

# Continuing the Protestant-Catholic Dialogue on Politics and Society

by Keith Pavlischek

While largely ignored by secular academics, and underappreciated even by Christian scholars, a renaissance of Protestant and Catholic thought on social issues has occurred during the past century. The promulgation of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of the Working Classes") by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 inaugurated the modern era of Catholic social teaching. And Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898 prompted the emergence of a brand of Protestant social thought distinct in several important ways from the Social Gospel movement familiar to Americans.

To commemorate the watershed events of 1891 and 1898, the Acton Institute and Calvin Theological Seminary, both in Grand Rapids, Michigan, sponsored a two-day academic conference at Calvin College late last October. The goal was to assess the legacy of the past century of Christian social thinking and chart a course for Christian social ethics in the next hundred years. Major presentations centered around the topics "Kuyper and Reformed Social Teaching" (Peter Heslam), "Christianity and the Humane Economy" (Michael Novak), "Religious Liberty and Pluralism" (Avery Dulles), and "Law, Morality and Culture" (Johann Van der Vyver). Formal responses were given to each address. In addition, keynote addresses were given by Mark Noll, Charles Colson, and Archbishop Francis Xavier Nguyen van Thuan, who spoke movingly of his experience as a political prisoner of the Communist regime in Vietnam.

While Roman Catholics and Protestants have been engaged in ecumenical discussions across a wide

array of theological issues for some time, cooperation and discussion between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics is much more recent. The most notable and controversial collaboration has been "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," an initiative of Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus. These discussions revolve around longstanding theological differences such as the meaning of justification and the relation between Scripture and tradition. The Center for Public Justice, however, is chiefly concerned with fostering and evaluating areas of civic cooperation—those areas of common ground and unresolved differences related to statecraft, Christian citizenship, and public justice. These are at the core of the Center's work in civic education, including the *Civitas* Program in Faith and Public Affairs.

The Grand Rapids conference was a remarkable achievement in itself. Such an event would have been almost inconceivable ten or twenty years ago. It signals a realignment of potentially great significance in the political witness of Christians. My suspicion is that academics are belatedly catching up to the cooperation evident among many Protestant and Catholic Christian activists mainly around abortion and other social issues. The conference also bears witness to a growing sense among faithful Christians that the dominant secular political options no longer offer the intellectual and moral resources required to bring us out of the current crisis of political and moral leadership in public life.

The event also served to introduce the Kuyperian tradition of Christian social thought to many Roman Catholic social theorists, who, it is fair to say, have had almost no familiarity with Kuyper and the Reformed tradi-

tion. American Kuyperians tend to be more familiar with Catholic social teaching but have, with rare exceptions, not interacted in a sustained way with Catholic scholars. Without downplaying the differences between the two traditions, the conference manifested a growing realization that Catholic and Kuyperian social thought have more in common than either may have recognized in the past. Most significant is the century-long effort to develop a principled theory of the plural nature of society. The corresponding ideas of sphere sovereignty (Kuyper) and subsidiarity represent those efforts.

This is not to suggest that there are no significant problems both within and between the two traditions. Much work still needs to be done on the principled foundations of religious liberty, the relation between law and morality, and the relation between economics, law and ethics. One of the more important and somewhat ironic aspects of the conference was that the Acton Institute, led by Fr. Robert Sirico is more sympathetic to a political-economy unfettered by state intrusion than were many of the Calvinists at the conference. The Roman Catholic scholar Michael Novak, for instance, was less concerned with the negative cultural aspects of capitalist economy than were his Calvinist respondents. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Bob Goudzwaard, and Craig Gay. Historically, at least, it has tended to be the other way around.

While it is unlikely that Evangelicals and Catholics will reach agreement on the significant doctrinal and theological matters that divide us, issues related to public justice and renewal of civic life offer promising prospects for a common witness. □