

## **Business and the Development of Human Personality: A Theme in the Thought of John A. Ryan**

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This paper considers the social thought of Rev. John A. Ryan as an important resource for the church's reflection on the modern economic order, particularly one of the themes of this conference, the calling of business. John Coleman, in an article published in the late 1970s, argued that only three deceased American Catholic thinkers – Orestes Brownson, John Ryan, and John Courtney Murray – are worth reading for more than historical interest. Murray certainly remains a much discussed and debated figure because of his seminal writings on religious freedom. But while a steady trickle of Ryan scholarship has appeared over the past several decades, most of this work treats him only as a figure of historical import. All too often, Ryan is treated as a thinker who cannot, or ought not, be invoked as a living voice for the church today. This paper argues that while Ryan was writing about an economic order that has obviously changed markedly in the century since he first embarked on his intellectual and political project, his approach to thinking about the church's relationship to liberal capitalism remains a relevant and untapped resource.

It is seemingly odd to invoke John Ryan as one whose thought can contribute to a conversation about the calling of business. His legacy, after all, is that of a progressive liberal critic of capitalism who was more concerned with overturning the regnant business practices of his day than reflecting on the calling of business. As one commentator wrote of Ryan in 1924, "More than any other priest or minister among us, he has turned the minds of Americans toward change in industry – changes in business organization – changes in the rights and opportunities of labor – which might well, in a short view – be called revolutionary." He stands out, this journalist added, "as the supreme American ecclesiastical champion of labor against capital."<sup>1</sup> Yet while Ryan was certainly a critic of the industrial capitalist order emerging in early twentieth century, he also appreciated its benefits more than many of his fellow Catholic thinkers. For all of his vituperative comments, Ryan did not, in fact, oppose the capitalist system and the emergence of the modern business enterprise. He rather believed that capitalist institutions, if properly ordered, could promote human flourishing in an unparalleled fashion.

John Ryan was born on a farm in Vermillion, Minnesota on May 25, 1869, one of eleven children of Irish immigrant parents. While it was perhaps an exaggeration to claim, as Ryan did near the end of his life, that as a seven year old he took "my stand" for Democrats Samuel Tilden and Thomas Hendricks in the 1876 presidential election, it is nevertheless clear that Ryan developed progressive sympathies at an early age. As a young man, Ryan regularly perused the *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, which he claimed one could not read "without

acquiring an interest in and a love of economic justice as well as political justice.”<sup>2</sup> Ryan also remembered being impressed by Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty*, following the reform proposals advanced by the Farmer’s Alliance and the Knights of Labor, and the election of Ignatius Donnelly to the Minnesota legislature in 1886.<sup>3</sup> The American frontier was awash with reformist sentiment in the decades after the Civil War, making it easy, Ryan wrote, “to become interested in the social question.”<sup>4</sup>

It is unclear when Ryan began to think *theologically* about social and economic questions. The American church in the mid to late nineteenth century provided few resources for someone like Ryan to integrate his faith with a commitment to social action. Even in the liberal wing of the church, little attention was given to social reform. If anything, the liberal’s drive to harmonize Catholic and American institutions made them all the more unwilling to criticize the dominant ethos of liberal capitalism.

The event that finally allowed Ryan to think coherently about the relationship between Catholicism and social reform was the appearance of Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.<sup>5</sup> One scholar has suggested that Ryan read *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 when it was published in St. Paul’s diocesan newspaper.<sup>6</sup> Ryan, however, recalled his first encounter with the encyclical coming during a class in seminary in January or February 1894. In any event, *Rerum Novarum* finally provided the bridge Ryan needed to link his political and theological commitments. Even before reading the encyclical, Ryan had decided “to devote as much as possible of my time and energy to the study of economic conditions, institutions, and problems,” with the aim of seeing economic questions “in the light of Christian principles.”<sup>7</sup> After *Rerum Novarum*, the publication of which Ryan found “not only pleasing but reassuring,” the young seminarian believed he had been given the imprimatur to push the church into the field of progressive reform.<sup>8</sup> As Francis Broderick writes, Ryan’s “career stretched out before him” after this encounter with the encyclical.<sup>9</sup>

After reading *Rerum Novarum* in early 1894, Ryan’s commitment to the study of social reform intensified. He spent the summer of that year studying economics, reading among other works, *Principles of Political Economy*, an introductory text by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Liberatore, writings by the English Catholic William S. Lilly, and the American Protestant economist Richard T. Ely’s *Socialism and Social Reform*.<sup>10</sup> Most important, however, was that Ryan also began to connect his readings in economics and social reform with the principles of Catholic moral theology. He very quickly developed a mature perspective on what Catholicism’s relationship to social reform ought to be. Writing about “The Social Question” in his journal on November 17, 1894, Ryan made the following observation:

