

# **One Nation but Two Cities**

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Christianity and the Conservative Party

## About the author

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# Series foreword

The Bible speaks to politics because God is interested in government – the right public ordering of our relational priorities. But what about party politics? Political parties are often tribal. Commanding our loyalty, they can often be places that both express and suppress religious identity. Whether we like it or not, political parties dominate politics in the UK and are set to do so for the foreseeable future. As collegiate enterprises, they have traditionally provided a political focus for joining broad sets of ideas around a unifying theme or common vision for society. In recent years, as the inspiration of great political ideals has waned, they have become more complex and even contradictory vehicles for representation. This offers new challenges and opportunities for Christian engagement in politics.

This is one of three publications – extended essays – representing the first phase of the *Partisan* project – a developing resource on Christianity and British political parties initiated and funded by the Bible Society, and produced and delivered in partnership with the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE). The aim of the project is to stimulate new and robust Christian political reflection within British political parties. It has been launched at a paradoxical time.

Presently, the public role of religion in the UK is both expanding and deepening. At the same time, it is attracting fierce criticism from increasingly assertive secularists. This makes the need for fresh insight on how Christianity relates to British parties an urgent priority.

The first phase of the project concentrates on the three largest parties – Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat – but our hope is that a later phase will engage other parties as well, and from all four nations of the UK. This phase has developed with the invaluable help of the three Christian party political groups within the parties concerned – the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF), the Christian Socialist Movement (CSM) and the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum (LDCF). Special thanks are due to Elizabeth Berridge (CCF), Andy Flanagan (CSM), and Zoe Dixon (LDCF). We are immensely grateful for their enthusiasm for the project, for their advice as it took shape, and for their assistance in disseminating these first fruits. We should make it clear, however, that while these three organisations generously offered their moral and practical support for the preparation of these essays, the opinions expressed in them are the authors' alone and do not represent the official

stances of the organisations concerned nor of the parties to which they are affiliated (nor of the project's two institutional sponsors).

These essays are offered as a part of a conversation that has been going on for many years among party political Christians. As 'critical friends' of the parties, the authors were each asked to address the role of Christianity within them. We commissioned Joshua Hordern, Paul Bickley and Stephen Backhouse to engage – appreciatively but frankly – with the history, theology and broad policy orientations of the party traditions to which they were assigned. We invited them to identify the characteristic historical and contemporary 'gifts' given by the Christian faith to the party tradition in question, but also to employ insights from Christian political theology to confront the party's vulnerabilities or Achilles' heels where they found them. Within those broad parameters the authors were given freedom to develop their arguments as they saw fit, with their own preferred emphases, and in their own distinctive idioms. Importantly, the books seek to be discursive, not definitive. Each offers a particular (theological) reading of the history and contemporary condition of the political party concerned, in recognition that there are, of course, other equally legitimate and necessary readings. We are very grateful to the authors for the intelligence and dedication with which they

rose to the demanding challenges of our commission.

Our hope is that the *Partisan* project will bring fresh theological depth, self-awareness, and critical potential to conversations already under way about the contribution of Christian faith to British party politics. The essays leave no doubt that Christianity has made notable – at times perhaps even decisive – contributions to the thinking and practice of the parties. At the same time, they proceed from the recognition that today these contributions are not only ignored by many, but also often resisted or derided by some voices within the parties. Among the latter are those who still subscribe to the discredited – yet surprisingly tenacious – social-scientific myth that modernisation necessarily (and rightly) brings with it the privatisation of religion and the secularisation of the public square. The *Partisan* project sets itself squarely against that myth and seeks to underline the legitimacy of a wide variety of faith-based contributions to political debate, within an open democratic forum in which robust political parties will continue to play an indispensable role.

No one involved in the project – least of all the authors themselves – pretends that these essays are anything more than one modest contribution to a debate that needs to take place at many levels and to involve a wide range of participants – and not only Christians. Yet, given the widespread

popular disillusionment with and disengagement from party politics – indeed from the whole political process – in recent years, the ‘convictional health’ of parties is of vital concern for our entire parliamentary democracy.

Everyone involved in this project would share the conviction that, as an ancient prophet warned another nation in crisis, ‘where there is no vision, the people perish’ (Proverbs 29.18, AV). We hope that these essays stimulate new thinking about the urgent need for, and the desirable contents of, new political visions shaped by a primary Christian identity and biblical worldview. We hope too that they will offer food for the journey for those already working within British political parties, and inspire others to consider entering the party political fray themselves as a constructive, honourable and missional arena of authentic Christian citizenship – for the common good of the whole nation.

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# Introduction

**As the 2010 UK general election approached, the Conservative Party was beginning to be perceived as a party which would govern in the interests of all. The country turned bluer on election night but not blue enough for an outright Conservative government. The coalition naturally raised questions about what the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats really believe. Could their deepest commitments coincide sufficiently to create that strong, stable and lasting government we heard so much about? In the midst of all this, renewed discussion about the nature of conservatism emerged.**

In particular, the 'Big Society' dimension of the campaign has received some sustained criticism. This theme had, in various pithy forms, permeated Cameron's leadership over the previous five years. Well ahead of the election, Cameron placed emphasis on the 'broken society', the 'welfare society' and 'social responsibility'. He enthused about volunteering and social justice. On his first day as party leader in 2005 he visited the East Side Young Leaders Academy with Iain Duncan Smith.<sup>1</sup> On 1st April 2010, he helped to launch the 'Big Society Network'.<sup>2</sup> And in an interview on 10th April 2010 with the Sunday Telegraph, he referred to the 1980s as a 'divisive' period, though he also acknowledged that Margaret Thatcher was 'on the right side of the argument'.<sup>3</sup> Some in the Party organised 'social action' projects in various constituencies. The Social Justice policy group was launched and, after the election, Iain Duncan Smith was not only given the crucial Department for

Work and Pensions but also cross-cabinet responsibility for implementing the social justice agenda. David Cameron's credentials as a 'One Nation' Conservative – concerned for the interests of all – will, of course, be tested by the work of government.

This testing is the responsibility of 'two cities' which exist in the United Kingdom. In the terms of the fifth century thinker, Augustine's, the first city, the city of God, is constituted solely by Christians, whom the apostle Paul calls citizens of 'the Jerusalem that is above' (Galatians 4.26) and whom Jesus likens to a 'city on a hill' which 'cannot be hidden' (Matthew 5.14).<sup>4</sup> How is this community to respond not only to David Cameron but also to the Conservative Party he leads and the diverse conservative tradition it represents? The second city, the earthly city, consists of all the people of the nation. This includes Christians who are understood as committed but pilgrim



residents. How might this one nation, the Conservative Party included, understand and assess British political conservatism? These two cities of our one nation are bound together in a common citizenship but distinguished by their attitude to the Trinitarian God made known in the person of Jesus Christ.

## Conservatism and political theology

This essay addresses these two cities in their distinctiveness and their commonality. In so doing, it seeks to contribute to the debate about the relationship between Christianity and the Conservative Party. Such a debate is already under way in the UK in a variety of settings. For example, the Conservative Christian Fellowship's recent *From Thatcher to Cameron: The Journey to Compassionate Conservatism* highlights, among other things, the golden thread of Christian social concern in the Conservative Party's heritage.<sup>5</sup>

However, there is room for further sustained, theological reflection on the past, present, and future of this relationship. The Conservative Party has never been an officially Christian party, but it has long been informed by various streams of Christian thought and practice. This essay is written as a suggestion that Conservatives can benefit greatly both from re-engaging with their historic Christian sources and from drawing on creative currents in contemporary political theology. The Party

is seeking to chart a future course in a demanding and complex new century. From a national and a global perspective, the future certainly does not seem secularised. From East Ham to India, from schooling to prison reform and from the UK's Black Majority Churches to the Church of England, God is very much back on the scene, if indeed he ever left it. Political parties will serve people better if they do not neglect this fact.

No single publication – certainly not one of this length – could offer a comprehensive analysis of all possible theological perspectives on the relationship between Christianity and Conservatism. Nonetheless, it is necessary to start somewhere. This essay is consciously informed by broadly Augustinian thinking. The choice of this theological approach does not in any way suggest that other theological traditions are less important. Instead, it is simply that the author has found this approach highly effective in shedding light on historic and contemporary trends in the Party. To avoid tedious repetition, Augustinian thinking will not be made explicit at every turn nor will it directly or explicitly inform every area or policy debate which is considered. But from a historical perspective, Augustinian trends and themes are found in some who are often cited as leading conservative thinkers such as Burke and Salisbury. In the twentieth century, Lord Hailsham (Quintin Hogg) and Lord Griffiths explicitly affirmed Augustinian thinking in different ways.<sup>6</sup>

Lord Hailsham's neat summary was that the 'Civitas dei [the city of God] is a voluntary association and we do not all belong to it... [but], like the unitary family, the Civitas terrena [the earthly city] is a natural society',<sup>7</sup> one which we do not choose and which is given to us as creatures. Distinctions between the political city and the family are key and will be developed in what follows. The key concept to grasp is that this Augustinian thinking has a long pedigree in Western civilisation and has arguably emerged, most recently, in ideas relating to the 'Big Society'.

Many of Augustinianism's conclusions can be supported by those of other theological beliefs or none. Nonetheless, a demonstration of one theological approach's usefulness will hopefully act as an invitation to others. Moreover, other theological approaches such as Thomism and Reformed thinking could be equally insightful. It is hoped that this publication might stimulate those with other theological orientations to offer their own contributions to the debate.

Whichever way one does it, analysing the relationship between British political conservatism and Christianity means entering a conversation constituted by centuries of thought and practice. The conversation has at times assumed that the match between conservatism and Christianity sits so deep within British national life that it is unnecessary to

articulate its significance. But there have also been substantial challenges to this comfortable marriage. A sceptical and sometimes anti-religious tradition of conservatism has recommended various degrees of separation. Non-conservative but deeply Christian voices have urged divorce.

So our situation in 2010 is not new. There are Christians who are political conservatives, there are political conservatives who are not Christians and there are Christians who are not political conservatives. However, recent trends towards secularisation and religious diversification have changed the demeanour of the United Kingdom and the Conservative Party. Gone are the days when the Church of England was regarded as the Conservative Party at prayer. The membership of the Conservative Party is less aligned with religious faith – let alone established Anglican Christian expression – than a hundred or even thirty years ago. Moreover, a wider range of religious faiths has entered both UK national life and the Conservative Party, from Islam to Pentecostalism to Roman Catholicism.

This book will assess British political conservatism and the Conservative Party from the perspective of Christian 'political theology' – that is, an understanding of politics guided and enriched by doctrinal, Scriptural, conceptual and concrete resources of Christian faith. In what follows, Augustinian political theology will be

used to examine key themes of British conservatism. As already noted, this is presented as one contribution to the debate about how Christianity might inform the Conservative Party. It is not offered as the 'authorised version' of the conservative tradition. A range of other theological approaches have been and could be taken.

Amidst the UK's changing patterns of thought and life, such an enterprise will attract a range of responses. In particular I hope that this book, and its companion volumes on the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, will stimulate further discussion on how Christian political theology interacts with politics. An open, free and sympathetically critical discussion on these matters seems essential if we are to continue to operate as a tolerant, welcoming and 'big' society which is so unafraid of big ideas that we are vigilant in criticising bad ones wherever they arise.

## Questions of conservation and acts of judgement

The shape of this book reflects the shape of conservatism. Part One consists of an illustrative history of British conservatism and the Conservative Party. This necessarily brief and incomplete survey will illuminate several important themes but is obviously not exhaustive. Part Two will examine major concepts which constitute conservative thought and practice, weaving contemporary policy discussion into the analysis and concluding

with a brief consideration of the current direction of the Conservative Party. To begin, continue and end with concrete history is natural for traditional or tradition-orientated conservatives. History interests them because it focuses conversation on a basic question, namely what they should conserve. They want to discover what aspects of their nation's tradition should be treasured, continued and developed. They avoid abstraction as much as possible and look instead for features of their own past experience which should be maintained or retrieved in present and future. But beyond this *what* question, such conservatives want to know *how* and ultimately *why* they should conserve whatever it is they decide that they value. These are the 'questions of conservation' and this is what political wisdom is for such conservatives, retrieving, maintaining and developing – sometimes innovatively – features of life, knowing how and why one is doing so.

The 'why' question of conservation points to a significant issue. For it implies that something is at least perceived to be good and that this goodness functions as a reason for its conservation. This immediately raises the question of rival accounts of the good existing within a single political society. One group will believe something is good in its current condition; others will wish to change it; still others will want to do away with it entirely. Accordingly, within a political party, for example, a measure of agreement about the goodness of a certain

range of goods will be important. From a theological perspective, there are a number of ways of characterising what is good. An Augustinian account will be given below in the first section of Part Two.

So, asking the 'questions of conservation' implies that conservatives are always open to making changes. To decide what, why and how to conserve is also to decide what can and should change. Conservatives make judgements about what they conserve and that process of judgement necessarily entails that some things are not conserved. The idea of political 'judgement' will be important and requires explanation. The theological ethicist Oliver O'Donovan helpfully defines political judgement as an 'act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context.' Note especially that it is the preceding act or existing state of affairs which is to be judged. Attention is focused on the past and present – judgement is, therefore, retrospective since the present is always becoming the past. Note too that the judgement will approve some things and disapprove others, conserving the former and not the latter. Therefore, judgement is also prospective, focused on the future – it is a new public context which is established, in intelligible relation to the old but nonetheless definitely new. For example, the British parliament's decision to extend the franchise in the Reform Act of 1832 was a judgement that conserved parts of

the old system as good but not others. Changes were brought in which were judged good and better than what was previously in existence. Moreover, as a political judgement, the Act was not just an opinion but actually effected what it pronounced, thereby establishing a new public context.

The fact that this Act faced opposition from 'conservative' quarters shows that conservatism is not always willing to make substantial changes. However, inasmuch as it can judge against conserving major features of a tradition, conservatism can make radical judgments. The desire to conserve is compatible with all manner of change so long as change involves some measure of continuity.<sup>8</sup> Innovation is essential to a conservatism which addresses contemporary challenges. And yet even this innovation will involve some kind of improvisation or variation of what has gone before. As the Teacher of Ecclesiastes taught us, 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Ecclesiastes 1.9). What is needed at each stage of conservation is judgement. This is not judgementalism – a harsh condemnation which lacks humanity and compassion. No, this is judgement which, following an account of the good, distinguishes between what it is right to conserve and what it is wrong to conserve, where to innovate, how to do so and why. In government, this conservative practice of judgement effects what it pronounces and gives reasons which are publicly intelligible.

Now this whole approach may seem hopelessly traditionalist or nostalgic. Someone might say, 'Surely the Conservatives believe, first and last, in the free market? And the free market has no instinctive respect for the past but operates by creative destruction. So what's all this talk about conservation?' This is indeed a widespread perception of the Conservative Party. The grain of truth in it is found in those who combine neo-liberal economic thinking with a neo-liberal social agenda. But the historical question of the nature of conservatism and the Conservative Party shows a much more complex picture. Conservatism has often pondered the significance of economic activity in relation to the social fabric. Scratch beneath the surface and most conservatives will say that the meaning of markets is not found within markets themselves. The idea of an omnipotent, omniscient and omniscipotent free market is not a necessary nor even a very prevalent dogma of the Conservative Party or conservatism. Even those who believe that the market can answer a wide range of national questions believe that the market is an aspect of conservation, a daily plebiscite deciding on what should be conserved, rather than a daily revolution, overturning all established valuations. Keith Joseph, a key player in the Thatcherite period, was strongly committed to the free market. But he was equally passionate both about what would now be called the 'welfare society' and about the state being an effective safety net. As Joseph said on

one occasion, 'we, who want to preserve a free economy, will select policies that can accommodate or care for dependent people in such a way as will not punish or destroy independence.'<sup>9</sup>

But instead of primarily defending conservatism from accusations of market idolatry, I will argue more positively that continually asking and answering the questions of conservation – 'what' to conserve (and what to change), 'why' and 'how' – is the heart of a wise conservatism. Just as a person's heart must keep pumping so these questions must keep on being asked and answered or else conservatism will seize up and die. Vigour for conservatism's heart comes from its major arteries. These arteries are too many for this short book. The ones principally considered in Part II are trust, the relation between state, society and religion, and the nature of economic activity and business.

As we now turn to consider the history of British conservatism and the Conservative Party, my argument will not be simply historical or descriptive. Instead, I will be drawing illustrations from history to argue that conservatism is very far from being a stale ideology. Instead, it can be a compelling and attractive source of life-enriching, dynamic activity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> eyla.org.uk; see 'Young people and crime', a speech at the Centre for Social Justice, 10 July 2006 in Cameron, D., *Social Responsibility: The Big Idea for Britain's Future*, The Conservative Party, 2007

<sup>2</sup> thebiggsociety.co.uk

<sup>3</sup> telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoptics/politics/david-cameron/7575489/General-Election-2010-David-Cameron-on-his-first-week-of-campaigning.html

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, esp. 14.28–15.4

<sup>5</sup> Carter, K. (ed.), *From Thatcher to Cameron: The Journey to Compassionate Conservatism*, Biteback,

2010, which collects the annual Conservative Christian Fellowship Wilberforce Addresses 1997–2009.

<sup>6</sup> Hailsham of Marylebone, 'The Two Cities', Griffiths, B., 'The Conservative Quadrilateral' in Alison and Edwards (ed.), *Christianity and Conservatism*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1990. See also, Hogg, Q., *The Case for Conservatism*, Penguin, 1947

<sup>7</sup> Hailsham of Marylebone, 'The Two Cities', 23

<sup>8</sup> Scruton, R., *The Meaning of Conservatism*, MacMillan, 1984, 22ff for a discussion of this theme.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph, K., 'The Humanity of Capitalism' in *Stranded on the Middle Ground*, Centre for Policy Studies, 1976, 71

# Part I: British political conservatism





# An illustrative history from John Wycliffe to David Willetts

## Time and terminology

This illustrative history selects periods and themes which especially bring to the fore the relation between Christianity and the Conservative Party. Along the way I also suggest lessons from that history for today. Two preliminary observations are necessary to make sense of this history.

First, a point about time. British conservatism did not begin with a particular day, year, book, idea or person. There was no revolution. There was no manifesto. There was no 'great leader'. So this journey through British history will not involve a story of triumphant progress within either Britain or British conservatism. For conservatives have largely been sceptical of the idea of inevitable, positive progress in which the present is always riding the crest of the wave of history. There have, of course, been identifiable times of learning. Obvious examples are the Conservative Party's increased respect for people of different races and increased understanding of single parenting. But such developments should not suggest a unending upwards movement from one degree of glory to

the next. Christians may rightly say that our 'salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed'. (Romans 13.11) Political conservatives – strictly as political conservatives – have (or should have!) no such expectation about their political tradition, their nation or history itself. The same lesson in reverse applies to the idea that things were always better in the past. From the point of view of theology, this reverse progressivism is equally inadmissible since it similarly dethrones the coming Kingdom of God in favour of a chequered and sectional period of human history. Accordingly, this historical journey through British conservatism will serve to *illustrate* it rather than vindicate it. Indeed, for the account to be properly conservative, let

alone Christian, a sharply critical approach to the tradition will sometimes be necessary.

Moreover, as an *illustrative* history this will be a sketch of conservative concerns and attitudes rather than a detailed analysis.<sup>1</sup> The issue is not whether any particular conservative was a Christian, as if that proved anything. Rather, the goal is to describe key arteries of conservative thought and practice and then assess them in light of Christian political theology in the second section of this book.

Second, two points about the potentially confusing terms 'conservative', 'Conservative party' and 'Tory'.

(i) First, 'conservatism' is not the same as the Conservative Party. For conservatism, as a cast of mind, pre-existed the political party in many different times and cultures and exists in the UK today outside the party.

