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Edited by John J. O’Keefe, Gina Merys, and Bridget Keegan

Creative Tensions

The Catholic Tradition and American Political Life

David Carroll Cochran, Loras College

Introduction

[1] I grew up Catholic and it has always been a part of who I am, though, like many people, in ways that have waxed and waned at various points. I attended Catholic grade and middle schools, but not a Catholic high school, college, or graduate school. As a freshly minted Ph.D., my research agenda was not concerned with the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, and whether I landed at a Catholic institution or not was irrelevant in my job search. But as it happened I did land at one, and over the last dozen years this has made a big difference in my own professional and faith journey.

[2] From the beginning of my career, my scholarship has focused on the intersection of theory and practice. I’ve always been interested in how normative political ideals find

concrete expression in the often messy realities of political life. Initially, this focus examined issues of race and ethnicity, but over the last several years I have shifted to also engage questions of religion, especially Catholicism. This shift was partly due to the environment and opportunities available at Loras College and its character as a Catholic institution. As a new faculty member at a college where the Catholic Intellectual Tradition was taken seriously, not just in campus spiritual life but in academic teaching and scholarship as well, I began to have a greater appreciation for the tradition's richness and potential to inform my own work. I was also able to take advantage of faculty development opportunities tied to work in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition – most notably a rotating endowed chair in Catholic thought that affords faculty members significant release time and a generous research budget for relevant projects. The other key factor was more personal. My father is also a political scientist with an interest in religion and politics, and, as my own interest in the area grew, we began collaborating on some projects.

[3] The line of research and writing that these factors helped open up centers on a series of creative tensions at the intersection of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and American politics. I use the concept of “creative tension” in the way Martin Luther King did in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, to indicate an area characterized by possible opposition or conflict that nonetheless has the potential to produce growth and deeper understanding as well. I want to offer some thoughts on four such areas of creative tension where Catholicism and political life in the contemporary United States come into contact.¹

The Catholic Tradition and Politics

[4] The first area of tension has to do with the place of politics in the life of the Catholic believer. There is an unavoidable political dimension to Catholicism. Our tradition teaches that we are made by God for life in community. But the kinds of communities we construct are up to us; we can build good, just, and humane ones, or we can build bad, unjust, and cruel ones. This is why we are not just social animals, but political ones as well. Politics is how we decide what kind of communities we will live in together. Catholic teaching tells us that we are called to work for a peaceful and just society, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable among us. This doesn't always directly involve politics, but it cannot completely ignore politics either. The law and public policy are central and inescapable parts of how we either establish or fail to establish peace and justice for all members of our communities.

[5] The Catholic tradition, however, does not provide specific policy blueprints. It offers a broad vision of the good society rather than a comprehensive and detailed description. This means that while Catholicism requires attention to politics, it also requires prudence on the part of each believer in deciding how and when to address political questions in specific circumstances. Additionally, the work of the faithful for peace and justice on earth exists alongside the vision of salvation also offered by the Catholic tradition. We are a pilgrim people on the road to heaven; our stay on earth is a temporary one. In Augustine's famous

¹ These reflections are drawn primarily from my own recent scholarship (Cochran 2003, 2006). Other books addressing these tensions range from the classic – Murray and Neuhaus (1984, 1987) – to more recent ones such as Heyer and Chaput.

image, we exist between two cities – the earthy one and the divine one (book 19, chap. 17). We are pulled between the world of sin, where politics is necessary, and the kingdom of heaven, where it will be unnecessary. Unlike some Protestant traditions that emphasize separation from the fallen nature of this world, the Catholic tradition, following Augustine, acknowledges that the work of the believer for peace and justice in earthly communities marked by sin does matter a great deal. But the tradition also teaches that this work is not exhaustive of the faith. Concern for the world and its tribulations without being rooted in other elements of the faith – prayer, sacramental life, the goal of salvation and unity with God – is misguided. The multiple dimensions of the Catholic tradition require balance and integration in the lives of the faithful.

