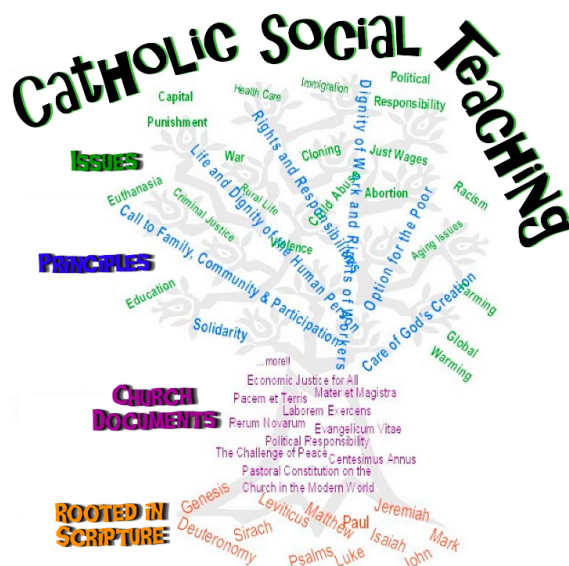


Catholic teaching: The new zeitgeist for Britain's Left



Catholic Social Teaching has been the focus of recent political and economic seminars and debates. In the last couple of months I have received some intriguing invitations from Catholic friends: one to an event on business ethics organised by Catholic bishops and featuring some of our most high-profile corporate leaders.

Another to a discussion of the progressive values after the credit crunch with prominent Labour advisors and Catholic theologians.

The common thread running through these events is a set of ideas going under the name "Catholic Social Teaching".

Compassion for the poor

I set out to understand more about these ideas, to find out why they are engaging so many different groups of people right now, and whether their current influence is likely to make any substantive difference to policy or politics.

The challenges of today's economic struggles echo with the origins of Catholic Social Teaching

Although its roots can be traced back not just to the Bible, but to the ideas of Aristotle, rediscovered in the 13th Century by St Thomas Aquinas, the modern expression of Catholic Social Teaching came in an encyclical - the highest form of papal teaching - titled *Rerum Novarum* and issued in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII.

The Pope offered the "gift" of Catholic social thought to a troubled world.

He called on the one hand for compassion for the poor and respect for the dignity of labour and, on the other hand, for respect for property and the family - all held together by the core idea of the common good.

The encyclical can be seen as the Church both realigning itself towards the concerns of the urban working-class, but also seeking to find a path of reform as an alternative to the growing threat of revolutionary unrest.

These origins offer one explanation for the current revival of interest in these ideas. For today too we live in a time of rapid change and social unrest.

Just this week a report from the Resolution Foundation predicts a further decade of stagnant living standards in the UK - a pattern shared with the US and most of Europe.

With austerity also stalking these countries, it is not surprising that various forms of anti-capitalist sentiment - of which the Occupy movement is the most high profile - have moved from the margins to the mainstream.

For Jon Cruddas, Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham and the man charged by Labour leader Ed Miliband with writing his party's general election manifesto, his focus is on the philosophical and ethical critique of free market in the wake of the credit crunch:

"When the music stops in autumn 2008... you sort of search for different traditions to reintroduce them.

Different bodies, frameworks, ideas," he explains.

"One of which is Catholic Social Teaching, which I think is a rich theme in order to analyse the contemporary situation."

But as Cruddas also recognises, the issues raised go wider and deeper.

'Hornet's nest'

In questioning not just the power of the market, but also the reach of the state, Catholic Social Teaching - updated in the light of the financial crisis in Pope Benedict's 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (charity in truth) - plays into a new strand of communitarianism reflected in the rise of Maurice Glasman's concept of Blue Labour, Philip Blond's advocacy of Red Toryism and even aspects of David Cameron's rather troubled Big Society programme.

Catholic Social Teaching is not just about the ends of social reform, it is also about the means. Its emphasis on change, from the community upwards, means its influence reaches down to street level.

The Archbishop of Westminster is cautious about the role Catholic teaching can play in politics

One of the new enthusiasms of the political class is for the old tradition - now updated in organisations like Citizen UK - of community organising.

Neil Jameson, a Quaker, is executive director of Citizens UK and he told me Catholics participating in campaigns on issues like the Living Wage and migrants rights were uniquely inspired by their church's social teaching. He even described their attitude as "joyful".

Here lies a tension which may be as crucial to the impact of Catholic Social Teaching as the inhibitions of the political class. Prof Linda Woodhead has just led a £12m government funded research programme on religion and society.

She argues that the Catholic Church is going through an "uncomfortable process" with "semi-democratisation in their own institutions, the clergy ceding much more control to laypeople, to the ordinary rank and file.

"But the clergy have still got their very traditional role of being the spokespeople and being the leaders," she adds, "so how do they let the laypeople help them develop Catholic social teaching, for example, or reform businesses or whatever and not cede their own authority?"

This might help to explain an answer I received from the Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols - head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

I asked him how he would feel if political party leaders started quoting Catholic Social Teaching. Amused by the very idea, he says: "I'd probably think it's opening up a hornet's nest."

It is no surprise that the archbishop sees the strength of the Church lying in religious conviction and not political popularity.

He also knows that while Labour figures like Jon Cruddas and Maurice Glasman may be keen on certain aspects of Catholic thought, they are not rushing to champion the church's views on individual morality - views which are much less open to interpretation than its social analysis.

Catholic Social Teaching is a doctrine well-suited to today's quest for more ethical businesses, a less overbearing state and a more vibrant and cohesive civil society.

Now, as in 1891, many fear we will not be able to adapt to profound change without dangerous social upheaval. It may not provide easy or even practical answers right now, though it does, at least, seem to be grappling with the right questions.

And for those of us tired of the ritual adversarialism and technocratic wrangling on show in Westminster, there is something rather inspiring about the response of a shrewd operator like Jon Cruddas.

When I ask him whether the ethical foundations of Catholic Social Teaching imply a different way of thinking about politics, he says: "Yes, I do and I see them in different parties. It's going to be uncomfortable, difficult, but it means that we have to focus in on almost transcending the formal architecture of politics in the national good."

Matthew Taylor - BBC