

Christian Democracy

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When they first emerged as a significant political force, following World War II, Christian Democratic parties were somewhat of a novelty, holding conservative views on issues relating to life, human sexuality, and the family, but opposing the socio-economic status quo, and firmly committed to liberal and democratic values. In both Latin America and Europe, they offered an attractive alternative to the right, tainted as it was by its wartime collaboration or its ties to a discredited older order, and to the countervailing threat that parties of the left posed to democracy and stability.

Christian Democratic parties were not confessional parties in the formal sense of the term. Most party members were Catholics, but this was not a condition of party membership, nor were parties themselves subject to Church authorities. They claimed the inspiration of Christian values, but affirmed their autonomy in interpreting and applying these values in public life, a position that Popes and bishops gradually came to accept as proper and legitimate.

For roughly forty years, these parties flourished politically. Prior to 1990, the average vote-share of 17 Latin American parties was 17.3%, and that of 19 Western Europe parties was an even higher 25.6%. Their supporters and adherents included businessmen, young professionals, merchants, civil servants, white-collar employees, rural small-holders and peasants, and, in some countries, industrial workers. Most parties settled and came to dominate the center, or center-right, of their respective political arenas. In those cases where workers were an important constituency, the party's positions on economic issues were often closer to those of

social democratic and socialist parties on the left.

Since 1990, however, the electoral fortunes of Christian Democratic parties in both regions have declined notably. 3 of the Latin American parties have disappeared, and the vote share of the others has fallen to 11.9%, and to 7.5% if one looks only at their most recent electoral performance. In Mexico, however, where the PAN is the country's only major right-wing party, its appeal may be due to its conservative, rather than its Christian Democratic character. Things have gone better in Western Europe, where only the French and Italian parties have been absorbed by other forces, and the average vote-share for all parties has dropped by less than 4 percentage points, to 23.9%, would fall to 14.3% if only the most recent election results were considered. Although here too, of the four parties that have managed to buck the downward trend, only one, Austria's OVP, faces a significant challenges from the right. In post-Soviet Central Europe, Christian Democrat parties failed to take root in 8 of the 15 countries, have been absorbed by, or are entirely dependent on, larger conservative parties in Lithuania, Croatia, and Hungary, and are minor players in Slovenia, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

In both Latin America and Europe, Christian Democratic parties have had trouble attracting younger voters. Their longer-standing supporters are aging and dying off, others have been drawn away to other center parties, to ethno-nationalist parties, to anti-system populist movements, and, in some cases, to social democratic parties, and younger people don't find them all that attractive. Additionally, their long-standing internal differences have intensified in recent years, blurring and perhaps tainting their political image. Workers and younger members have challenged the austerity programs and neo-liberal policies embraced by their leaders since 1990 as inconsistent with the importance attached to community and to solidarity with the poor.

Whether this is the case or not, depends on how one defines Christian Democracy. I

agree with those who stress its ideological distinctiveness, one rooted in shared general principles with which party leaders often explain or justify their positions on particular issues. Christian Democratic parties are not just “middle-of-the-road, conservative parties primarily characterized by pragmatism and opportunism,” as some have suggested;¹ they are linked by their commitment to principles that sets them apart from other party-families. But, as we shall see in a moment, these principles are not always understood and applied in practice in the same way, nor is it always clear which understanding or application is more faithful to the principle.

Foundational Values and Principles

Christian Democracy was inspired and nurtured by the social encyclicals of the late-19th and early 20th centuries, by Catholic lay people active in Church-sponsored organizations, and by the writings of Maritain, Mounier, and other Catholic social philosophers beginning in the 1930s. The movement’s embrace of democracy, and its search for an alternative to capitalist economic institutions and practices, rested on foundational principles supplied by these sources. They help to distinguish contemporary Christian Democracy from conservative Catholic parties of the 19th century, of which it is often wrongly seen as an extension, and from more recent “convert” parties (in West and Central Europe) that claim to be, but are not, really Christian Democratic.

Catholic social teaching emerged formally in the late-19th century, as the Church turned its attention to the “social question,” and the plight of workers, particularly Catholic workers, caught between profit-hungry employers and radical socialist agitators. This was the thrust, for example, of the encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), in which Pope Leo XIII defended the right of workers to organize and petition for better living and working conditions. His views were further developed in the encyclicals and apostolic letters of his successors, such as John XXIII’s Mater et Magister, and the resolutions of numerous Councils and Synods of Bishops.

