Experiments in Living

Christianity and the Liberal Democrat Party

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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 Flannagan (CSM), and Zoe Dixon (LCDF). 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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Conservative Christian Fellowship
Making an impact

ccfwebsite.com

Christian Socialist Movement

thecsm.org.uk

Liberal Democrat Christian Forum

ldcf.net

Introduction

The Liberal Democrats are the smallest party with the biggest ideas. Indeed, it is the very bigness of their central idea — liberalism — that perhaps explains the smallness of the party. If you value liberty of conscience and freedom of association, if you think individuals should not be cowed by groups, if you value tolerance and fairness then you are, in some very important ways, a liberal, even if you also vote Tory, or Labour, or UKIP, or Green. Liberalism is pervasive throughout our society, to the extent that no one political party can truly be said to own it any more. [1]

The Liberal Democrats, then, are faced with the problem of carrying the torch for a set of ideas with which everyone already implicitly agrees. Thus it is a common refrain amongst Liberal Democrats that the other main parties routinely steal their policies. For the same reason it is an equally common refrain amongst the electorate that no one really knows what the Liberal Democrats stand for. Within the party, too, there is disagreement as to how their liberalism works itself out differently from the 'liberalism' of the left or of the right.

And yet, the Liberal Democrats *are* different from the other parties, and they do provide a credible alternative. The credibility of the Liberal Democrats has been demonstrated in recent history with the rise of the party's fortunes during the 2010 general election. Here the party was able to position itself as the choice for political reform. Voters, evidently tired of the old Conservative-Labour dichotomy, were reluctant to give either one of these parties an outright majority. In the ensuing hung parliament, the Liberals emerged as the party that the others had to court. After almost a week of intense negotiation full of many carrots and a few sticks, the Liberal Democrats agreed to an alliance with the Conservatives to form the new Government. While they remain a small party, no one can say that the Liberal Democrats are insignificant.

The rapidly changing fortune of the Liberal Democrats provides a clue as to how this present work will unfold. At the commencement of writing this essay, the Liberal Democrats were a marginal party, rarely mentioned in the media except as the butt of political satirists' jokes. Their leader, Nick Clegg, was largely unknown to the wider electorate, usually heard (if he was heard at all) arguing for more attention to be paid to his party. Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrat Shadow Chancellor, was a critic arguing from the outside. Of its few prominent MPs, Mark Oaten and

Lembit Opik were primarily known for their interesting private lives, and Evan Harris was either celebrated or reviled as an outspoken secularist and atheist campaigner. Within weeks, none of these three were MPs, the Liberal Democrats became part of government, Vince Cable became Secretary of State for Business and Nick Clegg was appointed Deputy Prime Minister.

It will not do to write an examination of specific Liberal Democrat policies or particular Liberal Democrat politicians. The ground is constantly shifting and will shift even more as the necessary compromises of Government work their course. Instead, the present piece starts from the assumption that, while the actual role of the party and its members will inevitably change, the ideological importance of the party for Parliament will remain. Furthermore, the ideals of the Liberal Democrats and the flavour of their liberalism will make their presence known in our already 'liberal' society. For this reason, we are more interested in looking at liberalism itself, and the ways that Liberal Democrats historically have understood it than we are in addressing party manifestos past and present.

Above all, however, this piece is a *Christian* examination of liberalism. Compared to the more than two thousand years of history, thought and practice of Christianity, liberalism is a mere adolescent. There are

more forms of Christianity than there are of liberalism, and thus to speak of 'the' Christian approach is to invite even more complication than it would do to speak of 'the' liberals. That being said, while our approach clearly betrays Protestant, Anglo-Saxon influences, the following theological analysis draws from strong lines of Christian tradition that run broader and deeper than any one school (or church!) of thought. Liberalism, and the party which takes its name, has a history inextricable from certain forms of Christianity. We will examine the historical roots of key Christian groups and Christian leaders on Liberalism in Britain. The High Anglicanism of Gladstone and the Nonconformist conscience of the disestablishmentarians has shaped liberalism and the Liberal Democrats in ways whose contours can still be seen today. In the present age, the Liberal Party has acquired something of a reputation as a haven for secular humanists. Yet while it is true that leading anti-religious campaigners such as Evan Harris and Richard Dawkins are Liberal Democrats, some of the nation's most articulate Christian politicians (such as Baroness Shirley Willams, Simon Hughes, Steve Webb and Tim Farron amongst others) also call the party home. Christians occupy key ideological and leadership positions within the party, and indeed, Christians constitute a high proportion of Liberal party membership.[2] Liberalism provides a place for the less religiously sure as well. Nick Clegg, a self-confessed agnostic who nevertheless

attends church regularly and is raising his children as Catholic[3], probably represents a wider spread of society than do the fearful and angry fundamentalists found on either side of the religion/anti-religion divide.

These connections are no accident, for liberalism and Christianity are bedfellows, albeit at times uneasy ones. The impulse that attracts a certain sort of Christian to the party is similar to that which attracts a certain sort of secularist. The passion for social justice that drives the Christian is akin to that of the humanist human rights campaigner. The 'free-thinking' atheist and the Nonconformist Churchman share a common cause. Today it is liberal cultures that best provide the space for the social experiment that is Christianity to flourish. In turn, historically it was Christian thought which originally nurtured liberalism. Liberalism sprang from Christianity and its care for the liberty of individual human beings is a product of revolutionary seeds sown by the earliest Christians two thousand years ago.

Overview

The present essay is divided into four parts. Part One deals with the Christian influences lying at the roots of British liberalism and the Liberal party. The essay does not pretend towards an exhaustive historical account. Instead, after a brief overview of Liberal beginnings, we focus on nineteenth century Nonconformity and some of its concerns, and on William Ewart Gladstone

and some of his. Gladstonian Christianity and Nonconformist religion impacted not only Liberalism but also the wider British cultural-political landscape. We consider in particular the so-called 'Nonconformist conscience' and the vexed matter of disestablishment. The essay then briefly traces the implications of this Christian influence through the various iterations of liberalism and the Liberal party, up to and including the social liberalism of the present day Liberal Democrats.

