



Charity in truth

Eric De Beukelaer

Juni 2010

VLAAMS VERBOND VAN KATHOLIEKE HOGESCHOLEN
Guimardstraat 1, 1040 Brussel

ond.vvkhob.be

Inhoud

1	No angels	2
2	No beasts	2
3	The truth about human nature	3

The Christian truth about man - as represented by the social doctrine of the Catholic Church - lies between two extremes. Those extremes both rest on an incorrect perception of human nature: Human beings are no angels, neither are they beasts.

1 No angels

Humans are no angels, as thought Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788), who with his 'bon sauvage' myth, influenced Karl Marx and also today's radical defenders of anti-globalization. The idea is: "Man is naturally good. As angels are. It is society that corrupts him. Change society and you will see mankind awakening to its true nature: the natural goodness of an angel". Who wouldn't want to believe this? I like this utopic vision. But as the breakdown of the Soviet system proved: It simply doesn't work.

Yes, communism offers us the ideal society. Unfortunately, because humans are no angels, it only works for people who resolutely chose for it by deciding for some monastery, kibbutz, or similar communitarian communities. But political leaders who want to impose communism on their people by constringent measures, walk a sure path towards tyranny. Which also means a highroad - as Churchill put it - to the equal sharing ... of common poverty.

2 No beasts

Man is no angel. But neither is he a beast. This idea was defended by other naturalist thinkers of the 17th and 18th century and still is by those radical defenders of free market. "Homo hominis lupus", argued Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), using the formula of a Latin humorist, called Plautus. If that be so, then economics is but the continuation of Darwin's "struggle for life" in the human realm. "Greed is good and it is legal", declared Gordon Gekko, the main character starred by Michael Douglas in the film Wall Street. And why is greed - normally seen as a human vice - so useful? Because it allows individual enrichment. The creed of ultra-liberals takes it's intellectual origin in the writings of moral philosopher Adam Smith (1723 - 1790), contemporaneous to Rousseau. Smith's ideas were in fact more subtle, but the perception they left to many is: If everyone is free to enrich himself, and is protected by the state to do so, common wealth will grow at an optimal speed. Every kind of political interference in this free market is therefore to be avoided, because it would mean the slowing down of that principle of common enrichment. Leave it all to the market and its 'invisible hand' will automatically care for the best possible 'optimal' economic equilibrium in society!

Adam Smith's economical principles proved correct. Free marked without any political interference works ... but not in the long run. There lies 'Adam's original sin': Individual greed is the efficient to allow enrichment. But greed is also short-sighted. It permits maximal enrichment, but only in the short term. In the long run, it fails.

'Education' is a good example to illustrate this. Everyone agrees that the best economical investment a human society can do in the long run, is to care for an efficient educational

system, i.e. a system which allows all future citizens to receive a fair opportunity to enjoy the level of instruction and education which will enable them to develop optimally their own human potentiality. But nobody is willing to voluntarily pay for this. A normal citizen will readily agree to pay for the education of his children, grandchildren and maybe a godchild. But who would readily pay hundreds of euro to send his neighbour's child to a decent school? Nobody, apart maybe some very rich and very generous. But those tend to be, unfortunately, rather rare. The most efficient economical system in the long run requires therefore a political intervention, imposing taxes which will allow the financing of an efficient educational system for all. Free market enables efficient 'rich kids schools'... But history teaches us that the offspring of today's CEO do not necessarily make the best CEO's for tomorrow. In the long run, a meritocracy always proves much more competitive than a closed system of social casts. And to have this, the state has to intervene in the free market.