(ii) Many political contests from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries were between 'Tories' and 'Whigs'. These terms have no straightforward reference to our modern 'Right' and 'Left' or even 'Conservative' and 'Liberal'. Political parties were not so organised until the formation of the Conservative Party in the 1830s. There were more or less loose groupings taking similar stances on various issues. Roughly speaking, the Tories largely represented the landed interest, greater power for the

monarch and closer affiliation with the Jacobite (Roman Catholic friendly) royal line. The Whigs, by contrast, argued in the main for free trade, a monarchy subject to parliament and a distinctly Protestant settlement. Edmund Burke, for example, was a Whig and yet is often named as the key conservative figure of the eighteenth century. To avoid seeming to equate the 'Tories' with the 'Conservative Party', we will only rarely use the terms 'Whig' or 'Tory' in what follows. In the main, we will stick to the term 'conservative' (small 'c') for the broader tradition or cast of mind but 'Conservative' (big 'C') for the organised political party. This usage, though technically anachronistic until the 1830s when the Conservative Party as such was born, will be adequate for our purposes.

## Political 'conservatism' before the Conservative Party

### *Wycliffe and Burke*

With all this said, the MP and political thinker *Edmund Burke* (1729–1797) is a helpful entry point. Burke is best known for his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, where he denounced the revolutionaries' plans for a new political order which failed to reflect the nature of both government and humanity or map adequately onto past, current or future human life. Abstract ideas of political perfection, far from benefiting a nation, lead it away from a complex, chequered tradition and into strange heights of political fantasy and terrible

depths of bloodshed. Sceptical of such bids for perfect human understanding, Burke trusted instead in the collective wisdom of a people's tradition as a better guide to practical action. Such a position by no means undermines an affirmation of the dignity of the individual but rather takes a sober view of human fallenness. Moreover, by uniting multiple individuals' wisdom over time, individual human life, in its enterprise, understanding and follies, is recognised.

Collective knowledge is the 'historically accumulated political wisdom of the community, as embodied in its customs and institutions.'<sup>2</sup> Knowing ourselves and understanding how to live involves conserving and retrieving wisdom, thereby judging what should be done in light of the experience of the past. The imperfection of all human understanding, especially of individuals in the contemporary moment, is a constantly recurring conservative theme. Whether or not one accepts theological explanations for this imperfection, conservatives agree that people's intellectual and moral incapacities make them unable to design a good political plan from scratch. Instead, conservatives like Burke think it safer to consider the conservation and alteration of one's existing tradition – the 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions. In T.S. Eliot's words, 'to understand the society in which he lives must be to the interest of every conscious, thinking person.'<sup>3</sup>

Burke was operating downstream from the English and then British political settlements of the previous centuries – the Elizabethan settlement concerning, among other things, the relation of the Church of England and political authority (1559); the unification of the crowns of England and Scotland (1603); the re-establishment of the Crown's authority in parliament after the civil war (1660); the 'Glorious Revolution' whereby William and Mary came to the throne (1689); the act of settlement through which a Protestant succession was assured (1701); and the unification of the Scottish and English parliaments (1707). These changes were only intelligible within the preceding, organic, mixed constitution of a national church correlated to a monarchy, aristocracy and nascent democracy embodied respectively in the Crown, the Lords and the Commons.

Throughout these changes, the central, relatively stable institution was the monarchy. According to the influential constitutional thinker *John Wycliffe* (c1324–1384), this is for good theological reasons. For Wycliffe, authority descends from the Crown to fill the political and ecclesial dimensions of our national life. In more modern terms, the monarch is both head of state and supreme governor of the Church of England. As such, in Wycliffe's view, the monarchy was a true reflection of the two works of Christ in his general government of the world at large and in his special leadership of the

Christian faithful. The monarchy is a focal point from which national spiritual life and political institutions gain their intelligibility. It endows them with both confidence and humility – confidence because of the collective wisdom embodied in the monarchy; but humility precisely because of our dependence upon the past and, most basically, upon God, the source of wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

This Wycliffite tradition was present in Burke who comments that the Crown operates as a 'pledge of the stability and perpetuity of all the other members of our constitution.'<sup>5</sup> With the Crown there is social, political and ecclesial order. Without it, there is, as witnessed in France, only the gallows. Against the French revolutionaries, Burke is 'resolved to keep an established church, an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater.'<sup>6</sup> This is a vision of conservative order, rooted in the ordering power of the Crown as it derives authority from God. 'We fear God', says Burke, and so 'we look up in awe to our kings'.<sup>7</sup> There is an analogy from one to the other. Because political authority is derivative from the Christian God, anyone 'possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awefully impressed with an idea that they act in trust; and that they are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great master, author, and founder of society.'<sup>8</sup> In consequence the idea developed in England (and, in due course, Great Britain) that the

land – along with all its history – was held by the people *in trust* from God under the authority of the monarch. Here we gain our first insight into the great theme of trust which lies at the very heart of the questions of conservation. For to hold something in trust is precisely to be obliged to attend to its conservation.

### ***Two important Scots***

Burke's thought diffused through conservatism from the French revolution until well into the twentieth century. As the Union between Scotland and England became more established, two Scottish eighteenth century voices also made major contributions. The first is **David Hume** (1711–1776). This philosopher and religious sceptic's conservatism emerges in his commitment to social and political order and authority and his emphasis on social sympathy, rather than abstract theories. His religious scepticism gave birth to a stream of 'natural', non-Christian, conservative thought that continues to this day through such people as **David Willetts**, a leading contemporary Conservative MP and thinker. Hume's conservatism cautions against believing that Christianity is conservatism's only possible bedfellow. The temptation to identify any political ideology with Christianity must be resisted for the conservative reason that no political mindset or analysis could adequately represent the perfection of God's wisdom. Hume's scepticism also illuminates questions within conservatism and British

national life which have characterised the last two hundred years. The period's secularisation of public speech has made it difficult to articulate the significance of Britain's Christian heritage and decide whether the nation should consciously conserve at least some aspects of the multifaceted Christian heritage bequeathed to us. If so, what should we conserve, how and why? What reasons can be given in a context in which Christian language is frequently misunderstood?

Our second Scot is **Adam Smith** (1723–1790). The economic battle of his time was between 'mercantilism', which led to a protectionist policy, and free trade which Smith had propagated in his groundbreaking *The Wealth of Nations*. For Smith, mercantile theory was a fundamental misunderstanding of how societies and nations handle goods and money which confused amassing money with creating wealth. Specifically, it ignored the way that labour creates prosperity and that trade between nations can leave both sides better off. Those favouring mercantilism were largely rural landowners. They had strong vested interests in the retention of a protected market whereby they could sell their produce for a higher price due to the tariffs levied on all foreign imports. Those favouring free trade were largely convinced that mercantile thinking held Britain back from greater national prosperity and kept the price of food artificially high with deleterious effects for the poorer classes.

What weight these differing reasons held with the main protagonists of the argument is open to debate. But highlights of the contest included the thoroughgoing legislative reform of excise by **William Pitt the Younger** (1759–1806, Prime Minister, 1783–1801),<sup>9</sup> the resounding triumph for free trade thinking in the leadership of Lord Liverpool and then the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846 during the leadership of Conservative (big 'C') Prime Minister, Robert Peel.

Burke came to the same conclusions as Smith in his *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* where he declares that 'an indiscreet tampering with the trade of provisions is the most dangerous' of all things. And yet Burke also firmly believed that society was 'a partnership' between people not a congregation of individual consumers. But it was a partnership 'not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.'<sup>10</sup> In today's terms, he might frame climate change, the national debt and welfare reform in terms of how we are (or are not) failing in our partnership with our forebears and our yet unborn children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.<sup>11</sup>

Thus in Burke we see two themes united which have been common to conservatism ever since – on the one hand, a commitment to social fabric and established political

order; on the other, a commitment to free trade and free markets.

### ***Free trade and strong communities***

But can these two – free trade and strong intergenerational communities – be held together? Is the conservative commitment to conserving what is good in community and tradition at odds with the conservative commitment to free trade? Can conservatives guard and conserve the trust given to them by previous generations on behalf of those to come while also allowing market forces to work? Throughout the last two hundred years, Conservatives have faced the problem of balancing the benefits of free trade against the social costs of market-based disruptions to the social order. Of course, this is not necessarily a zero sum game. For when free trade serves a nation's internal prosperity, safety and external relations with other nations, this can be of great benefit to the health of a social order. The story of the Conservative Party, as we shall see, is hardly straightforward on free trade. It has not been a case of 'lower still and lower shall our tariffs be' (apologies to Elgar). In my judgement, to the extent that Conservatives have embraced market developments which contribute towards building the fabric of society, they have successfully served both the purposes of the markets and the common good. But where they have been captured by sectional or social interests then they have not. But more of this later.

Before pursuing these matters directly, we should remember **William Wilberforce** (1759–1833) who is known above all for his work on one particular aspect of trade, namely the trade in humans, the slave trade. Although really an Independent, he is often associated with the conservative movement partly through his connection with the free trader, Pitt the Younger. Wilberforce's campaign on slavery and the slave trade shows how no free trader really believes that trade should be absolutely free of all government restrictions but that the state should judge, to some extent, between right and wrong. What is needed is judgement about what trade should be conserved, how and why. In addition to all this, what marks Wilberforce out as a conservative (small 'c'!) is his extraordinary commitment to a vast range of Burkean 'little platoons'<sup>12</sup> both on a national and international level. His pioneering work in the RSPCA, the Africa Institute, the Bible Society and elsewhere rightly remains an inspiration for conservatives today, whether or not they are members of the Conservative Party.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Conservative Party**

The official Conservative Party was born amidst the free trade debate. **Lord Liverpool** (1770–1828, Prime Minister 1812–1827) had prepared the way for an official Party. But the organisational drive and eventual electoral success came from **Robert Peel** (1788–1850, Prime Minister 1834–1835, 1841–1846). The opposition of pre-1830s 'conservatives' (or 'Tories') to the

1832 Reform Act's doubling of the franchise reflected an uncertainty about whether the Conservative Party could be perceived as governing in the interests of all. Peel, as party leader from 1834 to 1846, was determined to show that such government was deeply Conservative. Far from wanting to keep wealth in the hands of the few, Peel's free trade reforms were intended to increase production and consumption, thereby spreading wealth further than before.

Electoral reform is clearly back on the agenda in 2010. In the early nineteenth century, a key aspect of such reform concerned the religious liberty and especially the political emancipation of non-conformist Protestants and Roman Catholics. Under the Tory **Duke of Wellington** (Prime Minister, 1828–1830, 1834), these Christians were finally allowed to enter political office. But this was by no means the consensus position. Burke had set the tone of much conservative thought in his declaration that 'religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort'. More specifically he commented that, although not 'condemning ... the Greek ... Armenian, nor, since heats are subsided, the Roman system of religion, we prefer the Protestant, not because we think it has less of the Christian religion in it, but because, in our judgement, it has more.' With the tradition from Wycliffe to Elizabeth to William of Orange behind him

he could declare, 'We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal.'<sup>14</sup>

However, this zeal did not prevent Burke from giving his wholehearted support to Catholic Emancipation or free trade with his largely Catholic homeland Ireland. But Anglican zeal led Peel to oppose Catholic Emancipation, even resigning his seat over the matter. Throughout the nineteenth century, the question of Ireland continued to beset both the Conservatives and the party increasingly known as the Liberals.<sup>15</sup> Positions were taken up on different sides of these questions for constitutional-theological reasons, for electoral advantage and from sheer prejudice. The establishment had continued to exclude Jews, Catholics and nonconformist dissenters (Protestant non-Anglicans) from the major universities and positions of political power. But the conservative movement was subtly divided on this. For example, the short-lived Premier **George Canning** (1770–1827, Prime Minister 1827) sought to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, which had entrenched these Anglican advantages. Robert Peel and others refused to join a government committed to that principle. But, in office, Peel divided national and party opinion by supporting a government grant to the Maynooth Roman Catholic seminary in Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Benjamin Disraeli***

**Benjamin Disraeli** (1804–1881, Prime Minister, 1868, 1874–1880), the undoubted

bright star of the Conservative Party in the second half of the nineteenth century, is of great interest in this connection. He was born a Jew but baptised a Christian aged thirteen at the instigation of his father, Isaac, who wanted his sons to swim in the mainstream. But his entry to parliament in 1837, only possible because he was Christian, did not mark a turning point in religious toleration. In fact Disraeli had to argue, with theological fervour and doctrinal eccentricity, for the abolition of the ban on Jews in political office. The occasion concerned **Lionel de Rothschild** (1808–1879), a Jew duly elected to parliament in 1847. To modern eyes, a non-Christian, let alone a non-Anglican, in parliament is unproblematic. However, the two cities of our one nation have today largely forgotten the theological, constitutional and historical significance of the established Church of England. In 1847 MPs and Lords understood that, in light of the Henrician and Elizabethan reforms which reflected Wycliffe's teaching, parliament had to legislate on matters concerning the doctrine and organisation of the Church of England. For many, a Jew hardly seemed the right sort of person to perform this role. Disraeli's distinctive approach illustrates effectively the challenges facing religious or theological public speech. He argued that Christians owed much to Jews and, therefore, to exclude them from parliament was ungenerous at best and ungodly at worst. Jesus himself was a Jew, he noted, and so

Britain should not reject the people of God. 'Where is your Christianity', he said, 'if you do not believe in their Judaism?'<sup>17</sup>

This manner of argument would have even less currency today than it had for Disraeli's audience. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing dispute today about whether and how religious claims and identities should enter public discourse.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the border clashes over nurses offering prayer and workers wearing crosses lies the substantial question of the place of religion in British life and especially what Burke called the 'Protestant religion' in the form of the established Church of England. We consider this in the second section.

We turn instead to Disraeli's more mainstream conservatism that emerges in his oft-quoted remark that the 'youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity'.<sup>19</sup> This cast of mind situates him squarely within the questions of conservation and coincides closely with Burke's account of trust and inheritance. But on whether free markets cohere with strong communities, Disraeli represents an alternative view. Peel's conversion to free trade, during his time as Prime Minister and Conservative leader, led him towards repealing the Corn Laws. Disraeli was outraged on two counts. First, Disraeli thought that politicians should 'stand by the principle by which they rise', and denounced Peel publicly for changing horses mid-stream and deceiving his erstwhile supporters.



Second, Disraeli conceived England's (and Britain's) strength primarily in terms of territory. He reckoned agriculture more basic to national security than manufacture and international trade. This was especially important for the workers who were bound together with the aristocratic landowners by land itself. Disraeli believed that free trade should not disrupt the 'tacit bargain' and reasonable, social harmony between landowners and workers who, though relatively poor, were nonetheless stably employed and protected from the potentially negative effects of free trade.<sup>20</sup> Peel too saw himself as serving the interests of the working classes. However, many joined Disraeli and, though the Corn Laws were repealed, Peel was severely damaged within the Conservative Party and eventually fell from office. The new members of the extended franchise were not sympathetic to the Party's in-fighting. The subsequent loss of momentum led to forty wilderness years when the Conservatives only had a Commons majority with Disraeli's government of 1874–1880.

Disraeli's policy might appear romantically nostalgic for high aristocratic power and, worse, complacent about conserving inequality between the well-off and well-fed and the working class poor and hungry. Commenting on later Conservatism, Maurice Cowling remarks that 'the Conservative conception of a social structure not only assumes that marked inequalities are inevitable but also declines

to justify them because their inevitability makes justification unnecessary.'<sup>21</sup> But such complacency did not characterise Disraeli and his Conservative friends such as **Richard Oastler** (1789–1861), the abolitionist and labour reformer. For Disraeli had understood early on in his parliamentary career the situation of the land he loved. He wrote that in England there were 'Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy ... THE RICH AND THE POOR.'<sup>22</sup> Disraeli, Oastler and others held to a 'benevolent aristocratic paternalism',<sup>23</sup> believing that the wealthy, upper classes should conserve poorer people's livelihood, legislating on their behalf where necessary. Two centuries of diminished, working class land ownership stirred Disraeli to champion 'the children of industry and toil',<sup>24</sup> now increasingly urbanised and employed in factories. It was Disraeli's government which, after the years of opposition, brought in the 1878 Factory Act, which combined other nineteenth century Factory Acts in extending protection for workers.

It is moot whether Disraeli was the true driving force behind this legislation. He exercised overall leadership but the government of 1874–1880 was much more than Disraeli himself. It contained key leaders, amongst whom 'Evangelicalism was represented by Cairns',<sup>25</sup> 'the man whose judgment Disraeli most respected.'<sup>26</sup> **Hugh Cairns** (1810–1885) combined a top quality legal and political career with work for

missionary societies, Sunday schools and the Dr Barnado's homes. In the Victorian Conservative Party, he epitomises the evangelical socio-political enterprise of the earlier Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect. The Conservative Party was not the only political home for Victorian Evangelicals but, as today, it was a perfectly reasonable one.

Cairns was a superb legal thinker and practitioner and led on many key legal developments, alongside the Liberal (formerly Peelite) Lord Selborne.<sup>27</sup> A particularly striking example, during one of Gladstone's premierships, was the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 which gave women legal rights to own, buy and sell property. This joint Liberal–Conservative initiative recognised the protection that owned assets afford to those who are vulnerable to unjust treatment and 'the changes and chances of this fleeting world'. In our contemporary situation, despite universal freedom to own, many people are similarly lacking in assets and so similarly exposed.

### ***Representing the One Nation***

Wilberforce and the Conservative government of Disraeli sought to represent the whole nation and the whole of mankind, especially vulnerable groups such as slaves, factory workers and women. Similarly, today's Conservative Party must answer questions of conservation by careful study of the diverse sectors and groups which

constitute the people. For the task of government is not retaining power but rather effective representation of the whole people. This requires genuine engagement by politicians of all faiths and none with the people being represented and a true understanding of their lives and concerns. As T.S. Eliot notes, 'it is the general ethos of the people they have to govern, not their own piety, that determines the behaviour of politicians.'<sup>28</sup>

For example, according to family and property records stretching back to the thirteenth century, Britain is a nation of small families and free enterprise. The two go hand in hand since a small family's needs require members of their family to seek their economic life in wider civil society rather than within the home.<sup>29</sup> From this, we note that there are deep and organic features of our national life which are themselves longstanding foci for the questions of conservation. These are naturally of interest to conservatives though historically very little to do with the official Conservative Party. Consider in particular the way that we are neither radical individuals nor do we operate economically and socially by extended kinship group or tribe. Instead, Britain has a particular way of embodying that universal, natural, creaturely, human love of home and hearth. We are localised but also enterprising, committed to our families and neighbourhood but willing to move if the economic conditions demand it.<sup>30</sup> Conservatism and the Conservative

Party should identify these 'conservative-type' features of the British tradition as a whole. Then it should retrieve, maintain and represent them in light of the current state of family life. In this sense, conservation can take the form of critical recollection.

### *The Cecils*

Turning again to our illustrative history, we note that two Conservatives of self-consciously Christian principle tower over the end of the nineteenth century, the third **Marquess of Salisbury, Robert Cecil** (1830–1903; Prime Minister 1885–1886, 1886–1892, 1895–1902), and his son, **Lord Hugh Cecil** (1869–1956). A great contemporary intellect was the Social Darwinist (and religious agnostic) Herbert Spencer. It was Spencer who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest', taking it to be the truth of natural selection which could then be applied to economic and social theory.<sup>31</sup> Spencer encouraged the maximisation of individual freedom in trade and other spheres, believing freedom to be the definition of human flourishing. Accordingly, he decried the growth in government legislation aimed at improving the conditions of the working classes – such as under Disraeli's government – precisely because it undermined the freedom of humanity. The **Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury** (1801–1885), by contrast with Spencer, had urged factory reform and suchlike on the basis that 'state regulation need not limit but could enhance men's freedom'.<sup>32</sup> This 'collectivist' legislation had marked

Victorian social concern and economics through greater government regulation of markets.

Salisbury, however, was opposed to increased government 'intervention'. He especially objected to it in matters of trade and finance, while at the same time recognising some role for the state in 'improving the physical, moral and intellectual condition of our people'.<sup>33</sup> At the heart of this scepticism were two related, theologically rooted commitments.

