

Kraynak: Christianity v. Modernity?

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Robert Kraynak's arguments regarding the inadequacy of liberalism's view of man and society are forceful and persuasive. Less persuasive is his argument regarding the inherent conflict between Christianity and democracy. Kraynak's argument is grounded in a reading of intellectual history that, contrary to his own stated purpose, fails to do full justice to the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition and its developing understanding of the limited, yet invariably moral, nature of the state.

In *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World*, Robert P. Kraynak challenges many of the assumptions made by both liberal secularists and committed Christians regarding the proper intellectual and moral foundations for constitutional government. He rejects the liberal assumption that some variant of "moral autonomy" can serve as a foundation for contemporary "rights talk," and, more broadly, questions whether the liberal intellectual tradition contains within itself the resources to sustain its own commitment to democratic self-government. And, while he believes that a more full-bodied religious sensibility that goes beyond a form of "Be Nice" Christianity is needed to sustain constitutional government, he wonders whether any principled commitment on the part of Christians to "modern democracy" might not constitute a surrender to liberal modernity. His arguments regarding the inadequacy of liberalism's view of man and society are forceful and persuasive. Less persuasive is his argument regarding the inherent conflict between Christianity and democracy--especially to someone who, like myself, shares with Kraynak a commitment to the beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism but who, I suspect, parts company with him regarding the intellectual vision and categories that might best inform the effort to sustain a Christian view of man and society.

To his credit, Kraynak is by no means sanguine regarding the contemporary effort on the part of many Christians, and especially of Roman Catholics in the wake of the Second Vatican

Council, to effect a rapprochement between Christianity and liberalism. On the contrary, Kraynak rejects these efforts and provides the reader with a thorough critique of the effort to ground constitutional government in the premises of philosophical liberalism. Understanding that every form of government is grounded in some view of human nature and of the goods that make for human flourishing, he argues that the variety of liberal efforts to ground constitutional government in a Kantianized defense of "moral autonomy" (a la David Richards) or "equal concern and respect" (a la Ronald Dworkin) cannot be sustained. These efforts undercut the matrix of institutions, virtues, and convictions that sustain the temporal common good. He endorses a teleological view of human nature, or, as he describes it, a spiritual, political, and social "hierarchy of ends" under which our obligations and rights as human beings are derived from the goods that are the goals of human nature. In so doing, he supplies a scathing critique of the liberal project: of the tendency of secular rationalist liberalism to create a culture of disbelief and of the trajectory of liberal rights talk toward statism rather than toward truly limited, constitutional government. "Unless the rights of persons are clearly specified from the outset as serving the true hierarchy of ends, those rights will be seen in contemporary secular terms and will weaken subsidiarity by increasing demands to expand the centralized bureaucratic state."¹

The second of Kraynak's major theses--that any endorsement in principle of human rights and democracy might constitute a surrender by Christianity to modernity--is the more controversial of the two, especially for those of us who reject the liberal model of man and society but who believe that a principled (and non-liberal) Christian defense of human rights and constitutional democracy is consistent with traditional Christian natural law teaching. I wish to focus the remainder of my comments on this latter thesis, and question whether Kraynak's effort to link Christian personalism--and, most especially, the Catholic personalism of the Second Vatican Council and figures such as Maritain and Murray--and liberal democracy is entirely successful. I will argue that Kraynak's argument is grounded in a reading of intellectual history that, contrary to his own stated purpose, fails to do full justice to the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition and its developing understanding of the limited, yet invariably moral, nature

of the state.

Kraynak's argument seems for the most part to be an extension to the whole of contemporary Christianity of themes addressed by the late Ernest Fortin, who focused on what he perceived to be the weaknesses of contemporary Roman Catholic social thought. Fortin wondered whether any Catholic defense of human rights and religious freedom as anything other than a prudential concession to the political facts on the ground might not place contemporary Catholic social thought in conflict with its historic commitments to "virtue, character formation, and the common good." For Fortin, this might produce within the Catholic tradition "a latent bifocalism that puts it at odds with itself and thereby weakens it to a considerable extent."² Those who would wish to preserve these historic commitments to a hierarchically ordered view of nature ground their arguments in a philosophical anthropology that takes most of its political bearings from the insights of ancient political philosophy. By contrast, Catholic personalism and rights talk is liberal and modernist in orientation--the two terms being somewhat interchangeable. To endorse human rights and democracy as a matter of principle is to endorse the modern project.

