

## Philosophy in Review



### Patrick Riordan, SJ, 'Human Dignity and Liberal Politics: Catholic Possibilities for the Common Good'

Seumas Miller 

Volume 44, Number 4, November 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115579ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115579ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Miller, S. (2024). Review of [Patrick Riordan, SJ, 'Human Dignity and Liberal Politics: Catholic Possibilities for the Common Good']. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(4), 29–31. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115579ar>

© Seumas Miller, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Patrick Riordan SJ**, *Human Dignity and Liberal Politics: Catholic Possibilities for the Common Good*. Georgetown University Press 2023. 256 pp. \$104.95 (Hardback ISBN: 9781647123680); \$34.95 (Paperback ISBN 9781647123697).

Liberalism is often thought to be inconsistent with political philosophies that emphasise collective interests, solidarity and the common good. Hence, J.S. Mill's defence of the individual's right to freedom in his *On Liberty* is at odds with Rousseau's notion of 'being forced to be free' in his *The Social Contract*. But is this necessarily the case? In his recent political philosophy book, *Human Dignity and Liberal Politics*, Patrick Riordan seeks to reconcile individual rights to freedom constitutive of liberalism with a concept of the common good derived from Aristotle and constitutive of Catholic social teaching (CST). Solidarity and subsidiarity (glossed as the collective responsibility for the good of all and individual self-responsibility, respectively (21)) are two key criteria for Riordan's expansive concept of a common good; common goods in his sense are by no means restricted to public goods in the economists' sense. Importantly, a commitment to this CST view of the common good does not necessitate authoritarianism. Nor does a commitment to liberalism require a view of freedom as unconstrained choice. Moreover, the mutual exercise of individual rights to freedom by all citizens in a polity is not only a means to a common good, such as a just society, it is constitutive in part of that common good.

In summation, Catholicism can have it both ways: a commitment to individual freedom *and* a commitment to the common good. Or, at least, it can do so once these two concepts are properly understood.

Riordan argues against some Catholic thinkers, among them integralists and political Augustinians, who view liberalism as essentially antithetical to Catholicism. But he also argues against those liberal thinkers who eschew pluralism and advocate a form of secularism ('illiberal secularism' (62-63)) which would relegate religion, including Catholicism, entirely to the private sphere. Ironically, the warring groups, conservative Catholics and illiberal secularists, share the same premise, namely, that liberalism is antithetical to Catholicism. It is precisely this premise that Riordan denies; and in *Human Dignity and Liberal Politics* he lays out a compelling case for this denial and in favour of a much-needed reconciliation between liberalism and Catholicism.

A distinction he makes that is fundamental to his argument is that between the ultimate common good, God (according to CST) and 'limited goods in common that are the means and conditions for human fulfillment both individual and communal' (according to liberalism) (26). While liberals and Catholics alike need to be committed to limited goods in common, i.e., to liberalism, liberals do not need to be committed to God. However, liberal democracy needs to be open to the transcendent and, therefore, to the possibility of God. Accordingly, a liberal democracy overreaches, indeed violates one of its fundamental principles, freedom to practice religion or, in the case of atheists, not to do so (a limited good in common), when it seeks to relegate Catholicism (and other religions) entirely to the private sphere.

Riordan uses three lenses through which he views common goods, namely, Aristotle's political philosophy, CST (notably, the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral



Constitution on the Church in the World) and political liberalism (especially the writings of John Rawls). In the course of making his case Riordan provides interesting discussions of various concepts, (e.g., common goods, culture as a common good), of particular issues, (e.g., paternalism and Catholicism, experiments in living), and of a range of historically influential thinkers, (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, J. S. Mill), as well as contemporary ones.

Riordan does a certain amount of reconstruction of the ideas of key historical figures to render these ideas serviceable for application to a modern liberal democratic state. Thus, Aristotle's city-state's telos in terms of the provision of human needs resonates with the modern nation-state's emphasis on human rights which have as their grounds and ends those same needs. However, neither Aristotle's summum bonum nor 'a religious vision of the summum bonum' (44) are appropriate common goods of the modern liberal democratic state. Rather, the telos of the modern liberal democratic state should restrict itself to the above-mentioned limited goods in common – 'the conditions for the flourishing of everyone and every group' (45).