First, he doubted 'the capacity of legislation to affect the state of the human soul, which was in itself the only thing that truly mattered in life.'<sup>34</sup> Salisbury's own intensely personal, teenage experience of God ordered his political life so that it was wholly committed to maintaining established Christianity. He believed this to be the main organ of resistance against a secularising world characterised by a dangerous combination of statism and atheism. Accordingly, he sought to prevent government from encroaching further on the freedom of the British people, thereby dehumanising them and making them less fit for Christian freedom and eternal salvation. He ridiculed government bills which sought to regulate matters such as window cleaning and seating arrangements for housemaids,<sup>35</sup> seeing them as the thin end of a wedge being driven into the human heart. Second, he was deeply sceptical about the human ability to discern the

weight and significance of their lives amidst a universe governed by the inscrutable Providence of God.<sup>36</sup> He believed humans too ignorant of their own affairs to be always trying to fix them with legislation and government action. On whether to intervene in a South American market, he commented that 'Her majesty's government [is not] in the least degree disposed to encroach on the function of Providence'.<sup>37</sup>

But despite this scepticism about intervention, Salisbury was not really an ideological Spencerian but believed in Providence more than natural selection. It was Hugh Cecil who offered a theological legitimisation of Spencer. He held that protecting human liberty from government intervention was the goal of politics. Appealing to an apparent lack of New Testament interest in government intervention, he argued firmly for a minimal state, authoritative in its own sphere but incompetent to enforce religious standards of morality – such as a duty to care for the poor – by means of legislation. An interventionist state is deeply dangerous to morality, in Cecil's view, since it robs people of the opportunity to exercise their freedom and grow in moral stature. The New Testament, while full of injunctions to fight poverty, is lacking entirely in recommendations that political authority should be the organ of redistribution.<sup>38</sup> Forced alms-giving through taxation is hardly the point of Jesus' teaching, in his view.<sup>39</sup> He goes so far as to call the right

to property 'a sacred thing'.<sup>40</sup> His ideal was a sort of individual self-actualisation through free choice leading to total social harmony.<sup>41</sup> While Burke, as a free trader, maintained an organic view of society, in which the intergenerational social partnership was significant, Hugh Cecil believed in an individualistic evolutionism, favouring individual self-actualisation over collectivism of any sort. Such internal contrasts, far from fading away, have continued to characterise the Conservative Party.

### ***Education and Empire***

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the now little known **Arthur Balfour** (1848–1930) immediately and somewhat suspiciously followed his uncle, Salisbury (Robert Cecil), into the prime ministerial office (the phrase 'Bob's your uncle' may have first arisen in this connection).<sup>42</sup> From a constitutional perspective, his leadership of the 1902 Education Act was especially important. The Act effectively installed the Church of England as the locally-funded provider of education in England, overturning the dominance of the secularly-minded school boards.<sup>43</sup> In the teeth of Liberal opposition, the Act publicly preferred Anglican to nonconformist schools and reserved religious education from government control while allowing newly formed Local Education Authorities to oversee so-called non-religious subjects.<sup>44</sup>

This raised afresh the question of God and government. In giving the established church authority in education, the Conservatives awarded a public privilege to disputed religious claims. Whether or not this was a reasonable course of action is open to debate. However, while the major reason behind the Conservative election defeat in 1906 was a dispute over free trade which distinguished trade within the empire from trade outside of it, it seems likely that the Education Act contributed to the disillusionment of the allied Liberal Unionists who had brought the government a wider electoral base.<sup>45</sup>

**Joseph Chamberlain** (1836–1914), the Birmingham-based Liberal Unionist politician, was in the thick of both disputes. He had gained a reputation in the late nineteenth century as a ‘constructivist’, Gladstone’s disparaging term referring to a kind of Radical commitment to state action, and was frequently in stark opposition to the Conservatives. Chamberlain argued (i) for tariff reform to promote intra-empire trade<sup>46</sup> and thereby underpin economic security and pensions for the working classes, and (ii) against Balfour’s Education Act which, he believed, would alienate nonconformists and sceptical secularists.<sup>47</sup> From an electoral perspective, Chamberlain’s campaign for tariff reform which would, so his opponents said, have meant more expensive food for all, was a catastrophe for the Conservative/Liberal Unionist alliance. Of more lasting

significance was Chamberlain’s failure to defeat the Education Act. The consequences of the Act are still experienced and debated today in the form of the widespread provision of nationally approved, state sponsored education through religious schools. Finally, Chamberlain’s dream of closer imperial federation was clearly not shared by the electorate nor, arguably, the Empire itself. Perversely, the electoral failure of 1906 not only ended Chamberlain’s dreams but also led to the almost total wipe-out of Conservative free-traders, making way for the more collectivist tendencies in all parties in the early twentieth century.

The election’s aftermath deepened the ongoing conservative question about markets and community. The collectivist political tide of the first half of the twentieth century militated strongly against the more individualistic and libertarian approach of the Cecils. In the wake of the first world war and the rise of socialism, the Conservative Party sought a form of collectivism which avoided the perils of socialism. The Labour movement, as Balfour foresaw even in 1906,<sup>48</sup> became the rising force in British politics and the long-term threat to the Conservative party. How would the British way of life be conserved while it adjusted to the rising international tide which was sweeping away old paternalistic and free market patterns?

### **War and social reform**

The defeat of Germany in 1918 raised questions which were not answered conclusively by the war-time coalition of Liberals and Conservatives nor **Stanley Baldwin** (1867–1947; Conservative prime minister, 1923–1924, 1924–1929, 1935–1937) through his conservative, 'cautious, piecemeal social reform'.<sup>49</sup> The option for 'Tory radicalism' – a direct appeal, on conservative grounds, to the working classes – hovered in the air in the first decades of the century although it was not effectively developed. The end result of this internal discussion was that Baldwin campaigned in favour of tariff reform precisely in order to tackle widespread, long-term working class unemployment. This was part of a wider 'interventionist' or corporatist policy which was the widely agreed position in the Baldwinian period in contrast to the discredited *laissez-faire*. Free trade was not prized above a sense of social responsibility for the working people alongside whom younger Conservative MPs had soldiered in the war.<sup>50</sup> Whether or not the particular economic policy was sound, economic ideology did not trump a pragmatic compromise which sought the common good. During this period **Harold Macmillan** (1894–1986), MP for severely deprived Stockton-on-Tees and later Prime Minister, began to write and speak extensively about the state's role in dealing with industrial and social ills. He promoted a minimum wage and a 'planned capitalism' which would focus publicly owned industries in

poorer areas but alongside a robust private sector.<sup>51</sup>

This evidence suggests that this phase of the Conservative party's tradition is not concerned with money and markets over against people and poverty. Socialism and social reform were sufficiently distinct ideas in the 1920s that the Disraelian tradition could be reenergised.<sup>52</sup> Figures such as Duff Cooper, Noel Skelton and Alfred Mond saw no necessary contradiction between private enterprise and state activity to deal with the problems of unemployment. It was Skelton who coined the phrase 'property owning democracy', making asset-ownership a chief weapon against poverty.<sup>53</sup> This idea, especially in the form of home-ownership, was picked up by successive Conservatives such as **Anthony Eden**, Macmillan and, most famously, by Margaret Thatcher's right-to-buy scheme.

A growth in the sense of social responsibility is only one facet of the significance of the two world wars, a topic in itself far too large for this brief survey. Indeed, party politics are often (and rightly) said to be set aside in time of conflict. But nonetheless we note that war illuminates well the conservative instinct to insist on the moral and intellectual imperfectability of human nature. Although it may achieve some measure of just judgement, war very often displays most starkly our failure to act justly and love mercy. The fact that the supreme war-time leader, **Winston Churchill** (Prime

Minister, 1940–1945, 1951–1955), was a Conservative is unsurprising. Churchill's famous realism about the necessity for blood, toil, sweat and tears in the face of a terrible foe represents precisely conservatism's instinctive guardedness about human nature. However, **Neville Chamberlain** (Prime Minister, 1937–1940) – brilliant in domestic policy but notorious for Nazi appeasement – shows that the tradition is hardly uniform. The lack of preparedness for war in 1939 was not forgotten when the time came for elections again in 1945.<sup>54</sup> And, unfortunately for Churchill, the blood, toil, sweat and tears had done little to genuinely improve the condition of the working man who voted Labour along with large numbers of the middle classes.

### ***The post-war years: wets and dries***

In the post-WWII years, explicit connections between the Conservative Party and Christian theology – such as with Salisbury or Disraeli – faded from view. With some significant exceptions, the Conservative Party lost touch with or consciously moved on from its theological inspirations. Although the secularisation of public life does not render these years devoid of theological interest, I will not spend so much time on them.

The challenge of effectively combining free trade with the common good of the community continued. David Willetts suggests that one aspect of the question

should be framed in terms of 'drys' and 'wets', the language Margaret Thatcher popularised. Her use of these terms came to distinguish those who were loyal to her from those who were not. This distinction of course had policy implications but was ultimately bound up with her own personality. Willetts is not using them in this Thatcher-specific way. Rather, he writes that 'Wets believe in a bigger role for government and looser financial policies; dries believe in less government intervention but within the framework of a sound financial policy.'<sup>55</sup>

In Willetts' terms, the dries had it after the war with Churchill (leader 1940–1955; Prime Minister (again) 1951–1955). The crushing 1945 defeat at the hands of Labour reflected the vast domestic problems which successive Conservative-led governments had not dealt with. Churchill's return to power in 1951 did little to move this impression, hamstrung as it was by his increasing age and infirmity. But Macmillan's publicly funded 300,000 new houses of 1951 did much more and were followed by a boom in the private building sector and growing competition.<sup>56</sup> The 'wetter' rethinking of the 1920s and 1930s towards social responsibility and state action increasingly began to steer the Conservative ship. The growth of the welfare state had changed the political landscape in such a way that the older conservatism of the Cecils had become almost unthinkable. A technocratic managerialism dominated

the political consciousness ushering in an era of consensus politics. Conservation of social security and the National Health Service, an institution devised during the war years, were now chief concerns of vast numbers of the populace and required government judgement. Macmillan was far more suited to such a setting than Churchill or his predecessor Eden (brought down by the Suez crisis) and set about effecting in practice his thinking of the previous thirty years.

In Willetts' judgement, Macmillan's thinking was profoundly at odds with true conservatism. He describes Macmillan's *Middle Way*, published in 1938, as a Bennite 'prospectus for central planning'<sup>57</sup> which was then carried out in office with a mix of 'political ingenuity and economic madness.'<sup>58</sup> Willetts' concern is not whether governments should attend to the nation's working and living conditions but whether government should direct the economy, specifically industry, to achieve certain planned ends. He holds that it is perfectly possible to be a 'One Nation' Conservative without believing in Macmillan-type central planning. In fact the One Nation Conservatives of the 1950s specifically criticised 1920s and 1930s state collectivism. Concern for one's neighbour embodied in a carefully managed welfare state does not entail a commitment to a tightly regulated or government-planned economy. The perverse idea that only socialism cares for the poor still lives on in

our contemporary setting in the claim that a reduction in state expenditure is necessarily an act of heartless cruelty.

**Edward Heath's** leadership (1965–1975) and premiership (1970–1975) initially promised dryness but actually ended up wet. Although he had been elected on a non-interventionist platform, his government often rescued failing businesses and gave grants to industry. When Rolls Royce went bust in 1971, the government conserved it despite its inefficiency. It was actions such as this – perceived as failures of nerve by some – which led to the 'super-dry' **Margaret Thatcher** (leader, 1975–1990, Prime Minister, 1979–1990). The willingness of her administration to allow industries, in which generations had invested life, blood and labour, to die raised very sharply the question of what was worth conserving. She believed that only radical, sustained change to the national economy would provide the prosperity which the country badly needed and on which the conservation of various state-run services depended. Only in a competitive environment, maintained by a sound financial policy, would the innovation and risk-taking occur which would lead to economic success. And this increased cake in turn would allow spending to be made on public services, though preferably at a lower percentage of GDP.

The established church's responses to Thatcher's economic and social reforms are well-known. They were almost universally



negative at least in the leadership of the Church of England.<sup>59</sup> But Thatcher herself claimed – in her in(famous) ‘Sermon on the Mound’ at the General Assembly in Edinburgh – that her spiritual and political life was deeply formed by the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. She emphasised ‘the importance of a strict code of law’ and Paul’s dictum that ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat’.<sup>60</sup> And it was her administration which strongly enjoined people to work hard and create wealth, while, at the same time, some will say, allowing traditional means of production to wither away. Then there is the oft-repeated comment that ‘there is no such thing as society’. As Iain Duncan Smith rightly says these words have been routinely ‘wrenched from their context and grotesquely misrepresented’.<sup>61</sup> She was correctly rejecting the idea of society as an undifferentiated monolith *and thereby* massively affirming the individuals, families, businesses and other associations in which a natural, communal human life consists. Many Conservatives are especially enthusiastic for those mediating institutions which stand between the individual and the state, what David Willetts has called the ‘rich social architecture’ of our lives.<sup>62</sup> However, post-Thatcher, Conservatives have not been perceived in this fashion. They have often been dismissed as crass individualists when a moment’s thought (or reading) would have shown this to be quite incompatible with their stated views on

matters like the family, church or voluntary associations.

These are just some examples of what David Cameron called the ‘divisive’ quality of the Thatcher years. On the other hand, Conservatives and many in New Labour are united in holding that, on the basic economic questions, Thatcher got it right. They believe that the country needed to be rescued from state managerialism and captivity to inefficient and uncompetitive industries. Moreover they believe that a commitment to a sound fiscal policy in conjunction with a competitive, free market has been shown to be highly successful in producing innovation, wealth and the goods people need. They would remind Christians that, with the exiled Jews of Jeremiah 31, they are called to seek the peace *and the prosperity* of the city, and so must give their minds to how that prosperity can best be achieved.<sup>63</sup>

Sadly, envy and injustice will always exist in any economic arrangement. For envy is hardly the sole preserve of free marketeers but can be espoused by those of a socialist cast of mind jealous of the goods which any one sector of society has managed to conserve. The question of morality and markets will be addressed further below but suffice to say that there is now widespread consensus that the 1980s were a step forward in competition and wealth creation. The social consequences were not, however, sufficiently considered at the time and

this was a wrong done to those who then entered the long-term unemployment and hopelessness that ensued.

### ***Intervention or judgement?***

The proper nature of government's service to people is central to much of this illustrative history. It has been characteristic of twentieth century British politics in general, and of Conservative thought, in particular, to speak of government activity as 'intervention'. In Conservative speech, this has often meant intervention in the economy but it has also been used to describe all forms of government activity.

But the language of intervention betrays a cast of mind which Christians who are political Conservatives should question. For 'intervention' does not characteristically carry the rich sense of 'judgement' which, I proposed, is an act which distinguishes effectively between right and wrong, good and bad, to establish a new public context. Intervention, by contrast, tends to imply crossing a barrier or making a foray into an otherwise independently operating system. Government authority 'intervenes' in such systems as an alien intrusion without proper recognition or authorisation. Hugh Cecil's approach, noted above, is of this sort. He considers government action 'intervention' and lends it an essentially pejorative sense as negative to human freedom.

By contrast, the 'judgements' of government already have the authority of the social

organism which the government serves. The state is not coextensive with society but does serve it by delivering judgement against what is wrong and in favour of what is right. Such government is no alien intrusion but acts only with the people's own authority and is thereby limited to activity which will serve them. But the language of intervention lends itself to both maximalist and minimalist accounts of government. While judgement is constrained logically by the existence of wrongs which must be righted, intervention has no such constraint, being a description of what a government does, not what it *should* do. Salisbury's opposition to what he called 'constructivism' was an ideological commitment to a minimal state. Some Thatcherites tend in the same direction, putting the ideology of a market free from 'intervention' ahead of the need of a people for adequate judgement or the requirements of the common good.

Such minimalism is not warranted by Augustinian political theology. For Augustinians, government addresses actual acts and states of affairs and proportions the range and scale of its activities accordingly. People need government and government's work consists in judgement – the issue is not how to minimise government but how to fit the tasks of government to the needs of the people it serves. Not all that should be done should be done by government but government is authorised as a judge with specific power to right the

wrongs of the society it serves rather than to 'intervene'.

The difference between intervention and judgement brings to a sharp point our questions concerning markets and communities. How are governments meant to act in judgement concerning markets? Are markets ways of extending and ensuring individual freedom and self-actualisation? Are businesses part of the 'rich social architecture' of civil society? Or must they be in some way subordinated to the needs of the collective, society as a whole? Put starkly, is market regulation antithetical to the health of humanity? Or is it an essential ingredient of a community's wise conservation of the past and enjoyment of wealth in the present?

### ***The two cities of British conservatism***

To conclude this Part, consider two approaches to the questions of conservation. Both are intellectually and historically respectable but offer significantly different angles on conservatism and the Conservative Party. First, there is a secular discourse consisting mainly of social, economic and political analysis, represented here by David Willetts. In this view, answering the questions of conservation does not require any transcendent reference point<sup>64</sup> but rather examination of the nature of humanity as it appears along with principled and pragmatic decision-making. Second, there is a stream of conservatism guided and

sharpened by theological commitments. For example, Burke, Disraeli and the Cecils were, in various ways, deeply influenced by Christian thought. Today, the discussion threads of the website, ConservativeHome,<sup>65</sup> are often characterised by politico-theological comment from contributors such as 'Archbishop Cranmer'. And Phillip Blond, the so-called 'Red Tory' whose stock rose so sharply in the run-up to the 2010 General Election, is a theologian. Moreover, many of the current crop of Conservative MPs, staffers and leaders in influential Conservative think-tanks are theologically reflective. Many of them, along with many beyond the parliaments and assemblies of Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff and Stormont, are members of the Conservative Christian Fellowship.

So we have these two cities – the secular and the Christian. There will naturally be points of convergence on the 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions between them. This is hardly surprising since both are committed to studying the same world. Christians, as members of both cities, must be as secular as their non-Christian neighbour if not more so. 'Secular' is, after all, a Christian word for a theological thing – namely the life of this *saeculum* or age. Christians must politically inhabit this age and take very seriously approaches to policy based on evidence accessible to all. For Christian theology reckons that all can experience reality and have similar findings, whether or not they are people of Christian faith. Created

reality takes hold of us, drawing us in and demanding an interpretation with policies to match. This makes possible a unity of purpose between people of all faiths and none, a unity which could truly serve the one nation of the United Kingdom and its neighbours.

The possibility of such agreement on questions of conservation implies that there may also be substantial disagreement. And these disagreements point back to the place from where the deepest differences arise: these are the 'why' questions. Why should we conserve whatever we do conserve, however we then decide to conserve it? And why should we not conserve some things but allow them to fade out or disappear? These 'why' questions are often not considered today by either of the two cities. And it is these 'why' questions, along with their influence on the 'how' and 'what questions', that will be addressed as we turn to investigate the heart of conservatism.

An Augustinian approach to political theology has already informed the interpretation of the history of British conservatism and the Conservative Party in this Part. In the next Part, this political theology is drawn on explicitly and brought into conversation with the arteries that feed the conservative heart. The three arteries which we will examine are trust (section one), the relation between state, society and religion (section two) and the place of business and economic activity in society

(section three). These three are not the only arteries but are, arguably, the most important. Their individual significance and interdependent confluence will receive both sustained appreciation and criticism in the political theology that follows. Augustinian political theology will have something to say in all three sections of the next Part. But it will not attempt to pronounce directly on specific policy ideas. Instead it will set a frame of reference, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, within which major conservative ideas and policies can be analysed.

