

# **SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH BEYOND LIBERALISM: The Question of Europe**

*John Milbank and Adrian Pabst*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

**ADRIAN PABST:** The European question can be approached in a number of ways, but I want to start with the political debate and then take it to theology. I think that our political debate and discourse in the last few years and decades have very much been about what Europe is, and have in relation to the EU been more specifically framed in terms of the myths that the EU is either (1) a federal superstate that is going to absorb all of its members into a bureaucratic monstrosity, or else (2) that the EU is merely a glorified free trade area where the only thing which binds member countries together is commercial exchange and the relentless commodification which that entails. Of course, neither are true at all, but for some reason and especially in the UK (though increasingly also elsewhere), people have not been able to convey what Europe is really about. Ever since its inception early in the post-war era, Europe has been a strange hybrid and that is why it has rightly been described as a *sui-generis* polity, not

really like anything else that exists in the world. It's not a state; it's not an international organisation; and it's certainly not just a trade arrangement. It has hybrid institutions, where, for instance, the European Commission proposes legislation but also carries out certain decisions. It's got the member states that come together in the European Council through the Council Ministers and form an *ad hoc* executive order. It includes the European Court of Justice, which is in some sense supreme, but not in others because it does not deal in all areas of the law; for instance, it has nothing to say about national security or the army. It's very hybridised; it is polycentric, and it involves overlapping jurisdictions. All of that goes to show that Europe as a political project doesn't fit into the standard theories of either political science or international relations.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. EUROPE AS A NEO-MEDIEVAL PROJECT

The European Union is in some ways a neo-medieval project.<sup>2</sup> It involves a version of sovereignty that is always already shared; it means that there is this complex space where people can associate that is neither about the state nor the

---

<sup>1</sup> John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 363:

The German constitutional court, in a landmark ruling on the Lisbon Treaty in June 2009, emphasised that the Union in its original outlook is not so much an international organisation or single state as a voluntary association of states. But now that the European Union has been captured by the logic of the market-state, its members need to strengthen the associational model that combines vertical, hierarchical elements with horizontal, egalitarian aspects. Based on overlapping jurisdictions and a complex web of intermediary institutions wherein sovereignty is dispersed and diffused, such a model can help re-embed both politics and economics within the civic and social bonds of civil society. Amid the current crisis of legitimacy, this suggests that the European Union should pursue a truly subsidiary polis that connects supranational institutions much more closely to regions, localities, communities and neighbourhoods. Most of all, the Union requires a much greater sense of a common demos with a mutual ethos and telos.

<sup>2</sup> See Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 83-84, 145, 212-215, 328-332.

market, but essentially about what we would call civil society. I am referring here to ‘civil society’ in a much more fundamental sense than the mere conjunction of NGOs and the third sector (as it has now come to be known). By no means do I wish to belittle NGOs and the third sector, but it is clear that that is what civil society is now chiefly about.<sup>3</sup> Of course, civil society is about the freedom of association around intermediary institutions. The reason why discourse on these matters this is not purely social-scientific discourse (contrary to what Neil Turnbull will have us believe), but part of a theological argument has to do with that which upholds this freedom of association around such institutions, namely, the Church. The Church was the first institution to guarantee this free space over and against rulers, including the absolute rulers in antiquity, whether in Ancient Egypt or Ancient China. There was no difference between rule and people, the ruler defined the people, the territory, and the state. With Judaism and Christianity, we witness the emergence of this free space with the prophets who hold the kings to righteousness. We witness the Church essentially providing a counter balance to the state. This is the legacy of which the EU is a very, very late and of course vastly imperfect expression. Ultimately, the argument we are trying to make in the *Politics of Virtue* is that Europe is best thought of as a community of culture, because that is ultimately what binds Europeans together above and beyond territorial borders or any kind of trade relations; it is those cultural ties that define us *as* Europeans.