[6] So we see there are tensions within the Catholic tradition itself over the role and scope of politics. Politics matters but not exclusively or uniformly. The extent and content of political concerns will vary widely within and across the multidimensional faith lives of individual believers. Why is this area of tension creative then? It is creative because it challenges us to see the richness and fullness of the Catholic faith, to find balance in our own lives, and to recognize that others will strike different balances. A concern with political questions only exists alongside other elements of our lives as Catholics – career, family responsibilities, prayer life, parish ministry, service and volunteer work, and so on – all of which undergo shifts in the time and emphasis we give each of them at different points in our lives. In balancing these different dimensions, we need to avoid two dangers. The first is ignoring political matters entirely, of writing them off as irrelevant to living within the Catholic tradition. Too many Catholics view their faith as a purely private concern with no political implications. The second danger is making politics everything, of reducing the Catholic faith to simply political concerns. Too many Catholics, and this is true on both the left and the right, view Catholicism almost exclusively through the lens of mobilizing politically to fight injustice. Finally, recognizing the tensions in this area help us realize that the multidimensionality of the Catholic tradition means that different people are called for different things at different points in their lives. At any given time, some will emphasize political matters more or less than others, and among those who do make politics a major concern, the particular issues they feel drawn to will also vary. This is all as it should be. Within the Catholic tradition there is no single political template that each and every believer must fit.

The Catholic Tradition and Democratic Pluralism

[7] The second area of tension is between Catholicism as a distinct religious tradition and a political context in the United States that is democratic and dramatically pluralistic. There was a time when the ideal in the Catholic tradition was the confessional state, where the Catholic Church would have a privileged political status and the law would enforce its values. Vatican II repudiated these ideas, and over the last half-century Catholic social teaching has gone from being deeply suspicious of democracy to being one of its strongest global advocates. It now clearly embraces basic civil and political rights, emphasizing in particular the right of all to participate in the democratic process and freedom of conscience in matters of religion (see the Vatican II documents “Declaration on Religious Liberty” and “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”).

[8] The Catholic tradition still calls on individual believers to witness and work for Catholic values in the political arena, but in doing so we meet fellow Americans who represent a variety of traditions and ways of life. Many do not share Catholic principles, and some may embrace values deeply at odds with Catholic teaching. Catholics, then, are part of the larger set of questions surrounding the proper role of religion in American democratic politics.

[9] Broadly speaking, there are two dangers to avoid here. The first is the claim that religion is a purely private matter that should have no role in politics since it seeks to impose a certain brand of religious morality on others. Richard John Neuhaus famously, and critically, called this a demand for a “naked public square,” one stripped of all religious content (1984). This demand is wrong because it falsely implies that politics can be value-neutral, that it can avoid making moral commitments, including those ultimately backed by the force of law. In fact, democratic politics and the public policies it produces are all about making moral judgments, judgments about the most just or right or good way to live together as a community. Every law enforces a particular kind of morality. What is important is that everyone has a seat at the table in such deliberations, and that all members of the community, especially the most vulnerable, have their basic rights and interests respected. Since for many people religion is a critically important source of moral reflection that they bring to the table, excluding it effectively silences them. It also denies to the rest of the participants the chance to learn from the rich diversity of religious voices. Indeed, some of the most inspiring political movements in our history, most notably those for abolition and civil rights, are inseparable from the religious voices that were part of them. So while it is clearly not the only source of moral reflection available in American democratic politics, religion is certainly a legitimate one.

[10] The other danger, however, is going too far the other way and trying to enact every religious doctrine into law.² Some religious doctrines do touch on the common good, the basic demands of justice, or fundamental human rights. As such they are relevant to the life of the entire community and have a legitimate role in the political arena. So it is entirely legitimate to work for laws that raise the minimum wage, or expand public healthcare, or ban embryo-destroying research, or prohibit physician-assisted suicide based on one’s religion convictions (just as it is legitimate for those who oppose each of these examples, whether from religious conviction or not, to work against them). But other religious doctrines are not like this. I live in a majority Catholic city, but my working to pass local ordinances requiring all citizens to refrain from meat on Fridays during Lent, or to attend mass each Sunday, or to never lie, or to never engage in extramarital sex, or to visit those who are poor, sick, or in prison would be both absurd and wrong. Each of these examples does involve Catholic doctrine, but giving these doctrines the force of law is inappropriate. In some cases, the doctrine is only expected of Catholics themselves rather than the entire community. In others, regardless of who the doctrine applies to, it is better pursued through personal witness or moral persuasion than public policy.

² Again, given the Catholic tradition’s troubled history with the ideal of the confessional state, Catholics should be especially cognizant of this danger (though historically the question of the confessional state was rarely as relevant in the United States as it was in Europe and Latin America).