So in the following section, the discussion moves from historical interpretation to explicit theological reflection. This is offered, not as the only conceivable theological approach, but in the hope of stimulating deeper conversation about conservatism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are many histories of the Conservative Party available. An excellent brief introduction is Cooke, A., *A Party of Change*, 2008 (conservatives.com/history); also Blake, R., *The Conservative Party from Peel to Major*, Fontana, 1997; Ramsden, J., *An Appetite for Power: A History of the Conservative Party since 1830*, HarperCollins, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Quinton, A., *The Politics of Imperfection: The Religious and Secular Traditions of Conservative thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott*, Faber and Faber, 1978, 11

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, T.S., *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Faber and Faber, 1982, 44

- <sup>4</sup> Wycliffe, J., *De Officio Regis and De Civili Dominio*; for translations of key passages see O'Donovan, O. and O'Donovan, J.L., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, Eerdmans, 1999
- <sup>5</sup> Burke, E., *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Kessinger, 2010 opening lines; Burke, E., *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 96
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 86
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 93
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Hague, W., *William Pitt the Younger*, Harper Perennial, 2005
- <sup>10</sup> Burke, E., *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 96
- <sup>11</sup> For a contemporary analysis of the significance of the dead and the unborn in the context of social contract thinking, cf. Scruton, R., *The West and the Rest*, Continuum, 2002, 1–41
- <sup>12</sup> Burke, E., *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 47
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. esp. Hague, W., *William Wilberforce*, Harper Press, 2007
- <sup>14</sup> Burke, E., *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 90. Wycliffe, of course, was not a Protestant but is known as the morning star of the Reformation because of his views on the Scriptures and on political and ecclesial reformation.
- <sup>15</sup> The Liberals were the other great political force of the time. From 1846–1859, there was a distinctive group of liberal, free trade Conservatives known as the Peelites, who had broken away from the Conservative Party under the leadership of Robert Peel. This group was eventually amalgamated into what became the Liberal Party.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert Cecil, the Marquess of Salisbury, prominent in the second half of the century, regarded the idea of Irish Home Rule as tantamount to Rome Rule and was scathing about such a 'government by priests'. Roberts, A., *Salisbury: Victorian Titan*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999, 380
- <sup>17</sup> Blake, R., *Disraeli*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966, 258ff
- <sup>18</sup> For a Christian assessment of the debate on immigration and asylum, cf. Spencer, N., *Asylum and Immigration: a Christian Perspective on a Polarised Debate*, Paternoster, 2004
- <sup>19</sup> Blake, R., *Disraeli*, 181 (speech at Manchester Athenaeum, October 1844)
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 281
- <sup>21</sup> Cowling, M., 'The Present Position' in *Conservative Essays*, Cassell, 1978
- <sup>22</sup> Disraeli, B., *Sybil*, bk. ii. Ch.5
- <sup>23</sup> Blake, R., *Disraeli*, 242
- <sup>24</sup> Speech in 1846
- <sup>25</sup> Blake, R., *Disraeli*, 540
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 544
- <sup>27</sup> For a fuller summary of Cairns' career, see <http://thepeerage.com/e534.htm>
- <sup>28</sup> Eliot, T.S., *The Idea of a Christian Society*, 56
- <sup>29</sup> Willetts, D., *The Pinch*, Atlantic Books, 2002, 3–8 drawing on the views of Professor Alan McFarlane.
- <sup>30</sup> McFarlane, A., *The Origins of English Individualism*, Blackwell, 1978. For a critical assessment of the British tendency to mobility, cf. Schluter, M., 'Roots: Biblical Norm or Anachronism' in *Christianity in a Changing World*, Marshall Pickering, 2000
- <sup>31</sup> Although, in fact, natural selection is not encapsulated by this phrase, Spencer believed himself to be interpreting Darwin's *Origin of the Species*.
- <sup>32</sup> Greenleaf, W.H., *The British Political Tradition (Volume 2): The Ideological Heritage*, Routledge, 1983, 202; Shaftesbury's contributions deserve greater space than is here possible.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 228, quoting a speech of 15 July, 1891
- <sup>34</sup> Roberts, A., *Salisbury*, 23
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 280
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>37</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 552. Salisbury's fiscal policy in general illustrates the point. Although he had, in earlier days, been a committed protectionist, Salisbury quickly turned to a pragmatic free trade position, believing that free trade had achieved greater commercial advantage for Britain. The closest he came to a protectionist position was to argue in favour of retaliatory tariffs against European nations who were shutting British trade out of the market place (Roberts 574; cf. 473-7). But this was not ideological protectionism. Instead it was an aspect of a consistent penal policy – other nations' tariffs against British trade were wrong and should be punished just as any wrong committed should be punished. Punishment was interpreted in terms of reciprocity and so tariffs should be (temporarily) enforced.

<sup>38</sup> Cecil, H., *Conservatism*, William and Norgate Ltd, 1912, 73ff; cf. Greenleaf, W.H., *The British Political Tradition (Volume 2)*, 290

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–99; cf. Greenleaf, W.H., *The British Political Tradition (Volume 2)*, 292

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. Hugh's father had a similar view but was more open to the possibility of the poor availing themselves of the state's help so long as it did not corrupt their moral character (Greenleaf, 291). Hugh allowed for the possibility of such wider benefits but only if they would genuinely benefit the entire society, a difficult standard to meet (Greenleaf, 293).

<sup>41</sup> Cecil, H., *Liberty and Authority*, 1910, 68–69

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, A., *Salisbury*, 826–7

<sup>43</sup> National government had been funding church schools for a number of years previously. It was the move to local funding which was particularly – though not altogether logically – abhorrent to many. Cf. Blake, R., *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, 172

<sup>44</sup> The 1902 Education Act was only superseded in 1944 by the Butler Act.

<sup>45</sup> The Liberal Unionists broke away from the Liberal Party in 1886 over Irish Home Rule, formed a coalition with the Conservatives in 1896 and finally merged with the Conservatives in 1912.

<sup>46</sup> Willetts, D., *Modern Conservatism*, 27ff

<sup>47</sup> Two other items are worthy of note: (1) Balfour's theological output in later life, including the highly prestigious Gifford Lectures in 1914 and 1922 which became significant scholarly works, including *Theism and Humanism*, one of the 10 books which most influenced CS Lewis throughout his life (Christian Century interview, 1962). Far from being a sceptic, Balfour commented at the beginning of these lectures 'When I speak of God, it is not the Absolute of which I am speaking, it is the God Whom a man may easily love and adore, not merely the end or conclusion of a logical process.' (Times report, Tuesday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1914; cited in *Theism and Humanism*, Inking, 2000, 12) (2) Balfour as Foreign Secretary in Lloyd George's government, was the named author of the 1917 declaration which formally stated British approval and effective support for the establishment of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine. The British rule in Palestine (1917-1948) made such a declaration increasingly meaningful. Support for a Jewish home in Palestine – interpreted as a Jewish state by Zionists – was not an especially Conservative or Liberal notion although we should note that Winston Churchill was an especially enthusiastic Zionist.

<sup>48</sup> Blake, R., *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, 206

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 208

<sup>50</sup> Greenleaf, W., *British Political Tradition (Volume 2)*, 246

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 249ff

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 248

<sup>53</sup> Skelton, N., *Constructive Conservatism*, William Blackwood, 1924

<sup>54</sup> Blake, R., *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, 254–5

<sup>55</sup> Willetts, D., *Modern Conservatism*, 39

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>59</sup> For an analysis of this see Butt, R., 'The Tension of the 1980s' and Gladwin, J., 'The Church of England in

Opposition?' in Alison and Edwards (ed.), *Christianity and Conservatism*, 27–69

<sup>60</sup> See her speech to General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Alison & Edwards, (ed.), *Christianity and Conservatism: are Christianity and Conservatism Incompatible?*, 335; also online at [margareththatcher.org/Speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=107246](http://margareththatcher.org/Speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=107246)

<sup>61</sup> Duncan Smith, I., 'The renewal of society' in Streeter, G. (ed.), *There is Such a Thing as Society*, Politico's Publishing, 2002, 32

<sup>62</sup> Willetts, D., 'The new contours of British politics' in Streeter, G. (ed.), *There is Such a Thing as Society*, 58

<sup>63</sup> Similarly, when Jesus says 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's', Christians must then enquire what Caesar should receive by way of tax. Matthew 22.15–22, Mark 12.13–17 and Luke 20.20–26

<sup>64</sup> For a similar approach less sympathetic to religion than Willetts, see Quinton, A., *The Politics of Imperfection*

<sup>65</sup> [conservativehome.blogs.com/](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/)





# **Part II: Three arteries of the conservative heart**



# Trust

Some basic questions confront us in the fast-paced, consumer society which today dominates the West. Why should we conserve anything? What will hold us together as we ponder the 'what', 'how' and 'why' questions of conservation? There are several ways to explore these questions. One helpful approach is to examine the nature of trust, a concept which opens up the very meaning of conservatism and so the significance of the Conservative Party. Without trust, people will not engage in the social, economic and political common enterprises which make conservation possible and sustainable.

## The meaning of 'trust'

To see this in more detail, it is helpful to consider trust in two ways. First, from the perspective of the relationship between God and creation, both human and non-human; second, from the perspective of relations between humans, and between humans and non-human creation.

### *Divine trust*

Burke drew our attention to the first, overarching sense of trust which frames all our political experience. In Burke's view, people with any degree of political power ought to be 'strongly and awefully impressed with an idea that they act in trust' and must account to God for their behaviour.

To elaborate what Burke was pointing towards, consider two basic claims of Christian faith. First, the Psalmist sings for joy because

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.  
(Psalm 24.1–2 NIV)

All the earth, all the non-human natural world and all the nations belong to God because they were created by God. This is God's good creation which is, accordingly, a worthy object of the questions of conservation. This claim can be interpreted in a number of ways. An Augustinian account of the good, widely accepted across a variety of Christian denominations, is that goods are of different kinds. For example, a bird is good and a person is good but in different ways. Goods have (i) different values in relation to each other (in Jesus' words, a person is 'worth more than many sparrows') and (ii) definite ends, purposes or goals (a person has a different purpose in the world than a sparrow). The

questions of conservation would, on this account, concern what a good is, in relation to other goods, and how to maintain it or enable it to develop in order to reach its goal. Judgements about conserving goods bring these different elements together in a decision. Two examples will illustrate the point. For birds, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds seeks to persuade people to make judgements to conserve sparrows (and other wildlife) and enable them to live a flourishing life. For humans, parents normally make judgements about organising their family life so that their children are brought up to become flourishing adults. You could never confuse the RSPB with a family. Both are themselves good but they are concerned with different kinds of goods and so are seeking different ends

Second, Christianity holds that this good creation became imperfect because of human sin and oppression. However, the good news of the gospel is that now 'in [Christ] all things hold together' (Colossians 1.7). In addition to the original creation, all that has become part of human life – all political traditions, parties and institutions, all businesses and markets, all art, music and culture of every form, all voluntary societies and associations, all hospitals, schools, universities, prisons and emergency services, all forms of transport, all families and the entire civil service – indeed, all things, tangible and intangible, belong to God. All these things have good purposes in human life.

However, they can all become corrupted just like the original creation. Although God owns corrupt political institutions and abusive families (for example), this does not signify that he approves of their current condition. Christ's coming shows that God is concerned to enable all things to fulfil their proper purposes and to bring redemption from all sin and oppression. All things are now held together in the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended Lord Jesus Christ and will be subject to God's reconciling judgement. This judgement, begun already in Jesus' death and resurrection, will discriminate between right and wrong in such a way as to create a permanent new public context, the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness and of perfect goodness.

Christianity claims that the good creation was and is continually entrusted to human creatures by God the Father and Jesus Christ. Humans have been entrusted with a world which they are called to conserve and so glorify God, benefit each other and maintain the non-human creation. This world remains good despite its sad corruption by human injustice, selfishness and lovelessness. And yet the gift and the trust remain – inescapable, inexhaustible and irresistible. This primary form of trust permeates all others – our accountability to God in trust is always an accountability for how we have handled that trust for each other and the non-human world. On a specifically political level, judgement which

effects societal change is needed when it enables society to reflect better the good order which God has created for the world. We learn about this from the Bible but also from theological tradition, empirical knowledge, history and reasoning.

So when we ask 'why conserve anything?', the basic Christian theological answer is that God entrusts us with a good world which is now held together in Christ. The very goodness of the world provides the rationale for conservation. In his wisdom, God has counted us trust-worthy, despite all our failings as a species. Consequently, he has called us to be good stewards of his gifts.

### ***Three forms of creaturely trust***

Second, it is arguable that trust takes three creaturely forms, all of which are derivative from this first form of trust between God and humankind.

(i) First, there is an inherited trust which is received from past generations, a substantial feature of our community life, conserved in the present but reshaped for contemporary needs. Just as God has given us the world as a trust so we, analogously, pass on what we perceive to be goods as trusts from one generation to the next.

The reason we pass them on varies, for there are many examples of inherited trusts. With some trusts, the overarching goal is the common good of a commonwealth. National

freedom and political liberty are just such inherited trusts, passed on from those who fought and died in the two world wars in order to preserve the United Kingdom against mighty enemies. The National Health Service, opposed by Conservatives in the post-war period, was bequeathed to later generations as a trust to be conserved and developed for the sake of the common good. Other examples include the British Broadcasting Corporation, the universities and the National Trust. All these may be viewed as substantial trusts inherited by one generation and passed on as goods held in common by various people, dead, living and yet to be born. None are impervious to national or global economic, political and social conditions. And conservation of one trust may be in competition with conservation of another. As we noted earlier, change – even radical change – is built into the logic of conservation.

To make the point from another direction, consider the battle of the 1980s between the Conservative government and the Unions. There was a perception that the UK coal and steel industries were trusts. Such a perception presupposed that these industries were valuable inheritances, passed on from one generation to the next, providing work and maintaining community. However, the economic facts told a different story, one of inefficiency and waste. Things had been different in the past but trusts must actually be valuable in the present if

they are to remain trusts. Such value does not necessarily have a pound-sign attached but, in these cases, the key thing was precisely the viability of the industries in a competitive market.

There are many other kinds of inherited trusts which, though not held in common nationally like the NHS or the BBC, are still communal in their orientation. There are family businesses, such as S.J.H. Sparkes and Sons' key-cutting and construction business in Cambridge, shared by four generations. Family wealth, passed on and carefully stewarded through generations, is another such inherited trust. Beyond families, there are all sorts of businesses, organisations, local parks, charitable institutions, schools and many other things which are passed on in trust as goods.

(ii) Second, an inherited trust – a substantial object or feature of life passed on from one generation to the next – may engender what we will call intergenerational trust. Such trust is an active, attitudinal relationship which is mediated by inherited trusts, subsisting between older and younger generations and also between the dead, the living and those yet to come. Older generations may no longer be alive and yet there is still trust between them and their descendants. The dead of the Somme, the Battle of Britain and D-Day – among many others – stand in this relation to us. Intergenerational trust grows precisely through the reception of goods from past

generations who have sought the good of future generations.

The knowledge that you have been cared for and loved by your elders is the soil in which this intergenerational trust grows.<sup>2</sup> For this knowledge leads to a gratitude for one's elders and an appreciation that benevolence between older and younger, richer and poorer, is possible. And so this intergenerational trust binds people together in mutual reliance as they recognise both the quality of what has been given and the quality of the relationship formed or strengthened by the gift. This trust is a deep feature of conservatism for it lies deep within humanity itself, being it is profoundly reflective of the bond between God and creation. Of course, what is passed on from one generation to the next may not be good and may not show love and care. The UK's current vast debt burden is unlikely to be received as a token of affection from their elders by children yet unborn.

(iii) Third, there is trust as it exists now between current, living members of our community and nation. This social trust is distinct from, though often dependent on, the two other inter-human forms of trust. It consists in that mutual reliance on others which leads people into enduring long-term commitments such as marriage, extended family, business, political parties and institutions, charitable activities and religious groups.

Of course, some of the people from whom we have received an inheritance trust will still be living with us and so, in that sense, intergenerational trust exists in the contemporary moment as one form of social trust. But social trust in general grows out of the way we have been treated by those around us, especially those older than us, and then flows into our relationships with our contemporaries. When distrust and suspicion flourish it is because people have not been treated with love and care. Trust has been broken. The many sad outcomes include broken homes, bones, lives, families, communities and political institutions. Talk of a 'broken society' suggests just such a breakdown of trust. It does not suggest, as some have said, that society is being likened to a broken machine that should be fixed. Rather the language shows how society is an organism which needs healing and that a basic form of healing is a restoration of trust. Talk of a 'broken politics' suggests the breakdown of trust between people and their political representatives following on from such affairs as 'cash for questions' in the 1990s and the more recent expenses scandal.

Such an account of trust holds universal appeal but draws deeply on conservative instincts. Many conservatives, whether theologically informed or not, will recognise instantly that to receive good things as an inherited trust and to pass them on to the next generation is basic to being human. Such conservatives believe that we

are constituted by our social relationships and especially our family, locality, religious grouping and nation. In these settings we learn how goods should be passed on from one generation to the next and learn human interdependence. We do not make contracts with our parents at birth but rather, as infants, depend upon them to do us good and so learn trust. Trust anchors us in this reality and prevents flights of fancy into abstract utopianism or fictional social contracts which forget the frailty and temporal quality of human life. On this basis, trust in the collective wisdom and foresight of previous generations is often wiser than merely one's own generation's understanding. The accumulation of many people's and generations' understandings will offer more stability to a political society than the ideas of the moment. The past's wisdom is itself a trust we need in order to handle the goods we receive in trust and so act wisely in the present and into the future.

### ***Critical trust***

So the proposal is that inherited trusts, intergenerational trust and social trust are core to conservatism, as Burke and Disraeli among others understood. But none of this implies uncritical acceptance. For the very idea of holding an inheritance as a trust implies responsibility for properly assessing and stewarding it. Responsibility is not uncritical or unintelligent but rather ready to make judgements in order to conserve the inheritance. This 'critical conservatism' takes seriously the practice of judgement.

Government makes judgements about inherited trusts just as, in an analogous way, families make judgements about an inheritance. To be in a relationship of trust is not necessarily to repeat or simply maintain the inherited trust bequeathed to us. Our true obligation to our forebears is expressed precisely through critical judgement on such trusts. Effective judgement, looking both to the past and the future, creates the conditions, 'the new public context', where trust itself can be renewed as together we gain greater clarity about the value and purpose of our inheritance and the rationale for its critical conservation.

Such an account is sufficient at least to challenge the Thatcherite-preferred economist Friedrich Hayek's dismissal of conservatism as being naturally unable to 'offer an alternative to the direction in which [a society is] moving'.<sup>3</sup> A critical conservatism characterised by judgement is by definition open to and desirous of new direction when necessary. Of course, it is not 'liberal' or 'Whig' in Hayek's sense because it has a richer, thicker, communal moral responsibility than he permits to government or individuals. But such a conservatism also doubts Hayek's confidence that 'moral beliefs concerning matters of conduct' can be properly privatised and sealed off from wider social concerns without evacuating those moral beliefs of their power to provide the conditions in which an economy can flourish.<sup>4</sup>

For many contemporary conservatives, it is trust-filled relationships which we value as we work for the good of generations yet unborn, honour the memory of our parents and, for some, live within a church tradition which fills our lives with colour and meaning. We understand that there are covenants of trust which permeate generations. These are not only familial or ecclesial but also social and political. When we contribute to and reform a long-standing corporate project such as a taxpayer-funded National Health Service or an established wealth-creation organisation, we are seeking to hold responsibly and critically a trust inherited from previous generations.

In summary, God has designed a world in which intergenerational and social trust are mediated through common goods passed on as inherited trusts from one generation to the next.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, it is not always goods which are passed on – corruptions such as debt, greed, experiences of abuse, worklessness and addiction are also passed on from one generation to another. Familial trust is often broken with profoundly destructive effects. Familial covenants are strained when parents take no thought for their children's future, squander the inheritance entrusted to them or simply have no goods with which they can love their children. When Phillip Larkin wrote, 'Man hands on misery to man/It deepens like a coastal shelf', he was looking bleakly at this dark side of inheritance whereby the sins of forefathers infect the lives of their



descendants.<sup>6</sup> This is undoubtedly a real part of human experience, the sad reality of broken trust; a failure of relationships within families and between families and wider society. Conservatives, believing strongly in the imperfection of human nature, mix sober realism on this point with the hope that the human instinct to care for posterity still sustains the brighter side of inheritance and has the capacity to maintain and renew trust. Christians who are also political conservatives should be more hopeful than Larkin and believe that reconnecting inter-human trust with the trust placed in humanity by God is key to the restoration of trust in society.

## **Trust, politics and Christian faith**

It has been suggested that God has entrusted the world to humanity, a world which is now held together in Christ. But what else might political theology have to teach about trust?