¹ Kalvas and van Kersbergen, “Christian Democracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2010, no. 13: pp. 183-209.

At the heart of Catholic social teaching is an affirmation of the dignity of each human person. It is the foundation on which the idea of the common good, the universal destination of all material goods, and the principles of solidarity, participation, and subsidiarity all rest. The responsibility for attaining the common good falls on both individual persons and the state, “since the common good is the reason that political authority exists,” and is able “to guarantee the coherency, unity, and organization of civil society of which it is an expression.” The state is also bound to promote citizen participation, and to respect the principle of subsidiarity, according to which “it is a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.” A tension is thus posited between rightful state authority and the rights of individual persons and natural communities such as the family, neighborhood associations, and the territorial entities in which they are formed and develop. The principles on which Catholic social teaching rests are permanent and inalterable, but it is a work in progress, keeping pace with new discoveries and changing circumstances, and subject to reflection and refinement over time.

In the years following Rerum Novarum, priests assigned by their bishops organized Catholic students and young Catholic workers in both Europe and Latin America. Catholic Action organizations sprung up everywhere, led by priest activists like Fr. Joseph Cardijn in Belgium, Frs. Luigi Sturzo and Romolo Murri in Italy, and Frs. Fernando Vives, Jorge Prandel, and Alberto Hurtado in Chile. Charged with spreading the faith and defending Church interests, they were to steer clear of politics and other unhealthy distractions. This proved difficult. Many of the students and workers to whom Catholic Action activists reached out were engaged politically. The contacts proved contagious, and young Catholic activists were quickly drawn in, distancing themselves from Church authorities, and from other, traditional Catholic or Catholic-based parties. These developments were welcomed by progressive bishops, priests and lay

people, but viewed with alarm by conservative elements, and by Pope Leo as well.

He was worried that lay Catholics, and especially workers and the poor, would lose their way if not closely monitored. In a subsequent encyclical, *Graves Communi* (1901), Leo warned of the dangers of politics generally, of popular government, and of lay people acting independently of church authorities. He was also critical of the Christian Democratic movements of his time, suggesting that they cared only for the poor, thus neglecting other social classes, and that their unjust disparagement of non-democratic forms of power could lead to attacks on all non-democratic forms of authority.² Neither Pope Leo, nor his successors, Popes Pius X and Pius XI, had confidence in the judgments of lay people, nor did they believe it was as important for people to choose freely to do the right thing as it was to do it. In fact, it would not be until the 1940s that a Catholic Pope would to embrace democratic principles and encourage their practice.³

For these social activists and early Christian Democrats generally, the commitment to democratic values was nourished by the writings of Catholic social philosophers beginning in the 1930s. One such thinker was the neo-Thomist and natural-law theorist Jacques Maritain (1882-

² Fittingly enough, the English title given to the encyclical is *On Christian Democracy*, a generic term Leo used to refer to several political movements of which he disapproved. He conceded that democracy or popular government was a legitimate form of political authority, but he worried that its advocacy might lead to attacks against other instances of civil and religious authority, and he urged Catholics working with the poor to give priority to the perfection of their own souls, and those of the poor as well, to respect distinctions of rank and class that were “indispensable” to a well-ordered commonwealth, and to steer clear of the “passions and vicissitudes of political party activity.”

³ Pius XII’s 1944 Christmas Message marked the first time that the Vatican formally embraced democracy. In it, he conceded that other forms of government were also legitimate, but that democracy was clearly the most consonant with Christian values and the Church’s Social teaching.

1973). His *Humanisme Integral* (1936) provided young Catholics with a critique of laissez-faire capitalism and revolutionary socialism, and proposed, instead, a Christian, democratic, and communitarian alternative. At its heart was a principled defense of political democracy at a time when the Church was unwilling to take this step. He did so for two reasons: his commitment to individual human freedom, and his insistence on striking a balance between individual human rights (to self-government and private property) and the common good of all, for which all members of society were called to work. Political leaders were to be chosen by, and accountable to the people, not as agents or spokespersons for this or that bloc of citizens, but as representatives of their “hidden will” and stewards of the common good.