Kraynak argues that there are "three great periods of Christian theology, each associated with a dominant philosopher": (1) the Platonic or NeoPlatonic Christianity of the early Church fathers; (2) the Aristotelian Christianity of medieval Scholastic theology; and (3) the Kantian Christianity of modernity (Kraynak, 153 ff.) The reader is left to infer that pre-modern (i.e. Platonic and Aristotelian) Christianity was teleological, hierocratic, prudentialist, and not favorably disposed to rights talk or democracy. (Kraynak dismisses all too quickly the efforts of scholars such as Brian Tierney to establish that "natural rights" talk originated among medieval constitutionalists.) By contrast, modern Kantian Christianity is deontological (it adopts a morality and politics of categorical imperatives), egalitarian, rights-oriented, and pro-democratic.

At a number of points, Kraynak seems to assume that all rights talk is liberal and modernist (neo-Kantian) and that liberal democracy and constitutional democracy are

synonymous. At others, particularly in his analysis of contemporary Catholic social thought, he retreats slightly from this assumption, at least as regards *the efforts* of Catholics to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical liberalism. In support of the former assumption, Kraynak argues, for example, that "today, the term 'person' refers to a human being with a duty to forge his or her own identity or moral personality by an assertion of the will" (Kraynak, 154), that "the deep premise of rights is the natural freedom and natural equality of the autonomous self"(Kraynak, 172). Even though modern Christian theologians believe that rights can be detached from these voluntaristic premises, the subversive nature of "the deep premises" gradually take over because "rights are essentially ungrateful claims against authority, either for protections and immunities against authority or for entitlements against authority" (Kraynak, 172). Thus, the fundamental premises of contemporary republican self-government are, at root, individualistic and voluntaristic: "those who see republican self-government as the decisive test of human dignity oppose any authority that stands above the will of the people" (Kraynak, 24). And "many modern Christians" have bought into the Kantian, modernist assertion "that the consent of the people and human rights are the sole legitimizing principles of political authority" (Kraynak, 181).

The problem, however, is that, while "many modern Christians" (e.g. Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Rauschenbusch, to name just two theologians cited by Kraynak) do buy into a largely neo-Kantian take on human rights and the nature of democratic government, other "modern Christians," as Kraynak readily acknowledges, explicitly *attempt* to avoid grounding rights and democracy in neo-Kantian formulations. And Kraynak is not entirely unsympathetic to these efforts. For example, he acknowledges that the Second Vatican Council's embrace of religious freedom and constitutional democracy was "qualified" by the Church's historic commitment to a teleological view of human flourishing that subordinated human will to truths made accessible to man through revelation, reason, and the teaching authority of the Church itself. Moreover, "the modern synthesis of Christianity and Kant's philosophy of freedom is not inherently wrong. Like all syntheses, its validity depends on the precise formula for putting the different elements

together" (Kraynak, 163). Something resembling the right formula is put together by Pope John Paul II, who subordinates rights to Christian natural law. Kraynak is especially supportive of the views of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who prudentially defends democracy insofar as "it is merely a state structure" rather than, as Solzhenitsyn describes it, "a universal principle of human existence, almost a cult" (Kraynak, 246-47).

Despite Kraynak's minor concessions to contemporary Christian personalism, the major theme remains the same: even legitimate efforts to control the Kantian component of a Christian synthesis are probably destined to fail. The Kantian preoccupation with moral autonomy will ultimately devour the more teleological (and traditional) components of the synthesis. The fundamental choice for Kraynak is between Platonic/Aristotelian Christianity (and its hierarchical, prudentialist view of politics) and Kantian Christianity (and its egalitarian, imperativist view of politics). Given this fundamental dichotomy, which seems to be a Christian variation on the Straussian distinction between "ancients" and "moderns," Kraynak expects the Christian traditionalist to opt for the former and reject the latter.

The problem here is that, even though Kraynak invokes the Augustinian doctrine of "the two cities" to explicate what he believes to be a Christian view of the proper relationship between the spiritual and temporal realms, Kraynak's view seems to collapse back into a baptized variation on classical political philosophy. In so doing, it fails to appreciate fully the distinctiveness of the Christian view of man and society.

