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Euophobia on the Right

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

I know that American exceptionalism lives on both the left and the right, but when did the right become so Europhobic? And why? National Catholic Register has a review of a new book by the Acton institute's Samuel Gregg entitled "Becoming Europe: Economic Decline, Culture, & How America Can Avoid a European Future?" I confess, come August, when Europeans sensibly take the month off and head to the beach or the mountains for time with their families, I am envious of them, not scornful. When I look at Europe's lower rates of income inequality, I am envious, not scornful. When I look at the creative ways Germany minimized unemployment during the recent economic downturn, I was deeply envious.

Of course, given the fact that Gregg works for the libertarian Acton Institute, where the false god of the market is worshipped day in and day out, it should not surprise that he misses the Catholic and Christian roots of the modern social welfare state as it exists in Europe. And the fact that Rev. C. John McCloskey misunderstands the Christian roots of the modern social welfare state shows the degree to which some members of the Catholic clergy have bought into what can best be described as the Glenn Beck narrative of the relationship of faith and culture.

John Milbank, in writing about Margaret Thatcher, gives a more accurate accounting of the relationship of faith and culture, reminding us that Thatcher was tagged, correctly, as being Europe's first truly secular political leader in the postwar era. Milbank's essay can be found here. The money quotes:

The post-war settlement, which reached its apex in 1948, was the last truly Christian covenant of the complex and freely theocratic British order. It was the final manifestation of social Anglicanism and the last fruit of the spirit of Victorian philanthropy. It enshrined a welfare state which Christians had done much to imagine and implement; it sought to sustain in perpetuity a wartime spirit of service and solidarity; finance, industry and transport were subordinated to collective ends; the educationally elitist but totally free and accessible grammar schools were further entrenched into the education system; religious education was made compulsory. Thatcher was the prime agent of the destruction of this settlement - and for this reason the churches opposed her far more than did the Labour Party, which finally accepted her agenda.

And this:

Thatcher rejected the insistence on relationality and reciprocal respect for personhood that has been so profoundly part of the Jewish and Christian traditions for well over a century. In its place, she famously championed a claustrophobic suburban austerity derived directly from the narrow moralism and thin Christology of her father, Alderman Alfred Roberts. His desiccated Methodism had little to do with the more authentic Methodism which, from John Wesley's High Toryism through to the primitive Methodist trade unionists, always wedded pietism to social justice in the name of the Kingdom of Christ. Apart from that tenuous religious thread, Thatcher was a coiffured nihilist with no culture or imagination and very restricted intellect.

Which reminds me of another thing I prefer about Europe: Their socio-political pundits are far more trenchant than ours.

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