In the solution of this question is involved to a great degree the future of religion, of morality, of true civilization. Where then should the priest be, if not in the midst of this movement, restraining the destructionist, encouraging the true reformer and applying the ethics of the Gospel everywhere? This is his paramount duty, to apply Christ’s teaching to the practical aspects of the problems that confront us. The priest must be able and anxious to point what in the present system is wrong, and to what

extent the Brotherhood of Man means social equality. He must instill the Gospel doctrines of justice between man and man, of love for the poor and unfortunate, of denunciation for the plunders of the people, whether these plunderers be the lords of commerce or the rulers of nations. This is a duty of the minister of religion, not alone because of his love of justice, or of his pity for the poor, or of his feeling of kinship with the race, but principally because the interests of religion demand this of him. This may be called the technical reason of the priests' participation in the social movement. It means that men are more susceptible to religious influence, can know and serve God better when they are contended and comfortable than when they are impoverished and miserable. This is a general law that holds good for every condition of mankind. Consequently, we who are striving to promote the glory of God must first see that the general conditions of mankind are favorable to the best results of our efforts. Hence the social question is for us in great part a religious question.

He continued:

Henceforth the battles of the Church must be fought out on social lines. She will be obliged to make terms with the great politics – industrial upheaval which is inevitable in the course of the next half century. Institutions and aspirations will be all important in deciding the future of religion. Theocracy is a thing of the past; the Church must henceforth depend upon her own worth and her own intrinsic adaptability for her successes. How is the most likely to succeed? Why, by taking advantage of the prevailing tone of the age, by appreciating its aspirations, and by making these her own in so far as they are conducive to the glory of her Divine Master. Which means simply, that she shall make this universal longing for brotherhood and better conditions of life her own approving it where it is right, and pointing the way to the highest practical realization. To do this, she must deal with institutions and systems, not with individuals. She must endeavor to make men contended here below. She can make them attentive to considerations about the other life. The one thing to be done then is to apply the Gospel doctrines to present social systems and conditions in a practical and fearless manner; to show to the world how necessary it is for the true Christianity that men should follow the Golden Rule. This should be the watchword of those who would win multitudes to Christ: Christian doctrine applied to the social needs of the age.<sup>11</sup>

Only a year after first encountering *Rerum Novarum*, Ryan had transformed his progressive political sympathies into a full-blown Catholic vision of social reform. He did not, at least in the journal entry above, speak about particular reforms that ought to be pursued. His concern at this

point was not policy, but developing a theoretical framework for how the church ought to respond to the questions of the day. But the vision he had developed did combine his passion for social reform with the ecclesiological commitments of Catholic liberalism. As with liberals, Ryan agreed the church must harmonize with the age. Christendom was dead – theocracy, Ryan wrote, “is a thing of the past – and the church must look to the future embodied in liberal democratic America, not the past glories of medieval Europe. But unlike some of his liberal cohorts, Ryan wanted the church to do more than imbibe the spirit of the age. He wanted the church to transform the age. A relevant church in the modern world would have to be a church that strove not only to change souls, but also institutions and politics. The social question, as Ryan wrote, “is in great part a religious question.” Thus, while this journal entry displayed a certain youthful exuberance, it also revealed the extent to which Ryan had begun to unite the manifold intellectual currents that informed his worldview – Catholic liberalism, the reform message of *Rerum Novarum*, and Midwestern populism – into a nascent political theology. The commitments Ryan displayed in 1894 would define his academic pursuits and public career for the next five decades.

After his ordination to the priesthood in 1898, Ryan’s bishop sent him to the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. to pursue graduate study. Ryan quickly focused his studies on the application of moral theology to social questions. Ryan had wanted to take courses in economics, but this type of interdisciplinary work was not then permitted. He nevertheless managed to audit courses in economics, studying under the Johns Hopkins trained economist Charles Neill, while also continuing to read on his own. His licentiate dissertation, completed in 1900, was on “Some Ethical Aspects of Speculation.” He also published his first journal article this year, a review essay entitled “A Country without Strikes.”<sup>12</sup> In October 1900, Ryan’s proposed dissertation on the living wage was accepted. He completed this work in 1906, and it was published the same year as *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects*. The book received extensive comment in the Catholic and non-Catholic press. The *Minneapolis Tribune* called the book “a significant and important volume.” The *New World* of Chicago described *A Living Wage* as “a book of great value to the theologian, jurist, statesman, and philosopher,” while the *London Pioneer* exclaimed that “Every reformer should endeavour to obtain this book, which from its gathering together and arranging of the numerous arguments adduced by the most modern writers on social questions, as well as some of the oldest, they will find a valuable weapon in their armoury.” One of the most extensive reviews appeared in the *New York Times*, which wrote that “as an alternative to Socialism, as an antidote to Anarchism, as a stimulator of thought, the book seems to use well described in Dr. [Richard] Ely’s words – ‘a meritorious performance.’”<sup>13</sup> Ryan had immediately established himself as the leading Catholic social thinker in America.