The historical part is, in fact, more a history of the development of certain key ideas than it is a history of persons and events. The focus on ideas continues in the subsequent three parts. Liberalism is above all, a political philosophy of *liberty* or freedom. Part Two thus looks at the role of 'freedom' in Christian thought and its relationship to the secular variations of the same. There are two main strands of 'freedom' in operation, namely a sense of freedom *from* all constraints and a sense that true freedom means freedom *to* flourish in a particular way. These two freedoms do not always coincide. The essay suggests some of the main points of congruence and tension between these senses of freedom, as well as considering how Christian liberty fits within the wider liberal milieu.

Liberty means nothing if it does not apply to the real lives of actual persons. What is more, the category of personhood is as important for Christian theology as it is for liberalism.

For this reason, Part Three takes a close look at the development of the idea and value of the '*individual*', and at the Christian roots of 'human rights'. In the present age, of course, much of the rhetoric of personhood and human rights makes no reference to Christianity. Part Three concludes by questioning the track record and ability of purely humanist liberalism in upholding and maintaining liberal human rights.

Finally, Part Four looks at the component of *equality* that is so important to both Christianity and liberalism. The essay considers the place of equality and the role of fairness in modern liberal discourse as well as Christian theology and ethics. Liberals – Christian and secular – often stress the importance of providing fairness in opportunities rather than outcomes. All persons should be equally free to pursue their path apart from coercion – be it religious, political or cultural. Thus another prime component of equality is tolerance. Liberal society requires tolerance, yet it is unsure how to go about tolerating individuals and groups who depart from the norm, especially when it comes to religion. The liberal solution of tolerating religion only so long as it stays in a supposed 'private' sphere is now commonplace. We challenge this approach as politically and theologically incoherent. Instead, there are ample resources within liberalism that allow for tolerating the existence of divergent factions sharing one public space. The traditional liberal impulse towards seeing

groups as 'experiments in living' deserving of equal opportunity to sink or swim recommends itself to modern Christians living as minorities within liberalism – and as Liberals.

It is to the history of Christianity in the Liberal party, and then a closer study of the three key ideas driving Christianity and Liberalism that we now turn.

Notes

[1] It is worth noting here that there is a difference between *theological* liberalism and *political* liberalism, the focus of our present study. As a general rule, 'theological liberalism' is the name for the school of thought that takes an historical-critical view of the development of the Scriptures and Church practice. It tends towards agnosticism or rejection of the supernatural claims of Christian doctrine while retaining core principles of Christian ethics and community. Both theologically liberal and traditional Christians can be attracted to political liberalism, and indeed are found within the Liberal Democrat party. Certainly, the politically liberal values of fairness, equality, social justice and personal responsibility would find a home with those who tend towards a literal reading of Biblical injunctions no less than their theologically liberal brethren.

[2] A major independent survey in 1999 revealed a majority of party members (65%) consider themselves to be religious. Of these, 70% are C of E, 15 % Methodist, 11 % Roman Catholic. In addition, these party members are educated and articulate. 'Of the three main parties, the Liberal Democrats are the most highly educated.' 40% Liberal Democrats have a degree compared to 30% Labour and 19% Conservative. Paul Whiteley, Parick Seyd and Anthony Billinghurst, *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots,* Oxford University Press: 2006, 23–25.

[3] Interview with Nick Clegg, *Telegraph Magazine,* 10 April 2010, 27.

Part I: History

The Liberal party has gone through a number of iterations since its inception in the nineteenth century.[1] At all stages Christians and their concerns have played central roles in shaping liberal policy. Christianity continues to influence the modern Liberal Democrats, but it is especially in the early stages of the party that the Christian contours of Liberalism are most clearly seen. Christianity is in the DNA of British Liberalism – it is impossible to tell the story of the Liberal politics without running into Liberal Christians at every turn.

The tradition of moral crusading, radical dissent and opposition to institutionalised privilege runs deep and strong in British history, but it would not coalesce into liberalism until the nineteenth century. The word 'liberal' appeared in Spanish and French discourse during the first decade of the century. It referred to those who agitated for constitutional reform, sovereignty and individual freedoms. In Britain the term was originally used as a term of abuse, as when Robert Southey attacked 'British *Liberales'* in 1816.[2] Eventually, however, the label became more salubrious as adherents began to own the ideas. By 1842 the radical campaigner Richard Cobden was able to declare both the Conservative Robert Peel and the Whig Lord John Russell 'liberals' and mean it as a compliment.

When considering Liberal history, tracing the development of the idea of liberalism is as important as the party itself.[3] Indeed, it is the very preservation of the term 'liberal' that serves as a testament to the success of the ideas, even if the parties using the name experience fluctuation in popularity and power. Political historian Michael Steed thinks that the strength of the liberal tradition is what sustained supporters through the many lean years when political Liberals had no hope of forming a government. 'The Liberal Party's survival in adversity is a tribute to its own belief that what it stood for was important, distinctive and attractive.'[4] If the ideas had not been strong – and strongly held – then the name 'Liberal' would not have survived to furnish the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats are not the only political party to hold to liberal ideas, however, they are the party with the strongest claim to the label, and are arguably the best preservers of the liberal tradition.

The Liberal tradition

What constitutes this tradition? The most common and consistent theme of liberalism is that of liberty: freedom for individuals and for groups.[5] Asked why he was a liberal, in 1936 the political scientist Ernest Barker answered that it was because liberalism 'has been a continuous force in English history, acting for causes I believed to be good – free churches, free parliaments, free trade and the freedom of labour.'[6] It is often assumed that the Liberals are a party of the middle or the centre. Yet many Liberals draw the spectrum differently, with liberalism on one side and totalitarianism of any kind on the other. It is the affirmation of 'freedom' which has given the Liberals a different approach to traditional 'left' or 'right' politics, the extremes of either of which are communism or fascism.

In the history of the United Kingdom, often the hegemonic tendencies against which 'liberals' fought were expressed in the institutions of the aristocracy and the established Church. Thus it is true that liberalism has its roots in opposition to Christian authoritarianism. Significantly, however, it is *Christian* opposition to Christian authoritarianism that forms the backbone of the liberal tradition. So for example, Steed and others can trace the thread of British liberalism through Milton, Cromwell and the Puritans. Behind these dissenters lie the Lollards – followers of the fourteenth century radical English theologian John Wycliffe.[7] Closer to the

point, it was Nonconformist Christians opposed to the monopoly of power and influence of the Established Anglican Church that provided the bedrock and impetus for the most distinguishing features of the early Liberal Party.

Emancipation

Before considering the story of the Liberal Party, we need to briefly look at the pre-liberal political and religious context from which Liberalism sprang.

