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# What the critics of Pope Francis miss

Michael Sean Winters | May. 13, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

It has been 64 years since Reinhold Niebuhr published *The Irony of American History*. In 1952, many Americans remained haunted in a real way by the memories of what it had taken to defeat totalitarianism in World War II. They were still living in fear of a thermonuclear war and worried about the repressive communist regimes that had followed the Red Army into central Europe and taken over China. McCarthyism brought fear into America more directly, into our colleges and universities and unions and into the arts. So it was courageous for Niebuhr to point out that we Americans had more in common with our Soviet nemesis than we cared to admit.

Niebuhr's work came to memory when reading George Marsden's wonderful new book, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief*. Here is how Marsden recapitulates Niebuhr's argument that our American culture shared much in common with Soviet communism:

*Each affirmed the goal that humans should be masters of their own destinies. Each believed that the prescription for reaching that goal involved following the dictates of an economic system. Each had a myth of its own innocence and of the corruption of its opponents. It was particularly ironic that while Americans saw their prosperity as evidence of God's favor and hence of their own virtue, their enemies saw Americans' riches as evidence of their vice. Americans were fond of condemning the Soviet Union's "materialism," Niebuhr observed, "but we are rather more successful practitioners of materialism as a working creed than the communists, who have failed so dismally in raising the general standards of well-being." Each nation saw itself in the forefront of modern progress based on the highest intellectual authority: the scientific analysis of social conditions. Each was a latter-day manifestation of the enlightenment faith in the ability of science and rationality to solve human problems. Each nation continued to have an almost unreserved regard for the scientific model as the key to controlling and improving the human condition.*

Niebuhr was only one of many intellectuals in the 1950s who were concerned about the corrosive effects of materialism on American culture. We don't really have that debate about materialism anymore. Both the left and the right argue about the best way to improve GDP, but no one really questions the moral significance of our GDP.

This is what is meant by structural sin, when the conditions of life are such that even those who wish to improve the lot of their fellow man and follow the dictates and the example of the Lord Jesus are trapped in a system that requires them to hope for something that may be spiritually corrupting. No one can really want GDP to decline. An anemic economy brings real human hardship and suffering with it, especially for the poor and the vulnerable. But as a wise scholar said to me several years ago over coffee, an economy based on consumption is not sustainable, not environmentally, not economically, and not morally. Most importantly, we must rekindle that 1950s debate that wrestled with a fact so obvious we tend to miss it today: Materialism is the chief evangelizer of the Gospel of Secularization.

Yesterday, I wrote [1]about the fixation of so many of Pope Francis' critics on economic freedom. [N.B. I mistakenly attributed a slur against the Jesuits to Austin Ruse in yesterday's post when, in fact, the slur came

from his interlocutor. I apologize to Ruse and to my readers for this mistake.] The criticisms of Pope Francis based on his strong words about economic injustice amount to fighting the wrong war. The Acton Institute recently held an event in Rome [2], co-sponsored with the Italian Tea Party movement (ugh!), to highlight the link between economic freedom and religious freedom. Certainly, Niebuhr would agree that regimes that are repressive in one area of life are likely to be repressive in other areas as well. But that is like noting the sun rises in the east; you do not need an academic conference to examine the topic. No, what requires attention is the degree to which we in the affluent West, with our abundance of freedoms, repress ourselves with a materialistic culture that, among other things, suffocates the Gospel. The concern at Acton is a bit like the concern of several Fox News and other conservative analysts who fret every year about the "War on Christmas." As I have noted previously, if you go into a Wal-Mart in the weeks before Christmas, and you perceive that the threat to Christian civilization can be discerned in the fact that Wal-Mart now uses the phrase "Happy Holidays" rather than "Merry Christmas," you are missing the forest for the trees. Wal-Mart and its fellow commercial enterprises have turned Christmas into an opportunity to teach youngsters how to be greedy. That is the war on Christmas that matters, although you are unlikely to see an Acton Institute conference on that topic anytime soon.

This morning, we can see a different and more compelling Christian and Catholic approach to our secularized culture. At the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, Cardinal Sean O'Malley began his talk by discussing his early years as a priest working with the immigrant poor in downtown Washington, not far from the hotel where the breakfast is being held. Then, as now, O'Malley shared the poverty of those to whom he ministered. Some clerics and hierarchs make fun of O'Malley because he still wears his Capuchin habit, but the habit is a part of his way of life, a very simple life for one who has been thrust into prominence. He eats as simply as he dresses and even when proffered a very fine wine, he sticks to water. O'Malley shares a rectory with several other priests, and while I am sure he gets the family room for a meeting whenever he needs it, one does not have the sense that the life of the rectory conforms exclusively to his needs. No, it functions like most rectories as a busy place where the doorbell is frequently run, coffee cups are left in the kitchen sink, a secretary sorts the mail. Poverty and simplicity are the antidote to materialism and the secularism it brings.

O'Malley also related a story about the Capuchin provincial asking for a truly difficult assignment for the friars. They were given the missionary territory of Papua New Guinea. O'Malley relates:

*Many years later, a young friar I ordained who was working in Papua New Guinea came to see me on his home visit. He had glorious pictures of smiling natives, with bones in their noses, feathers in their hair and little else in the way of clothing. He announced proudly, "This is my parish council." I was particularly intrigued because one of my own pastors had just told me that his parishioners were not ready for a parish council.*

As Pope Francis noted the other day, pastors should not erect barriers -- "my parishioners are not ready for a parish council" -- to the work of the Lord. Here, too, humility is the antidote to power.

O'Malley goes on to say:

*We need to find new ways of bringing the Gospel to the contemporary world, of proclaiming Christ anew and of implanting the faith. Our task is to turn consumers into disciples and disciple-makers. We need to prepare men and women who witness to the faith, and not send people into the witness protection program. As the U.S. Bishops wrote in Go Make Disciples: "Every Catholic can be a minister of welcome, reconciliation, and understanding to those who have stopped practicing the faith." Pope Francis speaks of the culture of encounter and the art of accompaniment.*

The "culture of encounter" and the "art of accompaniment" are the antidote to our hyperindividualized, consumer culture: "Our task is to turn consumers into disciples and disciple-makers," as the cardinal suggests. Funny, this was not on the agenda of the critics of Pope Francis to whom I called attention yesterday.

Pope Francis' critics miss what Niebuhr understood so many years ago. Whatever the economic indictment of Marxism, the religious indictment was always its materialism, and that indictment applies to us in the capitalist West today as much as it applied to the communist East back then. We are, as Niebuhr observed, far better practitioners of materialism than the devotees of Marx and Lenin. And it is this that frustrates evangelization. The antidotes are found, as Pope Francis and Cardinal O'Malley indicate, not by perusing the works of Ludwig von Mises or Ayn Rand, but in the Gospels. There, in simplicity and poverty, practicing the art of accompaniment and solidarity, demonstrating to all what a culture of encounter entails, the Master taught us, as the Church must teach us still: Woe to the rich and comfort for the poor. That message did not go down well then and it certainly does not sit well today with our friends at Fox News or the Acton Institute. But it is the message of Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and forever.

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