Things Hoped For: On the Faith and the Economy

(Promoting what we Oppose, Part 2)

Robert Tilley

In an essay for *The New York Review of Books* entitled ‘The Tea Party Jacobins’, Mark Lilla commented upon the profound similarity between the Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Street movements; the former movement being identified with the Right of politics, the latter with the Left. This similarity was especially evident in respect of the concept of freedom, both movements evidence a “radical individualism” and desire for “private autonomy” expressed in matters both moral and economic. It is a concept of freedom, says Lilla, “rooted in the American mind.”¹ Lilla’s insights as to the concept of freedom informing American culture are nothing new, after all it informs something of the thesis of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1838) and, more pertinently for the purposes of this essay, it can be said to inform Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical in which he condemned a form of liberalism associated with what some at the time were referring to as ‘Americanism’.²

Furthermore, in certain quarters of the Left there has been for some time now a critique of liberalism and its understanding of freedom by reason that it is held to be little more than a dissimulated form of American (including NATO) imperialism. An imperialism that uses the discourse of freedom and human rights in order to further the reach of neo-liberal economics not least by justifying armed intervention.³ We might add to this the fact

¹ M. Lilla ‘The Tea Party Jacobins’ *The New York Review of Books* 27/5/10 (53).

² *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899). For me perhaps the best expression of ‘Americanism’ in which right and left converge is in the work by the anarchist theorist Alexander Berkman (1870-1936) *The ABC of Anarchism* (reprinted by Dover Publications, Mineola New York, 2005). Following a failed assassination attempt he was deported from America to Russia, he fell in with the Bolshevik revolution only later to be exiled from Soviet Russia on account of his anarchist ideas. He was praised by no less a figure than H. L. Mencken, a hero of the American libertarian Right, and when one reads Berkman’s primer on anarchism it is not too difficult to see why the right would praise him. Berkman argued, as might be expected, for as little state interference on individuals as possible; for decentralization and the extinction of collectivism (286-8); and for the material independence of individuals where the principle is that an individual must help him or herself (285). Anarchy is not “disorder and chaos” rather because “disorder is the child of authority and compulsion” then no “government” means “freedom and liberty” and “order” (181). The reason for the problems of the time is that “Authority controls our lives from the cradle to the grave – authority parental, priestly and divine, political, economic, social and moral” (179). Anarchy will bring with it “a new culture of a new humanity” (209). And so it is that Berkman cites Thomas Jefferson in what has become one of the more famous phrases today among American libertarians on the Right, “That government is best which governs least” (169). By and large there is little to distinguish Berkman’s fundamental concept of individual liberty as autonomy, an autonomy that must inform matters moral and economic, from that view of liberty espoused by Ayn Rand.

³ The best known exponent of this way of thinking is Noam Chomsky; see for example his *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*, London, Pluto Pr., 1999. Chomsky’s books can, at times and in parts, be a little tendentious, but among a number of other works on this theme see the following: J. Peck *Ideal Illusions: How the U.S. Government Co-opted Human Rights*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2010; R. Seymour *The Liberal Defence of Murder*, London, Verso, 2008 (see too his critique of Christopher Hitchens for promoting this liberal agenda in *Unhitched: The Trial of Christopher Hitchens*, London, Verso, 2012 (in the Counterblasts series); E. Weizmann *Least of all Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*, London, Verso, 2011. On the rhetoric of liberalism allied to democracy and freedom see J. Dean *Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, Durham, Duke University Pr., 2009. Dean follows the lead of Slavoj Žižek. As with Chomsky one is spoilt for choices from Žižek’s oeuvre but perhaps the book most representative of his critique is his *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London, Verso, 2009. Žižek notes in

that historians, again notably on the Left, have begun to trace something of the illiberal history of ostensibly progressivist liberal ideals and institutions.⁴ Of added pertinence to our topic is that authors have shown how liberalism has also sought to enforce its dominance over especially poorer countries through population control measures involving both contraception and abortion.⁵ What's more these are measures that have, from very early on in the piece, included the agenda of eugenics.⁶ Finally, others have commented upon what seems, on the surface at least, a strange juxtaposition joining those who claim to be conservative and concerned about morality with what is, if not an immoral system of economics, then an amoral one.⁷

Liberalism and freedom, progressivism, free-market capitalist economics, abortion and eugenics are all said to be – at least by the authors cited – entwined together in a distinctly modern form of imperialism. And they are so in a manner that obscures, if not dissimulates, their connection, this being a sure sign of their ideological provenance.⁸ (It

his *Living in the End Times* (New York, Verso, 2010) that liberalism moves between two poles, economic liberalism (Republicanism) and political liberalism (Democrats) and that capitalists like Bill Gates are the masters of both (37-38, and 338). See too his *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London, Profile Books, 2008) where he observes how caring capitalists like Gates have a distinct preference for “spirituality” of “non-confessional meditation” over old fashioned religion (18). ‘Spirituality’, of course, is congenial to a consumer economy.

⁴ For example Domenico Losurdo's *Liberalism: a Counter History*, London, Verso, 2011. See too Ishay Landa's *The Apprentice's Sorcerer: Liberal Tradition and Fascism*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2010. Also Mark Mazower's *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton, Princeton Uni. Pr., 2009 (Mazower traces out the early racist ideas that informed first of all the League of Nations and then the U.N., until the rise of East Asian figures such as Nehru.

⁵ See Matthew Connelly's *Fatal Misconception: the Struggle to Control World Population*, London, The Belknap Pr. of Harvard Uni. Pr., 2008. Connelly's work is not of a religious nature but secular and of the Left. For a more strident take on the subject see J. Kasun's *The War against Population: the Economics and Ideology of World Population Control*, San Francisco, Ignatius Pr., 1999. Kasun comes from a rather different political perspective and in fact argues that liberalism is down to government interference and the markets ought to be left to sort things out (32-34). The Catholic pro-life website, *Life Site News*, regularly details the use of economic measures, especially aid, to push population control measures on African and other countries in the global south, and this usually by American agencies and billionaires such as Bill and Melinda Gates and more recently it was revealed (by the *National Review*) Warren Buffett. One of the means by which liberalism justifies its coercive ‘humanitarian’ and ‘charitable’ practices, especially in respect of the global south, is by use of the discourse of concern about ‘over-population’ and ‘limited resources’. But in fact the reason there is a lack in certain countries has little if anything to do with these matters, but, one might say, has everything to do with the imposition of neo-liberal market theories. See Jean Ziegler's *Betting on Famine: Why the World still goes Hungry*, New York, The New Press, 2013.

⁶ Edwin Black *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*, New York, Four Walls and Eight Windows Pr., 2003. Black writes from a position on the Left and covers not only America but Europe as well (Australia too gets a look in). Black notes that the Catholic Church was one of the few voices raised against eugenics in the first part of the twentieth century a position it held with the more strident elements in the Trade Union movement (233-4). See too M. Freedén ‘Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity’ in his *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imagination and Twentieth Century Progressive Thought*, Princeton, Princeton Uni. Pr., 2005; Troy Duster *Backdoor to Eugenics* (with an Introduction by Pierre Bourdieu), New York, Routledge, 2003.

⁷ P. Dardot and C. Laval *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, London, Verso, 2013. The authors note the tensions with neoliberal and market logic, not least that “neo-conservatism has become established as the standard ideology of the New Right, even though ‘the high moral tone’ of this ideology seems incompatible with the ‘amoral’ character of neo-liberal rationality” (309). Their answer is that the apparent contradiction masks a deeper rapport.

