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Johnson's book and lessons from history

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 1, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

In reading about the decision of the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee [1] to condemn a 2007 book by Sr. Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University, my thoughts turned back to another story of ecclesiastic condemnation in the late 19th-century regarding the writings of Henry George. Back then, some U.S. prelates argued that condemnations were ill-suited to the American temperament and were likely to produce more harm than good.

In the 1880s, Fr. Edward McGlynn, pastor of St. Stephen?s Church in New York, became enamored of the economic views of Henry George, specifically his espousal of a single tax theory that focused on landowners. McGlynn went so far as to openly campaign for Henry George when the latter ran for mayor of New York.

George?s theories were found objectionable by many, most importantly by McGlynn?s superior, Archbishop Michael Corrigan. He ordered McGlynn to desist from campaigning for George, McGlynn refused, and Corrigan suspended him and removed him from his pastorate on January 14, 1887.

The McGlynn affair landed on plate of the archbishop of Baltimore James Gibbons in part because he was heading to Rome to receive his red hat. There he would meet with Vatican officials about a host of concerns, from the founding of the Catholic University in Washington to his forceful, and successful, defense of the Knights of Labor. Gibbons used his influence to try and achieve a rapprochement, and both sides in the dispute treated him shabbily, putting words in his mouth or making assumptions about his intentions that were quite inaccurate: They all wanted Gibbons on their side and if they could not achieve that, they pretended he was.

Gibbons successfully avoided getting drawn into the specifics of the McGlynn v. Corrigan affair, for the most part, but he did make his views powerfully felt on the subject of whether or not to condemn the writings of Henry George.

Archbishop Corrigan had called for a condemnation of George?s writings to strengthen his hand against McGlynn. Gibbons submitted a memorial on the subject to Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, Prefect of the Propaganda Fide, which then had jurisdiction over the church in the United States.

Gibbons addressed some of the specific issues regarding George?s writings, such as the fact that other writers had advanced similar views and noting how different his position was from that advocated by communism and socialism, but the central point of Gibbons? memorial was the any condemnation of George?s writings would likely do more harm than good.

Even if there were errors in the writings, Gibbons ?invoked the moral principle that a sentence should not be issued when the consequences would probably be contrary rather than favorable to the good end proposed,? as Gibbons? biographer recounts the tale. Gibbons argued that ?if the writings of George were condemned it would give to them an importance that they would never otherwise enjoy would excite the curiosity of readers so that thousands of additional copies would be sold, and thus the very influences which the condemnation sought to check and restrain would be immensely extended.?

Now, I have not read Johnson?s book. Maybe it is as misguided as the bishops suggest, maybe not. My point is a different one: I am not a betting man, but I am willing to wager that Johnson?s numbers on Amazon took a spike upward when the USCCB announced it findings. (Actually, I just saw that my colleague, Thomas Fox, has checked [2]and Sr. Johnson?s book has jumped to the top of the Amazon rankings for ?general theology? books.)

Condemnations seem ill-suited to achieve their objective in our day and age. Gibbons recognized this more than a century ago.

That said, I am not unmindful of the need for the bishops to keep watch over what does, and does not pass, for Catholic theology. There have been theologians in the past who have made large errors, even heresies, and Rome or a Council has had to step in.

I am glad that the bishops at Nicaea condemned Arius. I think the papal and episcopal warnings against communism were necessary and right and history as proved them right. And, when Fr. Feeney refused to abandon his interpretation of claim that *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* to mean that all non-Catholics were going to Hell, I am glad the Holy See pointed out that he was wrong and, indeed, excommunicated him.

This created the strange result that because of his insistence that there was no salvation outside the Church, Feeney found himself outside the Church.

I do not know if Sr. Johnson?s book falls into such egregious errors as the USCCB discerns. It does seem strange that neither side thought to speak to the other about the doctrinal committee?s investigation, and that burden clearly falls on the doctrinal committee. But nothing in the ambient culture has changed in ways to make Gibbons? fears about the effects of condemnation seem less applicable.

In the event, the Holy See did decide to condemn the writings of Henry George but in a move that would scarcely be possible today, they declined to publish the condemnation. It was merely circulated to the American bishops.

This compromise agreed with Corrigan that the writings in question were not consonant with Catholic teaching, but also with Gibbons about the ineffectual, even counter-productive, quality of the tool of condemnation. They left it to the American bishops to guard against doctrinal error by way of preaching and persuasion.

There is one other aspect of this story. It is often thought that the seeds of Pope Leo XIII?s seminal encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, are found in Gibbons? memorial arguing against the condemnation of the Knights of Labor, and indeed, many of the ideas Gibbons articulated did find their way into the eventual encyclical.

But it was actually in his correspondence about the writings of Henry George that the cardinal of Baltimore first raised the possibility of the Pope writing an encyclical that addressed issues of private property and social justice.

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