

## Response to Daniel K. Finn

**Laura Nichols**

From my standpoint as a sociologist, a great value of this paper, and also the bringing together of a scientist and a theologian, is the ability to use historical understanding to inform our assumptions about where the Church and our societies are headed in this modern context. Indeed, this bringing together of seemingly very different disciplines and ways of thinking may be what can ultimately move us out of some of our most intransigent issues, both in the Catholic Church and in our societies. But more than that, this paper and our discussions can also reinvigorate our thinking and practice about the value that our colleges can bring to the world today.

So I will start by raising a few observations and questions from the content of the paper using social change theories as a means to reflect on the three economic changes that Dr. Finn discusses and how they relate to the classical or historical-minded views of Church teachings. Then I will look briefly at the two teachings that have not changed and raise some other questions about what it means for us to be working in institutions training students for the future while being steeped in a very deep historical tradition.

### **Three Models of Social Change Applied to Changes in Church Teachings**

In looking at how change occurs in societies, social change theorists tend to assume one of three patterns. The first is a linear understanding of change that presumes that societies are on a developmental course that is informed by history, but not necessarily predetermined by it. Change is cumulative, non-repetitive, developmental, and usually permanent.<sup>1</sup> According to linear theories of social change, technology has propelled

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Harper and Kevin T. Leicht, *Exploring social change: America and the World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2015).

*Laura Nichols is an associate professor of sociology and director of the undergraduate core curriculum at Santa Clara University. Her research is in the areas of participatory program planning and evaluation, the application of sociology in nonprofit organizations, the study of inequalities, the experiences of first-generation college students, and teaching about inequality. She has most recently published in the edited volume Homelessness in America as well as in the Journal of Social Policy, Public Sociology: Research, Action, and Change, and the Journal of Family Issues.*

societies from agrarian to industrial to postindustrial times and institutions (religious or otherwise) must adjust or be left behind. This model fits well with a vision of the historical period in which we find ourselves today, in particular what I see living in Silicon Valley: where science is held up as a religion of sorts that will save us from ourselves and our past sins, an approach that rarely looks back and is always looking to tomorrow. Following the linear model, I feel for those who take a classicist view as described by Professor Finn who must see us getting further and further away from being able to even understand original Church teachings, much less be guided by them today.

Applying the linear model to the early Church's teachings on usury explains why Church teaching had to change, as the Church's definition of how money worked became outdated.

The cyclical model of social change presupposes that we continually encounter the same tensions and questions over and over again, and change occurs as different segments of the tensions are influenced by current conditions until the contradictions become untenable, and the same questions must be raised again, perhaps next resolved with a different emphasis on a previously minimized institution. The case of the question of changing the Church's teaching on economic rights with a turn toward human rights could be understood according to the cyclical model, which would likely point to the continual questions and tensions around whose rights should dominate. In this model, the classicist and historically minded approaches are in continual debate and conflict, with each dominating at different points of time as the same issues are encountered over and over again.

The third model of social change, the dialectical model, appears to fit best with the premises of Professor Finn's paper overall and perhaps also the way that the classicist and historically minded perspectives continue to interact in modern society. The dialectical model combines assumptions in the linear and cyclical models of understanding how change happens, where contradictions and conflicts are wrestled with and bring institutions to new understandings of themselves and new configurations of how they are operating in society. Change takes place as an attempt to resolve the accumulation of intolerable contradictions, the unraveling of those stressors that are inherent in social life.

The case of slavery and the Church's change in its teaching could serve as an instrumental example of how change happens according to the dialectical model. Of course slavery serves not only economic purposes but also provides powerful social statements about which persons are considered fully human.

As Professor Finn notes, the Church's slow and seemingly quiet change to reject slavery is rooted in understandings about the relationship between the material and humanity. Dialectical change is also often seen in the interface of the contradictions between structural realities and cultural ideals. It appears that it was not just that the Church finally realized that it was on the wrong side of history, but that it allowed its

definition of humanity to be expanded to include those who previously had been seen as less than human. Critically I wonder if the roots that supported slavery in the Church might still exist, with only the visible weeds having been removed, leaving a space wherein discussions of the full meaning of, in this case, humanity can continue to grow and even change over time. This is perhaps how Church teaching on other issues may also be able to change over time.

Applying the dialectical model of social change to the different orientations toward doctrine, the constant battles between those taking a classicist compared to a historically minded approach to Church doctrine slow social change. This could be considered a positive or negative, depending on where you sit.

### **Why Things Do Not Change**

In looking at the two economic teachings covered in Professor Finn's paper that did not change—property ownership and just wages—I would just like to offer a few brief comments and end with some questions.

To start, I appreciate that Professor Finn put property ownership first of the five teachings he covers, saying that property ownership “powerfully structures the relation between human persons and the material world.”

In the case of the Church's teaching on property ownership: the first part that supports the private ownership of property aligns well with capitalism as practiced in the United States. However, the second part, that discusses how the personal and communal aspect of the material world is a gift of God for all to share, is not as easy to realize under a capitalist system.

