

John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, 24.95, pp. x & 406.

The British campaign to leave the European Union, and the campaign of Donald Trump for the Presidency of the United States, channeled and legitimised vicious elements in contemporary political culture: xenophobia, pride, lying, irrationality, hate, greed, anger, and naked ambition were much to the fore in the campaigns. And they have, sadly, remained to the fore in the public conversations which have followed. Without Boris Johnson, the British 'Leave' campaign would likely have lost and it is widely recognised that he joined the campaign not out of anti-EU or anti-migrant conviction but from ambition to replace David Cameron—his rival since school days at Eton—as Prime Minister. Donald Trump began a low key campaign for the Republican candidacy out of wounded pride, having on a number of occasions been told by other Republicans that he was not fit for the office of the Presidency. Written in the two years prior to these campaigns, Milbank and Pabst's historically and philosophically deep, and yet policy rich, book is prescient in its prediction of the collapse of the liberal *status quo* in the UK and the USA which is now evident in the populist turn of the globally 'left behind' against the perceived liberal cosmopolitan consensus in the Brexit and Trump victories.

The core of Milbank and Pabst's argument is that what they call 'liberalism'—which they define through an amalgam of Hobbes' account of the State as Leviathan restraining the war of all against all, Locke's individualist concept of self-ownership, and Hume and Smith's claim that economic exchanges governed by little more than the law of price turn individual vices into collective well being—is the origin of the current 'metacrisis' of capitalism, politics, culture, and

the nations. These metacrisis were deferred from the end of the last century by foolish post-imperial incursions—from the ‘Falklands War’, and the tragically ill-conceived ‘War on Terror’ to the disastrous intervention in Libya. But since 2008 the interconnected metacrisis of capitalism, democracy, culture, and globalism (and the metacrisis of nature which also finds subsidiary reference) are increasingly proving beyond the capacity of established political parties, or technocratic elites, to manage or resolve. These metacrisis may only be resolved, they argue, by abandoning the tired divisions of left and right, conservative and radical, and by reviving the classical and Christian accounts of moral and political virtue and rejecting the core claims of liberalism.

If it is the work of philosophy to repair the world, as Novalis argued, then this book is philosophy of a high order. Unlike Milbank’s earlier sole-authored works, this book is organised so that chapter-length genealogies of the metacrisis it describes—in politics, economics, culture and education, and international relations—are followed by policy chapters in which the authors lay out a remarkably detailed imaginary of what a ‘post-liberal’ politics would look like, albeit fleshed out primarily in relation to the economy, institutions, lands and people of the British Isles, and especially England. The four genealogies have a shared and broadly anti-modern *telos*—they trace the origins of the current crises from the English Tudor Reformation, through the Enlightenment, to modern State and Corporation directed technocratic rule. The four repairs are more fine-grained but they too share a pattern. They have in common the view that the purpose of being human is to be in communion with other souls and other beings, and that human society and its economic, political, and cultural institutions, ought to be ordered so as to enable persons to become more fully human through induction into constructive economic vocations and the contemplation of nature and of God. The purpose of human institutions is to educate citizens to perceive their transcendent and common goods, and to enable, but not coerce, citizens to work towards these goods in collectivities

which are governed by the virtues of 'economic justice and social reciprocity' which are more differentiated, more local, more genuinely plural, and smaller, than the organs of modern States, or superstates like the EU, or modern economic corporations.