⁸ In older political treatments of ideology dissimulation was one its chief characteristics, space does not permit our going into this matter any deeper but for an overview of the subject see my ‘The Birth of Ideology: Genesis and the Origins of Self-Deception’ in *Crucible* 5.1, May 2013.

probably does not need to be said that the authors cited are *not* sympathetic to a distinctly Catholic position on the matters raised.)

Much turns upon the way in which we understand ‘freedom’. Indeed, it can be argued that Modernity is, above all else, a change in the way that European culture conceived of freedom and that from at least the late Renaissance on. The ‘turn’ might be put in the form of a question: does freedom designate the ability to accord with one’s nature proper, a nature that is an ontological given; or does freedom designate the ability *not* to have to accord with *anything* that might be said to be an ontological given? In light of more contemporary debates the difference can be put like this: is freedom to be understood as the freedom to bring oneself into accord with a given nature; or is freedom to be understood as the freedom *from* any given nature?⁹ And in light of our answer how are we to understand progress?¹⁰

As Mark Lilla intimates, according to which view of freedom dominates the culture will orient itself by way of its politics, its theology, and its economics, and it will do so shaping apparently antagonistic political positions. It is probably superfluous to say that the view that dominates will, being promulgated in the political and economic *structures* of the culture, become all the more engrained and, thereby, all the more dominant. It will become, to borrow from Antonio Gramsci (who borrowed from Lenin), the *hegemonic concept* that will inform and shape all discourse and, thereby, consciousness as well.

It was for reasons such as the above that the first essay in this series stated that there is an ‘organic’ relationship between economic liberalism and cultural liberalism; each ‘grows’ out of the other; each is inextricably linked to the other by reason of sharing the same

⁹ Something of this thinking can be seen in contemporary political theory. For example see John Rawls comments in his *Political Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Pr., 2005). Rational autonomy, Rawls writes, is to be equated with political autonomy (28) and this correspondence is predicated upon there being no “metaphysical doctrine of the person...presupposed,” indeed such a doctrine is positively disavowed (29). This then plays out in respect of abortion that only the woman concerned has a “duly qualified right to decide” on whether or not the unborn child should live (nb. 32 p. 243). In Rawls’ system liberalism is based upon the absence of any metaphysical doctrine of personhood, which absence translates into the rational and political autonomy of an individual. There is no transcendent reference over and above an individual which necessitates that individual defer to an authority other to itself (except pragmatically so in that one has to operate within a society of other individuals). In other words, non-metaphysics, autonomy, the right to abortion, and immanence are all entwined. This is a point of fundamental significance for the arguments of the popes (see below). See too the analysis of liberalism by Norberto Bobbio (*Liberalism and Democracy*, New York, Verso, 2005). Bobbio notes Kant’s famous identification of individual and political autonomy with ‘maturity’ (17). This then translates into a political liberalism that sees the state as having limited powers and functions (6) except insofar as it guarantees the legal freedom of individuals (19). “Without individualism there can be no liberalism,” observes Bobbio (9). He cites Friedrich von Hayek as insisting upon the “indissolubility of the connection between economic liberty and liberty *tout court*” (81). As John Stuart Mill famously summed up the matter: “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way” (‘On Liberty’ in *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women*, London, Penguin Books, 2006, p.19). The accent being on the individual’s own good and not on a good as determined and defined by metaphysics, a good that would apply to all. J. B. Schneerwind in his *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, CUB, 1998) writes that it was Kant who “invented” the concept of morality as being one informed by autonomy (3). Schneerwind does, however, note that the primary source for Kant’s view of autonomy was the accent that the Reformers like Luther and Calvin placed on a man standing alone before God. On faith being, first and foremost, a *private* faith (30-33). In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, para. 87, Kant wrote: “Autonomy of the will is the property the will has of being a law to itself...Hence the principle of autonomy is ‘Never to choose except in such a way that in the same volition the maxims of your choice are also present as universal law.’”

¹⁰ For a Left critique of progress as being a part of the discourse of liberalism and thus of capitalism, see Massimo Salvadori’s *Progress can we do Without It?* (London, Zed Books, 2006).

foundational concept of freedom and being informed by the same logic that operates out of that foundational concept. It is a concept of freedom that is anti-essentialist, which is to say opposed to metaphysical definition. As a rule in public discourse ‘economic liberalism’ is identified with the Right of politics, while ‘cultural liberalism’ is associated with the Left. In the first essay it was adumbrated that at the heart of both is abortion (and the other accoutrements of what John Paul II termed ‘the Culture of Death’). This is because abortion is the concrete expression of the operation of a concept of freedom fundamental to the rise of capitalism proper in the Modern period, a concept that has come into its own in the development of neo-liberal economic theory especially so since the late 1970s.¹¹ Abortion stands as the *clear* expression of the ideological dominance of the capitalist concept of freedom in that everything, including human life, has become alienated from all inherent value and meaning – that is, all *ontological* value and meaning – and is tied to the value and meaning consequent on the market values of a predominantly consumer society. A consequence of this is that regardless of how often those who are cultural-liberals rail against the spread of global capitalism, by arguing for the right to abortion they champion a principle that legitimises capitalism at its foundation and ensures its continued rise to dominance.

But the concern of the first essay was to argue the obverse; the same holds true in respect of economic-liberals who fight against abortion for, insofar as they champion capitalism, they champion abortion. When *First Things*, a conservative and orthodox Catholic periodical based in America, champions neo-liberal economics then, although the magazine opposes abortion, it is, in fact, effectively *promoting* abortion. Why this should be so was only touched upon in the earlier essay and it was the intention of this the second essay to unpack the reasons for this being the case. Only, as Jeeves often remarked to Bertie Wooster (citing no less an authority than Robbie Burns), “the best laid plans of mice and men oft run a-gley.” But sometimes they do so in a rather satisfying manner.

Pope Francis’ Exhortation

Shortly after the publication of the first essay of this series, in fact two days or so after, Pope Francis published his Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, which Exhortation excited a good deal of comment on the topic that is the concern of this series, not least from those associated with the magazine *First Things*. Gloating is not, of course, good form, but as with all sins, mortal and venial, we often overestimate our ability to resist temptation until, that is, we fall and are left undone. If I should sound smug my only defence is that it is hard not to be; it is not often that one’s timing is so exquisite. As we will see below there was good reason to hold that what Francis said in his Exhortation fits rather well with what was being argued for in this series.

It was also mentioned in the first essay that this critique of *First Things* is not in the way of a mere academic exercise, for the influence that the magazine (and those associated with it, not least by way of the American think-tank The Heritage Foundation) has on the Catholic Church in Sydney and thereby on the Church in Australia, is not inconsiderable. As

¹¹ This is not to say that such theories were not developing prior to this date or that they did not have some clout. But this is not the place to rehearse the history of liberal economic theory and how it came to be summed up in the tussle between Keynes and Hayek and their respective followers especially those involved in what is often referred to as the Chicago School. In giving the date of the mid to late 1970s I am following what can be called the general opinion. See David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford Uni. Pr., 2005; but especially Daniel Stedman Jones *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, Princeton, Princeton Uni. Pr., 2012.

in America, so too here, the idea being championed is that the defence of the faith, the family, and the free-market is of a piece.¹² The entrance of Francis' Exhortation onto the scene means that a number of points have to be established and clarified, not least that which concerns the degree of continuity between Francis' arguments and those of his predecessors. The argument in this essay is that the Exhortation is *not* a departure from what his predecessors have written (focusing on John Paul II and Benedict XVI) but in fact could be seen as a *popularising* of their critique, thereby aiming for a wider audience.

