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God, Marxism and the Culture War: Recovering Liberalism

INTRODUCTION

Post-liberalism is a slippery concept. Whereas, liberalism is widely known as one of the great traditions in political thought, and arguably the mother of the modern West. In contemporary British politics it is known to comprise two component traditions: economic liberalism and social liberalism. Post-liberalism can be used to suggest something about the character of the age in which we live. As being either after the high watermark of liberalism or understood as a normative project which seeks to supplant liberalism with a variant of conservatism. It is the latter definition that concerns this essay. If post-liberalism is a declaration, it is necessary to grapple with the reasoning behind such a declaration. My working understanding is that in Britain, but also elsewhere in the Anglosphere, there is a call for orthodox conservative politicians and thinkers to reflect upon the extent to which their governments and parties have been compromised by liberal tendencies and policy agendas.

By orthodox conservative, I mean those whose thought emanates from the tradition of Edmund Burke. I interpret this tradition as giving tribute to the primacy of the origin of English culture, namely Christianity and how it developed into English Protestantism through the Reformation. This tradition is neither nostalgic nor curmudgeonly. It grasps that change is a condition of human life and experience. And yet, there is within this stream of thought

¹ I am grateful to colleagues at the workshop for questions and comments which have helped refine the argument. In particular, my thanks to Dan Banks, Phillip Blond, Christopher Fear, Andrew Jenner, Noël O'Sullivan, Daniel Pitt and Sean Oliver-Dee for reading an earlier draft. Any errors are, of course, my own.

a sensibility about the proper handling of the past and what that means for the temporary role of guardianship of each generation. Gratitude for the gifts that have been bequeathed by our forebears: institutions, practices, dispositions, language, literature and law. Put simply, the material that shapes a nation.

Orthodox conservatism opposes socialism and libertarianism in equal measure, seeing the narcissism of self-will in both political projects. It has a deeper connection to liberalism, but the family relationship is strained in critical places. As for Marxism and fascism, they are regarded as aliens, and hostile ones at that. The charges against orthodox conservatives are for the socialist and the libertarian, parallels. For the socialist, the conservative is a defender of the atomised individual, drunk on the magic of the market, ignorant of the effects of poverty, and concerned with the preservation of vested interests, whilst for the libertarian, the conservative is a sell-out to soggy social democracy, who clumsily uses state power to over-regulate and fund public services paid for by other people's money.

The call to post-liberalism is a call to orthodox conservatives to genuinely engage in self-reflection, and this is indeed healthy. And in the contemporary British case, given the fact that many (if not most) Members of Parliament who stand on the manifestoes of the Conservative Party are heterodox and can be described as liberals, libertarians or progressives of varying hues,² then such a call to post-liberalism has some value. Whilst the Conservative Party is necessarily a broad church comprising a plurality of intellectual traditions, orthodox conservatives (within and without) ought to be concerned when the influence of their tradition declines within this great party of state. Moreover, for five years, from 2010, the Conservative Party was in full coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. It oversaw distinctly liberal reforms in political economy (austerity) and social affairs (gay marriage). Given this ideational and policy context, the declaration for a post-liberalism is not unreasonable. But how conservatives meaningfully extricate themselves and their party from the broad political tradition of liberalism (or *liberalisms*), is a different question. It is made more problematic by the simple fact that the liberal tradition houses great treasure as well as trash.

² For a discussion of the ideological traditions in the contemporary Conservative Party see BEECH 2023: 11–24.

CHRISTIANITY, LIBERALISM AND WESTERN CIVILISATION

The problem with the notion of post-liberalism is partly one of definition and partly one of emphasis. What I mean by this is, if liberalism is restricted to the economic doctrines of free markets, the minimal state, modest regulation and competition, and social liberalism pertains to ethical warrant in spheres of consensual adult appetites and relationships (a form of non-discrimination and non-interference), then it is simple to define and to apprehend as a political tradition. Once identified, one can engage in reasonable critique and, in turn, propose counter-perspectives. And for the purpose of this project, orthodox conservative counter-perspectives.