In 1902, before completing his dissertation, Ryan left Washington to return to Minnesota and become a professor at St. Paul Seminary. Ryan would remain at St. Paul until 1915, when he left to join the faculty at Catholic University. In addition to his duties at Catholic University, Ryan was on the faculties of Trinity College, where he conducted a course in political science, and the National Catholic School of Social Work. Ryan was also involved in founding *Catholic Charities Review* in 1917. For four years he served as editor and manager, and he remained a frequent contributor after his editorial responsibilities ended. Perhaps Ryan’s most important appointment came in 1920, when he became director of the newly formed Social Action

Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. The Department was established to promote the principles of Catholic social thought in the nation's political debates, particularly on industrial and economic issues. The Department sponsored conferences and lectures, produced publications, and organized other activities to promote a "Catholic" position on the issues of the day. It was an ideal platform for Ryan, who remained director until his death, to gain access to Washington political circles and to bring his interpretation of Catholic social teaching to a broader audience.

Along with *A Living Wage*, Ryan's most scholarly work was *Distributive Justice* (1916). It was Ryan's most systematic examination of social and economic justice. The book addresses a range of issues relating to distributive justice, including land ownership, the morality of interest, profits, and wages. Unlike most of his other writings, *Distributive Justice* was highly theoretical and dealt only minimally with contemporary public policy issues. Though Ryan still wrote scholarly publications after returning to Catholic University, he never produced a book as rich as *Distributive Justice*. His writing increasingly focused on the application of Catholic social thought to public policy, and his time was increasingly occupied by the demands of speaking commitments, committee service, and the life of a prominent public intellectual. Ryan thrived in Washington, though, surrounded by sympathetic colleagues at Catholic University, conversation partners in the political scene, and access to the legislative environment he found so enthralling. With this change in scenery, Ryan's writing increasingly took the form of articles, some for academic publications, most for more popular outlets. His articles appeared primarily in the Catholic press. *Catholic World*, *Commonweal*, *America*, *Catholic Charities Review*, *Catholic Action*, *American Ecclesiastical Review*, and the *National Catholic Welfare Conference Bulletin* were common outlets for his work. Ryan also wrote from time to time for secular journals including *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, and these publications in turn occasionally reviewed Ryan's books.

Many of the books Ryan published after *Distributive Justice* were compilations of lectures and previously published articles: *The Church and Socialism and Other Essays* (1919), *The Church and Labor* (1920), *Social Reconstruction* (1920), *Declining Liberty and Other Papers* (1927), *Questions of the Day* (1931), *A Better Economic Order* (1935), and *Seven Troubled Years, 1930-1936*. Ryan's publications occasionally moved away from economics. He wrote *The State and the Church* (1922) with Moorhouse F.X. Millar (revised as *Catholic Principles of Politics* (1940) with Francis J. Boland), a which served as the standard textbook on political theory in Catholic seminaries for years. Ryan's other political theory book *The Catholic Church and the Citizen* (1928). An extended 1914 debate with Morris Hillquit (originally published in *Everybody's Magazine*) was compiled and published as *Socialism: Promise or Menace?*. Ryan also wrote a short book in 1913, *Alleged Socialism of the Church Fathers*, challenging the argument that the theology and practices of the early church were socialistic. His autobiography *Social Doctrine in Action* was published in 1941, although it was a rather formal chronology of his public life that contained few insights or reflections. The final book of Ryan's life was a short work in moral philosophy, *The Norm of Morality: Defined and Applied to Particular Actions* (1944).

The focus of Ryan's reform efforts changed during the forty years in which he was a major intellectual and political figure. During the Progressive Era, Ryan focused on promoting the need for a living wage, along with a panoply of other moderate reform measures. Ryan's

platform received a boost 1919 when, as World War I was coming to a close and Americans were debating the structure of the post-war economy, the NCWC issued the Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction. Ryan wrote this document for the bishops, and it gave a certain official sanction to the reform agenda he had been promoting – the abolition of child labor, provision of universal vocational training, a legal minimum wage, labor participation in management, insurance against unemployment and sickness, legal enforcement of the right to organize, public housing, progressive taxation, and wider distribution of ownership. The Bishops' Program received extensive comment in the press. One New York newspaper declared that the Bishops' Program showed that the church “is fully enlisted on the side of American workers in their striving to realize their just dreams,” while an article in the *The Nation* stated that “The radical character of this pronouncement. . . marks the leaders of the church as among our advanced labor thinkers.”<sup>14</sup> Even the reformer Upton Sinclair, famous for his 1906 expose of Chicago stockyards *The Jungle*, referred to the Bishops' Program as a “Catholic miracle.”<sup>15</sup> It was one of the important means by which the American church, according to historian Philip Gleason, established a “point of contact with American liberalism.”<sup>16</sup> The Bishops' Program was, in Ryan's words, “more nearly ‘radical’ than anything of the sort that had ever before proceeded from Episcopal sources in the United States,” and it marked the church's symbolic entry into the American progressive movement.<sup>17</sup> The Catholic church finally broke free from its longstanding conservatism on matters of social reform and, according to one contemporary, ceased to be a “hand-maiden of an unregenerated capitalism.”<sup>18</sup>