Following on from an overview of Francis' Exhortation and the writings of John Paul and Benedict, the question will then be asked, what is the substance of their critique of our culture and how does it pertain to capitalism proper? The latter discussion will answer to some of the questions not addressed in the first essay of this series, but the intention is that it prepares the way for the third part in that it clarifies what the foundational issues are, as well as what they were in respect of the Bible and subsequent Church discussion and rulings.

Again, it ought to be clear that this is no disinterested academic exercise, far from it; yes it is academic but it is very much partisan in that I am *opposing* any identification of the truths of the faith and the protection of human life from conception on, as well as the integrity of the family and the protection of the poor and vulnerable with the promulgation of capitalism, neo-liberal economics, or the free-market. In sum, to promote economic liberalism is to promote the Culture of Death; is to promote what the Faith opposes.

And with that we will take up the discussion proper.

Reading the Signs of the Times

A recurrent theme from the Second Vatican Council on has been the call by successive Popes to 'read the signs of the times', in doing this the Church reflects upon how she should speak to the world and, thereby, answer to the world's deepest and most hidden yearnings; 'yearnings' hidden from the world itself. Now Pope Francis has called for the same in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: "It is not the task of the Pope to offer a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality, but I do exhort all the communities to an 'ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times' [*Francis is quoting Paul VI*]. This is in

¹² In the last essay I noted that Robert George, a regular contributor to *First Things* and the Heritage Foundation, gave a talk in Sydney, at the Cathedral, on the five pillars of a decent and dynamic society, how the defence of the free market and the family stand or fall together. Last year the liberal senator Cory Bernardi published his book *The Conservative Revolution* (Ballarat, Connor Court Pub., 2013 – Connor Court is a publishing house with a very strong Catholic orientation). In his book Bernardi argues for four pillars to a good society: faith; family; "our flag"; and free-enterprise. Bernardi was the key note speaker at Family Life International's 2014 Board of Advisors Gala Dinner on 22/2/14. Family Life International is the most prominent among Australian Catholic pro-life groups. The reference to 'pillars' appears to be a common trope for Niall Ferguson in his *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die* (New York, Penguin, 2013) likewise sees there as being four pillars to a good society. These according the dust jacket are representative government, rule of law, civil society, and yes the free market. Ferguson is a little more to the point as he refers more to "capitalism" than the 'free-market' – these pillars are, he writes, the "key components of our civilization" (11). Apropos of the American influence on the Sydney Church it might also be noted that the President of Campion College, a Catholic liberal arts college, is Ryan Messmore who comes via the Heritage Foundation. I stress that this in no way impugns the sincerity or the ability or the faith of those whom I have mentioned, it is simply to show that there *is* a relationship of some sort between a distinctly American and free-market view of things and the Church in Sydney.

fact a grave responsibility, since present realities, unless effectively dealt with, are capable of setting off processes of dehumanisation which would be hard to reverse.”¹³

Given the tendency in the press to claim that the pontificate of Francis represents a decisive break with the pontificates of Benedict XVI and John Paul II it is significant that by far the greatest amount of citations in Francis’ Exhortation are from the works of his two predecessors. It would be wrong, however, to think that Francis was merely out to dispel malicious rumours not least because of what begins to become clear as one reads through the Exhortation; Francis sees in the encyclicals and writings of John Paul and Benedict (and Paul VI as well) the foundation for a critique of ‘present realities’, or to put it another way *the means* by which we are able effectively to read ‘the signs of the times’.

Following the lead of both John Paul and Benedict Francis holds that the root problem shaping our world today is something expressed in the experience of what he refers to as the “void” and “desertification”.¹⁴ But what exactly does he mean by this? We need to understand that it is not simply a matter concerning the innermost feelings that characterise an individual’s life, rather does it refer, first and foremost, to the way in which community and solidarity are dissolved in today’s culture, and that under the banner of freedom, such that we find ourselves more and more alienated from others. What’s more, being alienated we find a freedom that is far from liberating, is in fact a confinement. We find ourselves confined even when – *exactly when* – we think ourselves as free individuals. “To be self-enclosed,” Francis writes, “is to taste the bitter poison of immanence.”¹⁵ What he means by this takes us to the heart of his Exhortation for the ‘bitter poison of immanence’ is contrasted to the joy that the Gospel brings, a joy that is of the essence of a missionary and evangelical life lived in communion. It is a contrast between hope on the one hand that is identified with communion, and despair on the other which is identified with the ‘desert’ and the ‘void’ of an individual alone. It is a contrast that informed much of Benedict’s writings not least his encyclical, published in 2007, entitled *Spe Salvi* (On Hope).

On Hope

“Hope,” wrote Benedict “is a key word in Biblical faith,”¹⁶ it names the way in which faith, here and now, participates in the coming salvation of the world.¹⁷ It is for this reason that the “one who has hope lives differently; the one who hope has been granted the gift of a new life,”¹⁸ which new life involves a new way of seeing the world in which we live, indeed in seeing the universe in which we live. Not only does Christian hope transform culture and the arts¹⁹, but it also dispels the sense of despair that comes with fatalism, with the idea that we are prey to impersonal forces. But Christian hope tells us that impersonal forces do not govern the cosmos, but rather it is a “personal God [that] governs the stars.”²⁰

Though this is a fair summary of the encyclical *Spe Salvi* it gives the impression of a message that is, if not sentimental, then something of a romantic folly. By leaving out what it

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium* para. 51.

¹⁴ Para. 86.

¹⁵ Para. 87.

¹⁶ *Spe Salvi* para.2.

¹⁷ Para. 7.

¹⁸ Para. 2.

¹⁹ Para. 6.

²⁰ Para. 5.

is Benedict accented the result is to transform something substantial into something aetherial. And substance is very much to the point of the encyclical.

Setting the tone for the rest of the encyclical, from paragraphs seven through nine, Benedict engages with the biblical statement that “faith is the substance (*hypostasis*) of things hoped for.”²¹ Benedict’s point is that the Greek term ‘hypostasis’ means substance and does not refer to a subjective disposition. The telling thing, however, is that from at least Martin Luther on the sense of the passage *has* been read in a ‘subjective’ sense. Rather than a metaphysical status the term is read as denoting something akin to an individual’s psychological state.²² This deracinating of the Bible by way of dissolving metaphysical reference, Benedict argues, is an exegetical move that is reflected in the way Modernity, from Bacon to Kant and beyond, thinks upon matters religious.²³

It is instructive to see how it is Benedict constructs his argument such that certain themes that might not seem to naturally go together are presented as having something of a logical, if not necessary, connection. Thus, Benedict ties together the dissolving of metaphysics with the rise of an individualistic understanding of the faith, with an antipathy to visible authoritative communion. This, in turn, is tied to the fear of eternal life in that for the modern mind, unable to think in terms of substance, life without end can only mean a life that is interminably boring.²⁴ The latter point is especially poignant for although the world promises abundant pleasures by way of consumer goods, ultimately it has no hope or faith in desire. The desire attendant upon living can only ever end up in unending tedium. So it is that one secretly hopes for death as being the cessation of one’s existence. Though this point seems incidental to the argument of Benedict and this paper it is, in fact, of great importance, but why this is so can only be spelt out later in this series.²⁵

What is it to live *without* hope? asks Benedict. *It is to live without substance.* To have no hope is to give up on life; it is to feel there is no point to anything so one might as well go along with the way things are, to resign oneself to injustice and sin both in others and in ourselves. It is to resign oneself to the ideology under which one lives. In contrast to this, Christian hope is one that is efficacious and thus defiant; it delivers on what it promises, or rather on what God promises. Benedict quotes Jesus’ words to his disciples just before his

²¹ *Hebrews 11:1.*

²² *Spe Salvi* paras 7-9.