However, whilst I think this definition and emphasis of the liberal tradition is necessary, it is not sufficient. Why not? Because, what is identified as liberalism does not merely comprise the twin components of economic and social liberalism. In fact, liberalism's ontological starting point emerges out of the Christian presupposition of the equal moral worth of each human being. Christian thought explains this through the idea of *imago dei*; the image of God; that the apotheosis of God's creation are humans and every human is an image-bearer. Put slightly differently, that all people bear the Maker's mark and possess something of His dignity. From this theological source flows the belief in the inherent equal value of human life. When one reads the intellectual history of the West, which starts with Ancient Greece but is swiftly supplanted by Christianity and its holy scriptures, one sees gradually crystallising the centrepiece of its thought: the incarnate life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The West, as a civilisation, is predicated on the Gospel.³

This story is of a person; or to be precise, it is *the story of the person*. It is a story of sacrifice and redemption. Once, for all who will believe. The Holy Scripture gifts the world the story of creation, the fall of man, divine rescue (sacrifice and redemption), commission, judgment and recreation. Amongst these

³ See HOLLAND 2019.

truths, is the idea of the primacy of the equal moral worth of individual human beings:⁴ our creaturely uniqueness, evincing the spark of the divine. And what is more, though hostile resistance, discrimination, war and persecution is frequent, this idea is incrementally recognised by civil authorities, monarchs and empires, throughout two-thousand years of Christendom. This metaphysical understanding in Christian thought surfaces upstream with the Apostle Paul, flows through the Apostolic Fathers, deepens in the work of Augustine, down through the scholasticism of the Middle Ages to the lake of thought that is Aquinas, then meanders into the canon lawyers, and floods the many plains of the Reformation in the wide basin of Protestantism, from where it irrigates tributaries of political thought in the 17th century including (but not limited to) Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Scotland and England.⁵

It must be said that though liberalism was the first to possess this beautiful, good and true realisation, it is not alone in doing so: conservatism does too.⁶ This is evident in the words of Roger Scruton appraising the significance of T.S. Eliot as the pre-eminent conservative thinker of the 20th century, marrying faith to modernity:

To rediscover our religion is not to rise free from the temporal order; it is not to deny history and corruption, in order to contemplate the timeless truths. On the contrary, it is to enter more deeply into history, so as to find in the merely transitory the mark and the sign of that which never passes: it is to discover the “point of intersection of the timeless with time”, which is, according to *Four Quartets*, the occupation of the saint.⁷

Whilst liberalism and conservatism are different, and often counterposing, their starting points are the same because they are, in effect, Christian traditions.

⁴ Galatians 3:28.

⁵ See SIEDENTOP 2015.

⁶ One can argue that other long-standing political traditions (e.g. social democracy) scaffolded upon liberalism bear some of the same qualities. And yet, some expressly European traditions have emerged in contradistinction to the theology and ethics of Christendom (e.g. feminism, ecologism, fascism and Marxism).

⁷ SCRUTON 2019: 204.

Perhaps, it might be better to say that in Western forms liberalism and conservatism are part of the political thought and practice of Christendom. Problems, very serious problems, occur when Christian thought is divested from such political traditions. In the wake of the dominance of the spirit of anti-Christian liberalism (better explained as progressive humanism) in the middle decades of the 20th century, individual and social practices were reformed ostensibly upon liberative foundations. Such “liberation” – often but not exclusively in the campaigns of the New Left – yielded the assault on holy matrimony, the celebration of divorce, the growth of absent fathers, the warrant for sexual licentiousness, the emergence of radical feminism and the curse of abortion. The formal decision-making of British society was initiated by a small proportion of progressive humanists within Parliament and without. At times such voices of “reform” came from so-called “shepherds” and progressive theologians. And when scrutinised closely, this spirit of progressive humanism resembled the loan shark pushing a payday loan to a fool; weak-minded enough to buy an unnecessary product: “self-realisation”. This product, gleefully sold by the loan shark deploying the lie of small costs, was like all usury – nothing more than a bad debt; a bad bargain for generations of Britons to come.

PHILLIP BLOND, POST-LIBERALISM AND MARXISM

Phillip Blond is one of the leading intellectual proponents of a post-liberal politics. His Red Tory⁸ platform and Christian worldview offer a distinct and different direction of travel from humanist progressivism on the one hand and populism on the other. And in one review article, Blond explicitly calls for a post-liberal, Catholic social teaching to fill the ideational and policy void left by liberalism. He argues: “The Catholic Church must return to the political fray, not as a chaplain to the left or right but as the herald of a new order.”⁹ This is interesting and points to a rich communitarian conservative tradition, in which post-liberals

⁸ BLOND 2010a.