Liberal politics has the 'constitution of individualism' and relies on a negative definition of what individuals want, which is freedom from coercion and from limits on their own choices from the needs of other persons or the plans of other agencies. Liberals—or adherents of liberalism which is the more common usage in this book—assume that there are no widely agreed common goods which societies ought to be ordered to foster other than the restraint of theft and civil violence. This conception of political individualism underwrote the rise of an over-bearing State which, particularly since 1945, took upon itself evermore works of charity and of cooperative planning and organisation. In medieval Europe ecclesially-shaped charity and cooperation had fostered the institutions of apprenticeships and trade guilds, common pastures, city governments, land-owner parliaments, law courts, monarchy, universities and schools, and smallholder farming. But secular liberalism gradually dissolves conceptions of common and transcendent goods towards which these institutions are originally directed. And the consequence is the neoliberal turn of political institutions and governance towards economic management in which the dominant publicly recognised values are merely those of capital, consumer goods, and money. Repair of the political effects of these tendencies is identified in the recovery of a Christian conception of political society as a parliament of souls, and of persons as political animals destined to political participation: it was these conceptions which gave rise, in the Christian Middle Ages, to the principal institutions which endure, albeit in more secular form, in British society, but which economic liberalism is dissolving. Repair of the resultant tendency of liberal politics to oscillate between a 'debased popular will' and an oligarchic and technocratic elite is identified in the proposed recovery of the plural and mixed constitution of

the England of the Elizabethan Settlement when governance was exercised in a multiplicity of corporate, personal and societal forms, from city guildhalls to the monarchy. In a Romantic reading of that pre-reformation world, Milbank and Pabst underwrite, surprisingly uncritically, the unique fusion of the ancient order of Melchizedek, from which sacred lineage the English coronation service still traces the authority of the monarch, with the parish system of the Church of England, the Houses of Parliament, the judiciary, and the local government of cities and shires.

The critique of economic liberalism lies at the centre of the book and begins from the recognition that capitalism imposes a secular logic of commodification which desacralises both human life and nature. Drawing on Karl Polanyi, Milbank and Pabst argue that the original turn in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain of persons into wage labour, and of land into rental value, and the resultant disembedding of productive exchange from pre-modern communities and gift-exchange, is the deep cultural origin of the metacrisis of the twentieth-first century which were heralded by the 2008 financial crash. The global financial crisis was caused by debt being used to sustain economic distribution, since globalisation had out-sourced much industrial waged employment, and financialisation had commoditised infrastructure, land and most public services. The transition of the economy from one based on land and labour into a speculative economy sees wealth increasingly abstracted from really existing communities of persons, or land areas, and creates a newly disordered capitalism in which artificial scarcities are created. These scarcities—for example the scarcity of employment in continental Europe or of housing in Britain since the financial crash—reflect the needs of finance capital which a technocratic elite decided anti-democratically, should predominate over real human need, causing the populist backlash. The repair of neoliberal economism is found in a bringing together of Bruni and Zamagni's account of an Italian-style 'civil economy' with Catholic Social Teaching and especially the latter's emphasis on social justice

and the common good. The chapter on civil economy is in policy terms the strongest in the book and contains detailed propositions on more ethical approaches to corporate governance, on the recovery of human making as economic vocation, on the benefits of regional, cooperative manufacturing and food production, on the restraint of debt and the sharing of risk, on the 'wise use' of land, and more broadly on the return of an ethical economy.

The third genealogy and policy area the book addresses is cultural liberalism. The broadest of the book's four themes, this chapter ranges widely from libertarianism and political correctness to gender-shifting and the scientific re-engineering of life, including of children. Here the core theological claim of the book is more fully elaborated, which is that the finest fruits of Western humanism, and the resources for its future repair, lie in Christian spirituality and sacramental communion. Secular liberalism is ultimately destructive of humanism, and especially of popular political agency, because of its 'refusal to acknowledge the reality of the soul and the ontologically irreducible relation between the realm of the psychic and the realm of the political' (275). Human life is directed towards its true ends—the parliament of souls, the beautifying of nature and the city through benign production, and the love of transcendent goodness and God—through education. And the debasement of education as the business-oriented, and increasingly business-run, shaping of persons to be resources for and agents in market transactions is among the deepest of all denigrations of Christian humanism currently being realised in what the authors call 'Anglosaxondom'. The cultural repair involves the 're-forming' of formation through a range of recovered approaches and organisational forms including: the abolition of national curricular and a return of power in the classroom to teachers; re-emphasis on British cultural heritage and Christian history in schools; a genuine attempt to reinstitute apprenticeships for crafts and trades on the German model; the reduction in the number of universities and the re-inauguration of other tertiary institutions to promote and sustain technical,

skilled and craft work linked with a renewal of guild-governance of such work; the restoration of genuine self-governance to universities and the abolition of the top-down, debt funded, market-oriented reorganisation of Higher Education in Britain that threatens its charitable origins and purpose, and enhancement of the role of faith schools.