Emmanuel Mounier was another French thinker to whom future Christian Democrats were intellectually drawn in the 1940s and 1950s. Like Maritain, he stressed the spiritual transcendence of individual human persons and their solidarity with one another, a solidarity reflecting the desire for communion, for human-centered community, and not just survival or material advantage. Personalism was an alternative to what Mounier saw as the shallow individualism of bourgeois democracy and the materialism of secular socialism. And he too was a staunch defender of democracy, one based on the Christian ideal of *being*, in communion with others, and not on the bourgeois ideal of *having*.

Two additional intellectual pillars for Christian Democrats were the French sociologist Fr. Louis-Joseph Lebret and the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray. Lebret’s work on the structural obstacles to social and economic development was widely read from the 1940s through the 1960s, and had a major influence on Catholic social teaching in the modern era. Murray, though not widely read outside the United States, addressed the issues of religious freedom and Church-state separation, and underscored the natural affinity between democracy and Christianity. Both men were influential in the period leading up to the Second Vatican

Council, and helped to shape many of its resolutions, thereby crystalizing the increasingly liberal perspectives toward which both Christian Democrats and progressive bishops had been moving for some time.

Christian Democrats thus believe in the **inviolable dignity** of each human person, the right of each to religious and political freedom, to meaningful and justly rewarded work, and to the basic necessities of life. And they are therefore devoted to the **common good** of society as a whole, which both the people and political authorities are duty-bound to promote. The economy of such a society should produce sufficiently and distribute equitably; its political order should be open to the participation of all and accountable to them. In sum, a properly structured society should be economically equitable, socially integrated, and politically democratic.

But while a consensus on such matters may distinguish one political party from another, it may not amount to much in practice. Political ideologies involve issues and challenges going beyond these general notions. Matters of interpretation and relative priority among values, assessments of likely risks and costs involved in defending or extending rights, and other challenges must be faced. A case in point is the notion of a preferential option for the poor, which emerged as a core element of Catholic social teaching in the 1960s. According to the Compendium,

“The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force.”⁴

The concept was first advanced by the Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, and later embraced by Pope Paul VI at the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops in

⁴ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 182, p. 79.

Medellin, Colombia. Pope John Paul II was less enamored of it, expressing reservations in his address to the Latin American bishops at Puebla, Mexico in 1979, although it was affirmed in the Conference's final resolutions. No one quarrels with the concept today, and yet honoring it in practice is a complicated matter. What, for example, is the relationship between economic growth and the reduction of poverty and inequality? And which is more important, the end of poverty, the reduction of inequality, or the means through which both are pursued? And, finally, with what urgency must they be pursued?

In recent years, most Latin American and European Christian Democrats have been willing to limit anti-poverty initiatives to those not likely to adversely affect macroeconomic growth and stability, although dissenters in a number of parties have been critical of the practice. In these matters, diverse notions and priorities regarding poverty, inequality, and growth, and differing assessments of the consequences of alternative courses of action, allow people who aspire to the same things to be at odds on what to do. A pledge of allegiance to the normative prescriptions alone, then, is not sufficient; one must also determine and then agree on what can be done to promote them effectively, and this is a function of how one sees cause and effect relationships involving social forces.

Ideology

Unfortunately, this is a level of reflection on which Catholic social teaching fails to speak clearly, and Christian Democrats think differently, if not always consciously. It might be good, therefore, to look more closely at how Christian Democratic values and principles inform a party's decisions and actions, and how to recognize if, and when, they are honored, set aside, and/or betrayed, in practice. These are the functions performed, I would suggest, by one's **ideology**, i.e., a set of judgments and assertions portraying how societies actually work, and how they could and should be structured and fashioned. There are other features, of course, that one

might associate with an ideology (e.g., like wishful, self-interested, or manipulative thinking), but I use the term in a non-pejorative sense, i.e., a framework with which people try to make sense of their world., and of what is to be done in and about it.⁵ In a nutshell, it is an effort to blend what one sees as “good” or “desirable” with what is thought to be possible or feasible.

An ideology consists of judgments of both value and fact at various levels. Its value judgments are **philosophical and/or religious** in nature. They define the meaning of life, the nature of love, happiness, freedom, equality, justice, and community, and what it means and what it takes for men and women to flourish. In short, at this level, ideological thinkers take positions on what is good and desirable generally or in the abstract.