Ryan's comments about capitalism became increasingly vituperative in the 1920s. He described American capitalism as “well nigh bankrupt,” “fast becoming an industrial feudalism,” and “definitely immoral.”<sup>19</sup> On another occasion, he wrote that the American economic order was “independent of justice and the moral law generally,” and premised on the pursuit of private gain, “unlimited greed,” and “almost complete non intervention.”<sup>20</sup> This was language entirely absent from his Progressive Era writings. Ryan never challenged the validity of private ownership or the pursuit of profit per se, but he did reject a capitalist system that permitted “not only the right to own and operate the means of production, but the right of the capitalist to pay the lowest wages possible, to exact the highest possible prices, to reap unlimited profits and to accumulate limitless amounts of wealth.” Such a system “ought not to endure” and, in fact, “never should have begun.”<sup>21</sup>

Along with this increasingly critical appraisal of capitalism, Ryan also began to advance a more comprehensive and radical program of reform. While his Progressive Era writings focused on changing the economy through moderate legislation, his writings in the 1920s called for a fundamental reorganization of capitalism. As he stated in a 1926 lecture, “the policy of demanding more and ever more in the matter of wages and working conditions should be supplemented by a policy of co-operation with the employer and studied attention to the welfare of industry and the community.”<sup>22</sup> Moving beyond a focus on distribution, Ryan now argued that economic justice required “a change not merely in the worker's employment and living conditions, but in his status.” The worker, Ryan wrote, “must become something more than a well-fed instrument of production. He must be accorded some of the powers and advantages that are included in industrial management and industrial ownership.” The accepted relationship between labor and capital had to be overturned, with workers gaining the right to participate in management, share in profit, and become owners of business. Ryan spoke little of the Bishops'

Program or its policy proposals during the 1920s. His focus was now on industrial democracy and movements “in the direction of the greater control of industry by the workers.”<sup>23</sup> In a speech to a labor organization, Ryan declared that “the time has come when the militant attitude and the policy of demanding more and ever more in the matter of wages and working conditions should be supplemented by a policy of co-operation with the employer.” Economic justices now required focusing not only on wages but on the status of workers.<sup>24</sup>

With the onset of the Great Depression, Ryan became all the more persuaded that the American economy was fundamentally disordered. He became particularly enthusiastic about the ability of the New Deal – particularly Roosevelt’s proposed National Recovery Act – to not only remedy the immediate sufferings of the depression but to provide the basis for a reorganization of the American economy. These change would require amending business as well as the state. Businesses, Ryan repeatedly argued, had an obligation not only to provide a living way to their employees but to support employees whom they fired. “Our present industrial system,” Ryan stated in a speech, “requires the employee to spend all his working time in the service of the employer. It also puts the employer in possession of all the means, of the only means, from which the employee’s remuneration can be drawn.” To require the state to be the sole provider of unemployment insurance was to burden it with a responsibility that properly rests with industry.<sup>25</sup> The problem with the American economy was not that it lacked productive capacity, but that it failed to distribute its resources widely and justly.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time Ryan called on business to assume these palliative tasks, he also called on government to take up the task of “economic planning.” Only the active participation of the state in restructuring the economy could address the min causes of social injustice.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Ryan boldly declared that “modification” of industrial society, of the sort envisioned in the Bishops’ Program, was no longer adequate. The only remedy to the social ills of the day was a “reorganization of industrial society,” that is a thoroughgoing “reconstruction” of the fundamental principles and practices that undergird American capitalism.<sup>28</sup> The nation had to bring forth what Ryan called “a new economic society” in which the pursuit of profit is subservient to the demands of justice, reason, and the moral law.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout these different intellectual stages, Ryan remained resolute in his criticism of capitalism. Indeed, critics both inside and outside the church considered his views so radical that they were frequently derided as socialistic. Augustine McNally wrote in the *New York World* that “I believe his [Ryan’s] economic views would lead to ultimate Socialism. Indeed, his radicalism and Socialism might sleep in the same bed, locked in each other’s arms, in serene peace and happy contentment.”<sup>30</sup> Ryan was similarly lambasted on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives as “a bitter thorn in the side of many respectable Catholics,” and called by others “a dangerous revolutionary in clerical guise.”<sup>31</sup> These criticisms, however, had little effect on Ryan, who continued to criticize America’s economic system as well those in the church “who find a way of reconciling their conscience to the business practices of the world.”<sup>32</sup>

But while Ryan has, quite correctly, been seen as a critic of the industrial order, a more nuanced reading of his views reveals that he also saw modern business as having the potential to be of great service to the common good. In fact, though he never used the language of vocation, he understood business as having not on the capacity, but the obligation, to serve humanity. Within

this subtext of Ryan's social thought are important resources for the project of reflecting on the contemporary vocation of business.