### ***Trust in the Scriptures***

The Scriptures describe both trust formation and broken trust. Israel is entrusted with bearing the light of Yahweh to the Gentile peoples. Each successive generation are the inheritors of God's good gifts which are guaranteed to them by Israel's Jubilee provisions.<sup>7</sup> In particular, God designates the land as an inheritance which deepens trust between generations and amongst each generation. However, the Old Testament shows how Israel continually fails to participate rightly in her inheritance. The

nation disintegrates into two rival blocs – Israel and Judah. Injustice goes unchecked and the land itself – far from being held for all – is increasingly withdrawn from the reach of the poor. Israel thereby continually breaks trust not only with God – terrible enough – but also with its father Abraham and children yet unborn. Children born in Israel live without assets such as land. God's judgement is that Israel's children are born in exile and bear the pain of previous generations' corruption.

Fast forward to the Roman Empire's oppressive, politico-military rule and the birth of an Israelite who will inherit Israel's trust and fulfil it, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' parable of the tenants precisely illuminates this issue (Matthew 21.33–44). The bearers of the tradition – the tenants of the vineyard – have repeatedly failed to be worthy of a trust. Their impenitence has stymied their tradition's vitality and blocked the renewal of intergenerational and social trust. When these original tenants are punished for their rejection of the servants and the son, the master does not reject the vineyard but rather installs new tenants to inherit the trust.

One of Jesus' sayings contrasts markedly with the original tenants. Jesus taught that 'every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' (Matthew 13.52). Jesus' point is that those who explain

the coming reign of God should draw resources both from the past and from its contemporary fulfilment. They are to retrieve the tradition and Scriptures of Israel in light of their fulfilment in Jesus. What was promised and passed on as a trust through the people of Israel was inherited by Christ and passed on to the Christian Church. They are called to care for the vineyard. They are to 'guard the good deposit' entrusted to them (2 Timothy 1.14). This reaffirmation and redirection of the new humanity's responsibility to act in a trustworthy manner is the deep Christian logic which a wise conservatism needs.

For God's special dealings in Israel and Jesus demonstrate his general providential pattern of action. Christ's incarnation shows that God does not shrink from being attached to a particular tradition but willingly stoops to identify himself with it. Christ's life vindicates the earthiness of attachment to people and place, showing that people should not seek escape from intergenerational inherited trusts. They cannot float free of their embodied, organic relation to their people's past. All humanity is imbued with responsibility to receive inherited trusts and to contribute to the growth of intergenerational and social trust. At the heart of Christianity's good news we observe that God deals with his world and all its peoples in the terms under which he created it, as a place of space, time, change, continual inheritance and, therefore, trust.

### ***A chastened conservatism***

Just as God deals specially with Israel, in condemnation and in blessing, just so he deals generally with all nations. God allows nations freely to develop cultural traditions whereby people achieve distinctive local and national identities. But he also stands in judgement over all such traditions and identities. Since trust and tradition are human means by which God's eternal purposes are carried out, so the human ability to steward a trust is judged by God. His Providence remains ultimately inscrutable, a point rightly insisted upon by Salisbury. His special choice of Israel as his people and gift of Christ as universal, incomparable Lord and Saviour are not in doubt. But judgement of every nation's stewardship of their inheritance – precisely as an inheritance from both God and man – is unavoidable.

Accordingly, trust, tradition and inheritance emerge as humble, human and wise ways of conceiving the interrelation of past, present and future. Instead of an arrogant attempt to transcend the past and the future by believing that one's own generation is the pinnacle of history, there is a respect for the past and a concern for posterity. Instead of an absurdly simplistic urge to dismiss the past as 'out-of-date', there is a desire to conserve the good and adapt it for the contemporary moment. Such adaptation will be piecemeal, slow and cautious since one is dealing with a complex organism – a body of people in a tradition is sensitive

to radical change. Such an organism must change to survive but, in the typical case, must change slowly to thrive.

So here we find encouragement for the questions of conservation at the heart of political life. But here we also see the stark difference between political societies in general and the Kingdom of God. For at the root of political judgement is God's greatest work of judgement, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the cross and resurrection, God performs the ultimate judgement which both moves against what is wrong – human sin as a whole – and vindicates what is right, namely his own righteousness as revealed in Jesus Christ. This judgement actually saves humanity, creates a new, global public context and promises a new heaven and a new earth. Christians, the City of God, stake their lives on Jesus being the fulfilment of Israel and the 'desire of the nations'.<sup>8</sup> This is the content of Christian faith as distinct from any kind of trust. But faith holds to a specific and all-encompassing hope concerning God's love revealed in a specific person. It willingly accepts the divine trust of all the world as fulfilled in Christ and has its first allegiance always to God as revealed in Christ.

But no other political society or movement can have this same confidence. No political entity should suppose that one figure or event provides total definition for itself and history as a whole – neither the

Russian Revolution, nor Adam Smith, nor American Independence, nor the French Revolution, nor Winston Churchill nor Margaret Thatcher could fulfil such a role. From a Christian standpoint, this is reserved exclusively and scandalously for Jesus Christ.

Such a perspective helps conservatism to be aware of potential blind-spots and pitfalls. Some examples illustrate the point. First, British Conservatism has been peculiarly liable to a complacency about the status quo. Many Conservatives have failed to grasp the seriousness of trans-generational poverty, sickness, addiction and hopelessness which exists on the other side of town. An easy belief that their disadvantaged neighbours should be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps does not take seriously either the extreme difficulty of escaping poverty or the psychological effects of initiative-sapping coaching into state-dependency.

Second, consider the past Conservative tendency towards a romanticised imperialism that overstated the place of Britain in the world and in history. Augustine was scathing about the idea that the Christianisation of the Roman Empire was a climactic triumph for the gospel. Christians who are political Conservatives should have been similarly wary of an easy cohabitation with British imperialism.

Third, consider Phillip Blond's lament for the loss of working class self-reliance and mutuality in the nineteenth centuries and the destruction of valuable social fabric in steel and mining communities in the 1980s. In his view, the uncritical captivity of some Conservatives to classical economic liberalism wreaked havoc on rich features of British life.<sup>9</sup>

Neither social situation, nor geo-political self-importance nor economic ideology should blind Conservatives to the need for right judgement in an imperfect world. A conservatism which understands the intellectual and moral frailty of man will be alert to the need for self-criticism in these regards.

### ***Trust and the Conservative Party***

Sadly, an insufficient self-criticism has marked some Conservative policy. Consequently, narrow sectional interests have tended to undermine the formation of trust. That these failings are, of course, common to all political parties does not make them less serious. For example, the failure to moderate the growth of retail giants by successive governments has led to an evisceration of the experience of local life and the soul-crushing sameness of British high streets. Conservatives should have a natural sympathy for locality and a desire to conserve a sense of place. For it is in locality – just as in family – that people learn trust. The destruction of places where trust can grow is counter to

what conservatism needs, namely a public context where the questions of conservation may be asked. A desire for local ownership of assets, local business and local banking is not nostalgia but rather a recognition of how humans thrive. The ideological, sub-biblical commitment to a minimal state (as opposed to a limited state) has tended to blind some Conservatives to how trust ecosystems need protection by the state. Therefore, a question Conservatives must face is how to maintain both a diverse local economy and an open market for national and international retailers. For example, Tesco has built a strong bond of trust with a vast number of the people of the UK. However, unlike trans-generational local businesses, Tesco is not perceived as an inherited trust and so does not feed trust at its source. A symbiotic rather than mutually exclusive relationship between local and multinational businesses would, therefore, seem to provide the best context for all forms of trust to flourish.

Encouragingly, the contemporary Conservative Party demonstrates considerable alertness to trust's role in politics. In the secular stream of Conservatism, David Willetts argues that a trust deficit has appeared in the aftermath of the baby boomer generation. This blessed generational cohort have, in Willetts' view, neglected posterity and kept the benefits of the post-war years to themselves. Accordingly, there is less intergenerational trust than there should

be between them and the next generation. Knock-on implications of this effect include, among other things, the (un)availability of affordable housing, income tax revenues, pension plans and, crucially, levels of 'social trust' in younger generations. Trust which is formed intergenerationally should spread out and permeate civil society. Yet people today are less likely to trust others than ever before.<sup>10</sup>

Willetts notes that the British people's religion is part of our inheritance but this does not make it central to our identity or to trust. He reclaims 'social contract' language from an abstract, individualistic usage which undermines inter-generational thinking. Following Hume he develops a 'naturalistic account of society and morality', contrasting this with 'appeals to external or ethical obligation which appear to solve tricky problems by some *deus ex machina*.'<sup>11</sup> This Latin phrase refers to the practice at the end of Greek tragedies of some god or other suddenly descending on a trapeze to pronounce judgement on the preceding drama. Theology uses such 'sky-hooks', Willetts claims, and will not help our politics. Instead, using evolutionary and game theories, he argues that there is an inner structure within human societies which fosters empathy, co-operation and trust. We evolve as groups and we know, from game theory, that cooperation within institutions is the most rational way forward for everyone. Exchange of goods between people develops reciprocity between them

and so deepens trust. Institutions should therefore develop so as to conserve what makes for trust in order to 'create their own networks of reciprocity'.<sup>12</sup> Willetts roots this in Adam Smith's lesser known work, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and argues that empathy enables the maintenance of our interpersonal political commitments.<sup>13</sup>

This account invites serious analysis. Willetts appeals to game and evolutionary theories because he believes that theological or at least non-social scientific or non-scientific approaches will not gain widespread support. The broad proposal that evidence-based policy must be central to the work of government deserves support. Whether or not people do make rational choices in economic settings is a question for economists. In addition to these social scientific concerns, Willetts' approach raises two important concerns.

First, his account of theological ethics as *dei ex machina* for tricky moments is puzzling. Although God will 'suddenly return' (as the old hymn puts it) and disclose the meaning of history, this 'eschatological' expectation frames all aspects of life, not just the tricky moments. As the preceding illustrative history and account of trust have shown, political theology stimulates serious political thought, attitudes and action in the here and now. Both secular and Christian conservatives can recognise that trust is good. But Christianity can contribute distinctively to the growth of trust in both

local and national settings. As such it is an enduring feature of our national life which can contribute to, guide and critique political ideas such as the 'Big Society'.

Second, Christians who are Conservatives will want to be discerning about which social scientific accounts they adopt into their political understanding. Willetts believes game theory to be a promising avenue, holding that individuals' rational self-interest develops into institutions of reciprocity and cooperative empathy over time. He wishes to show 'how cooperation can emerge without appealing to a sense of community'<sup>14</sup> but rather through exchange and reciprocity in complex social negotiations and with only very 'limited assumptions about human nature'.<sup>15</sup> He dismisses the idea of a social glue being poured over people and insists that institutions can be better or worse fitted to enable reciprocity and so create trust.<sup>16</sup>

Some will wonder whether this is too optimistic an account of human nature. The conservative tradition has often stressed the imperfection of humanity – its 'fallenness', in theological terms. This includes intellectual fallenness and, therefore, rational self-interest cannot be counted on, even if it were a good basis for fostering community, a point which is itself disputed. Moreover, as Willetts himself notes,<sup>17</sup> some will question whether he provides an adequate account of trust formation. Most political theology holds that humans'

created constitution is communal and that God creates us naturally to desire that trust which sustains conservation. This 'creaturely communitarianism' will both differ and at times converge with the minimalist assumptions of Willetts' game and evolutionary theories. But inasmuch as it fits in well with widespread instincts, it hardly seems to be a *deus ex machina*. The natural community of the family is one obvious feature of such communitarianism but Christians are called to strengthen their neighbours' confidence in all such natural institutions. Conservatism would do well to recover this basic confidence about human nature and form policy accordingly.

To achieve this neighbourly service, Christians should argue theologically for marriage and other natural communities as places in which humans come to a fulfilled experience of life. But, alongside this, they should use evidence from the social and natural sciences. This should not amount to an uncritical acceptance of what they hear but rather involve critical evaluation. The Centre for Social Justice which, though not partisan, is certainly (small 'c') conservative, argues for consideration of such evidence in forming family policy. For example, CSJ uses neuroscientific and psychological research to scrutinise government policies concerning the early years of childhood. The growth in a child's brain and the development of neural pathways is one very important indicator both of the loving attention which the child has received and of future life

outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Such findings deserve attention from Christians.

### **Conclusion**

Behind these debates about the significance and source of social trust lies the 'why' question of conservation. For unless the 'why' is convincingly answered, generation by generation, then the heart-rate will stutter, slow and then fade away. Answers to the 'what' and 'how' questions will lack a sense of overriding purpose. Margaret Thatcher, in her 'Sermon on the Mound', articulated this thought theologically when she observed that if 'you try to take the fruits of Christianity without its roots, the fruits wither. And they will not come again unless you nurture the roots.'<sup>19</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with her own version of Christianity, one may agree that without some compelling answers to the 'why' question, organic, critical conservation of common goods will lapse into mechanistic managerialism as in the technocratic conservatism of the post-war period. In conservatism, 'why' questions do not require neat and tidy answers. And the modern Conservative Party quite rightly does not require universal consensus. But conservatism requires substantial answers and substantial debates if it is to generate the ideas and practical policies that are needed.

This section has offered a possible theological answer to the 'why' question –

that God, in his providence, has entrusted people with the world and has reaffirmed this trust and this creation in Jesus Christ. Humans, in imitation of God revealed in Christ, are to receive trusts passed on by tradition critically conserving common goods, counting others worthy of trust and so engendering intergenerational and social trust. There is no earthly utopia and humans should not wish for one. What is needed is a trust between generations and between peers which stabilises common life but allows for criticism and substantial change.

For Christians who are political conservatives, their answer to the 'why' question must recognise the fallen condition of humankind. Conservation is necessary because of our tendency selfishly to hoard or to destroy what is good. But Christians who are political conservatives must also recognise that sin is about social systems as much as about the individual culpability which creates them. An inherited trust may effectively keep certain groups of people down. Many Conservatives hold that the Welfare State partly operates like this by creating dependency and reducing people to client recipients of state largesse. They argue that welfare should be an effective safety net not a quencher of human responsibility and social interdependence. Alternatively, consider how an inherited trust like education should be more widely accessible so that a much greater proportion of sixth formers are educated and prepared well enough in state schools

so that they take a greater proportion of places at the best universities. The disproportionate presence of pupils from fee-paying schools in the top universities is a challenge for Conservatives. But merit, not social engineering, is the most reliable way of preserving the quality of the universities and thereby conserving the trust's value.

Trust can be built in both public and private enterprises. Although conservatives are keenly aware that the state's coercive force and legislative power are often ineffective to achieve desired social results and even less effective in bringing moral change, they also know that such instruments are sometimes part of the answer required. The practical thing is to ask is 'what should be conserved and what should be rejected? What should we judge as wrong and what as right?' The contribution of the City of God to public reflection on these issues is that God has entrusted humans with a good world, despite our profound moral and intellectual imperfection, and reaffirmed that trust in Jesus Christ. Of course, there are two cities in the Conservative Party and Christians should not expect their fellow Conservatives to proceed from the same convictions. Nonetheless, Christian Conservatives are to work at building trust by making critical and self-critical judgements about how and why they conserve the good world God has created.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10.31

<sup>2</sup> In being counted trust-worthy by others, we understand ourselves afresh as called to be worthy of the trust we receive. This intergenerational trust is a way of understanding ourselves, each other and the world. It is substantially 'affective' or 'emotional' as a form of 'emotional intelligence', being able to see objects and the relationships they mediate in a certain value-laden way.

<sup>3</sup> Hayek, F.A. von, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960, Appendix 'Why I am not a Conservative', section 1

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, section 3

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the highly readable O'Donovan, O., *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community*, Eerdmans, 2002

<sup>6</sup> Larkin, P., 'This Be The Verse' in *High Windows*, Faber and Faber, 1979

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 25; cf. Deuteronomy 15

<sup>8</sup> See further, O'Donovan, O., *The Desire of the Nations*, CUP, 1996

<sup>9</sup> For another view, cf. Eliot's trenchant critique: 'the tendency of unlimited industrialism is to create bodies of men and women – of all classes – detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words, a mob. And a mob will be no less a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well disciplined.' *The Idea of a Christian Society*, 53

<sup>10</sup> Willetts, D., *The Pinch*, 120ff

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>13</sup> Smith used the word 'sympathy' to capture the relation of emotion and instinct.

<sup>14</sup> Willetts, D., *The Pinch*, 90

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 95



<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 96–97

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 96

<sup>18</sup> Cf. especially 'The Next Generation: The Early Years Commission', CSJ, 2008 accessible at

[centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/TheNextGenerationReportFINAL.pdf](http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/TheNextGenerationReportFINAL.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [margareththatcher.org.document/107246](http://margareththatcher.org.document/107246)

# Society, state and religion

In describing the significance of trust, we have encountered a vital artery of the conservative heart, namely the role of the state in relation to society and religion. Now we must ask how the interrelation of these three will support trust. As we do so, we will keep in mind the contemporary situation and will attempt to offer some interpretative shape and conceptual ballast to the contemporary Conservative Party's idea of the 'Big Society'.

## Society and the state

In assessing the relationship between society and state, some conservatives have focused squarely on the size of the state and enquired whether government should have a larger role in directing the people's affairs or a smaller one. Distinctions between small and large states are also sometimes interpreted through the share of national GDP that they take in tax. In the UK, this has hovered around 45% in the last twenty years. Conservatives generally believe in a smaller rather than a larger state. However, it is questionable whether this is the most important way to view the state–society relationship. We have only to ask whether conservatives should believe absolutely in a small state at all times to see that the answer is obviously 'no'. For one thing, times of war or other national crises may require an expansion in the size of the state. Moreover, a relatively small state could be invested with significant strength in certain areas that individuals could not

manage for themselves but can manage when collectively represented. These include the regulation of markets, the enforcement of law, the raising of necessary taxes and the ability to raise and equip military forces for national defence.

So commitment to a minimal state may be too leaden-footed a posture for the complex organism that is a nation-state. It is often connected to the equally unsubtle idea that the maximisation of free choice in all areas of society's life will breed responsibility and freedom. It is unsubtle because choice can express slavery as well as freedom, especially under the influence of commercial advertising. The protection of children from commercialisation promised in the 2010 Party manifesto goes some way towards recognising this fact<sup>1</sup> and echoes much earlier warnings from Archbishop Rowan Williams.<sup>2</sup> Or, from another perspective, consider the way in which apparently free choices about energy and transport are

actually driven by whole nations' slavery to previous generations' decisions which trapped their descendants in cycles of environmental damage. The addiction to fuel-inefficient cars in parts of the United States is perhaps the extreme example of this tendency although the UK obviously has its problems too.

Genuine freedom is found in those trusting relationships that order our choices to consider others' good as well as our own and so to love our neighbours as ourselves. If this is so, Conservatives must avoid obsessing about minimising the state's size or its strength. State size and strength are important. But the Conservative concern should be that the state is limited (not minimised) and yet sufficient to carry out the judgements needed by society. To see this, it is necessary to explore just what the state is or ought to be from a theological perspective.

### ***Non-political membership***

There is, in the Christian and conservative tradition, a vital distinction between the state and society. Roger Scruton, the conservative political philosopher, argues that the core of a people's life is 'a non-political idea of membership'.<sup>3</sup> This membership is 'non-political' in the sense that it does not, in itself, depend on the coercive power of government. Government may protect such membership but government does not create it. Government may represent such membership but

government does not conscript it. When contemporary Conservatives say 'there is such a thing as society; it's just not the same thing as the state', they are pointing in this direction.

Descriptions of our basic national membership will vary: some will call themselves English, some Scottish, some Welsh, some Irish and some British. Although governments pertain to territories marked out by these words, they are not essentially governmental terms but rather describe groups of people and their cultures. Leaving these national markers aside, consider the term 'civil society'. It captures forms of belonging which are substantial but essentially non-political. Phillip Blond describes civil society as 'everything that ordinary citizens do that is not reducible to the imposed activities of the central state or the compulsion and determination of the marketplace'.<sup>4</sup> With the important proviso that the marketplace is not essentially uncivil, a point we will revisit later, this is a helpful summary. The kinds of things that constitute civil society are families, voluntary societies such as churches, clubs, associations, friendships, musical traditions, trade unions, businesses, charities, literary circles and universities qua independent institutions. Especially important in recent Conservative Party thinking have been all manner of social enterprises such as Birmingham's Balsall Heath Forum, a local community organisation which effectively gathers and represents the people of the

local area in a non-political fashion to seek common goals and build trust around common goods.<sup>5</sup> Such non-state groups are the guts of the Big Society.