²³ Paras 18-19.

²⁴ Paras 12-13.

²⁵ Something similar to this point was made by Søren Kierkegaard in his *The Sickness unto Death* (trans. A. Hannay, London, Penguin Books, 1989, fp. 1849). Kierkegaard wrote that despair is seen in the desire for the cessation of all life, and for the hope of there being no eternal life. Despair “is exactly a consumption of the self, but an impotent self-consumption not capable of doing what it wants...” (48). Here is despair, that the one who despairs “Cannot consume himself, cannot be rid of himself, cannot become nothing” (49). For us the issue turns upon which economic system most encourages this despair? Joseph Schumpeter’s book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, Routledge, 2010, fp. 1943) is famous for its delineating the character of capitalism as necessary involving ‘creative destruction’, only this process is predicated upon desires not reaching a state of satiety. For if a state of satiety arrives, if desires are met and satisfied, then a “stationary state” (116) will have been reached and capitalism and its markets will then, if not come to a halt, radically slow down. It is thus in the interests of capitalism and an ever-expanding market that desires (the passions being also under this rubric) should constantly be stimulated. But what if despair should begin to reign? What if, following Kierkegaard, the only remaining desire is to consume oneself and be quit of oneself? I want to return to this topic for I think it one that has not been given due regard in the literature but which is, in my opinion, at the very heart of the matter.

death: “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”²⁶ We might say that joy attends substance.

Benedict ties together a substantial sense of faith and hope with the necessity of visible communion, with the nature of the self as one constituted by, in, and for communion, all which matters find their proper locus in the Church and her sacraments. It remains for us, however, to see how this translates into matters economic, something to which we will return later in the piece.

To recap: it is important to understand that Christian hope is not, first and foremost, the hope of an *individual* standing alone before God, but rather does it have to do with solidarity, for it is this solidarity, in the mystical community that is the Church, where true and real universality is to be found, it is here that the means to joy is given. It is here where substance is. It is something Francis intimates early on in his Exhortation when he writes, citing Paul VI, that “our technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy.”²⁷ As will be seen below, the fundamental reason that our society cannot engender joy is because it is informed by an ideology destructive of solidarity and, concomitant with that, an ideology that is destructive of substance. It is a point Benedict made when, early on in *Spe Salvi*, following on the need to understand faith as being a matter of participation in what is substantial, he wrote of salvation that “it presupposes that we escape from the prison of our ‘I’ because only in the openness of this universal subject does our gaze open out to the source of joy, to love itself – to God.”²⁸ Salvation is predicated upon the necessity of countering that which is inimical to the vision of God; to that which by closing off the ‘I’ obscures the transcendent nature of what it is to be human and that strips faith of any real substantial reference.

What is it, then, that works to have us be blind to the true nature of things? What is it that prevents us from seeing in a transcendent manner and, thereby, experiencing joy? Why is it that we do *not* see the source of joy but instead see joy as promised in a freedom from substance? What prevents the world from seeing the truth? To be more specific, why do we see the world and ourselves through a consciousness that is informed by concepts of value and meaning that have to do with the freedom of an autonomous individual and not the freedom that is tied to solidarity? Indeed, why is there the need for the Church to learn to read ‘the signs of the times’ so as to have the world see things correctly? The pat answer is to say that it is due to the blindness that attends sin, which is true, only what successive Pope’s have called for is something a little more considered and substantial, *something in the vein of an ideological critique* which requires a critique of the individual sinner but also of the cultural, the political, and economic make up of our world; a critique that can expect to meet with resistance, so much so that it can have the character of martyrdom. It is in martyrdom writes Benedict that “people resist the over-bearing power of ideology and its political organs and, by their death, renew the world.”²⁹

The Necessity of Discerning Ideology

Today, when the word ‘ideology’ is used more often than not people simply mean ‘ideas’. Hence, when people are described as being ‘ideological’ all it means is that they hold

²⁶ *Spe Salvi* para. 12 citing *John 16:22*.

²⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium* para. 7.

²⁸ *Spe Salvi* para. 14 (see too paras 28 and 33).

²⁹ *Ibid* para. 8.

to a system of ideas whatever it is these ideas might be, whether or not they are true or false ideas, or good or bad ideas. But John Paul, Benedict, and Francis use the term in its older and more proper sense; by ‘ideology’ they mean a *false* and *pernicious* system of ideas that make up and inform the way in which a society operates culturally, politically, and economically and which expresses itself in alienation. That is, alienation within *a society* as well as alienation within *an individual*, this by reason that an individual introjects the meanings and values of a society treating them as his or her own. Furthermore, so strong is this ideology that most of the people in the society concerned do not even suspect that they live under its spell, indeed they often think that the way the society thinks and operates is just the way things are. One of the main reasons for the Church to read ‘the signs of the times’ is in order that she can alert others to the dangers that threaten the world.

At the core of our ideology is a false idea of the self as something to be understood by reference to the autonomous ‘I’, and by a concomitant economy predicated on the autonomy of the market. Thus, Francis writes that today “we are forgetful, distracted and carried away by limitless possibilities for consumption and distraction offered by contemporary society. This leads to a kind of alienation at every level, for a ‘society becomes alienated when its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people’.”³⁰

In order to read ‘the signs of the times’ and thereby work to illuminate the world we need to know what the nature and character of the ideology is that we live under today. As it happens this is one of a number of things that Francis’ Exhortation sets out to do, namely to clarify what the nature of the ideology is that so perniciously shapes the way we view the meaning and value of life. We might say that the Church is to be the locus proper of the carrying out of ideological critique. It probably doesn’t need to be said but it is also this aspect of the Exhortation that has excited most comment.

The Ideology under which We Live

What follows is a summary of what it is Francis in his Exhortation says when describing the ideological world in which we live and think and feel.

There is an imbalance in both wealth and power in today’s world, writes Francis, and this imbalance “is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation.”³¹ The autonomy of the marketplace finds its concomitant expression in the way the self is perceived and this, in turn, has an effect upon the faith. This ideology, Francis observes, gives rise to a form of secularism that “tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal,” which is to say to the realm of the autonomous individual, thereby preventing the Church from checking the effects of market economics. Francis goes on to say that secularization “by completely rejecting the transcendent has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism.”³² It is for this reason that Francis wrote, in the quote given above, that there is “alienation at every level, for ‘a

³⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* para. 196. Francis is quoting from John Paul II.

³¹ Para. 56.

³² Para. 64.

society becomes alienated when its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people.”³³

It is a “world pervaded by consumerism,” one that encourages the pursuit of “frivolous pleasures,” and where “our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns”³⁴; a world subject to the “processes of dehumanization”³⁵ and thus of “often anonymous kinds of power”³⁶; a world where the “stock market” takes precedence over the fate of the poor,” with an “economy of exclusion and inequality,” in which “everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest”³⁷; a world obsessed ‘with immediate results’ that becomes intolerant of any obstacles³⁸, and it is for this and other reasons a world “which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment”³⁹; it is a “disposable culture” where “human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded,” where people “continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth encouraged by a free market” will solve our problems but which has not done so.⁴⁰ It is a culture that values “financial speculation” where “debt and the accumulation of interest” destroys economies and nations.⁴¹ It is a world in which “evil is crystallized in unjust social structures,”⁴² and which brings people under the “thrall to an individualistic...self-centred mentality.”⁴³ It is a “postmodern and globalized era” one that “favours a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds.”⁴⁴ And what’s more, it is a world that in holding to the “false autonomy” which informs an “unhealthy individualism” promotes “spiritual consumerism” as well as a “disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others.”⁴⁵ In all of this there is “growing” a “new self-centred paganism.”⁴⁶

Above all it is a world in which the vulnerable are increasingly treated as having no worth in and of themselves and this is especially seen in abortion. “Among the vulnerable,” notes Francis, “for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are the unborn children, the most defenceless and innocent among us. Nowadays efforts are made to deny them their human dignity and to do with them whatever one pleases, taking their lives and passing laws preventing anyone from standing in the way of this.”⁴⁷ “It is not ‘progressive’,” writes Francis, “to try to resolve problems by eliminating a human life.”⁴⁸

³³ Para. 196.