⁹ BLOND 2017.

might discover, or rediscover, old solutions to contemporary problems. Many years ago, Blond described the provenance of liberalism and what it evolved into:

[W]e must first note that philosophical liberalism was born out of an 18th-century critique of absolute monarchies [...]. But so extreme did the defence of individual liberty become that each man was obliged to refuse the dictates of any other – for that would be simply to replace rule by one man's will (the king) with rule by another. As such, the most extreme form of liberal autonomy requires the repudiation of society – for human community influences and shapes the individual before any sovereign capacity to choose has taken shape. The liberal idea of man is then, first of all, an idea of nothing: not family, not ethnicity, not society or nation.¹⁰

Blond sees the pathogen of the West in general, and Britain in particular, as liberalism. It is for Blond the clear and present threat to the life of virtue and the common good. Building upon this argument, in an article in 2010 he argued that forms of state liberalism and market liberalism have caused Britain to become the *Shattered Society*.¹¹ In contrast, my diagnosis identifies Marxist ideas and values, albeit cultural forms rather than classical Marxism or liberalism as the pathogen in Western societies and especially in Anglo-Saxon societies. Such forms of Marxism are the issue and thus the agents of challenge and attack on the hard-won wealth of Western civilisation. Contra Blond, liberalism cannot be the adversary of a society predicated upon centuries of Christian thought through which liberalism emerged. Marxism, to the Christian mind, is idolatrous. Liberalism, properly understood, is the product of Christian society. Therefore, Marxism and liberalism are enemies. They do not cohere; nor can they peacefully coexist. We know this from history because Marxism was as full a reaction to 19th century liberalism in Britain, as Burkean conservatism was to 18th century radicalism in France. In a speech to a conference in 1992, Doris Lessing reflected on her experience as a one-time Communist intellectual. She noted how ideas, such as Marxism, can captivate and if left unexamined can possess people resulting in unexamined mental attitudes:

¹⁰ BLOND 2009.

¹¹ BLOND 2010b.

Exciting ideas have always swept across countries, nations, the world. There have always been people high on ideas. They used to be religious emotions, a fact we might usefully keep in our minds. (They still are religious in some areas, and spreading fast.) But in all our minds are patterns which we do not examine that govern our behaviour.¹²

Like Lessing, I too think that people, especially young university educated folk, are very often “high on ideas”. The crucial observation is that Marxism, in its cultural guise, is extant and maintains its allure. It is a formidable tradition of thought with many intellectuals, academic outlets and subject-specific fields of enquiry. And Marxism possesses a property that is overlooked, namely, emotion. For all of the supposed scientific socialism and anti-clericalism of its founder, the Marxist tradition remains because it mingles rationality with romance; it blends realism with the promise of utopia. Within Cultural Marxism – from Critical Theory¹³ (pioneered by the Frankfurt School) or its offshoots, Critical Legal Theory,¹⁴ Critical Race Theory,¹⁵ radical feminism¹⁶ or gender theory¹⁷ – the humanities and social sciences contain sub-fields which employ the “oppressor–oppressed” analytic frame to detect social injustice. The reality of injustice, and the ever-present maltreatment of fallen creatures by their fellow fallen creatures, means that Marxism sustains genuine emotional force and moral purpose. It does this whilst shrugging off the inconvenient historical record: the rule of Marxist-Leninist regimes with enough famine, suppression, brutality and bloodshed to fill reservoirs;¹⁸ nothing short of evil on an industrial scale. We know them by their fruits.¹⁹

¹² LESSING 1994.

¹³ See for example, ADORNO–HORKHEIMER 1973.

¹⁴ See for example, CRENSHAW 1989: 139–167.

¹⁵ See for example, DIANGELO 2018.

¹⁶ See for example, BINDEL 2021.

¹⁷ See for example, BUTLER 1990.

¹⁸ Space restricts the listing of the many studies of the evils of Marxist rule which have been documented in every country that has had the misfortune to suffer its utopianism. For a classic study see SOLZHENITSYN 1973.

¹⁹ Matthew 7:15–20.

