

Review: "Tea Party Catholic" Part III

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 21, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I began my review of Samuel Gregg's book "Tea Party Catholic." You can find the earlier installments by clicking [here](#) [1] and [here](#) [2]. As noted, this book makes perfect sense if you listen to Rush Limbaugh and watch Fox News and believe all that you there hear and see. But, if you have a discriminating mind, if you are inclined to see complexity on the world and in history, if you think oftentimes there are more than binary choices, and if you know that strawmen arguments are not very convincing, then you will find this book woefully deficient.

I read in the paper the other day that after the 2011 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Fox News reported that CIA personnel had been ready to come to the aid of the besieged Americans in the consulate but they were prevented from doing so by those higher in the chain of command. The CIA immediately denied this charge yet it was repeated on Fox News some 85 times in subsequent coverage. If you repeat a lie often enough, some people will believe it.

The issue of veracity stalks "Tea Party Catholic" in a similar fashion. Gregg makes assertions that demand to be proven, not accepted as fact. He writes, on page 93, "Today it is more widely grasped that, contrary to dependency theory, free trade is not a race to the bottom." Is this true? Are there not some countries, and some people, for whom free trade has produced a race to the bottom? Has Gregg been to Toledo? He points to India and China, concluding with the observation that it is the new Chinese middle class that is most receptive to the Gospel. "After all, one you concede liberty in one sphere (such as the economy, it is very hard to constrain it in other areas? such as the freedom to think about and ask questions concerning life's ultimate meaning." These words are written 24 years after the massacre in Tiananmen Square.

On the next page, Gregg writes, "But the very nature of free trade is such that it helps to realize the principle that the goods of the world are to be used for the well-being of all rather than just one community or one particular nation." Hmmmm. I would like to assign Mr. Gregg an essay question for his midterm: "How do you square that claim with the consequences of the Argentine sovereign debt crisis?" And, I should like to propose that his essay be graded by the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

The Tea Party is driven by an anti-government animus and Mr. Gregg has caught that particular flu in the worst way. In discussing "how Americans fulfill their responsibilities as citizens to those in need," he starts with this observation: "The first [factor] is the disturbing size now assumed by the American welfare state." Why is this "disturbing"? Other countries have more expansive social welfare states. Some of them, Germany comes to mind, even pay for it as they go. The size of our government spending is problematic because we have lowered taxes on the wealthy and the investor class so much in the past thirty years, we are creating huge deficits. That is a problem. But, is the size of the welfare state itself a problem? If so, why? He refers to the "welfare state's" worrying effects on America's moral culture, as if Bernie Madoff was a welfare queen and Enron a ponzi scheme concocted by Medicaid recipients. Yes, some social welfare programs created perverse disincentives from work and family life, although the demise of the family is an enormously complicated phenomenon and it is hard to pin it on LBJ. Wouldn't we be better off, morally that is, by learning to be a bit more indifferent to the

lives of the poor, a little more Calvin Coolidge and a little less FDR? This is nonsense.

In his treatment of subsidiarity, Gregg makes other claims that show a certain blindness to the complexity of the human heart. He writes, on page 105, that subsidiarity helps deal with the "knowledge problem." "People closer to a problem affecting, say, Albuquerque, New Mexico, usually have a better sense of all the issues involved than government officials who rarely venture out of Washington, D.C." I wonder why Gregg did not choose, say, Birmingham, Alabama for his example? People closer to a problem sometimes have a biased view, not a "better sense" of "all the issue involved." There is a one word response to this misuse of the principle of subsidiarity: Katzenbach. Sometimes, in full accordance with the doctrine of subsidiarity, a higher authority must step in to achieve the common good. That is what happened when Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach confronted Gov. George Wallace at the entrance to the University of Alabama. That is what happened when Congress, at long last, passed something close to universal health insurance. The issues of civil rights and access to health care are different in many ways, but in respect to their relationship to subsidiarity, they are closer to each other than either is to Gregg's adulation for individual and property rights.