³⁴ Para. 2.

³⁵ Para. 51.

³⁶ Para. 52.

³⁷ Para. 53.

³⁸ Para. 82. See too paras 223-225.

³⁹ Para. 64.

⁴⁰ Para. 54.

⁴¹ Paras. 56, 59.

⁴² Para. 59.

⁴³ Para. 208.

⁴⁴ Para. 67.

⁴⁵ Para. 89. “Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts.” “A privatized lifestyle can lead Christians to take refuge in some false forms of spirituality” (para. 262).

⁴⁶ Para. 195. Elsewhere Francis refers both to a new “Gnosticism” and a “self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism” (para. 94)

⁴⁷ Para. 213.

⁴⁸ Para. 214.

Whatever we might think of these statements by Francis they clearly reflect the opinion that matters economic are inextricably entwined with matters to do with culture and with faith such that just as liberal economics idealises autonomy in respect of the market (which means little or no government interference), so too does it give rise to, or attend, a like privileging of autonomy in respect of the self. It is this autonomy that legitimises the whole Culture of Death in that it legitimises the treating of the most vulnerable, the unborn, as commodities to be thrown away or kept as the consumer desires. This autonomy that characterises both the nature of the market economy and the concomitant concept of the self represents a powerful obstacle to faith.⁴⁹

To repeat the quote from Francis (who is quoting Paul VI): “Our technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very hard to engender joy.”⁵⁰ And there is little joy by reason that under the ideological regime of liberal economics there is little hope; the substance of things is dissolved and so too the solidarity that constitutes the very nature proper of humanity.

Responses to the Exhortation

As might be expected the popular media reported the reactions that made for the best copy and in this Rush Limbaugh didn’t disappoint (Limbaugh is a top rating American neo-conservative shock-jock). *Evangelii Gaudium*, he said, was hypocritical in that it lambasted wealth when everyone knows the Vatican is one of the wealthiest institutions in the world second only to some multinational or another. At the same time as it is hypocritical the Exhortation is also “pure Marxism.”⁵¹ It is not, of course, too difficult to find copy like this especially in this the blog-age, furthermore a shock-jock’s genre requires Punch-and-Judy-like hyperboles. What is pertinent to us is how First Things responded.

George Weigel, a principle contributor to First Things, was one of the first cabs off the rank in an opinion piece for The Wall Street Journal, entitling his commentary on the Exhortation ‘Pope Francis the Revolutionary’.⁵² Weigel related the concerns of the

⁴⁹ It is this critique that Paul VI was intimating in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) when he wrote how contraception worked to destroy the integrity of selfhood by reason that it ultimately served the concept of the autonomous individual. “By means of the reciprocal personal gift of self...husband and wife tend towards the communion of their beings” (para. 8). It is this gift of self that contraception destroys. So it is that the encyclical is opposed to the idea that individuals can “determine in a wholly autonomous way” the way in which they should go (para. 10). Contraception is of a piece with the rise of an “insufficient sense of social justice” for it attends “selfish monopolisation” (para. 23). It is a “dangerous weapon” in the hands of “public authorities” for they have less and less need to take “heed of moral exigencies” (para. 17). Paul VI called for “concerted pastoral action” to defy this trend, and that in the areas “economic, cultural and social” (para. 30). Of course it is well known that many clergy and laity instead of radical defiance to the dominant ideology chose to further the advance of liberal and thus capitalist thinking.

⁵⁰ *Evangelii Gaudium* para. 7.

⁵¹ As reported in the *Vatican Insider (La Stampa)* 5/12/13. We are also told that “Tea Party activist Jonathon Moseley” denounced Francis for his socialist philosophy not least because Jesus himself rejected the redistribution of wealth. The problem with citing ‘Tea Party’ figures is that as it is not a party proper anyone can identify themselves as a member and make announcements in its name.

⁵² This was accessed from Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Religion and Ethics web site on 3/12/13. In a later column – distributed from the *Denver Catholic Register* – reprinted in *The Catholic Weekly* (of Sydney) entitled *The Poorest of the Poor*, Weigel manages to turn the Exhortation on its head. There is no mention of Francis’ critique of free-market capitalism, indeed Weigel makes it sound as if what Francis said was that the problem was that the suffering ones of the world were *not* connected *enough* to the free market. Weigel writes in his review of the Exhortation that the “poorest of the poor” are “disconnected from the global economy and disconnected from the skills and habits necessary to participate in what has become a world market.” One might

Exhortation to those Weigel had raised in his recently published book *Evangelical Catholicism*, noticeably those that have to do with what he referred to in his column as “the rise of a new Gnosticism” in which “everything in the human condition is plastic, malleable and subject to human wilfulness.” A sentiment found in his book when he writes how the modern world has lost the sense of substance having succumbed to an “anti-metaphysical” way of thinking such that all is rendered plastic. So it is that “in its twenty-first century form, Gnosticism teaches the utter plasticity of the human condition: there is nothing given in men and women, not even their gender; all is malleable; all can be changed to fulfil the desires...of the imperial autonomous self.”⁵³ It is an opinion that I for one would agree with and I would also agree that Francis intimates a similar critique. Only, as was noted in the first part of this series, what is at issue is if the dominant economy which serves to define the modern age – capitalism – is a significant cause of this fall into Gnostic-like plasticity, and if it is what significance this has for tying together the defence and promulgation of the faith to the defence and promulgation of free-market economic theory. Is it to promote what the faith opposes, indeed what opposes the faith?

In light of what was presented above in our outline of the Exhortation, the argument here is that Francis’ take on things is one that sees a correlation between the dominant free-market global economy and the denigration of human life (and much else besides), wherein human life becomes yet another consumer expendable devoid of substantial meaning. It may be that Weigel would not read Francis in this way, but perhaps the strangest thing of all is that in his column he nowhere even hints at the fact that others do see an economic critique of capitalism informing Francis’ Exhortation. It might be said that for all his overblown rhetoric Rush Limbaugh sees something that Weigel does not; that the Exhortation is set against the dominance of capitalism. Perhaps this is unfair to Weigel and that he is even now preparing a far more informed commentary. More to the point is how *First Things* responded to the Exhortation especially in its editorial.

The editorial opens by noting how it was Francis’ comments on economics “that made the news.”⁵⁴ Though the attempt is to be respectful to the Pope (after all *First Things* in the past has contrasted itself with liberals who pick and choose from the doctrines of the faith as it suits them) it is clear that insofar as they are concerned he has gone too far. The tone of the editorial is, to say the least, tetchy. Francis’ “sweeping generalisations about economics are inaccurate, and even irresponsible.” Worse still Francis “ignores the ways in which state-dominated economies encourage corruption and often deepen rather than alleviate poverty while singling out trickle-down theories for harsh criticism.” Perhaps worst of all, Francis “effectively demonizes economic conservatives as moral cretins”!⁵⁵

Francis, we are led to understand, must realise that capitalism is “the world’s greatest poverty-relief program,” this being a “historical reality” that *First Things* hopes Francis “recognises.” Yes, markets can be harsh but capitalism best mirrors what it is to be human. Thus, “it’s very important to fight against the fantasy of a world without self-interest, which

quibble with this for in fact the poorest of the poor are *very much locked into the world market* in that they provide the cheap labour and thus the cheap consumer goods necessary for the market to prosper as it does in those countries that still have some sort of a basic and liveable wage.