In his article in *First Things*, Blond initially identifies Marxism as: “Among the ideas that compete to determine the world’s future, one can count Catholicism, Islam, and (until recently) Marxism.”²⁰ In this sense Blond is thinking about ideas at a civilisational level and then mentions liberalism as, “dominant, hegemonic, and all-pervasive”.²¹ Marxism for Blond *was*; it is a former worldview of note; a one-time, historic challenge to the West, now obsolete. I understand how one can draw such a conclusion given the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Marxist-Leninist empire. But through my teaching and reading of post-war Britain, I am led to discern cultural turns in British Marxism, especially after the death of Stalin in 1953 and Khrushchev’s “Secret speech”; the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956; and the Prague Spring in 1968.²² The exodus of gifted scholars, men and women, from the Communist Party of Great Britain and their fellow travellers across Western Europe, maintained the utopianism and intellectual energy of Marxism divested of Soviet Communism.²³ British Marxist intellectuals turned their attention and energy to critique institutions, practices and traditions; from welfare capitalism and education, to art, entertainment and above all, the Church and Christian morality. Marxism did not disappear or die; it evolved. It turned its attention from violent revolution and classical proletarian struggle, to what Rudi Dutschke, a student-leader in the American New Left movement, dubbed “the long march through the institutions”.²⁴ Herbert Marcuse argued that universities (both established and new) were essential institutions for counter-revolution:

I have stressed the key role which the universities play in the present period: they can still function as institutions for the training of counter-cadres. The ‘restructuring’ necessary for the attainment of this goal means more than decisive student participation and non-authoritarian learning. Making the university “relevant” for today and tomorrow means,

²⁰ BLOND 2017.

²¹ BLOND 2017.

²² See DWORKIN 1997; SCRUTON 2015.

²³ See DAVIS 2006: 335–358; HICKS 2019.

²⁴ See MARCUSE 1972: 55.

instead, presenting the facts and forces that made civilization what it is today and what it could be tomorrow – and that *is* political education. For history indeed repeats itself; it is this repetition of domination and submission that must be halted, and halting it presupposes knowledge of its genesis and of the ways in which it is produced: critical thinking.²⁵

If anti-Christian liberalism in its progressive humanist guise has been the tradition that has attacked Christian thought and simultaneously influenced contemporary conservatism, how does Blond account for post-war Cultural Marxism? This was, more or less, the question I posed to him at the conference in Budapest.²⁶ Blond's response to the question interpreted Marxism in its various forms as part of the broad, historic consequence of Enlightenment humanism and, in particular, a consequence of the impact of the political thought of Rousseau. For Blond, Marxism is downstream of Enlightenment humanism and liberalism. Rather it is anti-Christian liberalism, with its gradual usurpation of Christianity, which has ascended to its current position as intellectual and cultural hegemon of the West.

RECOVERING LIBERALISM: AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR THE CULTURE WAR

In my contribution to this volume I am attempting to deepen the appreciation of the liberal tradition. This I do, not merely to prompt a sympathy in the mind of the reader for some of its richness (though I declare that I hold such a sympathy) but also, to caution against dismissing the value of the liberal tradition because several generations of progressive humanists sought to jettison it from the established moorings of Christian thought. Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater. It is true that the liberal tradition became the hand-maiden of a different ideational project; figuratively speaking, the bastard child

²⁵ MARCUSE 1972: 56.

²⁶ *The Post-Liberal Turn and the Future of British Conservatism*, Ludovika University of Public Service and the Danube Institute, Budapest, 19 March 2022.

of progressivism and humanism. It is certainly the case, well made by orthodox conservatives, that unfettered economic liberalism (let alone libertarianism) and social liberalism, has furnished those societies which have pursued them, with a litany of negative externalities, tragedies and ongoing dilemmas. With a heavy heart but with clear eyes one can apply the prophetic judgement on the West, that the sins of the fathers have been visited upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.²⁷ So numerous are such consequences in British society, that they are almost too vast to map and measure. Not that there appears to be much public appetite to undertake such an audit of morality. And the conscience of so-called “bishops” in the Established Church is more concerned with affirming the Left – with all of its perversities of wokery – than with godliness and humility.²⁸

Here is the crux of the matter. The conversation about post-liberalism is germane because its participants acknowledge the moral failings of much of the dominant modes of anti-Christian liberalism – progressive humanism. Blond et al.²⁹ offer counter-prescriptions. And whilst, naturally, there is a range of prescription, there is broad agreement that liberalism and Marxism (in its various forms) cannot deliver the common good. Christianity can. And, the orthodox conservative tradition is best placed to draw upon the wellspring of Christian thought. So, the recovery of liberalism aids the recovery of conservatism. Such is the paradigmatic place of Christianity in the history and formation of the West, a little intellectual archaeology will expose troves of cultural riches, available to use and to invest in the present age.