### ***Government and society in Augustinian perspective***

Can we clarify further the idea of the 'non-political' and so offer a Christian interpretation of the 'Big Society'? Augustinian political thinkers have learnt to think of the 'pre-political', 'the political' and the 'post-political'. In this view, human political authority was a good and providential gift of God which was added to the world after humankind slid into selfishness, oppression and unbelief. Humans were not created to be judges, politicians or civil servants. There was no city in the beginning but only one authority, God himself. However, the entry of sin made political authority a necessary aspect of this present age because of the real evils in the world which assault society. It is needed by society but distinct from society. As such it is only necessary for this present age – it was irrelevant before sin and will be redundant after sin has been done away with in the new heaven and the new earth.<sup>6</sup> As noted above, this is only one theological option in the tradition and it is presented here because it seems to offer some conceptual ballast for conservative thought.

From this viewpoint, government's temporary expediency becomes clearer in light of Jesus Christ's incarnation, death,

resurrection and ascension. Because of the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, human political authorities no longer occupy centre stage. Jesus' enthronement at the right hand of God the Father has radically relativised the significance of all earthly governments. In the here and now, governments only have intelligibility in relation to Christ's authority. His authority is ultimately political in the sense that the New Jerusalem is political – that there is a City coming down out of heaven from God which is ruled by the Lamb on the throne and no one else. Accordingly, we note in passing that, in contrast to some strands of Islam, it is both absolutely inconceivable and entirely undesirable that any nation-state should be a Christian theocracy. There is no vacancy for the post of a government run entirely according to God's wisdom – neither the UK nor any other nation need apply.

With this in mind, we may observe that Scruton's 'non-political' membership is a reflection of the Christian idea of 'pre-political' or 'post-political' human identity. When people live in peaceful cooperation as civil society, they reflect in a shadowy way the peaceful life of Eden and the New Jerusalem. Of course, we know all too well that human life is often not peaceful and that civil society deals in sadness, sickness and death. It is because we live without perfect peace that God gives political authorities as necessary and good gifts. They are indispensable

to the flourishing of the common life of societies. By providing the conditions for peace and security, such authorities support intergenerational inheritance of trusts and so enable the development of trust between people, thereby reflecting analogically the providential government of God.

This account of government should encourage people not to consider political authority as the ultimate arbiter of their lives. A relativisation of political authority and concomitant belief in the ultimate primacy of non-political social life should inspire people to find meaning primarily in intergenerational and contemporary individual and corporate ingenuity, creativity, compassion and wisdom. In practice, some of these social forms may have a governmental dimension. Tax-payer sponsored university research is one such area. Tax-payer funded support for effective, poverty-fighting, governmental and non-governmental bodies is another. Indeed, the 'state must take action to agitate for, catalyse and galvanise social renewal.'<sup>17</sup>

But so much of what is passed on in trust has very little to do with government. And denying the ultimacy of the state should invigorate people to involve themselves in inherited trusts rather than abdicating responsibility to the state. When parents give good gifts to their children, take them for a walk in a public park and pass on stories about their late grandparents, government is necessary to provide peaceful

conditions in which the gifts can be bought at a fair price. But the park could be run by a non-governmental community group committed to stewarding the trust of common land.<sup>8</sup> And, more importantly, the giving, the walking, the talking, the remembering and the loving are essentially non-political activities which reflect the sociality for which humanity was created and destined.

So this account of political conservatism, rooted in Augustinian political theology, insists on a limited (not a minimal) state because it both points to this intended future of humanity and recognises the government's right work of judgement. Freedom is not an unencumbered individualism minimally protected by the state nor is it the elision of the state with society nor is it only possible in parts of our lives untouched by state control. Freedom involves a flourishing social interdependence which is partly governmental and partly non-governmental. Such a doctrine is the best bulwark against both radical individualism and state totalitarianism and a valid contribution to 'Big Society' thinking.

### ***Policy implications***

So when a non-governmental group, such as a church, offers to provide education for children, government does have a role to ensure that the children are not abused, to prosecute any offences and to set minimum standards for a curriculum. But government is not necessarily required for the full

formation of the curriculum, its teaching, the maturation of pupils into educated, thoughtful people or the oversight of examinations. Groups and individuals are capable of achieving these ends through their free association, thereby stewarding trusts and building trust.

This is not a matter of simply promoting choice. When Conservatives say, 'We believe that if people are given more responsibility, they will behave more responsibly',<sup>9</sup> we must balance this with the traditional Conservative commitment to humanity's intellectual and moral imperfection. People may behave more responsibly but they may well not. What matters are the opportunities for responsible choice that are presented, and whether people carry out their responsibilities in a trust-worthy manner. Trusting people may build trust but Conservatives should always expect untrustworthiness too. A sunny optimism unaware of the reality of widespread selfishness and incompetence is singularly unhelpful.

Complications obviously arise in parts of the British education system. The support of tax-payers received by some church schools (such as in the 1902 Education Act) creates specific forms of accountability. However, it does not change matters radically. Today, the New Schools Network (NSN) embodies the distinction between state and society with respect to education. They hold that 'there is an increasing body of evidence

that schools run by parents, charities and independent organisations improve standards more quickly than those run by politicians'.<sup>10</sup> According to the NSN, such schools are improving four times faster than their equivalents in the state-run part of the state sector.<sup>11</sup> The coalition government of 2010 has pledged to see this model expanded and deepened. It embodies well both the freedom of society to steward trust and a responsible, limited state. Some conservatives will be concerned about this policy's impact on local government as well as central government. Local government, including Local Education Authorities, has been important to Conservative Party thinking for generations. But this right emphasis on locality is not undermined by the NSN but rather is specified in more detail. Both Conservatives and the NSN are on the same side of the conceptual battle in backing the educational aspirations of local organisations and national non-governmental organisations with a local vision.

Turning to family policy, consider the CSJ's idea that classes in marriage and parenting should be offered by the voluntary sector but advertised through a local authority's register office.<sup>12</sup> It matters whether these classes are provided by government or by a non-governmental body such as the Bristol Community Family Trust (BCFT).<sup>13</sup> If the government runs it, everyone cries 'nanny-state' and runs a mile. But the BCFT, led by a married couple, runs on £20,000 a

year (raised through donations and modest course fees) and achieves concrete success. Recognised by David Willetts as a best practice model, it illustrates the proper role of the state as civil society's cheerleader. In this case, the state runs the register office but not the courses provided by groups like BCFT. The state provides the opening but civil society puts the ball in the back of the net. The state serves an emerging sociality that builds trust by passing on inherited wisdom about marriage, parenting and families.

This approach does not suggest that government is always less fitted than civil society to deliver services to society at large. Independent social initiatives are not always better than governmental action. Nor is political authority unnecessary in education or in supporting families. People are imperfect and charities are often badly run and ineffective at delivering good outcomes. Strong, limited government, which makes judgements and enforces them, is a reasonable conservative and Christian objective. Political authority, while not being coextensive with society, is always simultaneous with it. Contemporary society always needs political authority but it does not need it everywhere. This is particularly relevant to public services. Although the current NHS must be conserved and improved, its creation in 1948 was achieved by abolishing the many independent medical Friendly Societies that had emerged

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The theological point is that government is distinct from society as its servant not its master. This is what we should mean by public service. And therefore people should not primarily be petitioning government for this, that or the other piece of largesse or legislation, but rather working to strengthen society, enriching it with deepening levels of trust. The Augustinian position is that people are not originally designed or ultimately destined for rule by human political authority. Instead, they must temporarily endure the difficulties and enjoy the benefits government brings.

Of course, those who proceed from secular or other religious beliefs can endorse the notion of government as the servant of society. Many from both of the two cities can agree that a society is best constituted by a humble state and by a people who, as individuals, families and associations, are the nation's main actors. It is a trick of the political light – often, perhaps unintentionally, perpetuated by the governing elite and even the Church – to suppose that the most important communal act one can do is to vote. Voting is vitally important but it is only intelligible if the people have a social vision (or social visions) of the good. The challenge facing political representatives and the society they serve is to enter a conversation about the common good precisely in these terms. David

Cameron's attempt to promote the idea of the Big Society at the 2010 general election was an attempt at such representation.

### ***Big Society in Thatcherite and statist perspective***

Compare this with the Thatcherite vision of the free economy and the strong state, as described by the political thinker Andrew Gamble. He comments that 'the New Right claimed that they had a superior moral vision of what a free society should be like. Their concept of citizenship saw freedom and equality being achieved through the daily plebiscite in the market, not through the infrequent plebiscite in the political system.'<sup>14</sup> The freedom of society is front and centre but the chief mechanism for its realisation is the market. But it does not seem that Cameron has a similar 'distrust of all solutions to problems of public policy that do not involve markets'.<sup>15</sup> The 1979 Conservative Party manifesto announced that 'we want to work with the grain of human nature, helping people to help themselves'. These words could be echoed by Camerons today although with the belief in markets chastened and the desire to strengthen social trust within communities enhanced. Thatcher did not doubt the importance of communal associations and families but the infamous phrase ('there is no such thing as society') allowed her to be interpreted in a way that Cameron has wisely not left open.

In sharper contrast with Cameron are the attitudes, rhetoric and practice of socialists and statistes who presume that government is the best provider of a very wide range of benefits to the entire population. Phillip Blond has denounced this approach's most pernicious result, namely the dependency culture that has devastated parts of the working classes, robbing them of the mutuality, independence and ambition they used to enjoy. Blond points especially to the breakdown in local mutual societies and credit unions<sup>16</sup> which have been replaced with the anonymous, faceless benefits system. He argues that the aspirations of dedicated state social workers and private, voluntary bodies have been quenched by a system which has encouraged dependency on the state rather than growth in independent living and interdependent sociality. But there is an even darker shade to this problem. For ingrained state dependency crushes people into a self-understanding which fails to see the state as a limited and temporary aspect of human existence. To be encouraged to stay on benefits, because they are more advantageous than work, is bad enough. What is potentially worse is when the state becomes the limit of one's horizon, coinciding as it does with one's range of social and economic experience, and so clouding a person's perception of their creaturely social vocation.

New Labour policy by no means always reflected the statist wing of the Labour



party. Consider especially Tony Blair's part-private, part-taxpayer funded but independently run City Academies. The National Union of Teachers brought out a detailed response to encourage its members to campaign against Academies. The NUT's argument was to some extent reasonable and evidence-based and challenged the Academies to demonstrate improved school results. They also argued that Academies are not representative of the local area or accountable to local education authorities and parents.<sup>17</sup> Though this itself is doubtful, the main problem is that the NUT seems just as sceptical of the parent, teacher and charity led schools which constitute a large segment of the New Schools Network.<sup>18</sup> The issue seems to be not so much parental or charitable involvement in education as the mantra that state organisation (through LEAs and Whitehall) always provides an education which is best for all, partly because it is the same for all. The state-backed competition provided by the New Schools Network and the City Academies is providing a diversity which is testing this assertion and disclosing the deeper energy at work in society – a desire for free, cooperative interdependence.

### ***Punishing wrong, vindicating right and praising the good***

However, civil society should not be romanticised. In this imperfect world, society is often deeply uncivil. Christian political conservatives should be committed to upholding the goodness and the

authority of the state. The longstanding Pauline view is that government is 'God's servant' who 'does not bear the sword in vain' (Romans 13.4). The state must have, on the one hand, the moral competence to judge between right and wrong and, on the other, a limited but sufficient strength to punish effectively any wrongdoing which assaults the right order of society. A strong central government which can prosecute offences is crucial to conserving goods and so is vital for the development of trust. This is what we might call the state's reactive judgement – it is reacting to wrongdoing in a strong, coercive but limited way.

In reacting to wrongdoing the state also vindicates what is right thereby providing the conditions for the conservation of the good. This is what judgement does. The apostle Peter describes government authorities as 'governors ... sent by [God] to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good' (1 Peter 2.14). In other words, government is both reactive (against wrong and in favour of right) and approving of those who do good.

The state may praise what is good through judgements in courts and legislatures. For example, charitable status with tax advantages shows how legislation can implicitly and explicitly praise those who do good. In a further, complementary fashion, the good is praised through leadership, recognition and encouragement. For example, government should be

praising third sector groups like the Bristol Community Family Trust and the NSN when it can be publicly seen that they do good alongside traditional state schools and state social workers who are also doing good. Such recognition builds trust and enables conservation of goods to carry on more effectively.

This posture also entails not judging against those who are doing good such as the UK Catholic adoption agencies who have recently been in this position. The relevant legislation, albeit well-intentioned and in some respects beneficial, questioned whether these agencies should be obliged to consider placing children with homosexual applicants. Some of these agencies have now closed, some have accepted the legislation and effectively severed ties with the Catholic Church while one's appeal for reasonable accommodation was rejected by Local Authorities and the Charity Commission.

This seems like an example of government not praising the good work the agencies were doing precisely by denying their Christian integrity which involves both ethos and action. The case was not decisively made that the adoption agencies were doing any great wrong or any wrong at all. And yet the authoritarian government triumphed. An objector might respond that (i) there is clearly a difference of opinion between the Catholic Church and the British government about what

constitutes right and wrong and (ii) that some of the agencies are still doing good works. These reasonable objections deserve more extended treatment than is possible here. But I would ask whether government should impose an alien standard on an independent organisation concerning a topic which is widely disputed, namely the nature of family life. Should it crush this cultural diversity or should it instead let a range of initiatives flourish by allowing the Catholic adoption agencies to coexist alongside agencies which could, without objection, offer adoption services to homosexual couples?

More positive examples of political praising of non-governmental entities include the recognition afforded 'Welsh House Farm' at the 2008 Conservative Party conference. This organisation, driven by ingenious Christian faith and a community's desire to change, was discussed, visited and praised before, during and after the conference. Conference delegates even wore t-shirts affirming their admiration for the project's work in tackling social problems and reviving community spirit. This gesture clearly signalled the contemporary Conservative Party's orientation towards serving the many non-political groups working effectively for social change. Instead of crushing diversity by squeezing all organisations into an ideological straitjacket, they recognise and support the good works which are achieved. This has not been universally true. For example, the

Conservatives did not officially support the Catholic adoption agencies.

On a more positive note, David Cameron's stated ambition is to make Britain the most family-friendly society in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, government should do everything it can to praise and support families as rich sources of goodness and trust, while also judging against abuses and protecting the victims of family breakdown. We have already mentioned the Bristol Community Family Trust. The CSJ has recommended building on such schemes through a 'Marriage and Relationships Institute [which will] champion and administer preventative initiatives...[conduct] research into what works' and ensure that 'relationship and parenting education programmes are rolled-out nationally by the voluntary sector.'<sup>20</sup> But Government can also praise marriage and family directly by financial means. The recognition of marriage in the tax system is one such idea. The pre-election proposal amounted to a lamentably small £150 a year. But the fatuous response 'would you get married for three quid a week?' primarily reflects our culture's political cynicism. The point is not to bribe people to get married but to recognise and support marriage's uniquely beneficial quality. As we have noted, inherited trusts and social/intergenerational trust (i) are essential for social health because they enable us to navigate the crucial questions of conservation and (ii) are effectively mediated in stable families. And research

indicates that the most stable families with the best outcomes for children are, on average, headed by a married couple, quite apart from socio-economic factors.<sup>21</sup> And yet just this sort of family life has been radically undermined by successive decades and governments. New Labour had significant anti-family tendencies as other research shows. The narrow fascination with raising the income of parent(s) with children largely overlooked the deeper causes and effects of family breakdown in the lack of public recognition of marriage.<sup>22</sup>

### ***International affairs***

Punishing wrong, vindicating right and praising the good also has an international dimension. Wilberforce's tireless work to change British law on the slave trade and slavery itself is an example. Some conservative forces then were inimical to the practice of right judgement. They preferred to conserve the status quo rather than allow change which would conserve the good – such as trade routes between Britain and the West Indies – but judge wrongdoing, namely the trade in humans. The slave traders illustrate the ugly, impenitent face of conservatism, stubbornly resistant to change which threatens established wealth accrued through unjust practices.

Later in the nineteenth century, the Liberal Unionist Joseph Chamberlain sought a protected intra-empire market in order to benefit the working classes. He went further

than this, on one occasion commenting that as regards

the self-governing colonies we no longer talk of them as dependencies. The sense of possession has given place to the sentiment of kinship. We think and speak of them as part of ourselves, as part of the British Empire, united to us, although they may be dispersed throughout the world, by ties of kinship, of religion, of history, and of language, and joined to us by the seas that formerly seemed to divide us.

Chamberlain could speak without embarrassment about 'a national mission' in the work of Empire, whether to these colonies or to those governed directly by British rule. He looked for the emergence of a British race, united not by force but by common desires. Chamberlain was out of step with his erstwhile Liberal colleagues but in line with many in the Conservative Party. While opposition leader in 1872, Disraeli identified a similar faultline, accusing Liberalism of persistent attempts to bring about the disintegration of the Empire. In power, Disraeli's love of Empire took both hard-nosed and poetic turns in his purchase of four million pounds of Suez shares in 1875 and his special fascination with Queen Victoria becoming 'Empress of India'.<sup>23</sup> While the radicalism of Chamberlain's imperialism was never at home in the Conservative Party, the Conservatives even up until

Winston Churchill believed the Empire was rightly key to Great Britain's international position.<sup>24</sup>

Political theology of all sorts has long been largely sceptical of bids for Empire, even the more subtle forms which entail a measure of self-governance. Augustine was especially critical of Christians' fifth century tendency to identify a coercive Empire with the City of God ruled by Jesus Christ. The belief that the Roman Empire was the focus of God's work on earth was sheer heresy.<sup>25</sup> Salisbury's conviction about the inscrutability of God's Providence coheres well with this. Although hardly 'anti-empire', he was distinctly uneasy about Disraeli's posture and critical of anything approaching jingoistic imperialism.<sup>26</sup> Such caution combined with the conservative appreciation of the imperfection of human understanding and morality should have chastened Conservative beliefs that Britain could effectively govern vast tracts of the world. We are still experiencing post-colonial fall-out today, both in our own national psychology and in particular trouble spots such as Zimbabwe and Kashmir.

In the contemporary context, the boot seems firmly on the other foot. With weakened influence and increased government by the European courts and parliament, Britain's place in the world is quite uncertain. Edmund Burke would be no friend of these developments. He had no inherent dislike or disrespect for

those beyond the British isles but did regard national sovereignty and the rule of law with deep respect. Conservatives are concerned that a nation's law should not fall into disrepute. Instead, a conservative patience with apparent imperfection leads to a practically useful legal system. Much political theology traditionally warns against grand plans for international integration, seeing them, in light of the Fall, as covert bids for power. But it is also sceptical of a pull-up-the-drawbridge nationalism which fails to see the purposes of Providence operating in and between all nations. Sadly, such crude anti-internationalism still exists as the unwise underside of conservatism and the Conservative Party.

Without attempting to pronounce on the European project as a whole, there are good theological reasons for doubting that laws which do not arise in a way which people can understand or recognise as their own will have beneficial effects in the long run. Conservatives have classically been localists because they believe that only those laws which arise within the local or national context in which people live will have the capacity to gain a purchase on people's wills. This does not mean that Conservatives should not be deeply engaged in international cooperation especially around concerns such as the environment and international development. These are and must remain Conservative concerns and deserve far more space than

is possible here. The Party's support of high speed rail and the 2010 budget ringfencing of international development are just some indications of contemporary Conservatives' green and 'One World' outlook.<sup>27</sup>

## The British constitution

The convergence of trust and the state-society distinction is embodied in our national constitution.<sup>28</sup> Burke and Wycliffe believed that a stable monarchy, uniting political and ecclesial authority in a lay person, was the best grounds for the nation's political peace and spiritual health. But how should this mixed constitution influence a contemporary conservative account of the relationship of society, state, churches and other religious bodies? We shall specifically consider the monarchy and the House of Lords.