Human dignity and human personality lie at the heart of Ryan's critique of capitalism, and it is in his discussion of these concepts that his views on the vocation of business are most fully illuminated. Indeed, the claim that human beings are made in the image of God and therefore have a moral claim to economic rights is the foundation of Ryan's social ethic. As Ryan wrote, "Human dignity, the dignity of personality, means that man has intrinsic worth, that he is intrinsically sacred, that, in Kant's fine phrase, he is 'an end in himself,' and that he is never to be treated as a mere means or instrument to any other end whatsoever."<sup>33</sup> Because human beings are spiritual beings, they cannot be treated as mere instruments of production. They do not exist to serve business, but rather to serve God. The whole of economic life should be ordered such that this end is promoted.

Ryan's argument for the living wage illustrates the centrality of human dignity in his thought. His argument starts from the premise that all human beings, by virtue of their humanity, have a right to live humanely and decently. There are basic material needs that must be supplied if this is to be possible. These needs are not culturally relative – he dismissed those who pointed to the "low planes of living which are occupied by Japanese, Chinese, and Mexicans" – but rather are common to all by virtue of human nature.<sup>34</sup> Ryan even went so far as to catalogue what these basic needs were. In a 1927 address, he stated that "The minimum decent standard may be thus summarily stated in terms of goods; a decent home of five or at least four rooms; food sufficient for good health and physical efficiency; cheap but neat clothing, and some money for recreation, religion, intellectual life, and insurance against sickness and old age."<sup>35</sup>

As a second step in his argument for the living wage, Ryan claimed that the right to live humanely, and so to receive a wage that can support such an existence, is not contingent on one's capabilities. Ryan resolutely rejected the argument that a worker ought to be "rewarded in proportion to his activity."<sup>36</sup> Rather, "Human needs constitute the primary ethical title or claim to material goods."<sup>37</sup> As he wrote in *Distributive Justice*, "None of the other recognized titles, such as productivity, effort, sacrifice, purchase, gift, inheritance, or first occupancy, is a fundamental reason or justification of either rewards or possessions. They all assume the existence of needs as a prerequisite to their validity. If men did not need goods they could not reasonably lay claim to them by any of the specific titles just enumerated."<sup>38</sup> The most basic obligation of a business is therefore to adequately provide for its employees. The worker's right to a living wage is superior to the employer's right to receive a profit.<sup>39</sup>

Ryan did not conceive of human dignity as a static concept, however. Human dignity was part of the larger concept of human personality, which did not merely exist, but developed and evolved. Central to Ryan's thought was the idea that the human person is teleologically ordered to certain ends. As Michael Maher, S.J. wrote in the appendix to one of Ryan's pamphlets on the living wage, "man is placed in this world by God to attain a certain end."<sup>40</sup> Ryan never provided details about what he thought these ends were, other than that it involved the development of one's faculties – "physical, mental, moral, and spiritual to a reasonable degree."<sup>41</sup> But it was clear that Ryan believed all people were involved in the process of realizing their "place in the universe" and "ultimate end."

The process of developing one's personality did not occur exclusively, or even primarily, at the level of intellect. The development rather took place in the course everyday activities, of which Ryan identifies marriage, the raising of a family, recreation, study, leisure, and participation in church and community. Above all, the development of personality was intimately related to one's employment, social circumstances, and material life. Edwin V. O'Hara captured Ryan's point well in a 1917 *America* article, writing that: "The demand that men shall have a sufficiency for suitable housing, comfortable clothing and nourishing food is no mere echo of Socialistic clamor. It is their right as children of God; for without these things they cannot ordinarily lead normal lives, rear healthy children, improve their minds, practice their religious duties and fulfill the destiny for which god has created them."<sup>42</sup> Business, in Ryan's scheme, thus not only provides for material needs and wants, but is involved in supporting the development of human personality.<sup>43</sup>

Ryan's understanding of business was part of his larger theological anthropology. Human beings are ordered to orient their lives towards their supreme end, but they cannot achieve this end without access to basic material resources that provide opportunity, time, and resources. As Ryan wrote in an early 1902 article about the living wage, a labor has a right to receive this because it is necessary "to attain the end of his being, develop his personality in a reasonable way, which is the end of his earthly life."<sup>44</sup> The purpose of an economic system is ultimately to facilitate the realization of the divinely intended ends of human existence. To deprive people, through unjust economic practices and institutions, of adequate material resources is to deprive them of the opportunity to become fully human in the way God intends.

In Ryan's ethical system there is a strong, albeit often overlooked, connection between the material and the spiritual. Ryan saw economic justice as being not merely about the satisfaction of material needs. In fact, he very intentionally rejected the idea that economic justice could be an end in itself. To make such a claim was to endorse "the pagan principles of materialism."<sup>45</sup> Rather, economics must always be viewed in its relationship to the Christian life and the life of the soul. To live decently was important because it fostered the Christian life and encouraged people to "to know more and more, and to love more and more, the best that is to be known and love, namely, God."<sup>46</sup> In one remarkable statement, Ryan even went so far as to identify access to "economic opportunity, to property, to a reasonable minimum of education" as essential to salvation. "The salvation of millions of souls," he spoke, "depended largely upon economic opportunity to live decently, to live as human beings made in the image and likeness of God."<sup>47</sup> While spiritual development represented the highest ends of human life, an essential insight that pervaded Ryan's ethical worldview was the inseparable connection between the spiritual and material. In making such a claim Ryan did not deny that God would always call some to radical lives of poverty and simplicity. But he also maintained that in the workaday world of raising families, caring for children, and participating in community, the burden of poverty was not a source of grace but a pathway to a burdened soul closed off to God.