By the 1830s the two traditional blocs of political affiliation were disintegrating and new ideological alliances were being formed. An embryonic liberalism was diffused throughout the political system; it would take a series of far-reaching reforms to parliament and public life to shake up both the progressive Whigs and the conservative Tories and set the stage for a new, Liberal party.

One crucial issue (from 1829) was the Christian matter of Catholic Emancipation. The nature of Established Protestant Anglicanism meant that British Catholics were barred from participating in key areas of public life. Whigs and some Tory politicians saw the need for allowing emancipation. When Prime Minister Wellington and Robert Peel (both Tories) carried emancipation through with the support of the Whig opposition, they angered many of the Tory faithful.

The resulting coalition between Tories and Whigs may have produced emancipation, but it also led to a weak and compromised government. Alienated conservatives punished the Government at the next general election in 1830.

Ironically for them, the result was a further weakened Tory Government that allowed the Whigs to bring the matter of Reform to the top of the agenda.

Reform

'Reform' – the movement coalescing around the need to solve the connected problems of rotten boroughs, disenfranchised populations in industrial cities, and the under-representation of an increased electorate - became a *cause célèbre* for the Whigs and dissenting Tories. Wrangling over Reform further undermined the Conservative Government, and eventually it was forced to resign.

Earl Grey, a Whig, was invited by the King to form the new Government. Lord John Russell, also a Whig, was placed in charge of Reform. His 1831 Bill was unpopular and led to another General Election. This time, more Reform supporters were returned to government and in 1832 the House of Lords reluctantly passed the Reform measure. The electorate was increased to incorporate a larger male population (no women were yet allowed to vote). Rotten boroughs were essentially abolished. Reform extended to Scotland, Wales, Ireland and England,

particularly affecting those areas that would go on to become Liberal strongholds. By the end of 1832 the struggle for Reform had considerably shaken the political landscape both inside and outside Parliament. Three ideological groups were now apparent – the declining Whig party, the Radicals and the internally divided Conservatives, the latter under the leadership of Robert Peel.

Whig fortunes continued to fall following Lord Russell's attempts to curb the revenues of the Protestant Church of Ireland. The unpopular measures sent four of his cabinet to the Conservative side, strengthening Peel's party and also providing more evidence of the importance of Church matters in nineteenth century politics.[8] Following the ascension of Queen Victoria in 1837, the Whigs fell into further disarray, leading eventually (in 1841) to a large Conservative majority and Peel's second Premiership.

Corn laws

It appears to me that a moral and even a religious spirit may be infused into the topic and if agitated in the same manner that the question of slavery has been, it will be irresistible. [9]

An important popular movement at this time was essential for crystallising liberal political attitudes. The Anti-Corn Law League's campaign was an attack on economic privilege at the same time that it was a moral crusade directed on behalf of

starving people. The poor were kept in their hardship by protectionist laws artificially keeping the price of grain high.

Led by the Radicals Richard Cobden and John Bright, the Anti-Corn Law campaign rallied behind the idea of Free Trade by appealing to Christian conscience. The League was known for its Christian rhetoric. Bright, a Quaker and Nonconformist, came naturally to the language of biblical justice and love for neighbour. Cobden, a seasoned campaigner, was perhaps more calculated in his appropriation of Christian ideals.[10] For Cobden: 'Their veneration of God shall be our leverage to upset their reverence for the aristocracy.'[11]

In any case, the appeal was successful and the Christian conscience (especially the Nonconformist conscience, as we shall see below) was roused. Parliament acted. Against the wishes of his protectionist Conservative colleagues, Peel and a coalition of Whigs supported the abolition of the Corn Laws. Once again, Peel's actions alienated large swathes of his own party. Already bitter from Catholic Emancipation, the Conservatives would never again trust Peel and his faction, a political fellowship that included a certain William Ewart Gladstone.

Liberals at last

In 1852 the Peelites, Whigs and Radicals who supported Free Trade for economic and moral reasons held the balance of power against the Conservatives. Gladstone was appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer and in 1853 he produced the most thoroughgoing Free Trade Budget yet seen. The economic privilege of landowners was reduced via the extension of legacy duty. Furthermore, over one hundred items were freed from tax, including items such as laundry soap, which lent relief to the working poor. The political historian Roy Douglas considers this Budget as 'one of the most impressive in Britain's fiscal history.'[12]

By 1859 the loose association of opposition politicians were generally known as 'Liberals'. The term designated more allegiance to a familial set of principles (such as Reform, Emancipation and Free Trade) than to a party, and these members officially belonged to different factions. The General Election of that year again returned a number of MPs who were able to uphold a majority opposition against the minority Conservative Government. Finally, on 6th June 1859, a meeting was held in London. Two hundred and seventy four MPs turned up and thrashed out an agreement to properly organise their informal coalition. John Bright gave the union his blessing. Shortly thereafter, the Conservative Government was defeated. Palmerston emerged as Prime Minister, Russell became Foreign Secretary, and Gladstone renewed his role as Chancellor – for the first time as a member of the newly established Liberal Party.

J.S. Mill

One of the most important intellectual figures during this time of early and explicit Liberalism was the Radical John Stuart Mill. His *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) 'gave clear meaning to the central Liberal concern for freedom.'[13] Mill's articulation of the philosophy of liberty and his ability to trace the implications of this idea for culture, politics and social morality was influential in his time, and remains so today. Features of Mill's philosophy will be discussed further below.[14]

Evidently, however, Mill's ideas proved more palatable to the electorate than the man himself. Despite running in multiple elections, Mill only served as an MP for three years between 1865 and 1868. It is a particularly strange quirk of political history that Mill should have lost his seat at this time, for the General Election of 1868 was otherwise spectacularly successful for the Liberals, returning a large majority of over one hundred members.

W.E. Gladstone

What the Liberal party may have lost in Mill it more than gained in Gladstone, who first became Prime Minster after the 1868 General Election. Gladstone would serve as Prime Minister four times: 1868–1874, 1880–1885, 1886 and finally 1892–1894. Although in many ways Gladstone was a lifelong Peelite and deeply conservative, the disposition of the Liberal Party owes much to the imprint of this 'Grand Old Man'. More than any other leader, it was Gladstone's personality, convictions and approach that gave Liberalism the shape and character that it enjoys to this day.