Of course that goes for countries well beyond the confines of the EU, which is why ideally, what Europe *should* become is essentially a Europe that expresses a Constantinian vision which is inclusive of the whole of Europe, not just the Carolingian Europe of France, Germany, and the Benelux. A Constantinian vision which not only includes Britain and Ireland, but also stretches as far as

---

<sup>3</sup> In part, because a denuded civil society is more congenial to the expression of the fusion of the two apparently opposed liberal ‘revolutions’ (of the cosmopolitan left on the one hand and the conservative right on the other), see Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 15.

---

Ukraine and Russia.<sup>4</sup> Of course, that's not available in the immediate state of European politics; it may take two, three, or even four generations. Nevertheless, if the EU ultimately wants to survive, it needs to recover its cultural vision. It cannot carry on with business as usual, passing rules and regulations that are very abstract and very remote from people's concerns; it cannot carry on dictating to countries saying 'We know what democracy is, therefore implement our model of democracy'; it cannot insist on abstract human rights. It really needs to reflect on and enhance the cultural bonds that are there, even if they are themselves imperfect and—as Philip Goodchild has pointed out—partly destroyed by capitalism and partly by an aggressive form of liberalism. The EU needs to recover this self-conception as a community of culture. What ultimately brought such a community about historically, and what can help it flourish once again, is the Church. The Church invested in public life, the Church invested in the economy, in culture and in education; in society. Without the Church there is no way in which Europe can really thrive. The Church is associated with other institutions (or rather it is related to institutions, since the Church is not an institution but a body) and in some sense is the association of all associations. As such it also provides links with other faith communities. We should always bear in mind that many religious minorities in Europe feel most comfortable not in an aggressively secular Europe, which denies their own religious identity, but rather in a Europe that upholds its own Christians and expresses a Christian outlook and enables other communities to have their own sense of the sacred respected

---

<sup>4</sup> Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 350; this would introduce the

novel possibility of Britain herself being the most commanding continental power because she would then pursue the ancient Constantinian vision of a pan-European polity ideally to be extended eastwards. This vision differs markedly from the restoration of the ancient Carolingian unity of France and Germany in the West, which at present faces its most serious intellectual and political challenge since 1939—the migration crisis, the Eurozone crisis, the influx of ISIS fighters, a global economic slowdown, Russia's provocations against Scandinavia and Eastern Europe and the corporate scandals of banks and car companies.

more publicly because it respects, as it were, its own sacred. An aggressively secular Europe simply has no future, not for Christians, not for Jews, not for Muslims, not for anyone. The argument that we are trying to make is that you actually need Christianity in order to uphold a genuine form of pluralism – not a formalistic pluralism of rights or contracts, but a substantive pluralism which ensures that people feel they are respected in their own relational identity.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. THE NEO-MEDIEVAL VISION IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

**JOHN MILBANK:** What is needed is something intermediate between nations as well as something like the UN. To some degree there exists a South American union; we need this also in Africa and so on. Adrian and I are also arguing for something which the 1945 Labour government were originally aiming at, though they had to give it up in the face of the Cold War, and that was to have a link between Europe and what was then still the British Empire (which then quickly became the British Commonwealth), in other words linking former dominions

---

<sup>5</sup> Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 80; this has its precedent in Britain's historical radicalism:

traditions of courage, commitment, loyalty and leadership shaped the workers' movement in Britain, France and then elsewhere, in resisting the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution. Against the forces of the increasingly free market and the increasingly centralised state, British workers set up burial societies to honour their dead, and created cooperatives and mutuals to honour their communities and the places that they inhabited. They forged ties among Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, other Nonconformists, Evangelicals and Jews that gave rise to an almost unique internationalist movement of patriots who honoured their country, its constitutional legacy, literary culture and singularly long history of political unity and organic development. This radical traditionalism transcends reactionary nostalgia whose fatalism is just as misguided as the progressive utopianism of both state communism and market capitalism. In keeping with the oldest socialist traditions in Britain and France, and with an echo of Radical Toryism reaching back to Cobbett, Wesley and Dr Johnson, post-liberals reject both these positions in favour of the endless creative reshaping of traditional prescriptions and the reforming of habits, which can seriously and drastically transform, beyond the illusory reach and damaging iconoclasm of revolutions.