⁵³ George Weigel *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church*, New York, Basic Books, 2013 (44).

⁵⁴ ‘Francis and the Market’ *First Things* February 2014 (3).

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

given human nature means a world without human beings.”⁵⁶ Indeed, the “human drive toward political community is as fundamental as the drive toward market exchange.”⁵⁷ As we saw in our earlier essay, *First Things* argues that there is one form of economy that corresponds to human nature qua human nature (not just human nature as it has become since the fall) and this is capitalism. Consequently, if there are to be blessings upon humanity, as in the case of conquering poverty, then if Francis and the Church are to be in accord with historical reality they must embrace the free-market, they must promote capitalism; to not do so would be irresponsible.

So, while Francis might think that free-market economics gives rise to and/or contributes to the rise of a new Gnosticism (to use Weigel’s phrase) and is thus to some degree at least harmful to what it is to be truly human, *First Things* sees it as being quite the other way round. We need to be clear upon this matter for it is here that there is much obscurity - though to be fair to *First Things* (and its founder Fr Neuhaus) it has, by and large, been clear as to where it is it stands; a clarity that is evident in the magazine’s editorial response to the Exhortation. The question is what kind of economy best corresponds to human nature qua human nature, and, alongside this, best preserves the integrity of things *resisting* the anti-metaphysical Gnostic-like logic that would render everything, especially human life, plastic and malleable? *First Things* argues that it is capitalism that best corresponds to human nature, especially in its contemporary free-market liberal-economic form in which there is as less state involvement in the market as is possible. It is, therefore, quite reasonable that *First Things* should hold that the Church ought to promote capitalism and the market. It is also understandable that the magazine should feel angry (even worried) that a Pope should be seen as doing the very reverse. After all, this would mean that the Church is opposing the very thing that best accords with human nature and is conducive to its flourishing.

The problem is that when one casts an eye over many of the major encyclicals of the last few decades, especially by the Pope who is most extolled in the pages of *First Things*, namely John Paul II, it seems as if a rift of some sort was already in the offing, so much so that one feels mystified why it was the magazine could not see it coming. As noted above, in his Exhortation Francis cites most of all from the works of John Paul and Benedict, and when one returns to what it was these two Popes wrote it becomes quite clear that Francis has written little that is novel, indeed one could say that he has *tempered* what his predecessors said!

Papal Continuity

It would be easy to think that it was *following* the fall of the Soviet Union that John Paul II set about critiquing the cultural and economic structure of modern liberal democracy, most famously under the name ‘the Culture of Death’. And although the accent became more pronounced nevertheless prior to the demise of the Soviet Union John Paul was no – how might we put it? – Cold-War warrior blinkered to the problems attendant upon the free world market economies. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), John Paul wrote that man is today under threat from what he produces and this manifests itself in man seeing no “other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption.”⁵⁸ There is a “consumer attitude uncontrolled by ethics” which manifests itself

⁵⁶ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁵⁸ *Redemptor Hominis* 3:15.

in an “abuse of freedom.” So widespread is this that it must bring into question “the financial, monetary, production and commercial mechanisms that...support the world economy.” And though there must be “healthy competition” in trade there must also be on the “wider” level an “immediate redistribution of riches and control over them.” There must be an “indispensable transformation of the structures of economic life” one that requires a “true conversion of mind, will and heart.”⁵⁹

(To save having to repeat myself, in respect of all quotes from the works of the popes the emphasis is in the original. This especially applies to John Paul II’s writings for never was there a pope who revelled so in emphasis.)

In the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981), John Paul celebrated the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and he did so by accenting the Catholic doctrine that labour must have precedence over capital.⁶⁰ This is predicated upon the primacy of man over things⁶¹, whereas “the error of economism” is, at root, to consider human labour according to its economic perspective; to place matter and impersonal forces over man. It is for this reason that class conflict occurs, whereas if the person is given due primacy over capital then there will be a proper relation of workers to the “means of production.”⁶² Through this we will be able to transcend the “ideological conflict” one that is expressed in the conflict between “liberalism, understood as the ideology of capitalism, and Marxism.” Thus, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), John Paul spoke of the “structures of sin” that arise out of the “concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove,”⁶³ which structures are tied to the “desire for profit” and a concomitant thirst for power.⁶⁴ For this reason John Paul writes against the idea that the Catholic faith can be identified with free-market economics: the Church’s “social doctrine is not a ‘third way’ between *liberal capitalism* and *Marxist collectivism*...rather it constitutes a *category of its own*.”⁶⁵

In the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991), written on the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul opposes the Socialist subordination of the individual to socio-economic mechanisms but does the same as well in respect of capitalism. Just as the wrong understanding of anthropology via a materialistic and thus mechanical way arose out of the Enlightenment informing the rise of Socialism, so too does it inform capitalism and “a free-market society.”⁶⁶ So it is that “in this sense, it is right to speak of a struggle against an economic system, if the latter is understood as a method of upholding the absolute predominance of capital, the possession of the means of production and of the land, in contrast to the free and personal nature of human work.”⁶⁷ There are goods which by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold,” contrary to “an ‘idolatry’ of the market,” which idolatry blinds a society such that it ignores “the existence of goods by which by their nature are not and cannot be mere commodities.”⁶⁸ And contrary to the line championed by First Things, “It is the task of the State to provide for the defence and preservation of

⁵⁹ 3:16.

⁶⁰ *Laborem Exercens* 3:12.

⁶¹ 3:12.

⁶² 3:13.

⁶³ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* para. 36.

⁶⁴ Para. 38.

⁶⁵ Para. 41.

⁶⁶ *Centesimus Annus* 2:13; 2:19; 4:35.

⁶⁷ 4:35.

⁶⁸ 4:40.

common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces.” The State and society “have the duty of *defending these collective goods*.”⁶⁹

In John Paul’s subsequent encyclicals he confronts the dominant economic system more overtly referring to it again and again as ‘the Culture of Death’. We live today in the end of metaphysics⁷⁰, one which is characterised by pragmatism⁷¹, which in turn is informed by an “immanentist” way of thinking expressed in “technocratic logic”⁷² and where all succumbs to “a market-based logic.”⁷³

“We are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable *structure of sin*” a “culture of death.” It is a culture that is “actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency.” It is, in fact, a culture that can be summed up as “*a war of the powerful against the weak*.”⁷⁴ In this culture “*everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining*.”⁷⁵ It is this culture that legitimises the right to “abortion, infanticide and euthanasia.” In short, it grants “*an absolute power over others and against others*.”⁷⁶ Life becomes mere “biological material” to be freely disposed of.⁷⁷ These crimes against life where the unborn and vulnerable are treated as commodities – these crimes are justified by being seen as “*legitimate expressions of individual freedom, to be acknowledged and protected as actual rights*.” What’s more, it is system of justification that serves the “selfishness of the rich countries” and which, despite all the rhetoric otherwise, poses a “*direct threat to the entire culture of human rights*.”⁷⁸ Under the sway of this market logic we live under what John Paul called a “form of totalitarianism.”⁷⁹ (Given that John Paul struggled under both Nazism and Soviet Communism it is rather significant that he classes the period that witnessed the growth to something like the dominance of free-market neo-liberal ideology as being one that is totalitarian in character!)⁸⁰

Similar things were said by Benedict both before he became Pope and after. Thus, in the extended interview he gave in the mid 1980s to Vittorio Messori, the then Cardinal Ratzinger reflected upon what he called “a cultural revolution in the West,” which revolution represented “the success of the upper-middle class, the new ‘tertiary bourgeoisie’, with its

⁶⁹ 4:40.