In 1868 the Liberal party was notably successful in Scotland, Ireland and Wales – all Nonconformist or Catholic regions. In England, the success of Liberalism was affected by a large Irish immigrant population, which again had a strong Catholic overtone. The religious flavour of Liberal politics was particularly well suited to Gladstone. 'Politics, for Gladstone, had no meaning except as the vindication of underlying moral and religious principles'.[15]

We will shortly look at some of these principles. However, before considering Gladstone's Christianity, we need to consider the other key religious influence on British Liberalism, namely, Nonconformity.

Christian landscape

Historians often stress the importance of religion for understanding the nineteenth century political landscape of the United Kingdom. Then, as now, there were three main blocs of Christian tradition in the UK: Roman Catholics; Protestant National Established Churches; and Protestant Nonconformist groups such as Baptists, Congregationalists and Quakers who opposed official combinations of Church and State in principle.

In Ireland the majority peasantry was Catholic, the landowners Protestant – although Ulster Protestants occupied all class levels. Catholicism was strongly identified with Irish nationalism, while the Protestant Church of Ireland was associated with English allegiance. In Wales, Nonconformity was a dominant force. Services were conducted in Welsh, and the chapels were locally built and run. In Scotland, Protestant Presbyterians held sway over a significant minority of Catholics. Although Established, the Presbyterian Church shared with the Nonconformists many features in leadership structure, theology and worship. The 'Disruption' of 1843 saw the creation of the Free Kirk of Scotland with further affinities to Nonconformity. Politically, Catholics, Nonconformists and the Free Church tended towards Liberalism, while the Established Churches had strong Tory connections. In England, the Nonconformist population was comparable with the Established Church, with the 1851 national census showing almost as many Nonconformists as Anglicans.[16] In England the link between landowning and rural Anglicans and Conservatism was strong, as was the link between Liberalism and Nonconformity. Nonconformist Christianity was especially popular amongst the working and middle classes of the fast-growing industrial towns. These churches provided opportunities for leadership, education and activism for people who had no other means of social organisation. Trade Unionism, the Temperance Movements and political Liberalism all drew deeply from these wells.

Nonconformity

Nonconformity supplies the backbone of English Liberalism.[17]

Even before there was a Liberal Party, Nonconformists were 'liberals'. Radicals like Cobden stood for freedom of association, social justice and personal responsibility – all central planks of Nonconformist belief. After the consolidation of the Party, the campaigning rhetoric of the likes of Gladstone and Bright attacked privilege of all kinds. The attack was not on the accumulation of wealth or power *per se* but on the un-earned nature of that accumulation. Inheritance, nepotism, obscure legal loopholes - all were attacked as obstacles to progress. 'Once privilege was abolished, men would be fully free and enabled to better their lot in life.'[18] It was this emphasis that helped to cement the support of the ranks of Nonconformist urban poor as well as the rising middle-classes of Nonconformist industrialists and professionals.

Not only was there an emotional and intellectual resonance with Liberal ideas; the 1867 Reform Act provided the means for the Nonconformists to *do* something about it. Reform enfranchised more people and provided the Liberals with an expanded electoral base in the towns and cities. The areas of strongest Liberal support

thus corresponded to the regions where Nonconformity was most prevalent such as Wales, Scotland and the North of England.

Liberal nonconformity

For proponents and opponents alike, 'Liberalism' and 'Nonconformism' were virtually synonymous terms. Some of the age's greatest parliamentarians were Liberal Nonconformists. Joseph Chamberlain's Liberalism owed much to his early Unitarianism. John Bright came into political prominence after leading a Dissenter protest against church rates in Rochdale in 1840. He would go on to become the first Nonconformist to sit in cabinet in 1868. The Liberal MPs Edward Miall, Edward Baines, Samuel Morley and W.T. Stead were all Congregationalists.

Outside of the House, Nonconformist ministers influenced their congregations and the wider voting population. Preachers called for Christian involvement in public life, and for the use of political power as a responsibility towards God and man. In this way the Liberal awakening of the 1860s is largely attributed to Nonconformist influence.[19] Nonconformity pushed the issues of social reform, education policy and temperance in the Liberal party agenda. Through this political activity they brought an atmosphere of conscience-based campaigning and commitment to great causes to Victorian public life. Apart from proving a core base of voters, Nonconformity made its mark on the Liberal party in two main ways: as crusaders for moral seriousness and as champions of disestablishment.

Christian moral conscience

Politics is not a pastime, but ... a perpetual contest with wrong.[20]

The Liberal reputation for moral crusading and principled politics owes much to what historians commonly refer to as the 'Nonconformist conscience'. The first and most effective 'liberal' and Christian appeal to public morality came from the Anti-Corn Law campaign of Bright and Cobden. The success of the campaign showed proto-Liberals and Nonconformists alike that Christian conscience could be harnessed in the service of revolutionary ideas more commonly (and fearfully) associated with godless French Revolutionaries.

As a leading Liberal in the 1840s and 50s, Bright would continue to channel Nonconformist religious energy into positive political causes. According to Ian Bradley, 'More than any other single figure, Bright gave Victorian Liberalism its distinctive moral rhetoric and fervour. Palmerston hated him for it, calling him the "Honourable and religious gentleman."'[21] Gladstone, however, loved it. He would be quick to capitalise on the crusading fervour and religious tone of the earlier era, peppering his rhetoric with Scriptural verses and making overt reference to the Christian conscience throughout his political career.

As the Party came into its own, the Christian conscience was internalised. Nonconformists were quick to punish Liberals who fell below their moral standards. Financial probity and family faithfulness were important issues, and MPs were often held to account on these matters. Politicians with ambiguous marital relationships – such as the adulterous Charles Parnell in 1860 and the divorced Charles Dilke in 1886 – found their careers stymied. By and large, the effort worked. Liberal politicians were generally accepted to be less corrupt than their parliamentary opponents, not partaking, for example, in bribery-for-votes schemes often used by the Tories. As for Party policy, Nonconformists applied their considerable moral energies to three main areas: alcohol reform, prostitution and opposition to foreign despots.

Temperance

Addiction to drink was the source of many of the social ills plaguing nineteenth century society, especially in those industrial and working-class regions most represented by the Liberals and served by the Nonconformists. Abuse of drink lent itself easily to abuse of people, especially violence against women at the hands of their drunken husbands. Furthermore, drink contributed to hopelessness, it affected the wise use of money and it inhibited industriousness – all anathema to Nonconformists who elevated individual responsibility to a sacred plane.

