

The New Republic on Benedict

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 25, 2009 NCR Today

The New Republic has [an interesting essay](#) [1] on Pope Benedict's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. You have to read it quick as TNR's website only keeps articles available for free on-line for a matter of days.

The author, David Nirenberg, is a professor of history and social thought at the University of Chicago which may explain why his article is so refreshing and so frustrating. On the one hand, he understands that the advent of capitalism and its values represented a "reversal of a millennial moral consensus" and his brief but incisive recapitulation of that consensus includes a happy sentiment from Gratian's medieval *Decretum* with which I was unfamiliar. "A merchant can rarely or never please God," writes Gratian. "And therefore no Christian should be a merchant, and, if he wishes to be one, he should be expelled from the Church." I wonder what Michael Novak, Robert George and other apologists for Americanism make of that?

What frustrates about Nirenberg's article is his criticism of Pope Benedict for linking his economic teaching, which Nirenberg thinks is provocative and necessary, with the "truth claims" of Catholicism, which Nirenberg finds parochial. "Religions offer one of the few reservoirs of moral values still deep enough to nourish popular visions of a more 'common good'" writes Nirenberg. "But, if by 'common' we mean 'global,' as Benedict says he does, then the prescriptions that we produce from within our own communities of conviction must be intelligible and adoptable outside of them." Nirenberg is half-right. Prescriptions must be "intelligible" and nowhere does he suggest that Benedict is abstruse. But, must they be "adoptable" for non-Catholics for the same reasons that a Catholic might adopt them? Benedict, given his office, is in no place to present a coherent scheme of Lutheran ethics but his writing certainly serves as a prod to thinkers of whatever religious stripe to reach their own conclusions.

The reason this is very, very important is that Benedict sees a trap that Nirenberg does not, the trap of reducing religion to ethics. If you can disassociate a set of religious maxims about the economy from their roots in the dogmatic claims of the religion that gave them birth, you may have something "adoptable" by all but that something is thoroughly secularized. When the Church allows herself to be seen only as an ethical authority, the resulting secularization inevitably affects the self-perception of the faithful. Christianity is reduced to being kind and faith is reduced to pietism.

Pope Benedict has a much better model for engaging the world, one that insists that a Christian thinker must stay rooted in the experience of the Risen Christ. Benedict's vision does mean that we Catholics must find new ways to engage in public debate in a pluralistic society. Instead of abandoning our dogmas at the door, we need to be able to explain how they inform our vision. We must learn how to engage those who do not share our dogmas with openness to true dialogue, but it is time we recognize that it was always a mistake to overlook the dogmatic facts at the heart of our existence simply as a means of gaining access to the public square or of achieving a consensus on economic perspectives. If Nirenberg truly believes that Benedict's vision is narrowed by his insistence on truth to the point of preventing dialogue, why write a review of the encyclical? Nirenberg's effort disproves his own claim.

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