### *The monarchy*

The UK constitution deliberately guards against any particular government from changing too much too quickly. Neither government nor people can, without further ado, change the head of state. The execution of Charles I and the personal rule of Oliver Cromwell and his heir do not constitute a source of pride for our nation.

The monarchy is thus a kind of continuous trust passed on from generation to generation. To inherit a trust does not entail carrying on as before but rather requires stewarding it to meet the moment and engender further trust. The nature

of the Union which constitutes the UK illustrates this point. The rejection of James II and accession of William of Orange and Mary in 1688–1689 was conceived as an act of stewardship. The monarchy which emerged from this ‘Glorious Revolution’ maintained and developed the Union of Great Britain and Ireland over centuries until the achievement of a united Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England under the Crown. The devolved Scottish parliament and the Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies are part of this ongoing constitutional achievement. Conservatives should be committed not simply to the Union but to engaging respectfully in the conversations about national identity which the Union makes possible.

On specifically ecclesial matters, the Union contains a diversity of possible State–Church configurations. For the sake of space, we will just focus on England.<sup>29</sup> There, the monarch is Supreme Governor of the Church of England, not its ‘head’ (the title adopted by Henry VIII), a place reserved for Christ alone.<sup>30</sup> The monarch governs the Church as lay leader but is not herself its life and light. She is not charged with teaching Scripture but rather with ruling the land, which includes some rule of the Church of England. In this mode, she has authority to make church appointments, with the guidance of both church officials and civil government, but not to change church doctrine. Complementing her ecclesial role, the queen is also the earthly

source of parliamentary authority and acts of law in all legislatures within the United Kingdom. However, the monarch specifically represents all the people of the Union with respect to the Westminster parliament. Having observed their voting, she is authorised to invite a party leader to form a government. By convention, she invites the largest party in the Commons and her authority provides the context for creative thinking in the case of an indecisive electoral outcome. That, at least, is the traditional constitutional position.

We should not romanticise the monarchy just as we should not romanticise civil society. There is no certainty that the monarch will behave in a conservative fashion – monarchs can be radical dictators too, developing strange new doctrines such as the seventeenth century heresy of Divine Right. Moreover, there is no guarantee that future monarchs will reflect the conservative values of the institution. Nonetheless, it is arguable that the institution itself clearly displays the conservative idea of inherited trust. It builds intergenerational trust and social trust as all share in the common good of national stability and in the representative person who embodies stability. The current constitutional monarchy, made safe from the wilder excesses of the past by the authority of parliament and assuming a gentler form, articulates the British concern for cautious and gradual change in every area of life. Moreover, the monarchy embodies the

distinction between earthly government and the City of God while ensuring that they are not divorced.

### ***The House of Lords***

The Lords can be seen to represent a commitment to slow change similar to the monarchy. The provision that peers hold office for life is intended to provide enduring ballast in our political representation. Critical scrutiny of government legislation which draws on long experience and observes precedent may slow, adapt or stop legislative changes and alterations in attitudes. The goal, of course, is not the slowness of change itself but rather that we may give extended, serious thought to what we are and are not conserving, how and why.

The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition is committed to turning the upper house into a substantially, predominantly or entirely elected chamber. This is certainly a bold move. Questions remain, especially concerning the genuinely conservative reasons for espousing such a substantial change. It is not obvious that popular election is necessary for both houses.<sup>31</sup> For the idea of appointed Lords presupposes that the wisdom necessary for good government is recognised not only by popular election (to the House of Commons) but also by those experienced in government. Lords reformers often want to say that people should enter the Lords on merit. Well and good. But appointment

presupposes precisely a merit-based system but that the best judges of such merit are elected politicians or, in the case of the 26 Lord Bishops, the Crown Appointments Commission.

The substantial conceptual question here concerns legitimacy. The presupposition behind a substantially, predominantly or wholly elected house of Lords is that it will have greater legitimacy because all voters are equally entitled to elect many or all of those who will be making the law that all will equally be under. However, it is worth observing that there is popular consent and accord that some officials have legitimacy without being elected. We do not want to elect judges, whose judgements set precedent and form case law. Not even the USA – that most self-consciously democratic of nations – allows the people to decide directly on Supreme Court appointments. So some institutions clearly do have the requisite internal capabilities to make appointments and carry out legal judgements without the people's explicit, voted-for approval. There are, of course, distinctions between appointing an independent judiciary and party-political appointees to the House of Lords. But they are not necessarily concerned with the recognition of merit. Accordingly, it is not clear that voting for an upper chamber would improve its decision-making.

The Lords will be seen as legitimate if they rightly judge what will conserve the

common good of the people. If the upper house is to be reformed, it must be for the right reasons. Doing what the polls demand is not necessarily the right way forward for the people. The clearest conservative rationale for a second chamber is to ensure that legislation is carefully drafted and deliberated over. In particular, a second chamber should prevent any Prime Minister and his government from having too much power to push through legislation. Although an elected Lords coheres well with the wide diffusion of authority – among the electorate in this case – it also unlocks one of our constitution's last barriers against sectional interest and party ambition. If there are to be elected Lords, let them be elected for very long terms!

Current Members of the Lords of all parties and cross-benchers argue that the freedom and independence of a life appointment enables the effective conduct of their duties. This is not a matter of turkeys not voting for Christmas. Such cynicism is the insidious disease infecting much of our political media. Rather it is their considered view about how best they and their successors can serve the nation. Critics will say that an appointed chamber precisely gives too much power to the Prime Minister. But the counter is, 'Appointed by whom?' Given the purpose of an appointed Lords, there is no necessary conservative reason why it should be the Prime Minister, rather than a cross-party body, who appoints.

The dimension of the Lords beyond partisan or cross-party appointment is the House of Bishops. The first theological thing to say here is that God will carry on his work in the UK whether or not the Lords are appointed or elected and whether or not the bishops have reserved places and whether or not there are twenty-six, sixteen or just two such reserved places. Christians – or Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and sympathetic non-believers for that matter – do not need to despair if the bishops are asked to leave the room quietly. However, there is a widely held view, noted by the Wakeham report, that 'the presence of the Lords Spiritual is a sign that Governments are in the end accountable not only to those who elect them but also to a higher authority',<sup>32</sup> a view which coheres with the account of divine trust given above.

For some, however, Wakeham's affirmation will not pass muster. The Theos report *Coming Off the Bench* puts the alternative views well, asking whether we should

consider the continued presence of the bishops in the House of Lords to be a unique opportunity which sees the socio-political issues at the heart of British life considered in the light of the wisdom of the Christian tradition, or an unfortunate fact of history which no one has had the time or inclination to undo.<sup>33</sup>

Accordingly, the challenge for the bishops is to contribute in a way which is 'religiously distinctive yet publicly intelligible'.<sup>34</sup> In



previous decades and previous centuries, such contributions were common throughout parliament. Witness Disraeli's argument on the Rothschild affair which was understood and (rightly) rejected. The challenge of public religious speech is different now. The bishops rarely speak in an explicitly theological voice in the Lords but their contributions, as people who are (or should be) deeply in touch with the lives of all the people of their dioceses (not just the Christians!), are nonetheless heard. The Church of England needs to come to a view as to what will best conserve the recognition of a higher authority than Crown and parliament. Official representation from non-Anglican religious bodies would be one way forward. A compatible and enterprising approach would be greater research support for the bishops and other Christian representatives. Finding ways of speaking theologically, persuasively and intelligibly would conserve what is best about the presence of *ex officio* Christian representatives.

## Christian liberty and social trust

How does Christianity relate to the trust which is the British constitution? As already shown, the distinction between society and state has a deeper correlate in the distinction of the Church – as the City of God – from the different cities of man such as nation-states. But how might Christian liberty – alongside the freedom of other religious believers – support social trust in these earthly cities? Other faiths will speak for themselves concerning their

contribution. Suffice to say that all major religions have distinctively beneficial resources on which to draw.<sup>35</sup>

Christianity shares with some other faiths the idea of intergenerational, inherited trusts which the living are responsible for stewarding. For Christianity this trust must involve passing on the gospel itself, expressed in words and in the sacraments which Christ commanded. Stewarding this trust builds intergenerational and social trust within the Christian community. This community may then build trust in other parts of the nation. Christians and governments should understand this pattern afresh and see its significance for the nation at large.

Our inherited Christian trust today shapes a national toleration for all Christian denominations and for many non-Christian beliefs. Under the umbrella of established Protestant Christianity, other religious believers may shelter. In the nineteenth century, the Conservative Party was often slowest to recognise the wisdom of toleration, perhaps because of that fascination with the status quo. But at the heart of toleration was an understanding that many views of the transcendent dimension of existence should receive a generous though not uncritical welcome in the United Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> A public confession of Christian faith marked out public space for religion which is still welcomed by many religious believers today. As Jonathan Sachs,

the Chief Rabbi says, establishment 'is a force for good, and if it isn't broke, don't fix it.'<sup>37</sup>

In light of this, the growth of suspicion directed towards Christian people in the last twenty years has been unfortunate. The government led by Tony Blair presided over this cultural change which rapidly increased during his leadership and continued during Gordon Brown's.<sup>38</sup> An in-principle scepticism about Christians and Christian organisations bedevilled thinking about welfare, family policy and employment law. These two Christian socialists became almost as distrusted by many Christians as Margaret Thatcher did by the official, left-leaning leadership of the Church of England in the 1980s.

New Labour's problems in the area of religious liberty are traceable to the concept of equality. Their approach was, to a large extent, well-intentioned, for it sought to realise in public policy the idea that all people are of equal worth. However, it also entailed a religion-blindness, an inability to distinguish between different religious beliefs. A deep ignorance of Christians' lives was endemic among leading voices in New Labour. Their religious illiteracy and ideological antipathy resulted in a failure of judgement. The worst example was employment law where an attempt was made to enforce a government-sponsored concept of equality, framed as

anti-discrimination legislation, upon all religious organisations. This leaden-footed approach understood little of the subtlety of religious organisations and showed profound disrespect for great religious traditions. The most bizarre move was the (unamended) Equality Act's idea of dividing employees of Christian organisations into two groups: in one group were those who spent most of their time teaching and performing ritual functions in the church – the ministers, vicars etc; and, in the other, those who did not spend most of their time doing this. Churches and other Christian organisations were allowed to use moral tests to 'discriminate' (in the language of the Equality Act) over appointments of the first kind but not with respect to the second.

The obvious problems with this approach are that (i) most vicars, curates and youth workers do not spend most of their time teaching and performing rituals and (ii) that organisations require doctrinal and moral integrity across their entire staff team in order to function effectively. However, a little observed feature was the attempt 'to turn the clock back' to darker days when Christian people were separated into two classes – the religious or clerical leadership on one side and the rest on the other. The sad irony is that just such a distinction permeated New Labour's attempt to recognise the doctrinal integrity of religious organisations. One got the impression that the New Labour elite knew very little about

the life of contemporary British churches and thought of them primarily in terms of the Church of England parishes of a hundred years ago. Above all, it was this ignorance of contemporary Christians that was so grievous. The presenting issue was, of course, sexuality. But the deeper problem was a lack of sympathy and familiarity with the lives of those that members of parliament are meant to represent. Equality was debased in New Labour's hands and ended up being used to crush diversity, the very thing they had wanted to promote. The idea that any group – such as the Catholic or other traditionalist churches – might think differently from the government on issues in human sexuality met with strong opposition.

It is important that British Christians do not develop a persecution complex in response to all this. The elite culture has moved away from a Christian worldview and Christians will sadly often be misunderstood. But this will almost always not reflect some anti-Christian conspiracy, although a minority may be motivated in this way. This being so, British Christians must make two arguments as well as they can. First, they must steward the trust of toleration even and especially if the British government does not understand or observe it. It is our responsibility, as the host religion, in established and non-established forms, to conserve the liberty of all to practice their religion and to encourage the government to take the same attitude, making and enforcing just laws to that end. But second, Christians should

argue that freedom of religion is good for society at large. The logic of Christianity as a missionary religion is that freedom to live, speak and practice faith in Christ is good for our neighbours as well as being right. This is the hardest argument to make in our moral climate but it is absolutely necessary if Christians are not to become a special interest group, seeking to conserve only their own comfortable arrangements. But in making this argument, Christians will be of service to politicians struggling to provide the conditions for a genuine plurality which allows for real difference in social identities.

And so churches must arise and show the true nature of society by their common life of love. There is no use bleating about religious freedom if the churches are not using the freedom they have to witness to an alternative way of living characterised by the grace, mercy and moral wisdom found in Jesus Christ. This Christian liberty is not dependent on 'religious freedom' as such. Though it is good for governments to promote the flourishing of religious faith, it is not a necessary ingredient for the work of the Kingdom of God. Christians must not fall into the statist trap of becoming a supplicant people, praying to government for scraps.

From a Christian point of view, the life of the City of God is guaranteed not by national tradition but by the promises of Almighty God which received their 'yes' in Christ Jesus. Social trust will grow best when the churches live by this gospel so that the

overflow of their Spirit-filled faith enriches the communities, neighbourhoods and institutions in which they dwell as pilgrim people.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, 43. We note that such commercialisation is also of concern to other parties.

<sup>2</sup> [thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article1912344.ece](http://thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article1912344.ece)

<sup>3</sup> Scruton, R., 'In defence of the nation' in *The Philosopher on Dover Beach*, Carcanet, 1990, 299–328, 303

<sup>4</sup> Blond, P., *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*, Faber and Faber, 2010, 3

<sup>5</sup> [balsallheathforum.org.uk](http://balsallheathforum.org.uk)

<sup>6</sup> Please note that such political theology does not necessarily prejudice a view of the theories and findings of the natural sciences concerning the human species.

<sup>7</sup> Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, 37

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ix

<sup>10</sup> [newschoolsnetwork.org/schoolreform.html](http://newschoolsnetwork.org/schoolreform.html)

<sup>11</sup> [newschoolsnetwork.org/casestudyUK.html](http://newschoolsnetwork.org/casestudyUK.html)

<sup>12</sup> [centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/CSJ\\_Green\\_paper\\_on\\_the\\_family\\_WEB\\_2nd.pdf](http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/CSJ_Green_paper_on_the_family_WEB_2nd.pdf); *The Centre for Social Justice Green Paper on the Family*: 'on receiving a notice of marriage or civil partnership, registrars should be mandated to signpost couples towards marriage preparation services. Take up of the services should be entirely voluntary. For pre- and post-birth support we believe that midwives, health visitors, ante-natal and post-natal clinics, and providers of parenting courses should be encouraged to signpost couples towards relationship support.'

Relationship education sessions should be inserted into ante-natal and post-natal classes.' (21)

<sup>13</sup> [bcft.co.uk](http://bcft.co.uk); note that BCFT also conducts excellent work with prison families.

<sup>14</sup> Gamble, A., *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, Macmillan, 1988, 50

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48

<sup>16</sup> Blond, P., *Red Tory*, 14-15

<sup>17</sup> [teachers.org.uk/files/Acad-campaign-brief-LC-Nov09.doc](http://teachers.org.uk/files/Acad-campaign-brief-LC-Nov09.doc)

<sup>18</sup> For a representative exchange, cf. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/10348834.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/10348834.stm). Also, see the NUT's 'Together Against Academies' campaign.

<sup>19</sup> Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, viii

<sup>20</sup> [centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=312](http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageRef=312)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. CSJ's 'Family Breakdown' accessible at [centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/family%20breakdown.pdf](http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/family%20breakdown.pdf); also their report entitled 'Fractured Families' and the research conducted by Wilson and Oswald (Wilson, C. M., & Oswald, A. J., 2005, 'How Does Marriage Affect Physical and Psychological Health? A Survey of the Longitudinal Evidence,' *IZA Discussion Papers* 1619, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA))

<sup>22</sup> See Kirby, J., *Broken Hearts: Family Decline and the Consequences for Society*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2002. Cf. *Why is the Government anti-Marriage? Family Policy derived from strong evidence would lead to policies which supported Marriage*, Centre for Social Justice, December 2009, accessible at [centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/Marriage%20Paper%20FINAL%20\\_iii\\_.pdf](http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/Marriage%20Paper%20FINAL%20_iii_.pdf). According to CSJ (i) 'marriage is no longer recognised by the Government' – official language has excluded the 'M' word; (ii) 'married couples are financially disadvantaged by the Government' (iii) 'low income couples are financially and materially penalised by the Government' (iv) 'the Government has failed to endorse and support relationship education' (v) 'Ministers publicly refuse to recognise the value of marriage even though it produces the best outcomes

for adults and children.' In summary, 'the Government has actively sought to disincentivise marriage and disadvantage married couples'. In the words of the Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, New Labour failed to see that 'the warmth of a child's parenting is as important to their life chances as the wealth of their upbringing' (41).

<sup>23</sup> Blake, R., *Disraeli*, 562ff

<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Churchill more than most shared in the conservative and theological proclivity to doubt the wisdom and goodness of men. Such an attitude seems better suited to steering a nation in time of war than the sunny optimism which has characterised many parts of the liberal left. Political realism, tough-minded patriotism and the willingness to put the common good ahead of individual liberty – these are all arguably conservative traits rooted in various parts of the movement's tradition.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, passim

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, A., *Salisbury*, 140, 667

<sup>27</sup> Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, 117-118 where 'One World' seems to be the correlate to 'One Nation' although this is not explicit. For a theological account of international order and the United Nations, cf. O'Donovan, O., *The Ways of Judgment*, Eerdmans, 2005, chapter 12. For war in particular, see O'Donovan, O., *The Just War Revisited*, CUP, 2003

<sup>28</sup> Conservatism, by its very nature, focuses on the particular features of life to be conserved and so it is reasonable solely to examine the constitution of the United Kingdom. Comparisons with other national constitutions and the officially defunct European constitution – arguably simply replaced by the Treaty of Lisbon – would have been valuable if space had permitted.

<sup>29</sup> It is regrettable that a comparison between Welsh, Irish, Scottish and English settlements cannot be carried out at this point.

<sup>30</sup> This was a point decided on in 1559 with the Oath of Supremacy and it is amazing today that vast numbers of people, especially in the media, wrongly describe the queen (or even the Archbishop of Canterbury!) as head of the Church.

<sup>31</sup> Polling indicates that many British people will no longer submit to being ruled by those who are unelected. In a 2010 ICM poll, 65% of people said that it is fairly or very important that those who sit in the House of Lords as legislators should all be elected by the people at large, though only 37% thought it 'very important'. ([ekkleisia.co.uk/content/survey\\_on\\_bishops\\_icm.pdf](http://ekkleisia.co.uk/content/survey_on_bishops_icm.pdf))

<sup>32</sup> Wakeham (Chair), *A House for the Future*, Royal Commission, 2000, 152; accessible at [archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm45/4534/report.pdf](http://archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm45/4534/report.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Theos, *Coming Off the Bench*, 2007, 42

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

<sup>35</sup> For a fascinating attempt to work this out in practice, see the Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education's agreed syllabus which has taken shape under the Conservative-Liberal coalition in Birmingham City Council (accessible at [birmingham-asc.org.uk/index.php](http://birmingham-asc.org.uk/index.php))

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Other forces were, of course, shaping the landscape of nineteenth century Anglicanism – the growing power of liberal theology, the Oxford movement and the continuing Evangelical revival – all of which shaped the understanding of toleration in ways we cannot pursue here.

<sup>37</sup> Sacks, J., 'Antidisestablishmentarianism – A Great Word & A Good Ideal', accessible at [chief Rabbi.org/ReadArtical.aspx?id=1167](http://chief Rabbi.org/ReadArtical.aspx?id=1167)

<sup>38</sup> For evidence to support this claim, see Davis, F., Paulhus, E., and Bradstock, A., *Moral, But No Compass – Government, Church and the Future of Welfare*, Matthew James Pub. Ltd, 2008

# Business, society and trust

We now turn to business, which is proposed here as the third artery of the conservative heart. For many people, this is where the Conservative Party starts and ends. But our account suggests that it is wise to situate business in relation to the other arteries. This is especially so in light of recent threats to trust emerging from the relationship between business and society at large.

