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CATHOLICS IN AN AGE OF SECULAR MORALISM

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How do Catholics avoid reducing the faith to the pursuit of fundamentally secularist causes?

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From the Church's earliest beginnings, Christians have sought to make this world a better place. Whether through thinking about how to order the political realm more justly or by serving the poor in conditions of indescribable filth, great saints ranging from Augustine to Teresa of Calcutta exemplify this living-out of the Gospel message.

Like everything else in the Church's life, however, such activities can become distorted as a result of being detached from the truth of Catholic faith. Indeed, since the mid-twentieth century, many Catholics have effectively reduced the faith to the pursuit of various political, economic and social agendas—so much so that such activism becomes seen as the essence of being Catholic. This essentially amounts to the faith's absorption into what I'll call secular moralism.

The term "moralism" is used a great deal today. It's often employed to stigmatize moral arguments associated with orthodox Christianity or what are often conventionally labelled "conservative" positions. There are, however, legitimate uses of the word within a Christian context. One is the idea that moral improvement is the way to win God's favor, or what might be called a type of pious Pelagianism. Another is a deep preoccupation with oneself and others being obedient to moral precepts—an approach that goes hand-in-hand with a heavily duty-based and legalistic mindset. This type of moralism often degenerates into trying to find loopholes which allow people to rationalize free choices to violate, for instance, the moral absolutes underscored by the Decalogue, Christ, Saint Paul, and the entire Christian tradition.

A New Morality

Moralism, however, isn't limited to the Christian realm. It has many secular counterparts. Prominent among these is morality's reduction to my voracious support for particular causes. "I am a good person because I favor environmentalism, socialism, liberalism, unions, business, el pueblo,

refugees, feminism, the United Nations, pacifism, an end to air-conditioning, nuclear disarmament, etc.”

In this world, other peoples’ badness is determined by the fact that they don’t identify with, or have significant reservations about, for example, the contemporary environmental movement, the European Union, or some of the absurd claims made today under the rubric of human rights. Such individuals are relegated to the outer realms of acceptability and assigned a label. This usually involves words like “hater” or the suffix “phobic.”

It’s not that Catholics can be indifferent to something like the plight of refugees. In fact, we should be concerned about such things. But while the Church has always insisted that we may never freely choose to violate the moral absolutes, it recognizes that Catholics can often legitimately propose different solutions to a challenge like immigration.

Secular moralism, by contrast, generally involves denying that there is a prudential dimension to how we choose to do good. With secular moralists, it’s normally their way and no other way. If you want to test the theory, try telling one of secular moralism’s high priests (Jeffrey Sachs comes to mind) why you think, say, government-mandated carbon-emissions reductions might not be the best approach to addressing climate change. Then observe how quickly you are stigmatized as bent on destroying the planet or a tool of Big Oil.

Within the Church, secular moralism rears its head when the faith becomes exclusively identified with improvements of this world. And that really matters because it means that the person of Christ and the most essential messages of his Gospel are being marginalized, if not lost altogether.

When Christ becomes an optional extra

Again, it’s not that attempting to realize any number of goals in the realms of politics, the economy, or civil society is necessarily wrong in itself. Even popes have lent the Church’s support to particular causes. One example is Leo XIII’s effort to alleviate the condition of employees in early-industrial capitalism. No one, however, would suggest that Leo XIII diminished the Gospel to promoting the well-being of industrial workers. He spoke ceaselessly, and far more often, of the Christ who lived, suffered, died, and who was restored to life: the Christ who is, as Saint John Paul II wrote in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, “the source of a new life that does not pass away but lasts to eternal life.”

In short, while addressing contemporary problems is one aspect of the Church’s mission, spreading the message of Christ’s invitation to eternal life necessarily comes first and foremost for any orthodox Christian. Without this, we become mere secular moralists. As Joseph Ratzinger pointed out in a homily delivered one month before his election as pope, Christ’s opponents put him to death not for his good works, but because he claimed to be God. “Jesus’ adversaries,” the future pope said, “cannot deny the good works they have seen, but what they can deny is that these good works point

to something more, to something beyond the works themselves.” One sees the same thing today with those who praise Christians’ service to the poor but then object strenuously when those same Christians speak of Christ, his message of redemption and eternal life, and what this means for our free choices.

By definition, reducing the Gospel to promoting temporal causes involves being ambiguous about, ignoring, or subtly denying Christ’s call to eternal life. In his 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (much praised by Pope Francis), Blessed Paul VI noted that Christians “are frequently tempted to reduce [the Church’s] mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project . . . a man-centered goal: the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order.”

Given the context, the pope’s words were clearly a warning to proponents of Marxist-versions of liberation theology, most of whom were—and remain—rather quiet about man’s final destiny beyond death: i.e., oneness with Christ, or the eternal separation from God that we can freely choose for ourselves (also known as Hell). But Pope Paul’s critique goes beyond that group. It’s also a reminder to Christians of what happens when you read the Scriptures as a message of an essentially this-worldly liberation: something that involves reinterpreting the Resurrection as “symbolic” rather than a real historical event which opened the possibility of immortality with Christ. In other words, “immanentizing the eschaton,” to rework the phrase coined by the German philosopher Eric Voegelin, leads inevitably to Christianity collapsing into secular moralism.

Works which last

So how do Christians avoid reducing the Gospel to secular moralism while also fulfilling our Gospel-mandated responsibilities to our neighbor in need?

Part of the answer, we already know. Catholics must take the Scriptures’ presentation of Christ’s life, death, and Resurrection seriously—as the Apostles telling us what really happened—and not sideline their significance for the Christian life because we’re worried that environmentalists, UN officials, or German bishops conference bureaucrats might not take us seriously. The other part of the answer involves correctly understanding the relationship of our free choices and actions (or “works”, as James calls them) to the world which is to come.

Perhaps the best contemporary Catholic statement on this relationship is to be found, ironically enough, in the very document most claimed by those inclined to reduce Catholicism to just another secular moralism and Christ to just another noble sage. At the end of the third chapter of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers wrote:

while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom [humanae dignitatis, communionis fraternae et libertatis], and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise [industriae], we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: "a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace." On this earth that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower. (GS 39)

There is much worth pondering in those sentences. But perhaps the most important points are these.

First, there are no earthly utopias. Today's utopian is usually tomorrow's commissar. Second, eternity does begin in the here-and-now of our daily, often humdrum lives. Our good works, whether those of a senator or a janitor, create fruit—humanae dignitatis, communionis fraternae et libertatis—that lasts. These are the goods which ultimately matter. At the end of time, long after the rock concert for universal peace and cosmic justice is over, the goods which we have realized through our free choices will be revealed as, Saint Paul reminds us, through fire. What was built on the foundation of Christ, he says, will endure (1 Cor 3:14).

Next to Christ's offer of eternal life with him, the Church's doctrine of immortality, and what these say about just how much God loves man, the emotivist satisfactions afforded by secular moralism seem like very poor fare indeed.

About the Author

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