

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### Who Is My Neighbor?

#### Personalism and the Foundations of Human Rights

**Thomas D. Williams**

Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press,  
2005 (342 pages)

When I began reading Father Thomas Williams' *Who Is My Neighbor?* I had the eerie feeling that I was reading a book that I wanted to write.

For the most part, Williams presents a line of reasoning very similar to the argument that I made the last time I taught my university's 400-level philosophy course on Catholic Social Thought. In that course, I used Robert Kraynak's book, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, to set up the problem of the semester. Kraynak offers a serious challenge to Catholic social thought and personalism. According to Kraynak, the emphasis in personalism on the dignity of the human person, specifically when it is coupled with the language of rights, actually has the effect of weakening Christianity and sapping its spiritual energy. Kraynak believes that, in adopting the language of rights, both Vatican II and John Paul II have inadvertently undermined Christianity both in theory and in practice.

It is a plausible charge, but ultimately, I conclude, Kraynak is wrong. In teaching that course, I spent the rest of the semester working through the major social encyclicals from *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*. My goal was to show the students that the notion of "human rights" is used in a distinct way in the encyclical tradition. This theme has also shaped courses that I have taught on Christian personalism and John Paul II. While teaching these courses, I came to think that the topic warranted a book-length treatment. Had I the time, I thought I might take up the project myself. After reading Williams' book, I have determined that much of that work is already completed.

Williams has produced a very fine book deserving a serious readership. The argument proceeds in five parts, but hovering in the background before the text begins is the recognition—now nervously conceded by almost all defenders of rights language—that virtually every effort to defend the language of rights has failed. Thus, we find ourselves using the language of rights with no agreed upon account of what rights are or how we should understand them.

In the first part of his book, Williams helpfully lays out several features of the current state of the debate about rights language. In particular, he begins with an anthropological and ethical account of human rights (rather than beginning with legal rights). Next, he reviews and responds to three key objections lodged by those opposed to the language of rights: (1) Alasdair MacIntyre's claim that rights are fictions that do not exist, (2) Oliver O'Donovan's claim that rights are inseparably connected with ideas that are incompatible with Christian faith, and (3) Ernest Fortin's claim that rights are modern innovations that end up undermining Christian faith both in theory and in practice.

The heart of the book is part 3. I strongly recommend these six chapters as a solid introduction to Thomistic personalism on the role of rights language in contemporary Catholic thought. The net effect of these chapters is twofold: (1) the reader is left in a position to understand the distinctive way that rights language is used in the personalism of contemporary Catholic social thought, and (2) the reader is prepared to concede that understanding rights as flowing from the dignity of the human person is a helpful alternative to the widespread current confusion about rights.

Before I raise two objections, I want to repeat that this is an important and helpful book for those who want to think through the place of rights language in the social teaching of the Church.

My first point of criticism has to do with two metaphors that Williams mixes together throughout his analysis. On the one hand, Williams is concerned with the *language* of rights. Responding to our confusion about rights language, his goal is to help us understand more deeply the meaning of human rights by situating them within Thomistic personalism. According to this approach, the intellectual's task is grammatical; that is, one aims to identify ideas that are subtly revealed in the way key terms are used and to contrast the uses of terminology in one grammar with that of another.

I am strongly sympathetic with this approach, and Williams is at his best when he is engaged in this kind of project. For that reason, the best part of the book is part three because Williams successfully helps his reader understand the grammar of Thomistic personalism and the distinctive way in which the concept of rights (as flowing from the dignity of the human person) is used in that grammar.

On the other hand, Williams also frames his project in terms of providing a *foundation* for human rights. I have much less sympathy for this way of understanding the intellectual's task. Such a quest seems to flow from the Cartesian delusion that knowledge must rest on a sure and certain first principle that would convince the fictitious skeptic. In my view, the book would be stronger if Williams had abandoned the metaphor of foundations.

In addition, I expect that some readers of *Markets and Morality* will find Williams' final chapter unsatisfying. Williams urges us to ask: Who is my neighbor? Emphasizing solidarity, Williams answers, "we are really responsible for all." However, because he says little about subsidiarity, Williams leaves it quite unclear how "the human community" should satisfy, for example, the right of the hungry to be fed. Williams is at his best when he focuses on the sphere of morality; he offers almost no concrete guidance on the place of rights in markets or governments.

Despite these criticisms, *Who Is My Neighbor?* when it is good, is very good. This book is an important contribution to both the ongoing debate about the place of rights language in Catholic social thought and the broader debate about the meaning of human rights.

—Gregory R. Beabout  
*Saint Louis University*

**Evangelicals in the Public Square: Carl F. H. Henry,  
Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, John Howard Yoder  
Jay Budziszewski**

**With responses by David L. Weeks, John Bolt, William Edgar,  
Ashley Woodiwiss. Introduction by Michael Cromartie. Afterword  
by Jean Bethke Elshtain**

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006 (218 pages)

This structured exchange between political theorist Jay Budziszewski and four respondents on the need for, and the promise of, mature evangelical political reflection is a must-read. The exchange resulted from a 2003 conference on the subject, sponsored by the Ethics and Public Policy Center's program in Evangelicals in Civic Life. The book also includes an Afterword by Jean Bethke Elshtain, a most insightful consideration of the entire exchange.

Budziszewski, well-known as an evangelical, but now a practicing Roman Catholic, grounds the conversation with his careful and rigorous explication of the political ideas of four twentieth-century evangelicals known to be formative in the development of an American evangelical politics: Henry, Kuyper, Schaeffer, and Yoder. Acknowledging that these four represent various poles of evangelical thinking and that none understood himself to be a political theorist, Budziszewski attempts to show not only the extent of their formative influences but also the extent of their limitations as *political* thinkers. Hence, he concludes, there is much work yet to be done to enhance the effectiveness and broaden the influence of evangelical political reflection.

In particular, he argues that such reflection would profit considerably from a fuller appreciation of the tradition of natural law. This historically developed body of Christian *philosophy*, he argues, would provide contemporary evangelical political reflection with what it now lacks, namely: an *orienting doctrine* (*re: government*); a *practical doctrine* (or guide to action); and a *cultural apologetic*. Growing as it does from the doctrine of