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# Social Darwinism

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 5, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

The President used the phrase "social Darwinism" to characterize the GOP House budget the other day. I am not 100 percent certain that this blog was the first to apply that phrase to last year's budget proposal by Cong. Paul Ryan, but it was certainly one of the first. The meme quickly got picked up by other progressive Catholics because it seems to exemplify why Catholics have such resistance to these budget proposals.

The GOP likes to say that the Democrats' tax policies "punish success." Their idea is that, in a free market, people advance or decline economically based on their hard work or the success of their ideas and inventions, and that they should enjoy the fruit of that success. Democrats, at least this Democrat, has no desire to punish success, but I do wish to point out that, in the long tradition of Catholic social thought, going back before Rerum Novarum to Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo, indeed all the way back to the Gospels, there is the idea that the Creation belongs to no one but the Creator as a birthright, that the goods of the world have a moral claim upon them, that they be used well and justly, that the right to private property is thoroughly legitimate but is not absolute. Most importantly, we believe that all human institutions, including the economy and the government, are subject to moral considerations and are to be judged by how they advance the cause of human dignity and help a society to attain the common good. This is Catholic social teaching 101 and we believe it is rooted both in natural law and the dictates of the Gospel.

Of course, natural law is predicated on a view of nature that is far different from that presented to us by Darwin. But, before Darwin, Western philosophy had reached the conclusion that human life in the state of nature was "nasty, brutish and short," to use Hobbes' phrase, and the men enter into civil society to humanize it, make it less brutal, less nasty, less short. Hobbes' views do not align neatly with traditional Catholic latural law theory, but on this point they coincide: government is not a bad thing, nor is it merely a necessary thing. It is a humanizing thing, a means by which humankind can realize the common good as best they can.

This was the impetus behind the New Deal and the Great Society programs that the Ryan budget attack. Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid stand for the proposition that whether a human person was able to flourish in the free market or whether they failed there, whether their exertions met with success or not, whether they could have worked harder or not, no human person should be forced to live in poverty or without adequate health care because they are a human person. Period. We can debate the structure of these programs, to be sure. But, there is something profoundly unChristian and, yes, flavored with social Darwinism, in the way these programs are disparagingly called "entitlements." Yes, they are entitlements and proudly so. We believe human beings are entitled to live with adequate health care, irrespective of how they performed in the free market. We believe no senior citizen should be forced to live in poverty, no matter how foolish their investments of time or money. It is worth noting that Msgr. John A. Ryan and the forerunner of today's USCCB, endorsed the social welfare ideas we associate with these programs as early as 1919.

From Msgr. Ryan to Congressman Ryan, there has been a decline. Cong. Ryan says he wishes to move the country from an entitlement mentality to a freedom mentality, that those who work harder or whose ideas are better or who are better organized, should reap the rewards of their labor, and so they should. But, these

successful people should also acknowledge that they achieved their success in a context in which government not only paved the roads or built the airports that allow them to bring their products to market, but who supply the network of laws that protect private property and intellectual property, and guarantee a marketplace free from fraud, abuse or the kind of environmental damage that would not only cause widespread harm to others but helps the entrepreneur herself achieve her goals. If a businesswoman sells food, she knows that her customers understand that, by means of regulations, the government guarantees the safety of that food. If a businessman sells a toy, the customer is more inclined to purchase the toy because the country has child safety regulations. We need government and no one needs it more than those who are successful. If, in return, the nation expects them to acknowledge their debt to society for their own success by paying a bit more in taxes, that strikes me as precisely the kind of humanizing influence on the otherwise free market that we should applaud.

So, the appelation "social Darwinism" seems especially appropriate. It is wrong to predicate our nation's economic structures on the idea that the survival of the fittest is the only economic law that matters.

I am curious to see if the President will continue to use the phrase. It certainly resonated with the press, which quoted the phrase in virtually all coverage of the President's speech. I wonder, too, how the phrase will ring in the ears of, say, a 26-year old evangelical. Will it cause them to think twice before embracing Ryan's admittedly bold ideas? I hope so. We can certainly do better as a nation than the President's so far inexplicably inadequate proposals for dealing with the nation's long-term debt. But, we can also do better than Cong. Ryan's invitation to return to the state of nature.

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