Ryan's views about the centrality of the material in the economy of salvation led him to hold more positive views towards business than typically recognized. While Ryan frequently lambasted laissez-faire capitalism as an economic system that "cannot and ought not survive," he also praised the productive capabilities of modern business institutions.<sup>48</sup> Capitalism, he noted,

had the unrivaled capacity to alleviate “the great majority of evil conditions” and to provide a “decent living” for the masses. He added that “However much we may condemn the distribution of the product, we have to admit” that the system has allowed for a remarkable increase in the production of goods.<sup>49</sup> The production of wealth was not evil, but necessary for meeting basic human needs, promoting the development of human personality, and the cultivation of the soul. Ryan’s lifelong critique of capitalism must therefore be viewed not as a rejection of capitalism per se, but rather a condemnation of its failure to adequately distribute its fruits so that all persons might have the opportunity to live life fully in the way God intends. In fact, Ryan believed that if business and the state were organized differently, a decent livelihood could be provided to all people. The problem in the modern economy was not production. “The industrial resources of our country,” he wrote “are apparently great enough to give all the workers at least living wages, and quite a considerable portion of them something more.”<sup>50</sup> The problem was the unjust distribution of these resources that flowed from the prioritizing of profit over personhood.

Ryan’s reform scheme was ultimately governed by an overriding realism about the necessity, indeed the positive vocation, of modern businesses. While the overriding theme of his life’s work was nothing less than the “reconstruction of the social order,” he nevertheless believed that it made no sense for Catholics to question the basic framework of the capitalist system.<sup>51</sup> Ryan ultimately sought to amend capitalism while still preserving the essential structure of the American system. Though Ryan once declared that capitalism, as currently ordered, was “nearing its end,” he nevertheless expressed faith that “the system can be fundamentally reformed as regards both its spirit and its structure.”<sup>52</sup> The most realistic and useful contribution Catholics could make social reform was to work towards making capitalism moral and humane.

Ryan’s understanding of business’s vocation to serve human development is made all the more clear when his thought is compared with other Catholics of the day. Whereas Ryan wanted to make capitalism moral, a vocal group of radical critics questioned the moral validity of the capitalist system altogether. They had little interest in amending capitalism through legislative reform. Instead, these critics developed reform visions that sought to develop a distinctively Christian economy that challenged economic liberalism with the radical power of the Gospel. Christianity was not to be placed in the service of a moral capitalism, but to become a totalizing vision of social organization. Raymond McGowan, for instance, spoke of creating a “Catholic attitude, philosophy or, better still, theology” of economic relations, while the Jesuit Michael Egan advocated a “Christian reorganization” of the economy.<sup>53</sup> Joseph Keating added likewise that the goal of reform must be “to Christianize industry,” and William Engelen advocated replacing liberalism with “a new structure of society.”<sup>54</sup> These critics agreed that capitalism could not be made moral. It was based on a fundamentally flawed ideology. Some of the most vituperative comments about capitalism came from the German Catholic community.<sup>55</sup> The Germans were the most willing to point out the “evils of the industrial system” and the need of Catholics to establish an alternative system “resting on Christian principles.”<sup>56</sup> Even the *Washington Post* took note of the difference between Ryan and other Catholics. In an editorial on Ryan in 1939, the *Post* remarked that “Other contemporary Catholic social theorists” believed that a just economy “could be achieved only by substituting somehow a system of small proprietorships for corporate industry.” Ryan, on the other hand, sought to work within the existing system with the aim of giving “labor an increasing share in the management of industry.”<sup>57</sup>

As Ryan's social thought matured, it moved increasingly further away from the project of the radical Catholics. In Ryan's social ethical framework, the church should not throw its weight behind ineffectual and impractical modes of social organization. Catholics should rather seek to reform capitalism with the aim of developing a "true economic liberalism." There is no doubt that Ryan's more favorable attitudes towards the possibilities of the modern economic order emerged from his belief that the bountiful production of goods ought to be encouraged, and an economic system that maximized these possibilities was one which ought receive the church's sanction. Modern businesses certainly had to be tamed and reformed. As currently organized, they had left in their wake inequality and injustice. But business also had the capacity to promote the development, indeed the sanctification, of human life and community.