⁷⁰ *Fides et Ratio* (1998) para. 55.

⁷¹ Para. 5.

⁷² Para. 6.

⁷³ Para. 46.

⁷⁴ *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) para. 10.

⁷⁵ Para. 20.

⁷⁶ Para. 20.

⁷⁷ Para. 13.

⁷⁸ Para. 18.

⁷⁹ Para. 20. At the end of his life John Paul expressed the same sentiments in his book *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005). We live, he wrote, under another form of totalitarianism one that is “concealed under the appearance of democracy” (53). It operates by way of a notion of freedom that is abstracted from the ethical (37) and that is defined by ideas of “utility and pleasure” (38). This is “liberalism” and it sets out to impose itself upon developing countries by way of abortion, promiscuity, divorce, and its great economic power (38, 46, 52).

⁸⁰ See too the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) where John Paul characterises the world at the time – a world following on from the end of Soviet communism, one that was being trumpeted as being the vindication of liberal democracy and economics – as having human nature “reduced to and treated as a readily available biological or social material” (para. 46). A culture that proclaims freedom, only it is a “freedom which claims to be absolute” and which “ends up treating the human body as a raw datum” (para. 48).

liberal radical ideology of [an] individualistic, rationalistic and hedonistic stamp.”⁸¹ Later in the discussion Ratzinger becomes more specific in his description of the world which this class has given rise to: “money and wealth are the measure of all things” for it is here “where the model of the free market imposes its implacable laws on every aspect of life.”⁸² But what is perhaps most pertinent to our discussion is that Ratzinger also noted how “Economic liberalism creates its exact counterpart, permissivism,” which in turn makes it almost impossible to present Catholic morality as being reasonable.⁸³ It does not seem illegitimate to say that here, at least, Ratzinger was pointing to the inextricable relationship between economic liberalism and cultural liberalism and, furthermore, that this relationship proves inimical to the promulgation of the faith.

It is not possible to rehearse all of what Benedict has had to say on the topic of culture and economy, only there is one aspect that *does* need to be clarified and that has to do with his role in the criticism of Liberation Theology in the Church. As is well known, Ratzinger was the author of the Vatican document that condemned aspects of the ‘theology of liberation’,⁸⁴ but what is less well known is what was, in fact, condemned. What was condemned was the *uncritical* use of Marxist analysis in that being tied to materialism it exhibits all the failings attendant upon reductionist methods. Hence, it falls prey to “scientism” and “immanentism”.⁸⁵ It shares the same kinds of methodological problems that attend those associated with capitalism. The Instruction makes it plain that the Church must take the side of the poor and oppressed and for this reason it must call for radical reforms to the “structures” that make up and inform the global economy.⁸⁶ That Benedict did not reject the use of Marx as an addition to the Catholic critique of contemporary culture is borne out in his second encyclical, the one we discussed earlier, namely *Spei Salvi* (2007). There, as we noted, Benedict writes of the way in which the modern world since the Reformation, has stripped things of their substance not least in matters of the faith. This informs the “ideology of progress,”⁸⁷ one informed by a concept of “perfect freedom”⁸⁸ tied to “pure individualism.”⁸⁹ It has been a process concomitant with the rise of an “industrial proletariat,” the origin and rise of which Marx and Engels gave valuable insight. “With great precision, albeit with a certain one-sided bias, Marx described the situation of his time,” and did so exhibiting a marked “acuteness” in his “analysis.”⁹⁰ This is not the place to discuss Marx’s analysis of capitalism only it is pertinent here to note that capitalism’s power of dissolving the

⁸¹ V. Messori *The Ratzinger Report*, San Francisco, Ignatius Pr., 1985 (30).

⁸² 83.

⁸³ 83.

⁸⁴ The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* (1984).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, VII: 2-4, 10, 13; VIII: 1; IX: 3, 8.

⁸⁶ XI: 1-8.

⁸⁷ *Spe Salvi*, para. 17.

⁸⁸ Para. 18.

⁸⁹ Para. 13.

⁹⁰ Para. 20. It might also be noted that Benedict cites two of the chief protagonists of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer (paras 22 and 42). In his essay ‘Freedom and Liberation: the anthropological vision of the instruction “Libertatis conscientia”’ (*Communio* 14.1, 1985), Ratzinger critiques Marx for his view of what constitutes the ideal of selfhood. Ratzinger cites the passage from Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology* in which the goal of selfhood is to be an autonomous gentleman of leisure, self-sufficient and self-cultivating (59). What Ratzinger correctly observed is that Marxist thinking, at root, shares the same understanding of the self that informs capitalism. And of course, Marx too exhibited the common liberal disdain for metaphysics – to be specific, a disdain for a *transcendentally* oriented metaphysics. In his essay ‘Faith, philosophy and theology’ *Communio* 11.4, 1984, Ratzinger writes “We must take a position against this common opposition to metaphysics, which today appears as the only real bond which joins philosophers and theologians” (357). He is referring to what used to be called ‘liberal theologians’.

substance of things, thereby rendering all things malleable such that they can now be defined by commodity value, is of the essence of this analysis of his.⁹¹ It is an analysis that clearly finds its echo in the writings both of John Paul and Benedict.

In light of the above what Benedict wrote in his third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), is especially significant for our argument. Here, Benedict describes the global economy as being predicated upon a “closed system,”⁹² one he later styles as being shaped by a “technocratic ideology”⁹³ which extends its power by, among other things, the means of “demographic control” exporting abortion and its accoutrements under the guise of development, economic and otherwise.⁹⁴ It is an ideological system that seeks the “downsizing of social security systems” as well as the undermining of the rights of workers to form trade unions.⁹⁵ It creates a “climate of deregulation” thereby causing both economic and psychological instability.⁹⁶ There must, he charges, be opposition to the kind of “financial engineering” that looks to the “freeing up of markets.”⁹⁷ Instead, we must prioritize steady employment, the rights of workers, and the commitment to wealth distribution must not be abandoned.⁹⁸

All told, it seem reasonable to say that what the popes have said concerning the nexus between the faith, humanity, and economics does not sit that well with what First Things argues for. One can understand, then, the rather tetchy tone of First Things’ editorial response to Francis’ Exhortation, but what is *difficult* to understand is how the magazine could not see it coming. Indeed, how it was it had not seen that there was a problem back when the magazine was founded and Fr Neuhaus published what can be considered the manifesto of the movement the magazine represents, namely his book *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist*⁹⁹ (a book discussed in the first article in this series). It is a conundrum that takes us back to the Church’s call to read the-sign-of-the-times. More specifically to what that call implies: that there is something that prevents the world from doing so, a blindness of some kind, a blindness that includes those who are among the faithful.

⁹¹ It informs Marx’s (and Engels’) works from the early years. See for example his ‘*The All-Revolutionizing Power of Money*’ (1844); *The Poverty of Philosophy: a Reply to M. Proudhon* (1847); The Second Manuscript of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844); and of course it is the thesis of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). To quote from the latter work: the liberal bourgeois class, of a piece with capitalism, has dissolved all other social relations and has “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment...It has drowned the most heavenly of ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in the place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – free trade.” Marx then goes on to write those famous words: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned” (using the text in R. Tucker ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1978 (475-6).