[11] Catholics, then, are called to be witnesses for Catholic values in American life, but sometimes this means working through politics and sometimes it does not. For those instances where political action is appropriate, it means entering into an open and honest democratic dialogue with Americans from diverse traditions and perspectives. This requires building consensus about the best way to live together in community rather than imposing doctrines unilaterally. Fortunately, the Catholic tradition is well equipped to do this given its natural law tradition. While certainly rooted in gospel values, Catholic social teaching is also based on philosophical principles accessible to everyone. Principles like human dignity, the preferential option for the poor, or environmental stewardship are understandable to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, meaning the Catholic tradition can fruitfully engage in democratic dialogue with those not professing it (see Sweetman). This process of democratic dialogue and consensus building is also ongoing. Just because the law or public policy treats an issue a certain way does not mean this will always be the case, and citizens who are on the losing side of a question are free to continue pressing their views into the future in the hope that a new consensus will emerge and prompt a more just law or policy.

[12] Why is this area of tension creative? It is creative because it offers all of us, Catholic or not, a way to reflect on difficult questions about the nature of democracy. Building democratic consensus in a pluralistic society can be challenging. From religion to race to class to political ideology to other sources of diversity, American democracy is always struggling to forge common solutions amid a variety of perspectives and interests. For Catholics specifically, the tensions involved here are creative in two additional ways. First, they challenge us to know our own tradition better. There is no better way to fully understand and appreciate a set of values – to grasp their complexity, strengths, shortcomings, or points of commonality – than to engage in an open and honest dialogue with others who may not embrace them (see also Mill: 33-43.). Second, this process necessarily teaches us the virtue of modesty. Too often the temptation in political dialogue is to assume that answers are easy and that our perspective is obviously the correct one. Rarely is either true. This does not mean we should not have the confidence to make political judgments and speak out for them. Modesty is not relativism. Rather, it means acknowledging the complexity of most political matters, the range of legitimate perspectives, and the possibility that there is much we can learn from others in the process of democratic dialogue.

The Catholic Tradition and the American Political Landscape

[13] The third area of tension is between the social teaching offered by the Catholic tradition and the American political landscape today. This landscape is dominated by the left-right political spectrum. We Americans, and our media's political coverage in particular, tend to refer to candidates, parties, interest groups, and specific issue positions by placing them somewhere on this spectrum. Republicans are further to the right, and Democrats are further to the left. A conservative, right-leaning Bush administration was replaced by a liberal, left-leaning Obama administration. Those on the right support lower taxes, oppose gay marriage, or seek to end affirmative action. Those on the left support universal healthcare, oppose private school vouchers, or seek to end the war in Iraq. While such characterizations are not necessarily inaccurate, if often oversimplified, it is important to

recognize how significant this left-right spectrum is to defining the terms of contemporary American politics.

[14] It is especially significant when it comes to talking about Catholic social teaching since it famously does not fit into this spectrum very well. Indeed, it seems to be all over the map. On some issues – abortion, school choice, or same-sex marriage – it seems to be on the right, indeed often further right than many mainstream Republicans. On other issues – war and peace, the death penalty, universal healthcare, or a living wage – it seems to be on the left, indeed often further left than many mainstream Democrats. This often leads to confusion about the nature of Catholic social teaching. Is it really conservative or liberal? The real answer – that it is neither as those terms are usually understood in contemporary American politics – often gets lost in our culture’s tendency to oversimplify and the medias’ need to identify political camps with familiar labels. This is why coverage of Catholicism and politics usually glosses over complexity and falls back on a few familiar hot button issues.

[15] Catholic social teaching’s poor fit in the American political landscape creates challenges for those Catholics who do take their church’s teaching seriously as a unified whole. They often experience a sense of political homelessness and alienation. Given what many consider morally unacceptable positions advocated by each party, they don’t feel comfortable with either Democrats or Republicans, which, within the structure of our democracy as a two-party system, does not leave many other options (this sense of homelessness becomes particularly acute at election time, which I turn to in the next section). Furthermore, since democratic politics is also about alliances and coalition building, the political influence of Catholic social teaching and those who support it consistently can be weakened as groups across the spectrum who may be in agreement with Catholic teaching on some issues are often deeply at odds with it on others, a fact that while not fatal to coalitions can make collaboration difficult.

[16] Why is this area of tension creative? It is creative because it can offer a critical and prophetic challenge to the way American politics is usually understood. Maybe the fact that Catholic social teaching does not map onto the American political landscape very well does not mean the problem is with Catholic social teaching but rather with that landscape itself. Indeed, there is a strong sense among many Americans that the left-right spectrum we usually use to make sense of politics is flawed – oversimplified, too polarizing, artificial. But there is a real shortage of genuine alternatives. Most attempts simply try to triangulate the difference between left and right, ending up with a thin and lifeless centrism pursued for its own sake, and one still defined by the very spectrum it attempts to break out of. Catholic social teaching is one of the few traditions of reflection on political life that we have that is truly independent of the left-right spectrum, one offering an integrated and coherent alternative approach to thinking about political issues and their underlying connections.