Ryan's thought has often been criticized for its perceived lack of attention to theological and ecclesiastical matters. But while these issues were not the main focus of his work, nor the primary perspective from which he constructed his ethical system, Ryan's understanding of economic justice was nevertheless deeply connected to theological and spiritual concerns. The public face of much of his work was aimed at criticizing business practices and the direction of industrial capitalism in America. But beneath the surface of his advocacy of economic justice was a more fundamental set of concerns about the development of human personality, the care of the soul, and the cultivation of Christian life. Ryan's insights, crafted in the early twentieth-century as the church first began to develop its tradition of modern social thought, contain seminal resources for the church's conversation today about the vocation of business in the modern economy.

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<sup>1</sup> William Hard, "Father Ryan on Bread & Butter Morals," *Hearst's International* (July 1924): 52-53, 143.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action: A Personal History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941): 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action*, 9, 12.

<sup>4</sup> "Testimonial Dinner to Right Reverend John A. Ryan, D.D. on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday Anniversary," May 25, 1939, Ryan Papers, Box 51, File: Biographical 1938, p. 15-16, ACUA.

<sup>5</sup> "Testimonial Dinner to Right Reverend John A. Ryan, D.D. on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday Anniversary," 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick W. Gearty, *The Economic Thought of Monsignor John A. Ryan*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953): 13.

<sup>7</sup> "Testimonial Dinner to Right Reverend John A. Ryan, D.D. on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday Anniversary," 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Social Doctrine in Action*, 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan* (New York: Macmillan, 1963): 19.

<sup>10</sup> Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Journal, November 17, 1894, Ryan Papers, ACUA.

<sup>12</sup> John A. Ryan, "A Country without Strikes," *Catholic World* LXXII (November 1900): 145-157.

<sup>13</sup> These reviews were obtained from a collection of more than two dozen clippings Ryan saved in a scrapbook. See Ryan Papers, Box 58, File: Reviews of *A Living Wage*, ACUA.

<sup>14</sup> "Social Program of Hierarchy Wins Approval," *The Tablet* (February 22, 1919); Raymond Swing, "The Catholic View of Reconstruction," *The Nation* (March 29, 1919): 467.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997): 151.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Gleason, "American Catholics and liberalism, 1789-1960," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57; See also, Joseph M. McShane, S.J., "Sufficiently Radical": *Catholicism, Progressivism, and the Bishops' Program of 1919* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 7-56.

<sup>17</sup> John A. Ryan, "The Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction," address, July 1921, Ryan Papers, Writings Miscellaneous, Box 24, File: The Church and Social Questions, pp. 1, ACUA.