Prohibition was not official party policy. Nevertheless, the Nonconformist-inspired Temperance Movement was closely associated with Liberalism. Of 123 Temperance leaders between 1831 and 1871, 119 were Liberals.[22] The Liberal social philosopher (and Christian) T.H. Green was a Temperance supporter. The free-thinker John Morely considered prohibition to be ethically on a par with abolition and admired the Nonconformists for it.

The Tories routinely caricatured the Liberals as the anti-drink party, and indeed the party suffered from its association with the Temperance campaign. Some prominent Liberals such as J.S. Mill and Gladstone opposed prohibition on the grounds of individual freedom and in support of free trade. Others distanced themselves from the movement that was often associated with a killjoy image, rather than social justice.

Prostitution

Nonconformist campaigners were far more successful in rousing the conscience of the nation regarding prostitution and sex-slavery. Three of the most well-known campaigns for women and against prostitution came from Liberals acting on, and appealing to, Christian principles. The crusades of Gladstone, Josephine Butler and W.T. Stead brought to light many shameful facts about the abuse of women and traffic of children in Victorian society. The resulting moral outcry led to the increase in the age

of consent (from 13 to 16) and a campaign against child prostitution.

Tyranny

The Nonconformist conscience was not confined to internal affairs. In 1876, reports came in of Bulgarian Orthodox Christians being killed by their Turkish Ottoman masters. For diplomatic reasons, the Conservative government led by Prime Minster Disraeli refused to condemn the action. The situation whereby a Christian nation was taking the side of a Muslim Empire while it massacred other Christians appalled much of the British population. Liberal Nonconformists in particular were dismayed that British national interests were being allowed to trump matters of justice and peace.

W.T. Stead began the agitation in the *Northern Echo* in 1876, but it soon roused the ire of the Grand Old Man, bringing Gladstone out of retirement and into leadership of the Liberal Party. Gladstone's barnstorming pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* sold 200, 000 copies in one month and brought him back into favour with the Nonconformist base which had been formerly disappointed by his stance on disestablishment (see below).[23] As well as rejuvenating Gladstone's career, the campaign gave new life to the Liberals, who were once again seen as the moral crusaders of politics. It was a perfect marriage of Gladstonian leadership and

Nonconformist conscience, each side needing the other in order to gain political influence once again. His reliance on Nonconformist support was not lost on Gladstone, who proclaimed to followers at a rally in Holyhead:

> I am a decided and convinced member of the Church of England, I have been there all my life, and I trust that there I shall die. But that will not prevent me from bearing an emphatic testimony to this: that the cause of justice, the cause of humanity, of mercy, of right, of truth for millions of God's creatures in the East of Europe, has found its best, its most consistent, and its most unanimous supporters in the Nonconformist churches of the land.[24]

Christian disestablishment

This last quote highlights the second issue dear to the Nonconformist heart, as well as indicating the limits to Nonconformist support of Gladstone. Important as moral crusades were, it was in fact the issue of disestablishment that lay at the heart of Nonconformist involvement in Liberal politics.

The Nonconformist memory stretched back to historical persecutions at the hands of the Established powers-that-be. The Puritans were a source of ideological heroes for the Nonconformists.[25] They found in Liberalism the same Puritan values of freedom of conscience, sovereignty of the individual

and discipline of thought and morals that were thought to be undermined by established Christianity.

It was not mere bad-blood or jealousy of Anglicanism's favoured status that drove opposition to establishment. Instead, national settlements of any kind were seen as bad for the life of the Church *and* the nation. 'The existence of an Established Church was seen by Nonconformists as a positive hindrance to the spread of Christianity in Britain.'[26] For Christian disestablishmentarians, Church–State alliances serve only to compromise the Church's freedom to serve and proclaim to the nation, as any church must.

Significantly, until it was revived somewhat during the Bulgarian affair, it was disagreement about disestablishment that eventually eroded Nonconformist support for Gladstone. Gladstone started out well. His moral seriousness and evangelical upbringing stood in his favour. Nonconformists also liked Gladstone's constant appeals to the national conscience. The Gladstonian government also made some positive moves in the direction of disestablishment. It abolished church rates in 1868, disestablished the Church of Ireland in 1869 and religious tests for Oxford and Cambridge 1871. In 1872 a Burials Bill was introduced which would allow for any (or no) type of Christian service to be held at funerals. It was eventually passed in 1880. Yet for many

Liberals of a Nonconformist bent, Gladstone was not liberal enough concerning the principle of disestablishment. From the 1870s onwards, the Nonconformist Liberal Edward Miall was the first MP to propose English disestablishment: 'Religious equality is in strict keeping with the entire framework of Liberal policy which they have helped by past legislation to construct.'[27]

Non-Christian disestablishment

At this time radicals and 'free-thinkers' also took up the torch of full-scale disestablishment. These deist or atheist campaigners promoted the programme for wholly different reasons and did not share the Nonconformist concern for preserving authentic Christian witness free from state control.

John Morely, politician and editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (and future first biographer of Gladstone) became a leading agitator for secularism. His crusade was to remove religious influence and reference to Christianity altogether. Joseph Chamberlain, originally a Universalist Nonconformist, made no religious appeals when he argued for the economic and political reasons for separating Church and State in 1874. Together, Morely and Chamberlain represented the ascendant wing of the Liberal Party that sought disestablishment for purely secularist reasons. Significantly, their campaign hinged on *disendowment* of the Anglican Church. This was the process whereby land and buildings (namely all

cathedrals and churches built after 1818) would be taken from the Church and sold to other organisations. The revenues would then be ploughed back into re-building the educational system, which itself would have been drastically restructured following forced disestablishment.

Clearly, the Liberal campaign failed and Establishment remained. Ironically for the secular disestablishmentarians, they would have doubtless seen more success if they had not sidelined the Christian voices in their midst. At base, the Liberal secularists misunderstood the nature of 'church', of 'mission' and of the Christian conversation being had about these things. The secularists assumed, wrongly, that the congregation of the faithful was being held together primarily by support of the state, and that the Church of England (and perhaps Christianity itself) would fade away once this support was removed. Those with more sensitivity to Christian life and practice recognised that Christians congregated for reasons of faith, service, fellowship and worship, none of which essentially required Government subsidy. Nonconformists did not envision or expect the collapse of Anglican Christianity; rather they looked to the flourishing of all Christian corporate life, and the state recognition of the contribution that all churches were making.

