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Editorial | *Modern Christian Social Thought*

In recognition of a number of significant anniversaries occurring this year, the *Journal of Markets & Morality* invited submissions for this special theme issue, “Modern Christian Social Thought.” The year 2011 marks the 120th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical from Leo XIII in 1891 that inaugurated the subsequent social encyclical tradition. This year also marks the twentieth anniversary of John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which was promulgated at the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*. In the American context, twenty-five years have passed since the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued their pastoral letter, “Economic Justice for All.” In addition, this year is also the 120th anniversary of the First Social Congress in Amsterdam, which has become well known as a representative of the trend of European social congresses in the last half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries. Abraham Kuyper, the noted Dutch theologian and statesman, gave the opening address at this First Social Congress, a speech that set the tone for subsequent Protestant and Reformed approaches to the “social question” in light of Christian ethical reflection.

In some ways the development of these two parallel traditions of modern Christian social thought can be seen as attempts to grapple with the moral legacy of the early modern world in the context first of modernity and now postmodernity. There are some significant differences from the way in which Protestants, the Reformed tradition in particular, and the Roman Catholic Church have proceeded to address these questions over the last century. Whereas the social encyclical tradition inspired by Leo XIII with *Rerum Novarum* set the broad parameters

within which ensuing Catholic social teaching would develop, Protestant ethical reflection became characterized by fluidity rather than stability, cacophony rather than univocity. As James Gustafson has observed, there is “a much greater diversity in the history of Protestant ethics than in that of Roman Catholic moral theology.”¹ Whereas Roman Catholic social teaching employs natural law as a structurally normative mode of analysis and discourse, Protestants in the twentieth century have been highly ambivalent toward such doctrines and methods. While this Protestant antipathy toward natural law has begun to dissipate, in no small part because of the efforts of Protestant ethicists such as *Journal of Markets & Morality* editor emeritus Stephen Grabill, there remains fertile ground for cross-fertilization between Roman Catholic and Protestant social ethical thought both on theoretical as well as practical grounds.

As the Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten writes,

Catholic moral theology has shown no such hesitation to support natural law as has generally been the case in Protestant ethics. This helps to explain why the Roman Catholic Church has produced a comprehensive body of social teachings on most issues of human concern. Even when we do not agree with the Roman Catholic application of natural law in every case of moral dispute, there is much to admire about a church that knows where it stands on the critical issues of the day and offers cogent arguments to explain its teachings.²

The closest analogue to the social encyclical tradition for Protestants is the social thought coming from the ecumenical movement, whether that of mainline ecumenical bodies such as the World Council of Churches or that of the evangelical Lausanne Movement. As one might expect, the divergent social analysis amongst various Protestant groups continues to be, as Gustafson described it three decades ago, “a little short of chaos.”³ However, while documents such as the Accra Confession arising from the mainline ecumenical movement are troubling, there is some cause for hope.⁴ The Cape Town Commitment developed in conjunction with the Third Lausanne Congress held in South Africa in 2010 includes in its “Call to Action” a section focusing on “Truth and the Workplace” (§3), acknowledging a failure “to regard work in itself as biblically and intrinsically significant” and “to bring the whole of life under the Lordship of Christ.” The Commitment proceeds to outline significant ways to bridge this sacred-secular divide.

Even so, it is apparent that after the turn of this new century, amidst war and economic turmoil, we face problems of similar scale and scope to those faced by Christians addressing the social question at the turn of the previous century. As can be seen from the advice in and the reception of the recently released docu-

ment, “Toward Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority,” from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, there are widely divergent solutions proposed for addressing our multifaceted social maladies. It is our conviction that to answer the biblical question, “Where are you going?” we must first address its companion question, “Where have you come from?” (see Gen. 16:8). It is out of this dynamic, of looking back carefully so that we might step forward productively, that this issue of the *Journal of Markets & Morality* focuses on the last century and more of modern Christian social thought.

While we recognize that there are other significant streams of Christian social thought, such as that of the Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Anabaptist, and Pentecostal traditions, the contents of this issue specifically address developments in Reformed and Roman Catholic social teaching over the course of two world wars, the fall of Soviet communism, and the phenomenon of globalization. One set of articles focuses particularly on the developments in Roman Catholic social teaching, including analysis of particular themes in individual social encyclicals, to broader questions of the interaction between moral theology and economics as a whole. Another set of articles focuses especially on Protestant approaches, including the legacy of Dutch neo-Calvinism as represented by Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and others as a kind of case study for how a particular Protestant tradition addressed the social question in various ways and in various contexts.

As part of our continuing commitment to bring to the audience of the *Journal of Markets & Morality* the highest levels of research, we include in this issue not only these article-length studies but also a selection of book reviews on the latest scholarship at the intersection of ethics and economics. We also have been able to bring together a group of thinkers to focus in quite divergent ways on answering the question, “Does libertarianism tempt some Catholics to stray from Catholic social teaching?” This is a question with real-world application, as the recent denial of a proposal for a master’s program in Austrian economics at Loyola University New Orleans was in part attributed to “specific conflicts . . . between Catholic social teaching and the Austrian view of government, unions, taxations, human life and the place of Christianity in the public sector.”⁵

We are also blessed to include in this issue translations from two significant figures in the development of Reformed and Roman Catholic social thought. Luigi Taparelli, SJ (1793–1862), is credited with influencing much subsequent Catholic social thought, notably including *Rerum Novarum*, and we present in this issue the first English translation of his work, “Critical Analysis of the First Concepts of Social Economy.” The aforementioned Reformed theologian

and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) penned a significant set of essays examining the social implications of the gospel in the context of a political struggle over extending the franchise, “Christ and the Needy.” Both of these translations include introductions that set up the context and importance of these thinkers and their contributions, which, along with the rest of this special issue, we commend to your study and reflection.

—Jordan J. Ballor, Dr. theol. des.

Notes

1. James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 5.
2. Carl E. Braaten, “A Lutheran Affirmation of Natural Law,” in *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. Robert C. Baker and Roland Cap Ehlke (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 8.
3. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, 130.
4. I explore some of the shortcomings of the social witness of the mainline ecumenical movement in my recent book, *Ecumenical Babel: Confusing Economic Ideology and the Church’s Social Witness* (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2010).
5. Jamie Futral, “Where Do Austrian Economics Fit in a Jesuit Education,” *The Maroon*, September 29, 2011.