But philosophical and religious values alone do not determine one’s social or political practice. This requires a second, mediating level of judgment of judgment, a theory of history and social reality that might be termed a **sociological perspective**, or, in Charles Taylor’s term, a social imaginary.⁶ It integrates normative values and empirical (historical) observation to identify the forces that drive social relationships, and that enable one to produce adequately and distribute equitably, for example. In short, a sociological perspective helps to reconcile one’s notions of what is good, laudable, or desirable with what is seen to be feasible, and under what conditions. For the last two centuries, the views of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Max Weber have been the most influential in thinking about such matters. Each emphasizes certain phenomena and relationships over others, and each has spawned multiple amendments, refinements, and extensions into new areas. Each has found receptive ears in the Christian

⁵ Eagleton (1991, p.1) suggests that the term’s many useful meaning are not all compatible with one another, and that :to try to compress this wealth of meaning into a single comprehensive definition would thus be unhelpful even if it were possible.”

⁶ See his Modern Social Imaginaries, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 31.

Democratic parties of Europe and Latin America.

Perspectives like these inform assessments and actions at other levels or phases of ideological judgment. One involves the defining of **concrete historical objectives** believed to be feasible, and to which a party or leader may commit themselves. They form the basis for policies and initiatives to “deal with” challenges like democratization, humanitarian intervention, the entering into free or fair trade agreements, and “reforms” of various sorts. They represent the “best” that can be hoped for under current or foreseeable circumstances. In recent years, the issues on which internal debate and divisions among Christian Democrats have arisen run the gamut, e.g., free markets, globalization, inflationary pressures, budget deficits, unemployment, and questions relating to the family, gender equality, contraception, sexual activity, abortion, and the environment. Divergent perspectives regarding such issues have made it difficult for parties to present a united front in support of their agendas.

Two additional levels involve the **selection of strategies and tactics** capable of securing these objectives in particular settings. A **strategy** is a plan that makes the best possible use of one’s resources, while blunting those of one’s opponents. and dealing with other obstacles that work to one’s advantage. **Tactics** are the means used to mobilize and deploy one’s resources productively. Like concrete objectives, strategies and tactics are informed by one’s sociological perspective, i.e. by what one believes will engage and mobilize followers and potential supporters to do what needs to be done.

Given these multiple layers or phases of ideological judgment, the commitment of Christian Democratic parties to their tradition’s foundational values and principles loses some of its political significance. Without consensus in the way people see the world and the movement of history, these principles are likely to be applied differently in practice, i.e., when concrete

historical objectives must be identified, and specific strategies and tactics adopted. At these moments, differing sociological perspectives lead those aspiring to similar goals to draw diverse ideological and political conclusions. In effect, the various levels of ideological judgment are forks along the road at which travelers inspired by the same values can part company. These differences are frequently “principled,” i.e., they reflect honest judgments as to what can and should be done on behalf of one’s basic values; in some cases, however, the higher priority accorded to shorter-term goals or advantage may cause principles to be set aside.

In sum, shared principles do not assure a distinctive identity or uniform behavior. Not all Christian Democrats define or rank order their principles in similar fashion. They frequently differ over what can and should be done at particular points and on specific issues. Most parties contain identifiable factions, usually: a) a smaller, socially progressive, pro-labor group; b) a larger, generally ‘moderate’ faction that is more liberal on social issues, and that may or may not be “pro-business;” and a smaller, socially conservative and resolutely pro-business wing. When votes are cast, most party members fall in line with what their party’s leaders have decided, others do as well, but grumble some, and some, depending on the issue, refuse to go along. For some observers, such diversity or practicality of thinking is a virtue, or at the least an appealing party characteristic; for others, it is evidence of opportunism and indifference to principle. If concessions to convenience or opportunity by leaders or members are only occasional, they might be ignored or forgotten.

Practice matters, and the principles a party invokes should shape its policies and unite party members in support of them. The reality, however, is that most Christian Democratic parties harbor factions, and some of these appear to be “disgruntled” much of the time, and occasionally bolt party ranks to join other parties, or to form a “genuine” Christian Democratic party that competes with its former comrades. In view of this, it is, perhaps, surprising that is as

many Christian Democratic parties have endured, and prospered politically for as long, as they have. And, it may be one of the reasons for which today, generally speaking, parties and their supporters alike are becoming increasingly less ideological and more pragmatic.