The final theme which is called the 'metacrisis of the nations' covers an even larger terrain than the others, including the history of empire, the origins and travails of national sovereignty, and the emergence of globalisation and its discontents as revealed by Brexit. These last chapters are briefer than what has gone before and more controversial. Empire, and especially its British form, is treated in an uncritical way. But few who have dwelled for any length of time in a former British colonial possession would take the view that Britain governed its empire with a view to advancing a global common good rather than its own interests. It is true that the British permitted churches and missions to build more schools and hospitals than the Dutch or the Portuguese. But the destruction of India's pre-colonial textile economy and the pre-independence violent partition of India and Pakistan; the imperially-underwritten theft of tribal lands by white settlers in Africa and the subsequent division of Africa across tribal boundaries into a number of near-ungovernable 'national' terrains; the long war against independence in Malaya—all these and many more sagas underwrite the predominance of economic over civilising missions in the British Empire. And it is precisely the continuing flows of refugees from ungovernable nations and colonially-decimated economies that is a major focus of resentment among the many British people who, finding themselves left behind by the imperiousness of remote global economic agencies in their own regions, voted in the EU Referendum to 'take back control' of national borders, and re-assert political sovereignty over super-state power, by leaving the European Union. It may be, as Milbank and Pabst argue, that the British Commonwealth, and global networks of cities and regions, represent alternatives to more established

attempts to generate intercommunion and agreement between nations, including most influentially cross-border trade, and the United Nations. However a more powerful exemplar of a true globalism is not the remnants of British Empire, or informal networks of city mayors, but the Roman Catholic Church, which remains the largest provider of schools, hospitals and development aid in Africa to this day, and whose internationalism was at least as much the progenitor of currently existing forms of capitalism and globalism as those liberal-shaped Anglo-institutions and practices which are, rightly, traced in this book to Britain's Tudor Reformation.

In a book of such extraordinary breadth and vision, it is inevitable that in parts its authors will make judgments with which others may strongly disagree. Perhaps the greatest likely source of such disagreement is not over empire however but over the definition of liberalism itself. Anglo-Saxon liberalism carries a huge amount of weight in the narration of the four metacrisis the book describes, and at times it seems as if the responsibilities are just too great even for such intellectual giants as Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Smith. But it is precisely in its historical depth and philosophical vision that the authors pull off a rare feat in the human sciences, which is to combine an interdisciplinary meta-analysis, of the metacrisis which currently engulf the West, and a sustained and practical imaginary of potential civilisational, ethical, and spiritual pathways out of them. This book is not only an analysis of metacrisis but a set of meta-policy proposals which are both remarkably practical and real-world in their form and character while at the same time being situated in a rich and fruitful fusion of classical humanism and Christian political theology.

In Britain, France, and the United States a range of influential post-liberal analyses of the malaise of secularism and capitalism, and the rise of Islamism and populism, have been published, from Gauchet and Manent to Stiegler and Pickety. But none of these treatments has anything like the genealogical breadth

and policy relevance of *The Politics of Virtue*. In this extraordinary book Milbank and Pabst therefore perform a powerful service to British theology. Once the queen of the sciences, theology and the study of religion have been relegated to the lower ranks of the third division—the increasingly under-funded humanities—in most British universities. But the eclipse of theology and the history of religion renders academia peculiarly maladroit at diagnosing, let alone prescribing for, the metacrisis of late liberal modernity. In *The Politics of Virtue* theology again finds its rightful place among the human and social sciences, of which it was the progenitor, as the most practical of disciplines.

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