Let me give you a very small personal example that touches on the challenge of realizing these two aspects of property ownership in the U.S. in modern times. Santa Clara University provides some financial assistance for faculty to purchase a home. The amount of our salaries, especially those in the humanities, combined with the benefit, which we appreciate, is not enough for many faculty to be able to actually afford a home near the university. As a result, a group of us attempted to combine our benefits and our savings to purchase a shared property using the “cohousing” model.<sup>2</sup> This idea befuddled the bank and frankly the university officials we approached—the structures that existed had no easy way for us at the micro level to both own property and share it at the same time, and it would have cost us thousands of dollars to set up a legal structure that would allow both parts of this idea of property ownership to be realized.

Quoting from Professor Finn's paper that the world is good and the world is a gift from God, “any firm that intends only its own profits is immoral.”<sup>3</sup> And so given the

---

2 Cohousing is a popular concept in Europe and is growing in parts of the U.S. It combines private dwellings with commonly owned and used spaces for gardens, laundry, guest rooms, etc. See F. Kaid Benfield, Terris Jutkas, and Nancy Vorsanger, *Solving Sprawl: Models of Smart Growth in Communities Across America* (New York: The Natural Resources Defense Council, 2001). See also Dorit Fromm, *Collaborative Communities* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991).

3 Daniel K. Finn, “Catholicism and Modernity: What Economic Doctrines Can Teach Us,” above, p. 5.

difficulty of applying the Church's full teaching on ownership in a capitalist system, it seems that our approach often focuses more on personal ethics than on structural ethics, especially when connected to ethics in business. Individuals are left to battle against the very powerful structural forces that challenge individual ethics every day at the office.

Similarly, the Church's teaching on just wages can leave us again at the individual mercy of the owners of the means of production to offer up just wages. In a structural reality so dominated by capitalism, such individual approaches are very difficult to realize. Thus social policy becomes the main way to bring in such requirements. Professor Finn shows this by using as an example the EITC, the Earned Income Tax Credit, as this is a structural attempt at the policy level to make up for the inadequacies in the individual wages earned by many people in the U.S. And while the economic teachings covered in this paper focus on just wages that only can be earned by those able to work in the paid labor force, it could also be useful for us to talk about the potential role of Church doctrine in guiding how we think about the provision of resources for those who are dependent or caring for dependents, unable to work in the waged economy. We should be reminded that the origins of our social welfare system in the U.S., in particular what we call "welfare," was started as "mother's pensions" by religious organizations mainly so widows could keep their children. The concept and model was then adopted at the federal level during the Great Depression.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, perhaps what is most exciting about having this conversation here today is that we work at the fault line of two rapidly changing institutions: religion and education. Education is one of the most sought-after, important, and defining institutions of our day at the same time that in the U.S. those of the Millennial generation (born between 1986–2005) are less likely to identify with a religion.<sup>5</sup> As such, Professor Finn's paper fits nicely with Julian Bourg's paper, "The Enduring Tension Between Catholicism and Modernity,"<sup>6</sup> and both can be used to widen the conversation to a larger discussion about the role and function of the Church and our Catholic educational institutions in modern societies.

### Questions for Discussion

And now to a few questions, which I doubt we will need to keep the conversation going:

- Why have property ownership and just wages remained part of Church teachings over time?
- Is it possible that economic doctrine is the least fraught with controversy and perhaps easiest to change?
- As more and more economic systems reach toward the maximization of profit,

---

4 Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*, 6th ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1998). Also: Eve P. Smith, "The failure of the destitute mother's bill: The use of political power in social welfare," the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 14:2, Article 5 (2015).

5 Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

6 *Integritas* 6.1 (Fall 2015), 1–22.

can religion reach toward love? As such, do we see religion as a counterbalance to current economic systems, or something else?

- How are our higher education institutions examples of how modern institutions can engage the dialectic in history and modernity?
- Even though a nice example of how Church teaching can change with changing definitions, I wonder if something helpful was not lost when the Church changed its thinking around usury. The change in the “character of money” so that the bulk of what is considered material lies in property and investments has resulted in the material world revolving around those parts that make a profit. The wealthy prudently invest in things that bring profit, concentrating their wealth, and all we can do is rely/hope that such individuals will look upon that wealth according to the principles of property ownership as something to be shared. This reliance on a personal ethics, that we often teach in our institutions, is likely not enough within societies where economics dominates. Thus is there something more to be understood in this past teaching that would be helpful in addressing wealth inequality today?
- Countering the millennial statistics on religious membership, it can be helpful to remember that Catholic membership is growing in some areas of the United States. Catholic populations are certainly increasing in California, especially in the Silicon Valley. New churches are being built and religious leaders sought. According to data from the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life Religious Landscape Study in 2014, almost 60 percent of Catholics in California are under fifty years old; just under half are in households that live on \$30,000 a year or less; and 55 percent have a high school degree or less.<sup>7</sup> Thus some of our most active Catholics today are young, economically disadvantaged, many are new to the U.S., and they are seeking educational advancement for themselves and their children. What can Church teachings on economics instruct us about how to best respond and provide for these Catholics in this time period in history? In modern times have our Catholic colleges “lost their way” in providing for the Catholics in our midst?
- And finally, I would like to turn us back to the main thesis of Professor Finn’s paper and ask: How can understanding the changes in Church teaching in the realm of economics help inform us as to the development of Catholic doctrine more generally?

---

7 [www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/](http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/)