Another example of the limits of free market, is 'ecology'. If the 'free market' were to put the real economical price on every consumption good, there would hardly be a global warming effect. Indeed, if it were the case, every consumption good would have to be paid at its real price, including the price of polluting air, water and soil, which, on this planet, are non-renewable capitals. By this very system, non-polluting activities would become the cheap ones and polluting productions, the expensive ones. But, once again, free market based on individual greed is short-sighted. Wild capitalism considers air, water and soil as near-to-free infinite natural resources. This is profitable for all of us today who fly low-cost, but might not be good news for future generations. We all know that, but still react as did king Louis the XVth of France: "Après nous, le deluge". A few years later, came the French revolution. The king was dead by then, but his son lost throne and head. Once again, it takes the state's intervention to correct the free market, by taxing polluting activity and promote non-polluting ones. Doing this, is the only way to put on every consumption product its real economical and ecological price. Doing this, is the only way to promote a sustainable free market. A market that survives ... in the long run.

Finally, when an acute economical crisis breaks out, a free market without any political correction, puts democracy in danger. Dictatorship is no enemy to free market. In competitive terms, an authoritative regime which sends the army to quieten social upheaval, can prove very efficient. The way some of today's new superpowers are ruled, is a clear sign that this works out quite well. And, to look at it the other way round, most historians agree that, without the 1929 break-down, Hitler probably never would have risen to power in Germany. Without a global social consensus, based on a certain amount of wealth redistribution and the presence of a dynamic working and middle-class who thinks the system is 'fairly fair', democracy proves to be in mortal peril.

3 The truth about human nature

Pope Benedict XVI called his social doctrine encyclical: *Charity in truth*. And the Christian truth about us is that humans are no angels and no beasts. They are creatures - *capax dei* - i.e. 'capable of God', but at the same time wounded by some archaic injury - called by the Christian tradition 'original sin' - which makes it so hard for each of us to live according to

our sincerest ideals. Each Christmas again, we wish each other joy, brotherhood, peace and happiness. And when another year has passed, and Christmas turns up once again, we wonder: ‘What have I done to make those wishes come true?’

Man is a wounded angel, or a blessed beast. He is capable of great ideals, but also of great villainy. This is why Christian doctrine about society promotes a ‘check and balance’ policy. It encourages economical freedom, but at the same time advocates a corrected freedom. Humans live in an economical world with its own rules. Because of our corporal reality, we cannot live without possessions. At the same time, “man does not live on bread alone” (Matt.4, 4) and this is why human society is also built on certain values with as cornerstone the ideal of ‘justice’. Between the economical realm based on commercial logic and the moral realm based on the ideal of justice, there is need for a mediation. This is the place for politics.

And what is politics all about? Fair redistribution of wealth according to a certain idea of justice. The amount of redistribution depends on political options and keeps the political debate alive between ‘left’ and ‘right’. It is not the role of the Church to enter concretely in this debate. “The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim to interfere in any way in the politics of States.” (Charity in Love n° 9)

Yet, it is the role of the Church to recall that wherever there is an economical realm and a moral one, the need arises for a political mediation. In a world with economical reality and moral ideals globalized, one of the major challenges of the day, is to correct the lack of some kind of a credible world political mediation. This explains paragraph 67 of Pope Benedict's latest encyclical, which surprised and annoyed many advocates of a free market: “In the face of the unrelenting growth of global interdependence, there is a strongly felt need, even in the midst of a global recession, for a reform of the United Nations Organization, and likewise of economic institutions and international finance, so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth. One also senses the urgent need to find innovative ways of implementing the principle of the responsibility to protect and of giving poorer nations an effective voice in shared decision-making. This seems necessary in order to arrive at a political, juridical and economic order which can increase and give direction to international cooperation for the development of all peoples in solidarity. [...] Such an authority would need to be universally recognized and to be vested with the effective power to ensure security for all, regard for justice, and respect for rights. Obviously it would have to have the authority to ensure compliance with its decisions from all parties, and also with the coordinated measures adopted in various international forums. Without this, despite the great progress accomplished in various sectors, international law would risk being conditioned by the balance of power among the strongest nations. The integral development of peoples and international cooperation require the establishment of a greater degree of international ordering, marked by subsidiarity, for the management of globalization”.