Nowhere is Kraynak's effort to baptize classical political philosophy more evident than in his treatment of Plato's and Cicero's defense of a "mixed regime." The ancients understood "the advantages of a mixed regime in promoting a stable and balanced order that combines freedom and virtue in the citizen body with feelings of filial affection and piety for the foremost ruler" (Kraynak, 236). "The only point [at which a worldview inspired by the New Testament supplied an "important amendment"] that is missing in the classical philosophers is a proper distinction between the spiritual and temporal realms that the Greeks and Romans (and non-Christian cultures in general) were unable to grasp in all its implications" (Kraynak, 236-37).

The Greeks and Romans were unable to grasp the implications of a proper distinction between spiritual and temporal realms *because they made no such distinction in the first place*. Christianity has done more than merely construct a second-tier "amendment" of supernatural ends over a foundational tier accessible to unaided human reason. Christianity has, in the words of John Courtney Murray, "destroy[ed] the classical view of society as a single homogenous structure, within which the political power stood forth as the representative of society in its religious and in its political aspects."³ Moreover, it has "freed man from nature by teaching him that he has an immortal soul, which is related to matter but not immersed in it or enslaved to its laws....It has taught him his uniqueness, his own individual worth, the dignity of his own person, the equality of all men, the unity of the human race."⁴ This conception of man's personal spiritual dignity does not sit atop the classical conception of man as a rational animal. Rather, it transforms that conception with the light of its radiance into something other than "Platonic" or "Aristotelian" Christianity. And in freeing man from nature, it has rendered the most fundamental of classical "regime questions" (What is the best political regime?) largely irrelevant since no "regime" short of the Kingdom of God in its fullness can satisfy man's thirst for heaven. In fact, the very effort to answer such a question in political terms may be indicative of the fact that one has applied categories of analysis more characteristic of a resident of the earthly city.

At other points, Kraynak's acknowledgedly Christian commitments seem to be subordinated to a view of human nature and of the role and purpose of the state that is more overtly Platonic. For example, Kraynak decries "the replacement of a culture that aspires to spiritual, philosophical, artistic, and heroic greatness with one dedicated to mundane pursuits and the tastes of ordinary people" (Kraynak, 26-27). This aristocratic distinction between a "high" culture of aspirational greatness and a "low" culture of "ordinary" tastes leads Kraynak to argue that Jesus Christ himself distinguished between "higher" and "lower" human beings. By distinguishing between innocent and guilty human beings, Kraynak argues, "Jesus' very words require us to distinguish between higher and lower human beings and imply that fundamental

human rights can be negated in order to satisfy the demands of divine justice" (Kraynak, 174). The hierarchy of ends that distinguishes human nature from other natures seems to have been replaced at certain points in Kraynak's analysis by a terminology that implies a hierarchy of natures among human beings themselves.

In his discussion of the role of the state, Kraynak displays a similar fondness for the classical view of politics, however much that view is "amended" by his ostensible indebtedness to Christian theorists. For example, in his discussion of contemporary formative influences on his own political views, Kraynak expresses his indebtedness to Abraham Kuyper's defense of "sphere sovereignty" and the Catholic doctrine of "subsidiarity," each of which recognize "certain corporate spheres of spiritual authority" that limit the pretensions of the state (Kraynak, 206-207). Yet Kraynak pays little attention to the question of whether a principled commitment to these spheres of authority might not require Christians to reconsider the sense in which the state is, as Kraynak argues at several points, "a provider of civil peace and moral order" and the maintainer of civic piety (Kraynak, xv, 88, 189). Contemporary neo-Calvinists and Roman Catholics, expressing their indebtedness to the same sources and rejecting Enlightenment liberalism, have argued for a much more limited view of the state than that endorsed by Kraynak.

The proper question to ask Kraynak then is whether the synthesis which he has effected between Christianity and a quasi-Straussian reading of intellectual history, based as the latter is on a distinction between "ancients" and "moderns" (to which debate Christianity supplies an interesting footnote at the political level), does full justice to "the sacred tradition and doctrine of the Church--the treasury out of which the Church continually brings forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old."⁵

Notes

1. Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 223. All further references in the body of the text are to this edition.
2. Ernest Fortin, "The Trouble with Catholic Social Thought," *Boston College Magazine* (Summer 1988): 37-42. For a more extended treatment of Fortin's reading of intellectual history, and of Christianity's place within that history, see Fortin, *Collected Essays*. Three volumes. Edited by J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).
3. John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 202.
4. *Ibid.*, 192.
5. *Dignitatis Humanae*, Section 1. The reference is taken from the translation supplied by John Courtney Murray in *Religious Liberty: An End and a Beginning* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 163.