On page 119, Gregg deploys statistics to make his case, noting that government spending on what he calls "welfare programs" has skyrocketed in the past fifty years, although he includes Social Security and unemployment insurance, which are not really welfare programs. Gregg notes that in 1967, spending on such programs was 32.6 percent of GDP and in 2009, that figure had risen to 61.3 percent of GDP. He concludes, "These figures give us some sense of what happens, fiscally-speaking, when governments try to assume prime responsibility for giving direct effect to the principle of solidarity and pay lip-service, at best, to subsidiarity." Seems to me that these figures suggest the cost of health care has gone through the roof in the past five decades, in part because of new procedures and medicines and, in part, because the breakdown of the extended family has left many older people in need of government subsidized nursing home care.

On page 141, Gregg repeats the lie that Obamacare was "socialized medicine" although here he argues it was about "much more" too. "It also reflected," he writes, "as one commentator wrote, 'the principle that the comprehensive definition and delivery of human physical and emotional well-being is a responsibility of the liberal secular state.'" Silly me. I thought the Affordable Care Act was about affordable healthcare.

One of my favorite tendentious claims put forward by Gregg is found on page 154. He writes, "It is, however, worth considering that the more the state takes in the way of taxes to pay for its often ineffective and socially dysfunctional welfare programs, the more the financial ability of many Catholics to directly support Catholic outreach to those in need is diminished." This, we are told, is "an economic reality that many Catholic leaders need to reflect upon more deeply." Of course, other countries with higher tax burdens have similar rates of philanthropic giving. And, of course, lower tax rates do not always translate into more charitable activities; oftentimes they translate into obscenely large mansions, vacation homes left empty for 50 weeks of the year while others lack any home, more beluga caviar at dinner time, fancy cars and fancy clothes and all sorts of things. Suddenly, this uber-capitalist, who usually champions the dynamism of market economies, now discerns that the pie cannot, as George W. Bush famously said, "grow higher." Now, when comparing tax rates and charitable activity, the pie is fixed in size. To use Gregg's logic, you could argue that charitable activity was bad because that diminished the amount of money available for business investment. Nonsense piled upon nonsense.

Mr. Gregg rises to defend Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's restriction of union rights on page 178. I rise to charge Gregg with willful ignorance or simple deceit. He writes, "In the Wisconsin case, the issues concerned not simply the limitations on collective bargaining proposed by Governor Walker and passed into law by the legislature. Other factors touching on the wider common good included an out of control state deficit? Should not some sense of veracity have inspired Gregg to not that the "out of control state deficit" was largely caused by the fact that this same Gov. Walker pushed through a huge tax cut at the beginning of his term?"

Before this parade of tendentiousness is done, Gregg manages to slur Latinos, and any politician who seeks to better their lot. After praising Archbishop Jose Gomez, I suspect disingenuously given what follows, Gregg includes a reference to a study that demonstrated "Hispanics and Hispanic immigrants in California were disproportionately dependent on welfare programs". Some of this, MacDonald notes, is attributable to higher poverty levels among California Hispanics as well as lower educational levels?. Their dependence upon the government safety net, MacDonald writes, incentivizes them to support politicians who see welfare programs and extensive redistribution as a way to build up reliable voting constituencies.? So, Ken Langone and the Koch Brothers and Sheldon Adelson can write large checks to the politicians of their choice without having their reputations questioned, but woe betide the poor Latino mother who needs food stamps to feed her child, and the politician who votes for those food stamps. It is all a plot to control government and lead America down the Road to Serfdom. Does anyone believe this foolishness? Does Gregg himself?

This book took me a long time to read because it is so full of the distortions, strawmen, and lies that I have detailed in these three columns, I had to keep putting it down. I could not read it before bedtime without getting worked up. Why was it published? Was there an editor anywhere near it? I have written an "argument book" before and I am sure there are a couple of mistakes therein, things I would like to change now that I have read it in the afterlight. But, this is ridiculous. You can't make it ten pages without encountering something worthy of Sean Hannity. (That is not a compliment.) I would like to engage a really smart defender of the market, someone who would challenge my more lefty, pro-labor, unreconstructed New Deal outlook, but instead, the Acton Institute offers us Mr. Gregg. Reading "Tea Party Catholic" puts me in mind of Gore Vidal's reflection upon Norman Mailer assaulting him once at a cocktail party: "I saw this tiny fist coming at me." This book, "Tea Party Catholic," is a "tiny fist."

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