

Francis' critique of libertarianism echoes the Gospels

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Stephanie Slade is an editor at the libertarian magazine Reason. At its aptly named "Hit & Run" blog, she has posted [a criticism](#) of Pope Francis' [speech at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences](#) last Friday, April 28. The magazine also ran [a podcast](#) featuring Slade and other Reason editors discussing the talk. I note in passing, and in confusion, that Slade was recently named a contributor at America magazine.

It is more than a little rich to read Slade repeating her accusation that the pope's "ignorance of basic economics has led him to a bad conclusion about which public policies are best able to reduce the crushing yoke of poverty in the world." It goes without saying that the Holy Father is not an economist, but he has seen firsthand the ill effects of the economic policies Slade celebrates. They are not hard to find in Argentina or, for that matter, in Washington, D.C.

Slade further offers this diagnosis: "The problem is not so much that he's speaking to issues that go beyond the scope of his office; the problem is his speaking to matters on which he is ill-informed. In this case, his statements betray a shallowness in his understanding of the philosophy he's impugning. If he took the time to really engage with our ideas, he might be surprised by what he learned."

Of course, a basic familiarity with this pope's writings and speeches would alert you to the fact that his understanding of philosophy is not shallow at all, but that his disgust at ideology is pronounced.

More importantly, this pope, like his predecessors, comes at issues related to the market economy not from the utilitarian stance Slade proposes. We can all offer statistics to make the case that capitalism works or it doesn't. The deeper concern is with both the ethical values capitalism demands and with the anthropology it presumes. "Greed is good" is not really a parody on the modern economic ethical stance. And no Christian theology can start with the premise that self-interest, enlightened or otherwise, is an appropriate starting point for ethics, Christian or otherwise.

As for the anthropological difficulties the Catholic faith discerns in libertarianism, Francis was quite clear in his talk:

The radicalization of individualism in libertarian and therefore anti-social terms leads to the conclusion that everyone has the "right" to expand as far as his power allows, even at the expense of the exclusion and marginalization of the most vulnerable majority. Bonds would have to be cut inasmuch as they would limit freedom. By mistakenly matching the concept of "bond" to that of "constraint," one ends up confusing what may condition freedom — the constraints — with the essence of created freedom, that is, bonds or relations, family and interpersonal, with the excluded and marginalized, with the common good, and finally with God.

It is precisely its overvaluation of personal autonomy that makes libertarianism repugnant to Catholic anthropology.

There is a diversity among libertarians, Slade argues, and it is wrong to see them all as devotees of Ayn Rand. Fair enough. But it is also true that Alan Greenspan, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve for almost two decades, was a member of the Ayn Rand "collective" for even longer. It is also true that the most prominent and powerful libertarian-leaning politician in the country, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, encouraged his interns to read Rand and he publicly stated that Rand was his inspiration in grasping the morality of capitalism.

Ryan may now claim that he has abandoned Rand for Aquinas, but the "repeal and replace" legislation illustrates that he has not entirely abandoned his Randian past. Besides, just because some libertarians make the attempt to reconcile their ideology with, say, natural law philosophy, doesn't mean they succeed.

Indeed, the libertarians and sort-of libertarians always betray their hand when the subject of the rule of law comes up. They are ardent proponents of strong property law, but always resistant to the kinds of government regulations that would make the market more humane. Libertarians resist development aid, labor regulations, minimum wage laws, taxes on surplus income, etc. Their confidence in the market's ability to serve as the best regulator of all economic decision-making is their calling card. At least Greenspan had the courage to admit he was wrong after the 2008 meltdown.

Slade wishes to inform her readers that, in the event, none of what the pope said really has any binding claim on the conscience of a Catholic:

This is not a bad time to be reminded that popes aren't infallible, according to Catholic doctrine — instead, they are possessed of the ability to deliver infallible teachings on matters of faith and morals. As I pointed out in my piece, "In practice, such 'definitive acts,' in which a pope makes clear he's teaching 'from the chair' of Jesus, are almost vanishingly rare." Arguably, though, the pope's remarks today to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences do pertain to faith and morals. He seems to be arguing that an outlook that places the individual above "the common good" is morally suspect.

Yes, such an outlook is morally suspect. And Slade can enroll in a theology course at any Catholic university to learn about the levels of authority that attach to various papal teachings.

This issue of the degree of authority attached to different kinds of utterances came up during a panel discussion in which I participated at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank here in Washington. As I pointed out, on the subject of poverty, the pope is only echoing what we read in the Gospels, and there are no more authoritative Christian texts than they.

Reason magazine is an opinion journal, but it still should abide by some journalistic standards. To her credit, Slade raises a warning flag in the podcast that she is speaking about the pope's talk

based on a report at Breitbart. But she then says, "There doesn't appear to be text of the speech anywhere." Actually, it was posted at the Vatican website the day of the address. Surely, it is not asking too much of a journalist commenting on the Catholic Church to know that the Vatican publishes just about everything the pope says and posts it on the Vatican website.

On the podcast, Slade is not as offensive as her colleague Katherine Mangu-Ward in speaking about the pope's communication style: "He is the Donald Trump pope." Mangu-Ward also asked, "Is not fair to say that the pope is a goddamned socialist?"

To this, Slade responded, "That might be going a little bit too far, but only a little bit."

To suggest that the pope is a socialist is yet further evidence of the intellectual distortion that comes from an ideological commitment, in this case, to a view that what really matters in human life are economic relations, and the only way to pursue those relations is via the unfettered market.

But Mangu-Ward's intellectual sloppiness allows me to reiterate a point I have made previously: You could take the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's objections to liberation theology, which was always based on some of the anthropological assumptions of that theology, not on its economic analysis, and apply those objections to libertarian ideology.

Slade tells the reader she is a Catholic. Great. I wish to remind her, however, that just because a Catholic has a thought does not mean a Catholic thought has been had. The incompatibility of Catholicism and libertarianism is a thing so obvious, if she fails to see it, it is not hard to conclude that she has drunk very deeply indeed at the well of libertarian ideology.

It is, as Pope Pius XI said, a "poisoned spring," not a well, and the life-giving waters that Jesus gives are not for sale on the market.