[17] The “seamless garment” approach to life issues made famous by Cardinal Bernardin is the best known example of framing issues and their connections in ways that challenge the usual left-right split, but Catholic social teaching has the potential to offer creative and challenging alternative approaches on other sets of issues as well. A little noticed example is *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration*, a statement by the US Catholic Bishops released in 2000. It is a thoughtful, integrated, and compelling examination of criminal justice issues that

avoids the usual slogans and easy answers found in our political discourse. Another area of particular interest to me is how Catholic social teaching can help open up our often-deadlocked debates over issues of race and ethnicity in the United States. The Catholic tradition offers an approach that integrates social and economic justice concerns usually associated with the left, with attention to cultural and family structure issues usually associated with the right. It also offers powerful concepts like solidarity and subsidiarity that provide a framework for understanding how ideals like unity and treating all persons as equals can coexist with those like diversity and the flourishing of cultural differences (see Cochran 2006b).

[18] It is important to keep in mind, however, that just because Catholic social teaching has the potential to challenge the usual understandings of American politics does not mean it always does so successfully. One reason this area of tension is creative is that it forces us as Catholics to ask why our tradition's richness is not more effectively shared. In many ways Catholic social teaching is still our tradition's "best kept secret" (Henriot, DeBerri, and Schultheis: 3). The challenge for Catholics is to ask why this is the case and what we can do to change it.

The Catholic Tradition and American Elections

[19] The fourth area of tension is within the American Catholic Church over questions of political participation. This has become most apparent in recent years as each election approaches and battles break out within the Church over which candidates Catholics can and cannot in good conscience vote for. There are two interesting dimensions to this area of tension.

[20] The first is the dilemma of the consistent Catholic voter. This is the voter who takes Catholic social teaching as a whole seriously, but, as we saw above, experiences a sense of political homelessness given an American political landscape in which candidates who consistently embrace Catholic values are rare. This voter usually faces a range of candidates, all of whom may hold some positions supportive of Catholic teaching but other positions significantly at odds with that teaching. This voter is also subject to an increasingly intense effort to tip the scales one way or the other with targeted appeals from campaigns and interest groups, as well as a blizzard of competing voter guides in church pews and on car windows in parish parking lots.

[21] One particularly unhelpful tactic is to define some issues as "non-negotiable," usually those that line up with one political party's priorities, and define the rest as open to "prudential disagreement" (the best known example of this is the right-leaning *Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics*). This confuses a legitimate claim that some issues should weigh more heavily in a voter's choice than others, with a misunderstanding of the role of prudence. The Catholic tradition teaches that all of its core principles are non-negotiable in the sense that the faithful Catholic voter should take them into account. But doing this always requires the virtue of prudence, which is how we apply these general core principles to particular issues in particular circumstances (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: §1806). People who agree on broad moral commitments will often legitimately disagree on how best to apply them and balance them against other moral commitments in specific situations. Prudence is never off the table, no matter how important the issue, and it is also not a license to ignore or

minimize Catholic teaching on other issues. All issues that Catholic social teaching speaks to have their place, and all require prudence in deciding how best to address them, both in light of that teaching and given the specific political conditions voters operate within.

[22] Of course, saying all issues have their place is not the same as saying they all matter equally. Some are certainly more central in the Catholic tradition, so weighing issues is not simply a matter of counting up how many positions each candidate has that are consistent with Catholic teaching. A good way to think about this is to consider our own lives. We each have a range of things that matter to us – family, career, church, friends, hobbies, favorite foods, and the list of tasks to get done around the house. To say that all are always equally important is wrong. Some are clearly more central to our lives than others. But to exclude all the others in favor of just one is also foolish. Our lives are complex, and we try to balance different commitments by giving each its proper place. Sometimes this means making difficult decisions given the changing circumstances of our lives. We may devote more time and energy to one over the other at any given time, but this will likely shift at other times. And most of us also recognize that many of these commitments, the things that matter to us, are actually interrelated, so it is not possible to hold up one as so important we can ignore the rest. The key to all of this is prudence – how we decide the best way to meet the many general commitments we have in the ebb and flow of daily life.