And there is requirement for such riches. If we comprehend the conversation about the need for post-liberalism as means to engage effectively in the Culture War, it may cast light on the need to recover liberalism (properly understood). For orthodox conservatives and their allies, without recovering liberalism and expressing its Christian foundation, it is likely that the Culture

²⁷ Numbers 14:18.

²⁸ See Church of England 2020.

²⁹ For other thinkers who are engaged in the conversation about post-liberalism, albeit from a centre-left position, see MILBANK–PABST 2016; PABST 2021.

War will grind on with the Left as victors in certain spheres. In fact, their flags of victory are literally raised over an array of institutions. In some theatres of the Culture War, attritional identity contests drag on. Still elsewhere, conflicts about free speech and the role of the university are in the balance. Whilst I do not know the extent to which the Culture War can be won or whether an armistice is possible, I remain convinced that how the war is waged matters as much as the outcome of the war itself. By seeking to dignify one's adversaries and seeing in their creative endeavour a distant family resemblance, the ultimate peace can be kept. The Culture War can be maintained as a conflict involving argumentation about principles, visions, moral presuppositions and, above all, words than violence. *But aren't words violent?* They can indeed be harmful and hateful, but they remain in a different category. If that category is merged, blurred or allowed to bleed into the other, the Culture War, I fear, will soon cease to be in the realm of ideas and values alone. Hence the urgent need to recover liberalism; to recover something of the story of ourselves; the fundament of our shared nature.

There exists common territory between my position and that of Blond; we have overlapping theological and political convictions. For example, Blond once listed the following as the urgent prescription for British politics: "a civil state, a moralised market and an associative society."³⁰ Here we are in concert. But despite some personal influence, Blond's appeal to David Cameron ultimately fell on deaf ears. I am unsurprised that the Governments led by Cameron did not live up to Blond's communitarian conservative vision. The evidence and the legacy of the Cameron years is one which is more socially and economically liberal than orthodox conservative.³¹ And this verdict holds for the leaders of the Conservative Party who followed Cameron in swift succession. Orthodox conservatives seem to have a similar experience as their socialist opponents in being perpetually disappointed by party leaders. Part of the issue is to fully realise that state managers and economic managers operate in particular

³⁰ Phillip Blond: *The Future of Conservatism*, speech to launch ResPublica, London, 26 November 2009.

³¹ BEECH 2015:1–15.

social environments and ethical ecosystems removed from the mass of the people. One cannot do without the state or the market and pragmatic reforms are possible. But, neither the state, nor the market, nor government is the author of virtue and the common good. Such a noble and weighty burden is assigned to us all; the civil association of citizens.

CONCLUSION

Orthodox conservatives have much hard thinking to do to formulate mitigations; persuade their supporters; and, most crucially, convince the British public that a meaningful prescription exists to recover that which was lost and to conserve the things of greatest worth. This is not the task for the futurist or for pseudo-religious seers. Rather, it is the task of the likeminded to contend for the permanent things in the modern era. To make a fresh case to cherish those traditions, institutions and morals which preserve virtue and the common good, understood in the classical Christian sense. And to do this for the benefit of generations to come, whether confessional, humanist or religious minorities. Here Burke is instructive:

People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors. Besides, the people of England well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement.³²

Such an undertaking begins with conversation and culminates in a shared story; a living tradition. A living tradition which accounts for what has past, what the present is, and what the future ought to be. Conservatism is one such tradition embedded within an ongoing conversation with countless interlocutors, both living and dead. As G. K. Chesterton famously wrote:

³² BURKE 1790: 47–48.

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking about.³³

Due to the grace of memory we can read, recall and reapply stories within a living tradition. Canonical stories are the best stories; they are central to the culture of the West and to the beliefs and practices which they help to sustain. Therefore, canonical stories can be understood to be part of culture, and akin to what Matthew Arnold described as culture's purpose: "To make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere."³⁴ This is where the orthodox conservative has the advantage. Because possessing a reverence for what has been thought and known – an historical disposition – means not being coy about learning from the best of one's past, and being thereby fitted with the requisite confidence. Such confidence enables one to ignore the neophile with his fetish for novelty and fashion – like all fetishes, they lead to perdition – and to smile at the nostalgist and sing to the curmudgeon. For orthodox conservatives, such is the West's storehouse of practical wisdom; food for the heart, the soul and the mind; a feast, richly laid upon our table. If we chose to revisit and then dwell here for a while, what could be done? What could be imagined?

³³ CHESTERTON 1908: 45.

³⁴ ARNOLD 1961: 31.

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