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- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in William Hard, "Father Ryan on Bread & Butter Morals," *Hearst's International* (July 1924): 52-53, 143.
- <sup>19</sup> John A. Ryan, "Democratizing Industry," in *Declining Liberty and Other Papers* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 236; John A. Ryan, "The New Industrial Revolution," address, January 1934, Ryan Papers, Writings 1909-1935, File: 1930-1934, p. 2, ACUA.
- <sup>20</sup> John A. Ryan, "The New Industrial Revolution," address, January 1934, Ryan Papers, Writings 1909-1935, File: 1930-1934, pp. 1-2, ACUA; "Dr. Ryan for Fundamental Reform of Existing System," Unidentified newspaper clipping, Ryan Papers, Ryan Writings Miscellaneous, Box 24, File: Addresses, ACUA.
- <sup>21</sup> John A. Ryan, "The Encyclical's Indictment," Ryan Papers, Ryan Writings Miscellaneous, Box 24, File: Addresses, pp. 1, ACUA; John A. Ryan, "Tentative Statement of s Social Program," address, Ryan Papers, Writings Miscellaneous, Box 24, File: Industrial Labor, p. 1, ACUA; John A. Ryan, "Tentative Statement of s Social Program," address, Ryan Papers, Writings Miscellaneous, Box 24, File: Industrial Labor, p. 1, ACUA.
- <sup>22</sup> John A. Ryan, "Organized Labor Today," address, Ryan Papers, Miscellaneous Writings, Box 24, File: Labor Addresses, p. 2, ACUA.
- <sup>23</sup> John A. Ryan, "Address to Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers," address, May 15, 1921, Ryan Papers, Miscellaneous Writings, Box 24, File: Industrial Democracy, p. 7, ACUA.
- <sup>24</sup> John A. Ryan, "Organized Labor Today," address, Ryan Papers, Miscellaneous Writings, Box 24, File: Labor Addresses, ACUA.
- <sup>25</sup> John A. Ryan, "Unemployment Insurance II: The Ethical Argument," address, Ryan Papers, Miscellaneous Writings, Box 24, File: Industrial Democracy, ACUA.
- <sup>26</sup> John A. Ryan, "Unemployment: Causes and Remedies," *Catholic World* CXXVIII (February 1929): 535-542.
- <sup>27</sup> John A. Ryan, "The Economic Basis of Social Injustice and Religious Cooperation," address, Ryan Papers, Writings 1935-1940, Box 28, File: 1935-37, ACUA.
- <sup>28</sup> John A. Ryan, "Legislation and a Christian Social Order," address, December 1939, Ryan Papers Writings 1935-1940, File: 1938-1939, ACUA.
- <sup>29</sup> "Capitalism Fascism Likely If New Deal Program Fails, Predicts Msgr. John A. Ryan," newspaper clipping, Ryan Papers, Box 39, File: Industrial Recovery, ACUA.
- <sup>30</sup> Augustine McNally, "Catholics Insist Ryan Brought on Blow to Council," *New York World* (June 19, 1922).
- <sup>31</sup> "Excerpt from speech by Rep. Blanton of Texas," *Congressional Record*, January 4, 1926, Ryan Papers, Box 41, File: Personal, ACUA; "Monsignor Ryan," *Washington Post*, May 25, 1939.
- <sup>32</sup> Charles Bruehl, "Practical Christianity," *Central-Blatt and Social Justice* (October 1936): 192.
- <sup>33</sup> John A. Ryan, "Freedom, Rights, and Brotherhood," Ryan Papers, Box 24, File: Addresses, ACUA.
- <sup>34</sup> "Dr. Ryan Touches Heart of Social Problem in Address on Standards of Living," *The Tidings* (September 9, 1927): 4-5.
- <sup>35</sup> "Dr. Ryan Touches Heart of Social Problem in Address on Standards of Living," 4-5.
- <sup>36</sup> *Distributive Justice*, 289-296; *A Living Wage*, 120-121
- <sup>37</sup> *Distributive Justice*, 270. See also, *A Living Wage*, chapter 6.
- <sup>38</sup> *Distributive Justice*, 270.
- <sup>39</sup> Ryan described the living wage as a moral and political right that could be held against employers. *A Living Wage*, 69. "The right of the laborer to living wages is superior to that right of the employer or business man to anything in excess of that amount of profits which will insure him against risks, and afford him a decent livelihood in conformity with his accustomed plan of experience." John A. Ryan, "The Problem of Complete Wage Justice," *Catholic World* 103 (August 1916): 628.
- <sup>40</sup> Michael Maher, S.J., appendix to John A. Ryan, "The Living Wage," pamphlet, Ryan Papers, Box 11, p. 23, ACUA.
- <sup>41</sup> John A. Ryan, "A Living Wage," notes to address, Ryan Papers, Box 40, File: Living Wage.
- <sup>42</sup> Edwin V. O'Hara, "The Basis of a Durable Industrial Peace," *America* (December 29, 1917): 283.
- <sup>43</sup> See *Distributive Justice*, 95-96.
- <sup>44</sup> John A. Ryan, "What is a Living Wage?" *Catholic World* 75 (April 1902): 2.
- <sup>45</sup> John A. Ryan, "Industrial Paganism in the Black Hills," *The Survey* (November 1, 1913): 141.
- <sup>46</sup> John A. Ryan, "The Cost of Christian Living," *The Catholic World* 86 (February 1908): 576. See also, John A. Ryan, "Christian Standards in Social Life," *The Catholic Charities Review* X (February 1926): 51-59.
- <sup>47</sup> "Testimonial Dinner to Right Reverend John A. Ryan, D.D. on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday Anniversary."

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<sup>48</sup> “Testimonial Dinner to Right Reverend John A. Ryan, D.D. on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday Anniversary.”

<sup>49</sup> John A. Ryan, “The Bad and Good in Our Industrial System,” *The Catholic Charities Review* IX (November 1927): 343-345.

<sup>50</sup> John A. Ryan, “Present Wages and Prices,” *Catholic World* 110 (January 1920): 437. R

<sup>51</sup> John A. Ryan, “Seventieth Birthday Address,” address, Ryan Papers, Ryan Writings 1935-1940, Box 28, File: 1938-1939, pp. 7, ACUA.

<sup>52</sup> “Dr. Ryan for Fundamental Reform of Existing System,” Unidentified newspaper clipping, Ryan Papers, Ryan Writings Miscellaneous, Box 24, File: Addresses, ACUA.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond A. McGowan, “The Philosophy of Catholicism in Its Relation to Industry,” address, April 1931, reprinted in *Religious Education Association Magazine* (May-June 1931), NCWC/Social Action Department Papers, Box 22, Folder 8, p. 433, ACUA; M. Egan, S.J., “The Problem of Unemployment,” *The Catholic Mind* 24:12 (June 22, 1926): 236.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Keating, S.J., “To Christianize Industry,” *The Catholic Mind* 20:17 (September 8, 1922): 359-360; W.J. Engelen, S.J., “Social Reflections: Teaching the Social Gospel,” *Central-Blatt and Social Justice* 14:6 (September 1921): 180.

<sup>55</sup> On German-American Catholic social thought see, Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers: German American Catholics and the Social Order* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

<sup>56</sup> Henry H. Regnet, S.J., “Socialism and Social Reform,” *Central-Blatt and Social Justice* (April 1912): 13.

<sup>57</sup> “Monsignor Ryan,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 1939.