

BOOK REVIEWS

***Person-Centered Politics: A Personalist Approach to Political Philosophy*, by Eamonn Gerard O'Higgins**

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In *Person-Centered Politics*, philosophy professor Eamonn Gerard O'Higgins, LC, of the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum in Rome, presents a personalistic perspective on politics. The book consists of an introduction and twelve essays that cover a range of topics such as human rights, the relationship between truth and politics, politics and religion, and political authority. O'Higgins aims to evaluate these political phenomena "in the light of and from the perspective of the individual person . . . and to evaluate to what degree the political processes and structures contribute to the personal flourishing of persons" (23). Each essay explores a certain theme in relation to person-centered politics. These essays can be read independently, but they have internal consistency and follow each other in a logical order.

Recently, personalism has received renewed attention. Scholars such as Juan Manuel Burgos, John Henry Crosby, Josef Seifert, and Rocco Buttiglione have sought to revive this tradition. Buttiglione and O'Higgins place themselves in the Catholic personalist tradition. In Buttiglione's foreword to this book, he points to the transcendental dimension of personalism: "To put the person at the center of politics, we need to be formed as a people. And to be a people we need to accept God as the transcendent horizon of our dwelling together. O'Higgins explains abundantly that this is not a demand for a confessional state. It is a demand for a politics in which the pursuit of the truth of the human person stands in the center" (xi).

This transcendental dimension is one of the major recurring themes in *Person-Centered Politics*. O'Higgins explains how liberalism has slowly changed from a "politics of restraint," in which it defended classical freedoms and rights, to a "politics of aspiration," in which a quasi-religious hope in progress is used to promise a paradise on earth. This "immanentization of the eschaton" ignores the transcendent destiny of the human person. According to O'Higgins, the human person has a goal that goes far beyond the political domain. Since the person has a soul, he or she is created for

eternity. O'Higgins therefore states that "the real nature of human hope is for a real, future fulfilment beyond the confines of this actual existence, and beyond the capacity to achieve. . . . The real politics of aspiration necessarily depends on and requires a religious answer" (136).

Building on this religious anthropology, O'Higgins develops a political philosophy that emphasizes the person's connection to both religious and political communities. This should be understood as a reaction to both liberalism and certain existentialist currents of personalism that unlink the person from the community and the common good. Throughout the book, O'Higgins advocates for a reconnection between the person and the community. He follows this philosophical chapter with one on the present state of isolation among citizens in liberal societies, and he explores what we have in common as persons. O'Higgins gives due attention to horizontal social and political relations but also places the human person in a transcendental relationship with God. These relationships constitute the human person and give meaning to life.

The book continues this relational approach with a chapter on truth. Political liberalism often defines the truth as subjective, thereby making it impossible to foster a shared political narrative. For O'Higgins, truth is objective and should be given a central place in politics. O'Higgins warns against the exclusion of objective truth in politics, which he calls "political nihilism." The root of this political nihilism is a wrong concept of freedom. "Today reference to truth in politics is problematic. This is very understandable when the relation of the human person to political society is defined in terms of individuality and of unfettered freedom" (67).

O'Higgins agrees with the liberal notion that a democratic society should protect freedom. However, he criticizes the understanding of freedom as freedom from all constraints. O'Higgins refers to Joseph Ratzinger, who "observes that this entirely uninhibited freedom has become such an obsession that all social bonds are perceived as mere constraints and burdens, whether these are family bonds, the Church, moral requirements toward others, or even to God" (67). In such a context, the person who wants to live in objective truth is sometimes portrayed as a fanatic or an extremist.

O'Higgins's personalist answer is an integral approach to the human person and politics. He writes, "Personalist philosophy today is uniting findings from sciences such as biology, neurology, and psychology to a relational mode of personal being" (283). The answer to the exclusion of truth is a reintroduction of the transcendent for the political domain and a personal call to live publicly in truth. The personal call is important for O'Higgins. It is up to concrete human persons who live and act as political actors to proclaim the truth and live in the truth. "This means," O'Higgins notes, "to experience freedom by rejecting imposed models of passive, consumerist

citizens, to choose freedom by assuming responsibility for oneself and for others, and not to abdicate this responsible freedom by citing the misdeeds or injustices of others, however real they are” (283).

The power of this book is its application of deep philosophical and theological reflections on the human person to contemporary political problems. It can therefore be seen as a continuation of the tradition of personalists, which includes figures like Jacques Maritain. We need this deeper reflection on the human person in order to address the political problems of today. The individual is lost in an atomized and disenchanted world, often lacks deep relationships, and is focused on the material and economic world. O'Higgins instead offers a vision for a political community in which the fundamental dignity of the human person is sought in his relational nature with other persons and in his vertical, transcendent relation with God as his creator.

The book ends with an essay on politics and religion, wherein the last phrase refers to the deepest communion of human persons in God. A concluding chapter that synthesizes O'Higgins's insights and offers final reflections would have enhanced the overall coherence of the volume. Furthermore, *Person-Centered Politics* does not delve deeply into the relationship between politics and economics, which is a weakness, since politics is intrinsically related to economics. Nonetheless, the book provides profound explorations of key political concepts such as authority, rights, the common good, and freedom in our contemporary context. Anyone interested in these topics would benefit from reading *Person-Centered Politics*, and this book should therefore be on the bookshelf of everyone interested in political philosophy and politics today.

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