into the European project as well to try to create networks of trade, for example, as well as NATO security situations. This would definitely be part of our vision, so when we talk about the Commonwealth Principle we mean something that can be extended and the EU is the big test and in a way so far it has worked. For all its terrible failings, it has worked remarkably well, though it is now facing a severe crisis. Part of this crisis concerns the national question; 'how do you fit in the reality of national identities?' Notwithstanding the extent to which we see them as having negative features, they constitute very powerful realities and I think that the trouble is the gulf between them. There are no European newspapers; there is no European television; there is a lack of a European conversation if you like, it is too opaque a thing even amongst intellectuals. Maybe churches are in a unique position to start developing that, because there is more inter-European interaction between Christians and theologians than there is amongst other communities. Even the level of knowledge in Britain of what goes on in French intellectual or cultural life is minimal, and this is a shocking situation. So how can people feel European if they don't feel like they are part of a European conversation and exchange, that goes beyond just food and travel?<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, we need to be able to articulate this European identity without it leading to the sense that it is violating peoples' immediate national identities. I know that this is a very difficult thing to achieve, but I think that it is one of the biggest vacuums in Europe. This is what makes people have no sense of self-expression when they are electing to the European Parliament; the fact that there are no European debates, just a series of national debates.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Note that this surface of inter-European interaction corresponds to the thin conception of English identity described in *Theology and International Relations Beyond Liberalism*. Because the main problem described here refers to the gulf *between* nations, the lack of thick community at the European level problematises the articulation of a thick national self-conception, which, in accordance with the Burkean thesis, is irreducibly European.

<sup>7</sup> Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 363: 'For these reasons, the European Union should create a parliamentary system of bicameralism—with a lower house representing the people and an upper house representing cities, regions, nations, professions and faith communities'.

To clarify, we are not advocating a return to any earlier form of political organisation. If this impression is conveyed, particularly in the context of wishing to articulate a neo-Constantinian vision, it is susceptible to the apparent danger of backsliding into something unwanted and repressive. I say that this is a merely apparent danger in part because totalitarianism is a specifically modern phenomenon, and it is totalitarianism that seems to be the perennial danger for some. In so far as our project is post-modern, it is continuous with the post-modern accusation that there are features of modernity which now seem out of date, and this suggests something neo-medieval—but only in certain respects. It does not involve at all going back to crucial aspects of the Middle Ages. What it does involve is something very specific, namely the recognition that we seem to have gone beyond this post-Westphalian era of the nation-state. Consequently, international formations once again have assumed and must continue to assume a certain paramountcy so that in contradistinction to the modern account of sovereignty we have a rather more pluralistic model. This is why the Middle Ages become relevant, simply because they had a more pluralistic way of thinking about rule. Moreover, there is a sense in which the Catholic legacy has always favoured more pluralistic forms of sovereignty, which in a way allows the primacy of the spiritual, in the phrase of Jacques Maritain. What then dominates normatively, is not a political force but rather a cultural *focus* of unity such as the Pope. In many ways there is a sort of tendency now towards Empire and Caesarism; we have to deal with the forces leading to that, but the valid concerns need to be bent in a much more benign direction. But I suppose the whole force of our book is that we cannot now rely on liberal democracy as we know it, it needs a mutation.