In a related vein, the policy of disendowment proved to be a severe

misjudgement of the national mood. It was perceived as a punishment of an organisation which even some Nonconformists tended to agree was doing its best to be faithful to its calling. Liberal Christian disestablishmentarians did not wish to penalise their Anglican brothers, but to free them. The secular turn of disestablishment based on disendowment ensured the alienation of otherwise potential recruits to the cause. 'Gladstone could never have countenanced the secularisation of British cathedrals, nor indeed could Nonconformists like Samuel Morely.'[28]

Disestablishment remains on the books as a Liberal policy. Yet it is also an argument that continually fails to gain much traction with the public at large, and does not figure prominently as an issue in contemporary political campaigns. If not for Nonconformist disillusionment with Gladstone on the one hand and marginalisation by secularists on the other in the nineteenth century, the cultural landscape of Britain and the fortunes of the Liberal party today may have looked vastly different. To see further why disestablishment across the board failed to become a feature of early Liberalism it is useful to look at the other great religious influence on the Liberal Party past and present, and that is the issue of Gladstone's Christianity.

Primary purposes

> *[My life] has appeared and yet appears to me to carry the marks of the will of God. For when have I seen so strongly the relation between my public duties and the primary purposes for which God made and Christ redeemed the world?*[29]

The contours and influence of Gladstone's Christianity remains a puzzle to many commentators.[30] Undeniably complicated, it is not easy to track Gladstone's actions and thoughts across such a long and fruitful career. He is a paradoxical figure. An intensely practical and pragmatic politician, Gladstone also held to a strong sense that he was divinely called to office. A High Anglican, he attracted heroic devotion amongst many Nonconformists. A classical scholar with a predilection for academic theology, nonetheless he was supremely adept at appeals to the common man. A founding father of Liberalism, he remained a Peelite Tory at heart.

So it is that when looking at the matter of Gladstone's Christianity and his politics, many issues could be considered. We will focus here on the curious topic of Gladstone's approach to church establishment and religious toleration. An examination of Gladstonian Liberalism in this area has the double benefit of shedding light on the historical process that shaped the cultural and political landscape of the United Kingdom, as well as providing a way to look at modern liberal approaches to freedom of belief and the role of the Church in public life.

Establishment and freedom

Unsurprisingly, Gladstone's approach to religious freedom and matters of establishment matured and developed over the course of a long career. What is perhaps more surprising is how consistently Gladstone stuck to his original core principles. The young Tory High Anglican and the elder Liberal statesman are not so different as some might think.

How is it, then, that the man who led the charge to disestablish the Church of Ireland in the 1860s could be at the same time the Church of England's strongest defender? How could a man who believed in the centrality of Christianity for British politics also argue that religious oaths should be removed to allow Jews, Catholics and atheists to take their rightful place in Parliament? Considering the lengths and depths to which Gladstone went to ground his passions and political principles theologically, the charge that he was merely incompetent or simply inconsistent does not hold water.

Commentators who take seriously the Christianity underpinning Gladstone's Liberalism are most helpful here. The political scientist David Lorenzo pays attention to Gladstone's 'dualistic religious anthropology', which Lorenzo explains as 'his description of humans

requiring both the freedom to follow their individual consciences and the teachings of the institutional church to direct their spirituality'.[31] Throughout his career, Gladstone believed in reciprocal rights and duties of people and groups.[32] This position was outlined as early as Gladstone's first book *The State in its Relations with the Church,* published in 1841.

Here, the state is conceived as a sort of mass 'person'. As a 'person', the state enjoys a moral purpose derived, ultimately, from following the will of God. Within this framework, the state thus needs to enjoy a healthy relationship with religion; the Church, as the deposit of teaching and tradition, acts as the conscience of the state, always pointing it towards its calling.[33] As the state is the extension of individual lives, ideally it will operate in perfect harmony with the values of its citizens – values which themselves have been shaped by a Church properly in tune with the will of God. A state that completely severs its relation with religion is incomplete. What is worse, shorn of conscience or a sense of ultimate value beyond its own existence, such states are prone to tyranny.

Gladstone acknowledged that such an ideal situation for Church and State does not actually exist. 'The absolute and strictly ideal perfection of this theory ... requires conditions that have never been fully realised in our fallen state ... not only

unity of religious action in the state, but unity of personal composition with respect to religious profession'.[34] In other words, neither the state, nor the people, nor the churches can see clearly. Inevitably, as a consequence of error and sin, there will be disagreement and dissent; however, this should not prevent people from working towards right relations and consensus as far as possible. Toleration is necessary for this process. In this way Gladstone supports the principle of establishment *and* the principle of religious toleration.

Gladstone successfully fought for the disestablishment of the Protestant Church of Ireland at the same time as he defended the continued establishment of the Protestant Church of England. When looking at the issue it is tempting to see only inconsistency. Yet this would be to assume, as Gladstone did not, that all expressions and contexts of 'church' are the same. For Gladstone, some churches were simply closer to the social and spiritual ideal. The reciprocal relationship between individual, state and church is more fully realised in some contexts than others.

Gladstone recognised the fundamental Christian truth that people must be free in their faith or it is no faith at all (see Part Two). Religious freedom means that people must be allowed to follow God without coercion. Yet Gladstone also recognised that individuals do not decide for themselves in a vacuum. Private judgement is not generated

from out of nowhere, or from within. Instead, persons are clearly conditioned by the institutions around them. Gladstone did not have much faith in the ability of untutored, isolated individuals to find their way to right belief or knowledge on their own.[35]

For the early Gladstone, religious tolerance in this context meant indulgence of error while people seek to find their way. From the 1850s onwards, Gladstone's approach to toleration altered as he came into personal and political contact with Catholics and Nonconformists.[36] While he never stopped defending the Anglican Church's established status, his understanding of religious freedom moved from the minimal 'absence of coercion' to the more positive provision of equal protection. So, for example, in the run-up to the 1865 election, Gladstone campaigned against those who wrong-headedly defended the Church of England by 'maintaining odious distinctions against our Roman Catholic or dissenting fellow-subjects.'[37]

Ireland

The Established and Protestant Church in Ireland had manifestly failed to convert or shape the hearts and minds of the majority of the Irish Catholic population. As a guide to moral formation and state conscience the Irish Church was unsuccessful, and had instead contributed to massive political and spiritual instability.[38] When Gladstone spoke in Parliament in favour of Irish

disestablishment in 1868 and 1869 he did so along the lines that the majority population of Ireland was suffering social injustice as a result of an inadequate and inappropriate church, rather than according to a blanket principle of disestablishment. Catholics were not afforded equal protection, and as a result, their state existed in a position of chronic crisis. His point was not that the people should have no church. It was that the Church should be suited to the people, deeply rooted in their culture and able to contribute to the formation of their moral and spiritual lives without recourse to coercion or state protection.