Given space limitations I restrict the rest of my discussion of *Human Dignity and Liberal Politics* to two issues, namely, the relation between church and state, and law as a common good.

In respect of the relation between church and state, Riordan takes Augustine's *City of God* as his starting point. On Riordan's interpretation, Augustine's distinction between the *civitas Dei* (City of God) and the *civitas terrena* (Earthly City) pertains to ideal types neither of which can be identified with any actual historical city; rather any actual city, such as for instance Rome in Augustine's day, consists of some admixture of the two ideal types (51). Therefore, actual polities exist on a spectrum. More specifically, on Riordan's reading of Augustine, a polity committed to temporal limited common goods is not thereby tainted so long as in realizing these temporal common goods it, nevertheless, remains open to the ultimate transcendent common good, God. Hence, only forms of political liberalism which are not open to the transcendent because, for instance, they insist on an *absolute* separation of church and state, are inconsistent with CST. Thus, illiberal secularism is inconsistent with CST but not necessarily a liberal secularist polity per se.

An important question (or set of questions) arising here pertains to the precise point (or points) of separation between church and state. Clearly, separation entails that the state cannot be a theocracy. On the other hand, liberal democracies have (rightly) introduced legislation to enable religiously motivated conscientious objection to military service and done so on the grounds that no-one should be coerced into doing what they believe to be profoundly immoral (60). Moreover, contra Rawls, on pain of violation of the liberal principle of freedom of speech, it would be unacceptable to demand of 'religiously motivated citizens that they refrain from the expression of religiously formulated opinions in public debate', even supposing the state itself ought to be secular in its justification of its policies (64).

A further issue raised by Riordan in this context concerns the distinction between a secular state and a state that is neutral with respect to secularism and religion. The latter would likely be more pluralist in complexion since, as Riordan suggests (relying on comments by a recent judge of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights) secularism is itself simply one worldview among others, whether religious or philosophical, and privileging secularism over these

others is not a neutral standpoint (65). Clearly, there is more to be said on this complex issue of the separation of church and state.

Regarding law as a common good, Riordan focuses on Aquinas' account of law (in multiple analogous senses, e.g., human, natural, divine and eternal law) and the common good (again, in multiple analogous senses). A key thought here is that of different types of law each of which is in the service of a different common good. Accordingly, the corpus of legislation enacted by a government serves a common good, the structure of socio-moral norms in a society serves another common good, and so on. Moreover, if each common good is represented by a circle, then the resulting image is apparently that of a set of concentric circles (Riordan himself speaks of an accordion effect (82)). Thus, there are certain acts which, if permitted, would make social life impossible, e.g., murder and theft. Accordingly, human law serves the common good of prohibiting these acts and thus ensuring compliance with minimum moral standards. On the other hand, human law cannot guarantee virtues above and beyond those required for compliance with minimum standards. However, civil society has a role in the cultivation of virtues in accordance with reason-based natural law, e.g., principles of justice that have wider application than human law and by recourse to which human law can be evaluated. Moreover, once widely possessed by the members of a community these virtues are constitutive of a common good – a common good not able to be realised by human law but which, nevertheless, presupposes the common good provided by human law. Further, regarding eternal law, Riordan says that according to Aquinas, 'the eternal law is identical with God' (81); moreover, 'God is the ultimate end, the final cause, of human action and cooperation' (81). On this theological account there is an ultimate common good and God is this ultimate good. However, it is a transcendent common good participation in which cannot be affected by the state and its laws (since they rely on coercion), or even by civil society (given the inevitability of sin in the temporal order), although only states and civil societies that are at least open to the transcendent can be the precursors to such participation.

Riordan's expansive concept of a common good is novel, although further philosophical analysis of the nature of these various common goods (beyond the criteria of solidarity and subsidiarity) is called for, even if (as Riordan points out) their content is necessarily underspecified by virtue of their context dependence and their being the result of a dynamic political process of discovery and creation. Riordan's argument placing (different but means-end related) common goods at the heart of liberalism and CST (respectively) is not only intellectually interesting but, at least from a Catholic perspective, potentially of considerable practical, indeed political, importance.

**Seumas Miller**, Charles Sturt University