⁹² *Caritas in Veritate* para. 12.

⁹³ Para. 14.

⁹⁴ Para. 28.

⁹⁵ Para. 25.

⁹⁶ Para. 25.

⁹⁷ Para. 71.

⁹⁸ Para. 31. On *Spe Salvi* and *Caritas in Veritate* in light of the issues raised above see my ‘*Caritas in Veritate and the Metaphysics of Defiance*’ in N. Omerod and P. Oslington (eds.) *Globalisation and the Church: Reflections on Caritas in Veritate*, Strathfield, St Pauls, 2011.

⁹⁹ J. Neuhaus *Doing Well and Doing Good: the Challenge to the Christian Capitalist*, New York, Image, 1992.

Conclusion

The power of an ideology has a good deal to do with the way it dissimulates itself, not least in the way that it presents itself as being so natural, so much the way things are, that it is not even thought of as being an ideology but just, plain common sense. To the degree that an ideology identifies itself with the fundamental concepts that inform the way a people think – that is, to the degree it entwines itself in the culture – then to that degree it will seem to be ‘just the way things are’. More than that, its continuing reign will seem inevitable. A culture defines and is defined by its economy; there is an epistemic continuity between a culture’s understanding of the world – of the value and meaning attendant upon that world – and the way it ‘manages’ its world. One of the more powerful aspects to liberal economics is the way that it often inculcates the idea that there is no causal relationship between the consciousness a culture fosters and the economy that culture favours. In *First Things* the favour many of its authors, including its founder Fr Neuhaus, like the popes whom we have engaged with, understand that there *is* just such a relationship between culture and economics. Only, as we have seen, *First Things* differs with the popes as to what to make of this.

At the heart of the operation of an ideology there is a blind spot, by which is meant that there is a place where the ideology is revealed for what it really is. But this blind spot is more in the order of a tacit social compact than something absolutely hidden away. By this I mean that everyone knows what is veiled by the blind spot only everyone also knows that it is not the done thing to speak about it. The ways in which this blind spot is kept functioning are many and various and here is not the place to list them (if indeed it were possible to list them given that they *are* so many and various), only there is something like an unspoken and intuited knowledge that the primary thing to do is simply not to mention the matter. If it is mentioned then one can acknowledge it but then quickly move on; above all else it is not to be kept in view, it is not to be fully discussed, it is not to be analysed in respect of its political and especially economic significance.

It is upon and around this blind spot that the ideology operates. And it is the argument of this series as it is the argument of the popes that abortion is at the heart of the ideology under which our world operates.

Again, let it be clear that the principle thesis of this series is that abortion is at the very heart of capitalist ideology; it is of the essence of the concept of freedom that informs liberal economics and cultural liberalism. It is for this reason that it is around the subject of abortion that the full dissimulating and obfuscating power of capitalist ideology operates.

It also needs to be made clear that this does not mean that abortion was not present in other economic regimes. Just as it can be said that genocide was at the heart of Nazi policy does not mean that genocide is absent elsewhere, only that what was peculiar and unique to Nazi philosophy required genocide as fundamental given. For this reason, genocide is the locus by which National Socialism *as* National Socialism can be explicated in a coherent manner.

Abortion has been with us since the ancient world, only it is under capitalism that abortion is expressive of *the* fundamental principle, namely freedom-as-liberalism, which is essential to capitalism *as* capitalism. Abortion is the concrete locus of freedom predicated on autonomy, one that necessarily expresses itself in the rejection of any notion of substance that would prevent anything from being commodified. Abortion is *the* concrete locus of liberal

economics and cultural liberalism. It is *the* concrete principle of market logic in that it means everything, including human life, can become a product to be bought and sold.

Our argument turns upon which form of economy best corresponds to human nature such that it will foster, nurture and encourage what is best for human nature. As far as John Paul, Benedict and now, apparently, Francis are concerned the concept of human nature that an economy must be predicated upon is that of an individual-in-communion and an understanding of freedom concomitant with this concept. It is a view that is put in opposition to the idea of the individual as autonomous and a concomitant understanding of freedom; an understanding of freedom that informs liberalism in both its economic and cultural manifestations.

For John Paul and Benedict any system that is oriented toward the ideal of autonomy is one that will be associated with a materialistic and immanentist understanding of the world; it will be a system that privileges scientism and economism, which terms refer to the notion that impersonal forces (and thus morally indifferent forces) ultimately determine and shape human nature. It is a system of thinking that, in emptying the world of inherent meaning, strips the world of substance, ending in what we earlier saw Francis refer to as the “void” and “desertification” of all experience. It makes of the world so much ‘stuff’; stuff that becomes increasingly malleable, able to be manipulated in accordance with pragmatic demands, which demands in today’s global economy are those identified with the market.

The argument of John Paul and Benedict is that this ideological regime is expressed in a technocratic logic that both facilitates and confirms the dominant ideology so much so that it could be said that we no longer shape technology, it effectively shapes us. By privileging an ideology in which impersonal forces in the form of scientism and economism are allowed to dictate to social policy we end up being under the dominance of the technology we create. A technology that is peculiarly well adapted to answer to the dictates of capitalism and the market.

John Paul and Benedict argue that the dominance of this ideology in matters social, political, economic and, yes, religious, flows from the rejection of metaphysics proper. It is a rejection that finds its apogee today in what Weigel terms a new ‘Gnosticism’ in which as there is no nature proper to anything at all then all becomes malleable and plastic, including humanity. This system finds its concrete locus in abortion. But unlike Weigel (and First Things) the popes see a causal relationship between this new form of Gnosticism and economic liberalism.

The core issue, then, has to do with whether or not John Paul and Benedict (and apparently Francis) are right: that economic liberalism *is* a major player in that not only does it flow out of the rejection of metaphysics it also spurs this rejection on, doing so by encouraging a notion of freedom predicated upon autonomy. Or, is First Things correct in arguing that liberal economics is to be seen as allied to the faith in that it promotes a freedom that both protects and gives place for faith? Are the popes correct in seeing economic liberalism as destructive of human nature and a serious obstacle to faith; or is First Things correct in seeing economic liberalism as being *the* economic system that best corresponds to human nature and to the protection and even reception of the faith?

As might be clear it is the contention of this series that the popes are correct, that First Things is wrong and, being wrong, it ends up promoting what it opposes, namely abortion

and other accoutrements of cultural liberalism. Furthermore, the very failure of First Things to begin to understand *why* the popes are correct is itself *an example of why the popes are correct!* Admittedly this is a rather cryptic way of putting the point but by putting it so it serves to signal what it is that will form the content of the next part of this series. There the question that we will be attempting to answer is this: what is it in the teaching of the Church that the popes have had recourse to that has helped them *not* to succumb to what can be called one of the more powerful ideological systems to which the world has succumbed? That is, an ideology with a truly global reach; an ideology that can appropriate those systems that oppose it such that both economic liberalism and its ostensible opposite, cultural liberalism, are each necessary for the continued growth to dominance of capitalism.

What I hope to show is that the answer to this has to do with the Bible's and the Church's prohibition against usury. Only, in order to understand the significance of this prohibition we need to enquire after its *raison d'être*: is the prohibition of usury one that arises as an answer to the exigencies of certain social situations, situations that happen to be unjust; or does the prohibition address the issue of injustice by reason that usury disturbs the very integrity of being? To put it another way, is the prohibition concerning usury a matter of social circumstance or of metaphysics? And how does usury relate to the rejection of metaphysics, the concomitant rise to dominance of what is called anti-essentialism and, of course, to abortion? The next essay in this series will attempt to answer these questions.

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