England

My object and desire has ever been and still is, to keep the Church of England together, both as a church and as an establishment.[39]

For Gladstone a different situation applied to England. Following Irish disestablishment, there had been repeated Liberal attempts to do the same in England. In 1871 and 1873 the Prime Minister countered the members of his party by using the same logic for English Establishment that he had earlier used for Irish Disestablishment. In the specific case of England, the national church worked as a matter of social justice because the majority population supported it. The Anglican Church had shaped even those who were not active believers, for its waters ran deep. For Gladstone, Anglicanism was

inextricable from the history and character of England. As a psychological, cultural and moral influence, the Church was serving its rightful role in the state. 'Take the Church of England out of the history of England and the history of England becomes a chaos, without order, without life and without meaning.'[40]

Gladstone's Christianity demanded that membership of any church – even nationally established ones – should be voluntary and free.[41] The Church exists to educate willing individuals, which in turn guides the conscience of the state. This could not happen in Ireland, and thus the Church should be disestablished. However, according to Gladstone, the Church of England was largely performing its rightful function. Whereas the Church in the Irish context served to violate the right of equal protection, the Church in England, rooted in society, protected it. Because established English Christianity existed in a happy, organic and reciprocal relationship with the English people it could underwrite religious freedom. While the *ideal* Church–State relation did not exist, in England at least the Church was guiding the moral compass of the nation, and the character of the country was shaped by a Christianity appropriate to the people. It is from this position of moral legitimacy that Gladstone as a Christian and as a Liberal was able to champion the rights of Jews, Catholics, Nonconformists and atheists who wished to participate in public life.

Atheist oaths

In 1883, Gladstone defended the right of Mr Bradlaugh to take his seat as MP for Northampton, despite the fact that Bradlaugh was a confessed atheist who could not in good conscience swear the oaths of allegiance necessary to sit in Parliament.[42] Against his opponents, Gladstone argued that eligibility to hold office was not dependant on religious profession. Toleration in a Christian-formed state meant equal protection and equal rights to all who were loyal to the state, regardless of their loyalty to Christianity. Furthermore, for the ever-practical Gladstone, such oaths did nothing to preserve actual Christianity. All they did was ban honourable non-Anglicans. At the same time they were incapable of screening out hypocrites who had no qualms about lying, or anti-Christian deists who had no problem swearing allegiance to the vague and generalised 'God' mentioned in the oaths.

For Gladstone, more damage is done to authentic Christianity and to society by dishonesty and abstract religiosity than could ever be done by honourable persons obeying their conscience. After all, the values of honesty, individual responsibility and freedom of belief are themselves evidence of the Christianity inculcated in that society, whether individuals accept it or not.

Continuing Gladstonian influence

Since Gladstone the party has undergone a number of significant highs, lows and changes in configuration – not least the era of the Alliance, and then re-formation with the Social Democrats, the breakaway Labour group of the late 1980s. This is not the place to trace a detailed history of the party up to the present age.[43] What is worth noting, however, is the Gladstonian and Nonconformist influence that has imprinted itself on the party. As we shall see below, when modern Liberal Democrats describe themselves as 'social liberals' (which they do), they are demonstrating a connection to the Christian heritage of their party, even if they do not personally subscribe to Christianity (which many, of course, do not).

Gladstone came to define the tone of British Liberalism, harnessing the rhetoric and energy of the moral crusade in order to enact Liberal reforms. For campaigners in the Gladstonian mould, these reforms were largely 'bound up with the identification of privilege as the enemy.'[44] As we have seen above, wide differences of wealth within society were not the problem, as much as was the unjustifiable and irrational way in which this wealth had been accumulated and concentrated. While there was indeed a preference for the free market economy, inheritance, nepotism or legal loopholes born of privilege were attacked (especially by the Nonconformists and Gladstonians) as harming the commonweal. Appeals to

laissez faire principles were not enough, for these principles were neither moral, nor just, nor good.

It soon became apparent that Gladstonian economic reforms such as free trade and the liberalisation of markets had indeed increased prosperity in some quarters; however, the increase was not accompanied by a decrease in social problems. In the face of endemic poverty, poor health, ill education and crime it was apparent that richer societies were not necessarily more progressive societies.

A new liberalism

More was needed than individual freedom for free trade. In 1902 Herbert Samuel in his book *Liberalism* addressed head-on the traditional Liberal mistrust of the state. He argued that Liberals needed to use the machinery of their reformed state to solve social problems.[45] In turn, the 1906–1914 Liberal government led by Henry Campbell-Bannerman laid the foundation for the welfare state. They initiated progressive taxation and concentrated on land ownership. The Liberal government introduced old age pensions, national unemployment and sickness insurance, and national labour exchanges. By 1921 Ramsay Muir could define *liberalism* as:

> A readiness to use the power of the State for the purposes of creating conditions in which individual energy can thrive, of preventing all abuses of power, of

affording to every citizen the means of acquiring mastery of his or her own capabilities, and of establishing a real equality of opportunity for all. These aims are compatible with a very active policy of social reorganisation, involving a great enlargement of the functions of the State.[46]

Reforms fuelled by this 'new liberalism' changed the face of British society forever. Still, the Liberals stopped short of socialism and in so doing lost ground to the rising Labour party. The 'progressives' were divided, and the Conservatives were rejuvenated. From 1918 onwards the Liberals had to grow used to third party status, their brand of liberalism becoming the opposition alternative to collectivist state control on the one hand and unfettered free markets on the other.

Classical liberalism

There are now two main streams to western liberalism. *Classical liberalism* was (and is) mainly concerned with protecting individuals from the power-hungry state, especially in the state's capacity as economic regulator. Free trade and property rights especially are hallmark concerns of classical liberalism and clearly have their provenance in the Liberalism of the early Victorian era. Extremes of this view see taxation and state definition of property ownership as wrong in principle, and most forms of social aggregation as infringements on the supreme rights of the

individual. It is a strange quirk of history that in the present age the most vociferous opponents of 'liberals' are apologists for unregulated markets, libertarians and other outspoken conservatives. These anti-liberals are themselves the purest examples of a powerful expression of liberalism. One suspects, however, that the irony is not often appreciated by these classical liberals.

