

BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND

scientists have long told us that our political process alienates the poor. With secular thinkers like John Rawls, I agree that a democratic society cannot tolerate such inequality. No doubt, those are contested stipulations. But I want to focus on the second part of our title: American national priorities. This signals an interest in America as a _____, rather than simply as a state, a current political administration, or even public policy.

Institutions and public policies reveal the character of our nation. We are asking about the character itself, the republic for which it stands as I used to say in elementary school; that is, to name priorities. Priorities are things that merit attention before competing alternatives. We need to step back and think about the ends we seek

and equal fate, of common bonds of affection and purpose, or what has been called the “common good.” Goods held in common, constituted by relationships where none flourish until all flourish; such a political society allows us to perfect our moral natures in community with others, as both givers and receivers.

I don’t need to lecture this audience about the common good or the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching on poverty and “integral human development” (a tradition that the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and many American Protestants, cite as a major influence on their thinking). I don’t need to tell you about the many biblical admonitions against economic exploitation expressed in the “preferential option for the poor.” Indeed, historians of late antiquity now tell us that early Christians practically invented notions of care for the poor as a counter-cultural critique of Roman society. Christians were to be lovers of the poor, not lovers of the glory of Rome

into our religious vocabularies in breaking the spell of economic interests narrowly defined. We need more religion in public life, more religious conversation in public life, not less, in order to keep this conversation going.

Poverty is a tremendous political challenge, especially as politicians seek the coveted independent, middle class voter, confident in an American exceptionalism and self-reliance. Most of my students share a confidence in public-private partnerships which might combat unbridled capitalism; microfinance and social entrepreneurship are their buzz words, even as many go off to Wall Street, ostensibly to make enough money to help the poor later in life (especially their former poor undergraduate selves by giving to Princeton to support professors like me). Many of them

opportunity. We should not fear party politics, or political compromises. But we should chasten its hold on our imagination for the possibilities of our common life.

Let me come to an end. Thinking about economic justice is not only an empirical issue. We ask our best social scientists and economists to analyze our markets for their distortions, understand how this state of affairs was created, and study proposals and experiments in living from the left, right, and center. Consider, for example, the work of the MIT Poverty Action Lab just down the road from here. For the sake of our democracy, we should work to sponsor coalitions that might hold our politicians accountable for the poor. Such activity is a moral challenge, and for communities of faith, a profound spiritual challenge. For Christians, it is to take seriously the biblical ethic that w

giving in the United States goes to charitable uses such as helping the poor. Augustine knew we would never find the kingdom of God this side of eternity; he counseled a spirituality for the long haul, sometimes resigned to a tragic world. His notion of original sin can tempt Christians to wallow in our shame, to mourn, and pray. But Christians shaped by his heirs, including many of my fellow Cal