[23] Politics works the same way. For the consistent Catholic voter a range of issues will be important. Not all of these will be equal since some are clearly more central to Catholic social teaching, but each deserves to be considered, and they are all interrelated in the way the core principles of Catholic social teaching speak to them. And just as in our own lives where our commitments do not exist as abstract ideas, but instead come in the very specific and shifting circumstances of our particular experiences, weighing issues at election time must account for specific and shifting political conditions. For example, just because a particular issue may be more central to Catholic social teaching does not mean it is more central for a particular candidate. When candidates check the pro-life or pro-immigrant or pro-union box on their campaign websites, this does not mean they intend to do much about such issues once elected. It is no secret that the way candidates campaign – finessing issues, emphasizing different themes in front of different audiences, and making promises impossible to keep – often bears little resemblance to how they actually govern once in office. And another factor is the office itself. While opposition to the death penalty may be a very important position to consider when voting for a gubernatorial candidate, it may not be so important in a Senate or presidential election since capital punishment policies are largely a state matter in this country. Some elected officials are simply not running for an office with much relevance to particular issues, no matter how central to Catholic social teaching they are.

[24] So in spite of attempts by activists and voter guides to simplify the dilemma facing consistent Catholic voters, the dilemma remains. Such voters exist within the tensions that mark the intersection of Catholic social teaching and American electoral politics, and while prudence can help them navigate these tensions it cannot eliminate them. This, however, brings us to the other interesting dimension of tensions in this area – the fact that most American Catholics do not experience them. Those consistent Catholic voters who experience a sense of political homelessness and wrestle with how to vote each Election Day

are real, but they are few. Most American Catholics seem entirely comfortable within the dominant political landscape. Many pay no attention to Catholic social teaching when deciding how to vote. Others, and this is true on both the right and the left, filter Church teaching through their existing ideological or partisan lenses, taking what confirms their political preferences and jettisoning the rest. Indeed, while “the Catholic vote” gets invoked a lot in American politics, there is little evidence that such a thing really exists. Catholics as a whole are virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the American electorate. They tend to split their votes among parties and candidates according to the same demographic and ideological factors that characterize the rest of the country.

[25] Why is this area of tension creative then? It is creative because it forces American Catholicism to face some difficult questions about its role in the country’s political life. The intense debates within the Church ahead of each election are partly a sign of health, showing that we take our faith seriously enough to argue about how best to bring it into the political arena. But they indicate problems too, often descending into mean-spirited attacks and displays of self-righteousness. Too often they are mere partisan arguments dressed up in Catholic garb. How, then, can we as Catholics engage in dialogue over issues of political participation without losing sight of the charity, modesty, and openness to differences that make such dialogue fruitful rather than destructive? We also need to face the other problem with these debates in the Church over voting – the fact that most Catholics are not listening. What does it say about a tradition that seeks to bring its principles into the public square to share with all Americans when most of its own members seem unmoved by those very principles? How can a tradition with the potential to offer a distinctive alternative to the usual ways of conceptualizing politics in the United States realize this potential when its membership is not particularly distinctive itself?

Conclusion

[26] In closing I will return to my own development. In working over the last decade on the kinds of issues I have just briefly outlined, I have experienced three kinds of growth. The first is as a scholar. Doing research and writing within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has opened up a whole set of new questions for me. It has been an especially rich area for examining how political theory and political practice exist in an uneasy but fascinating relationship. It has also made me much more aware of the importance of interdisciplinary connections, as the conference that led to this collection of essays illustrates. Exploring the Catholic Intellectual Tradition quickly draws you to work done in theology, philosophy, literature, and history, and the questions the Catholic Intellectual Tradition asks reach out to engage those also examined by the natural and social sciences.

[27] I have also grown as a member of my academic community. The more I have learned about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, the more I have been able to connect with the mission and identity of my institution. The Catholic identity of a college or university should not be confined to specific areas like campus ministry offices or religious studies departments. Instead, it should be a dynamic and creative element in the life of the entire institution, not in a way that tries to impose a particular fixed idea of Catholic identity, but in an open-ended way marked by hospitality and dialogue. As someone outside the usual areas associated with Catholic identity at Catholic colleges and universities today, my academic

work in the tradition has pulled me into participating in a diverse set of campus-wide programs and initiatives that touch on our college's Catholic character.

[28] Finally, my work in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition over the last several years has helped me grow in my own faith life. As I have gotten to know my Church better, I believe it has made me a more committed and knowledgeable Catholic, but also a more reflective and critically aware one as well. It has helped me grow in my appreciation of the richness and complexity of my own religious tradition.

[29] Perhaps the thing I have been most thankful for in these areas of growth is their integration. One danger in academic life is that areas like scholarship, teaching, and campus service become separate and unconnected, but doing work in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition at a Catholic college has helped link these different areas so that they add to and inform each other. And an additional danger of any job, academic or not, is that it becomes cut off from the rest of one's life, but, again, doing work in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition has helped connect my work life and my personal life in ways that have deepened both.

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