## Business and civil society

A Christian conservatism should include business as an element of civil society, existing to serve society and not dominate it. As we saw earlier, Phillip Blond excludes 'the compulsion and determination of the marketplace' from civil society.<sup>1</sup> One can agree with the critique of marketplace slavery while maintaining the socially beneficial and 'civil' qualities of the market-based activities of business. Whether they are limited liability corporations, mutual societies, credit unions or some other entity, businesses are key elements of what makes civil society possible. This may surprise some and especially some Christians. A suspicious negativity towards business is widespread in society and the Church. People assume not only that the proper motive of business is self-interested profit but that this is the chief motive of most businesspeople. And it is a short but unwise leap from there to assume that getting on in business involves a 'greed is good' mentality and, therefore,

that successful business is somehow beyond the pale of Christian thought and practice.

Such negativity has some justification in the tradition. The Jewish and Christian Scriptures are somewhat sceptical of merchants who cross the sea hither and thither seeking profit.<sup>2</sup> However, their point is not a negativity to commerce *per se*. Jesus himself was the son of a carpenter and learnt the trade. Instead, what they criticise is the failure to see that money and markets are temporary expedients in a world 'between the times'. Idolatry towards money lies precisely in refusing to see both that money is always for something else, namely the goods of God's world, and that it will eventually pass away. Love of money is the root of all kinds of evil<sup>3</sup> in blinding people to these realities.

However, the world has also blinded Christians' eyes so that they cannot divide the wheat from the chaff. A mindless negativity towards private business has

bewitched some Christians who applaud the Conservative Party's social values but think lower taxes and free enterprise somehow unchristian. Their false dichotomy has disguised the insight that (a) Conservative social policy can lessen the need for high taxes by attending to deep social problems properly and (b) business itself has tremendous potential to serve the common good, most obviously through the creation of wealth, jobs, goods and services.

A further problem today is that businesses have bought into the idea that if every corporate entity pursues its own sectional interests then the common good will result. This is a highly dubious conception emerging from one aspect of Adam's Smith's thought. On this basis, some businesses have forgotten the common good, increasing vastly in size, causing massive environmental damage, developing exploitative labour practices, wrecking local social fabric and creating unacceptably vast income inequalities. Conservatives concerned with just judgement which conserves the common good should be deeply worried about these developments.

Of course the Conservative Party should still be seen as the party of enterprise. It should encourage wealth creation and fair employment in conjunction with profitability and robust competition. Interior to enterprise, of course, is the prospect of businesses failing. Conserving some businesses will entail not conserving

others. However, Conservatives must grasp that conserving wealth creation serves a higher goal, namely conserving people and communities. Businesses may become uncompetitive because of global markets beyond the control of employees. But people survive the failure of businesses. Society, represented by the state, must be on hand to conserve them. This conservation is itself made possible by those who create wealth and are taxed accordingly, thereby ameliorating, to some extent, the effects of intergenerational disadvantages.

Let us examine business more closely from a theological perspective. As explained above in the account of divine trust, there are many goods in God's world. We learn from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that everything which God made was good. Augustinian thought describes the interrelation of all these goods and their ends. The apostle Paul, reaffirming the message of the Jewish Torah, insists that 'everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.'<sup>4</sup> So Christians are to receive goods as goods and thank God for them. And the goal of businesses is to arrange goods, including service and intangible goods, so that all people, including Christians, can receive the goods they need. In order to exist as a community of diverse interests, we need a common economic language in the form of money

and a variety of places where that money can be exchanged for goods which are privately owned. In the exchange of goods for money (or other goods), everyone can become more able to access the goods they need and desire. Although its practical outworking is often far from perfect, this is a perfectly reasonable Christian idea. For it makes practical the idea of an order of value in which one thing is worth more or less than another thing.

The thirty-nine articles of the Church of England, the doctrinal basis of the established church and an aspect of our national constitution, recognised the nature of goods and property in its own distinctive way. The thirty-eighth article teaches that:

The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast; notwithstanding every man ought of such things as he possesses liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.

Now this article is definitely not an argument for the modern capitalist system nor for the possessive individualism which has accompanied it. But what this article does teach is that money and goods are quite properly owned by people until they are, for example, passed to others in the form of direct transfer of money, property or *pro bono* services. And, by implication,

the banning of the idea that all goods are held in common by all makes possible and necessary a market in goods and, by natural justice, some level of competition in that market to prevent unfair monopoly.

What is true for Christians is true for all people since all, as creatures, may have a share in the goods of the world. Indeed, the article indicates that the idea of property-owning is deep within British life. When Skelton, Eden, Macmillan and then Thatcher aspired to a 'property-owning democracy', they were appropriately developing this theological trust. They rightly saw that property helps to secure people amidst life's challenges. It gives them sufficient independence to launch their own initiatives in the civil practice of business.

### ***Businesses, goods and trust***

This article of faith and its fellow thirty-eight sit within a worldview which is not reducible to economics. It assumes that everything God made was good and that, despite the world's fallenness, that goodness, although seriously tainted, was not annulled. All the world's goods still come from God. Over the centuries, Christians have taken time to consider how all the different goods which there are in the world are related – to one another and to God. They have observed similarities between goods and grouped them into kinds or species; and they have seen how goods have different purposes in the world – what they are for. They have seen



the relative value of goods in relation to goods of different kinds; and they have seen how goods of the same kind may be better or worse examples of that kind and so may have greater or lesser value. Through markets we can navigate the parts of this terrain which involve economic goods by using money as a common language. Of course, businesses and people may consistently make bad mistakes about the money value of goods. Prices may be too high or low and people may willingly pay those prices. But in an open market other businesses may seek to persuade people about the quality and price of the goods they provide.

Business thus aims to provide goods people need or perceive that they need. People's perceptions of their needs may be incorrect and businesses may pander to, generate and manipulate those incorrect perceptions. But this is not a necessary part of business. Instead, business at its best will enable people to recognise goods as goods and to come to a fair valuation relative to other goods of the same and different kinds. Therefore, businesses may do much good (or harm) in the social values they promote and can shape the environment in which trust can flourish or fade. Such an outlook disciplines businesses to understand themselves as serving the common good as well as their own sectional good. As Augustine showed, love of neighbour is inseparable from love of self.<sup>5</sup> Just so, businesses' activities are inseparable

from the health of the social organism. For through businesses' faithful service in providing goods with a fair valuation, a critical trust may grow between customers, businesses and society at large. Accordingly, neither profit itself nor share value taken in isolation can ever be the bottom line. For even those shareholders who, quite reasonably, desire profitability, then proceed to use their dividends to make further decisions about the value of goods. To love money is to fail to see its true meaning, namely as a symbol of the goodness of God's world.

Consequently, directors, customers, employees, trade unions and shareholders may exercise moral leadership by insisting both on high quality goods and moral business practices concerning, for example, its treatment of employees and the non-human environment. These concerns have good economic rationale. With respect to the mode of business activity, Lord Brian Griffiths of Fforestfach, Vice-chairman of Goldman Sachs argues that a

company with an amoral standard [of operation] would be a cold, bleak and insecure environment in which to work. Loyalty would not exist. A person's commitment to honour a promise would forever remain in doubt. There would be no trust.<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to outline the positive commercial effects of solid moral standards

in a corporation before commenting that these

benefits...result from trust; and trust is an example of what an economist would term 'externalities'...goods which have tangible economic value and which increase the productivity of a company's operation, but [which] are not commodities which can be bought and sold on the open market.<sup>7</sup>

Trust, in Griffiths' view, is the beating heart of business. And so the growth of trust is both the prerequisite and goal of a healthy, moral market economy and the society which gives the economy its rationale. For, as we saw earlier, it is precisely the goods made available by businesses that mediate the trust between customers, corporations and generations of those who enjoy the goods.

### ***Banking and the flight from trust***

But trust is precisely what has been in sad decline and some forms of business have been directly to blame. Deep economic problems have arisen when people and businesses have forgotten the meaning and value of money. Money's basic purpose is to enable people to purchase concrete goods or services. Banking deserves special mention at this point. The failures of many banks, Goldman Sachs included, to support the growth of trust is now well-known. The basic problem is that banking has recently become exciting and has got detached from

the mundane business of life. Banking is and should be a boring affair. This is the view of Mervyn King, governor of the Bank of England, who has championed boring banking for years. Retail banking – the kind we see on our high street and which holds your current and savings accounts and, perhaps, your personal debts – is meant to be dull. Ideally a bank is an institution which should hold your money securely, make it available to you on request and take a low level of risk with your cash in transparently ethical investments. In particular, it should take the excess credit of Mr and Mrs Smith and make it available as a loan, on reasonable terms, to Mr and Mrs Jones. This kind of banking is manifestly not very exciting but is, at the same time, a very worthy endeavour. It is very much secondary to the primary and exciting business of economic life, which is the buying, selling and receiving of goods. A bank lending money to Mr and Mrs Jones is far less exciting than Mr and Mrs Jones actually buying and moving into their first home.

The other, more exciting, side of banking has caused the difficulties. On this commercial or investment side, there has been a dramatic and sustained departure from the boring, concrete realities of the weekly groceries and the bricks and mortar of mortgage-bought houses. Whether the Thatcherite 'Big Bang' reforms, which deregulated much of City activities, were ultimately responsible for this departure is a question for qualified economists. What

we can all see is that banking has taken off on a flight of fancy into the strange world of bundles of mortgage debt floating around the globe from one bank to the next, abstracted from the actual bricks and mortar in London, Glasgow, Bury St Edmunds, Cardiff and Truro. Christians would argue that there has been a departure from the moral discipline which the structure of God's world places upon our practical rationality. For a combination of the globalisation of markets and greed brought about a certain unreality in what should have been ordinary transactions. By losing grip on the created goods which people handle on a day-to-day basis and by developing financial instruments which have only a very tenuous link to concrete aspects of God's world, our embodied lives have been ripped apart. The painful fall-out of job losses and home repossessions is the result.

In this strange unworldly way, banks have taken massive risks with customers' money. Moreover, having been bailed out by the very people they were meant to be serving, they have not ultimately shared in those risks and their consequences. Martin Luther was scathing about similar, sixteenth century bankers, critiquing them for forcing others to bear risk and shielding themselves from suffering the consequences of loss. For to keep oneself from entering into risk is to seek to live beyond God's providential government. This is to live a life not fit for creatures.<sup>8</sup> But now that we have all been

brought down to earth with a bump and made painfully aware of our creaturely ignorance and incompetence, we need to stay there.

Business should serve this reorientation of our economic awareness and the growth of trust. They should seek to provide goods which are actually goods needed by the people they serve. For, contra some libertarian thinkers, it is not the act of choice itself which is basic to the moralising power of the market but rather the availability of good choices and the absence of bad, morally destructive ones. From temptingly priced, innutritious foodstuffs to pornographic materials to dangerous mortgage packages, businesses can decide what range of choice to set before people. Choice does breed responsibility but the role of a responsible, moral market is to help people to decide what is genuinely good and its value. This is what markets should be doing. Moral business leadership and responsible consumer attitudes are key to conserving and developing markets in this direction. In this way businesses participate directly in the formation of trust, an intangible which is much needed in today's trust-poor political and economic culture.

### ***Markets and communities revisited***

So we return to the major Conservative question of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We see straight away that an in-principle opposition of markets and communities is unintelligible. Communities

gather round common goods with each individual holding some goods in private. Businesses provide some (not all) of those common goods and enable individuals, families and private institutions to have the security of their private goods which enable them to involve themselves in the community's life. Accordingly, the markets by which businesses operate are necessary, interior aspects of communal life.

But we should be critical of certain ways in which markets operate. There will be occasions when some businesses simply become uncompetitive and unproductive. This was surely the case with many of the old nationalised industries by the 1980s. However, the rapid destruction of patterns of work on which families depended may lead to the evisceration of human hope and aspiration. Instead of supporting social flourishing, markets can bring about worklessness and state dependency for those not quick-footed or versatile enough to adapt to meet changing needs. This is the substance of Phillip Blond's criticism of the Thatcherite era.

What does this all mean for the Conservative Party today? It means that Conservatives must grasp in new depth the meaning of business so that their right support for private enterprise may be reenergised and reimagined. They must enrich free market thought and practice by conserving the intangibles of an economy. They must see businesses as essential

aspects of civil society which create trust and build social fabric as well as enabling diverse families and individuals to have a base of financial security which prevents them from becoming dependent on the state. And they must ask Britain's leading businesspeople to face up to the moral nature of their role instead of hiding behind the myth of the neutral market system.

On one level, this is uncontroversial. Whether you are a One Nation conservative, a more libertarian Conservative or even a New Labourite you will, at some point, be happy to affirm that business achieves socially helpful outcomes. But times will come when the nature of that affirmation is tested. Then we will see what people's true commitments are. Will they be for sectional interest alone or will they be for the goods which mediate the forms of trust that serves the common good?

There are no quick fixes in this area. Nonetheless, any Conservative policy should seek the moralisation of business leaders, the extension of the work of mutual societies and credit unions, better education about handling money and action to discourage irresponsible lending and borrowing. These things, among others, make for the growth of trust.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Blond, P., *Red Tory*, 3

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 18 represents a particularly dark view of the matter in rich symbolic language.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6.10

<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 4.4

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *de Doctrina Christiana*, cf. O'Donovan, O., *The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine*, Wipf and Stock, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Griffiths, B., 'The Business Corporation as a Moral Community' in Griffiths B., Siciro, R.A., Berry, N., Field, F., *Capitalism, Morality and Markets*, Institute of Economic Affairs, 2001, 21

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>8</sup> Luther, M., *Trade and Usury*, trans. Jacobs, C.M., *Luther's Works* volume 45, Fortress Press, 1962

# Conclusion

**By way of brief conclusion we will focus very directly on the contemporary moment. We have already taken up a variety of current policy concerns. But where is conservatism and the Conservative Party at the beginning of the 21st century? What are the challenges and opportunities for Christian engagement in the Conservative Party today? What might political theology have to contribute?**

These questions should be asked not only in the central and parliamentary party but also in local associations and in Conservative Party affiliated organisations such as the Conservative Christian Fellowship, a conservative and trust-building organisation *par excellence*.

With over twenty years of excellence behind it, the CCF has been a tremendous force for good in the Conservative Party. Tim Montgomerie and David Burrowes exercised initial leadership by founding the movement in Exeter in 1990. While Tim has moved on to ConservativeHome, David, now an MP, remains CCF chairman and the Fellowship is led by Elizabeth Berridge. People associated with the CCF have done a great deal to move the Conservative Party towards its current One Nation outlook. While William Hague conducted the 'Listening to Britain' campaign in the aftermath of the 1997 election defeat, Tim Montgomerie and CCF trustee Guy Hordern ran a parallel set of hearings called 'Listening to Britain's

churches', seeking to gather the wisdom of the nation's Christian communities.

Around the same time, various CCF members such as David Lidington and Gary Streeter (supported by leading Conservative figures David Willetts and Oliver Letwin) were key members of the research group, Renewing One Nation, which bore fruit in the publication of *There is Such a Thing as Society*, a book of essays which reflected the thinking of Iain Duncan Smith that would finally emerge as the Centre for Social Justice, founded in 2004.<sup>1</sup>

The CSJ is a clear example of a match between the political theology I have been drawing on and British political conservatism. A non-partisan think-tank, it mainly serves the people whom the Conservative Party has been traditionally accused of neglecting, the working class poor who suffer from a particularly lethal mix of 'pathways to poverty': family breakdown, educational failure,

worklessness and economic dependency, addictions and indebtedness.

These pathways to poverty are the unpaid debts of the middle class, socially liberal left and the middle-class, economically neo-liberal right. Phillip Blond puts the case well when he denounces the

Pleasure-seeking, mind-altering drug-takers and sexual pioneers of the 1960s who instigated the fragmentation of the working class family and sold the poor the poisonous idea of liberation through chemical and sexual experimentation.<sup>2</sup>

As Blond says, 'While toxic to civilised middle-class life, this mixture was lethal to the working class.'<sup>3</sup>

These patterns have recently been combined with New Labour's legislative priorities and cultural leadership. What has been left behind is a 'suppliant class – cut off from earlier working class ambition and aspiration'<sup>4</sup> and the deep social wounds of a 'broken society'. At the heart of it all is a deficit of hope, that deeply human intangible which fuels our love for families and neighbours, our work and economic productivity and our care for children and the vulnerable.

A conservative hope does not expect utopia but does look for genuine improvement in people's lives. Conservatives should reject utopianism and moral relativism because

they know they are dangerous not only to the most vulnerable in society but also to the middle class. This has not always been the record of Conservative governments, supporters of which have sometimes callously regarded the doubling of poverty during the eighties as collateral damage in the fight for a modern market economy. But sadly, there are some today who wish to combine again the lethal mix of social libertarianism and radical free marketeering. This is not the path to freedom but is itself a road to a new sort of dehumanising serfdom, one which Disraeli and Wilberforce would have vehemently opposed.

What then is needed? What must we conserve and what must we retrieve? We need a restoration of trust, especially trust as mediated in families made stable by employment and the assets whereby they can be debt and addiction free over multiple generations. As our analysis of trust showed, family life must be right at the heart of this fight-back. For in the family we learn that we are loved and that others have taken care to provide for us materially, emotionally and, in some cases, spiritually. There we learn the intergenerational trust which enriches our own lives but also those of our neighbours as we head out expectantly into the world. This is important for all, including the middle class, where greed and fear may crowd out hope and that right desire for social and familial mutuality. Such tendencies reflect the fact that spiritual

poverty knows no class divides in this one nation we all share.

Evidence-based policies are key to the renewal of trust and hope in family life. For we must engage with the genuine problems which people are facing in our toughest estates, in the young offenders' institutions and in adult prisons. The CSJ has now produced plenty of material on the five pathways to poverty.<sup>5</sup> And David Cameron's commitment to the Big Society has launched the Conservative Party ship out in the right direction. In its first months, the Liberal-Conservative coalition seems to be in reasonable working order, despite early setbacks. Crucially, they have jointly grasped the conceptual centre of the questions we face in the battle for a freer and bigger society.

But David Cameron faces a tremendous struggle to make these ideas understood and put into practice by the country at large. Moreover, some Conservatives have become so influenced by the benefits and side-effects of past economic, social and housing policies that they are now virtually removed from the extreme social meltdown and trans-generational poverty endemic in parts of UK cities and many rural areas. More hopefully, many others, especially but not exclusively in the younger generation, understand and sympathise deeply with the Big Society or One Nation conservatism Cameron is proposing, when allied with a

fiscal policy which tackles the horrendous debt crisis we are facing.

This brief and incomplete narrative of the re-emergence of Big Society and One Nation thinking signals the debt owed to Christian faith by the Conservative Party. So when it comes to religion, especially the Christian religion, the government led by the Conservative Party must, in the spirit of the Big Society, be on the front foot in inviting the vital force of Christianity and other religions to contribute in word and deed to the Party and the nation. The government should make room for society, including the churches and Christian faith-based groups, to get on with the work which humans are called to do, to love God, love their neighbours as themselves and take care of the non-human world.

These two cities, the churches and the one nation, are intended for a cooperative, though occasionally, by necessity, confrontational, existence. A Conservative Party informed by those who understand that authority is held in political trust from God will be better able to obey its own inner logic and resist the temptations to confuse the work of the state with the work of society. Christianity is uniquely placed in the history, contemporary structure and religious DNA of the United Kingdom to remind government of its awesome and demanding responsibilities both to God and to the people it serves, but also to prevent it from overstepping its limited role.



The people of many different churches – majority Black, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Free, Independent, Church of Scotland, Presbyterian and others – are all called to live their distinctively God-centred lives and, in so doing, to love their neighbours by building the trust which will strengthen society and enable the government to do the judgements which are necessary in this generation and those to come.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Streeter, G. (ed.), *There is Such a Thing as Society*

<sup>2</sup> Blond, P., *Red Tory*, 18

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>5</sup> [centreforsocialjustice.org.uk](http://centreforsocialjustice.org.uk)

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