#### 4. POST-LIBERALISM

**ADRIAN PABST:** There are a number of corrective directions vis-à-vis liberal democracy, in which we can approach this mutation. It seems clear to us that liberal democracy focused excessively on procedure, excessively on formalism, on formal rights, entitlements, and so on. It hasn't properly elaborated what sort of content or substance can give meaning to that. It's not that we want to abolish rights or contracts—that would be absurd—it's that we have seen an inversion of primacy, an inversion of priorities in our political discourse. Rather than talking about more substantial things like the common good, virtue, or honour, we have increasingly talked about ground rules of fairness (Rawls) and have forgotten that no society can work on that level, because it is too abstract for society. We don't all go behind the veil of ignorance to decide what a fair society must look like; it just doesn't work. This is a form of Kantian transcendentalism that as we all know works neither philosophically nor politically. The question then, is how can we have a greater balance between rights and contracts (which we all need in order to have a society, especially a complex one) on the one hand, and make proper space for things like the common good on the other? The common good is not an aggregation, the common good entails all sorts of irreducibly relational goods which we all have in common. Education, for instance, is a supremely relational good. Why? Because we are not all autodidacts; some of us might be for some things but there are always exceptions. Friendship is probably the most immaterial of all relational goods, but these goods are clearly also material; education, transport, health, these are all relational goods, viz., goods you can't have just on your own. But we don't have a discourse for the expression of relational goods as such, we only have the language of private and public goods, and we tend to completely miss out everything in between. So private goods become just things we have for immediate gratification and public goods are centrally determined and dictated things that we all have to have. Therefore we have to ask: how can we bring back, in a renewed and non-absolutist way, the



notion of the common good? That *is* where the debate is now, because we know, for instance, from business, that regulation will only get you so far. People who are criminal will always be a step ahead of any regulation you can come up with. So the real move is not to try to have better regulation, or more regulation, *ad infinitum*, but to try and really encourage, really incentivise and reward better behaviour, virtuous behaviour. That's what we need to talk about, not endless rules, nor indeed endless anarchy and how to cope with the consequences of it – neither will work. In this sense, our project is about the content or even spiritual substance of politics as an art of spiritual and embodied human creatures. If it seems similar to the Russian *sobornost*, that's because it is.

**JOHN MILBANK:** Yes, and we would like to make it clear that this notion of spiritual co-operation and relationality is closely tied to the question of Europe because if we are not Europeans we are absolutely nothing. I think it is evident that it is possible, within both the Church and theology, to have this conversation and this sharing. I don't think that it's the Church is the only body that is capable of eventuating this, but I do think that the Church's contributions are particularly congenial to such a conversation. The challenge then, for the Church is in a way to achieve a *more* substantive unity, without blocking other people from it, and I think that it will require something very practical – an infusion of all sorts of cultural, economic, and social activities with some kind of Christian spirit. Making a Christian difference, as Michel de Certeau has talked about, will be crucial; entering into these discourses that are ineluctably secular but showing how Christianity can somehow make a difference, a difference that can become something attractive.<sup>8</sup> I think that some of the various Catholic lay movements like CNL, as well as other ones, have a very interesting way of belonging to this line of orthodox Christianity but with a strong integration of

---

<sup>8</sup> See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (London: University of California Press, 1984).

nature and grace reducing closed boundaries. They are open to other sources of genuine wisdom. They almost operate at two levels: a very intra-ecclesial level, but also an area where engagement may be found and encouraged when there are coincidences about vision and practice with other groupings. And so, it is overwhelmingly a matter of culture, and this perhaps makes it a greater difficulty for us compared to the generation of Maritain. You can't totally ignore this question of power and authority without becoming some sort of kitsch theatre that simply reflects essentially secular debates in a kind of theatrical, ritualised, side show. So we necessarily arrive at the problematic question of how we infuse power structures.

In addition, I think that some of the issues that may have admitted to clear positions for our generation have stopped being so clear and we can no longer assume that there will continue to be a secular natural law consensus around everything. We are living in a world where even the Guardian is noticing that, for instance, the Netherlands is systematically murdering handicapped people.<sup>9</sup> And so we can't be quite so sanguine about questions of power, I think. Above all, this requires as its end to help to shape new forms of community that help to create a more attractive way of life that people will simply want to join in on, and for that reason. In that sense, our project is not only not an authoritarian project, but it can't work as one. In fact, we need this basic cultural project if we are going to defeat these new atavistic forces. As for the sources of these concerns vis-à-vis the nation-state and cultural atavism, it might well be that our modern theories of sovereignty are just secularised versions of papal absolutism, but very clearly (as research has shown), papal absolutism was a late medieval

---

<sup>9</sup> See Xavier Symons, 'When it comes to euthanasia, not all slippery slope arguments are "bullshit"', *The Guardian* [Online] April 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/apr/13/when-it-comes-to-euthanasia-not-all-slippery-slope-arguments-are-bullshit> (accessed: 13 April 2017) and Allen, C., 'The label "incurable" is not a justification for ending a life', *The Guardian* [Online] May 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/may/31/incurable-not-justification-for-ending-life-netherlands-euthanasia> (accessed: 13 April 2017).

invention. Nevertheless, in the face of orthodox and Anglican anarchy, we desperately need the papacy. We need a mixed constitution in the Church that we have never properly developed, in other words we need the Pope in council.<sup>10</sup> What we've got is an over-centralised Catholic church and extreme anarchy in other churches. The real challenge for the papacy is to be really bold. Modern technology makes it possible for the pope to say 'I am the head of all Christians'. The Pope now has infinitely more respect worldwide, even from Protestants, than ever before, and this is the effect of modern media. Now, how can this be creatively built up on? I am personally a heretic about this matter, I think that all these meetings about doctrine and things are a total waste of time. Inter-ecclesial progress will only come practically through increasing inter-communion. One thing I like to say in relation to this is that we are already one Church. The Catholic church already offers communion in certain circumstances. So it is a lie that we are not already one Church. We need to start on that basis, not with the idea that we are striving towards it. So we need to somehow work out *this* better political model which will then start to reverse the secular model—if it is the case that the whole trouble is false-ecclesiology in the first place.

## 5. THE CHURCH

**ADRIAN PABST:** I would also like to point out that what makes the Church unique and distinct from other institutions is precisely that it is not an institution but a living body; it's that it's all about personal rule.<sup>11</sup> In contradistinction to this, what we deal with today are all impersonal forms of rule: laws and contracts. But personal rule is something which people generally long for. Of

---

<sup>10</sup> See Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 205-245.

<sup>11</sup> Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, 207-208; 218-219.

course, you can take it to a very, very sinister extreme, in the form of fascism. But that is not to say that all forms of personal rule slide into that, you can have very virtuous forms of personal rule. And if you can offer a more virtuous form of personal rule, you can quite effortlessly appeal to this longing. That is where there is enormous potential politically—however we must at the same time recognise that the moment you institutionalise personal rule you get very problematic and often unexpected outcomes. The situation is not uncomplicated, but the fundamental difference of personal vs impersonal rule is crucially important if we are to move forward. Furthermore, what was historically novel and unique about Judaism and Christianity was precisely to articulate something people had never articulated before rather than to merely effect liberation from absolutism. When you look at, for instance, Ancient Egypt, the language of absolutism is of course anachronistic and we are projecting it back onto it, but as we know from the biblical stories, there is longing there for not just freedom *from* absolutism but also for a freedom *to* something positive that is there. This is not just something we invent later on, it is part of what it means to be human. Anthropology actually teaches us that most societies, even those that are, relatively speaking, more hierarchical rather than those that are more egalitarian, essentially function in accordance with this notion of mutual recognition.

**JOHN MILBANK:** And that is essentially why, as we say, the Church should reinvest in society, the economy, and politics in a plural way; not by dictating to people because that is never going to work, but by trying to form new bonds, new ties that can give people agency. I think a lot of this is about agency about this longing towards something positive, towards the ability to associate freely. A lot of people feel that they have essentially no agency and if the Church can give them both some space and some tools to regain a sense of agency, this would itself be a great victory. But I think that really is where the conversation ought to be at: to try and think of forms of communal, collective agency that aren't linked to just the state or are only limited to a global economy where very few of us

have genuine freedom of opportunity or equality of opportunity. It is essentially about a form of empowerment, not the trivial empowerment of consumer choice, but the empowerment of an agency for the pursuit of one's talents which allows one's inclinations to flourish. Consequently, it has to do with the support of institutions ultimately upheld by the Church. That's what we are gesturing towards.