Social liberalism

Social liberals believe that a democratic and open state has a positive role to play in guaranteeing individual freedom.[47]

In many ways, *social liberalism* is a liberal response to the problems raised by classical liberalism. Social liberals retain an emphasis on individual freedom and rewarding initiative. The creation and protection of such freedom is a main aim of socially liberal governments, an aim that necessarily entails guarantee from arbitrary state interference. Social liberals oppose granting the state overt control. They support free trade and the free markets. However, social liberals have an altogether more positive view of the state than do their classical cousins. Many of the greatest threats to individual liberty – inequality, unemployment, poverty, poor education and prospects, systematic bigotry, climate chaos and the like – require state-sponsored action to rectify.[48] The earliest social liberals saw that the state was often the best or only body that could solve otherwise intractable problems of social justice.

Fair distribution of wealth was a prime component of social equality, as was the regulation and devolution of power. These things are best addressed using state-led solutions and are necessary if the liberal goods of fairness and meaningful freedom are to come about.

Yet social liberalism describes more than a philosophy of the limits and uses of state economic intervention. In keeping with the Gladstonian and Nonconformist concern for moral *rightness* despite the cost, Liberals consistently choose to toe party lines that are not necessarily designed to attract mass populist support. Liberals were early converts to the environmental cause, and became the greenest of the main parties by the mid-1970s. Furthermore, the Liberal emphasis on personal freedom over group allegiance naturally meant that it was less amenable to nationalistic sentiment or jingoism. Against the often-overt patriotic appeals of their rival political parties, Liberals have maintained a distinctive internationalist outlook, sympathetic, for example, towards European integration. The same impulse meant that the party tends to oppose increased militarisation, and it did not support the creation of a British nuclear deterrent, or the Labour government's initial support for the US war in Vietnam in 1964. The Liberal Democrats were the sole party consistently to oppose the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Liberals are not isolationists, however, and the Gladstonian conscience for oppressed peoples continued (and continues) to be felt. Going against the specious argument of British self-interest, Liberals were leading and principled opponents of South African apartheid in the 1980s. Liberals value the free movement of persons, and as a result have a long history of welcome to foreigners. In 1892 the Liberal voters of Finsbury elected an Indian to the House of Commons. In the 1950s the Liberals became popular with the immigrant Jewish population. In 1968 the Liberals were the only party to fight for the rights of Asians holding British passports.[49] The Liberals were the first to implement a gay rights policy within the party in 1975. In 2009 Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats took the political lead in successfully challenging the Labour Government's policy denying Gurkha veterans the right to remain in Britain. The party has consistently appealed to all class groups and has resisted being identified with any one stratum of society. While the causes and agendas have changed over time, it is remarkable how the morally principled and socially inclusive values of Liberalism have remained intact from its earliest days as what was once the home of the Nonconformist conscience.

A party divided?

I know the birth of this coalition has caused much surprise, and, with it, some offence. There are those on both the left

and right who are united in thinking this should not have happened. [...]

David Cameron and I both understand that this government's unifying realisation is that power must be dispersed more fairly in Britain today: from the Whitehall centre to communities; into the hands of patients, parents and pupils in our public services; protecting the rights and freedoms of people from arbitrary state interference; mobilising social mobility through greater fairness in the tax and school system. In short, distributing power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government. [...]

We will oversee the radical dispersal of power away from Westminster and Whitehall to councils, communities and homes across the nation. So that, wherever possible, people make the call over the decisions that affect their lives. And, crucially, the relentless incursions of the state into the lives of individuals that has characterised the last 13 years ends here. From rolling back excessive surveillance, to ending the criminalisation of innocent people, we will restore and protect our hard-won civil liberties.

I call that agenda liberalism.*50*

Outside commentators often portray the Liberal Democrats as a party divided along ideological lines, with economic liberals on the right and social liberals on the left. Following the formation of the coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010 this line of reporting has been especially prevalent. However, within the party itself, Liberals suggest that a media obsessed with conflict has trumped up these divisions. To be sure, there are internal debates, yet the fault lines are not as they have been portrayed, nor are they as hard and fast as critics sniffing out discord would wish.

The distinction between 'economic' and 'social' Liberal Democrats should not be exaggerated, for 'economic liberalism' in this case is not equivalent to 'classical liberalism'. Take for example the two main compendiums of Liberal Democrat ideas in the past decade. The *Orange Book* is often portrayed as 'right-wing' and economically liberal, while *Reinventing the State* is supposedly 'left-wing' and socially liberal. Yet while the difference in emphasis is apparent, a number of the same contributing authors can be found in both books, including Nick Clegg, David Laws and Steve Webb.[51] The disagreements arise over the *means* of using the liberal state rather than the *ends* of liberalism.

For all Liberal Democrats, society must protect effective liberty for all so that a rightful government might be formed. 'One should not, however, exaggerate the differences ... Both begin, and end, with the view that the state that fails to secure political freedom is not legitimate.'[52]

When the markets interfere with political freedom, they must be curbed. So-called economic liberals seek market solutions to social problems, but they do not move away from the overarching social liberal vision. Market solutions will always be attractive because they emphasise individual initiative and reward decision-making. However, no Liberal thinks that the markets are a force above and beyond human regulation. The market should never be allowed to become a source of illiberality. Likewise, Liberals reject the conservative view (as endorsed by many Tories and New Labour) that security is more important than liberty. In any case the state overreaches its own competence when it tries to control too much. In the end it destroys the very freedoms it claims to protect. Over-concentration of power is itself a threat to political liberty, as are excesses of wealth for the few at the expense of poverty for the many. For social liberals, 'citizens need to be in a position to exercise their rights'.[53] This principle can lead to an extensive programme of public services that goes further than classical liberals would allow but which all Liberal Democrats can get behind.

Notes

[1] The Social Democrats merged with the Liberals in 1988, after an Alliance forged in 1981. Eventually the name Liberal Democrats was adopted in 1989.

[2] *Quarterly Review* (1816) quoted by Steed, M. 'The Liberal Tradition' in MacIver, D. (ed.) *The Liberal Democrats,* Prentice Hall, 1996, 46. It is worth noting that even today in popular discourse 'liberal' is generally considered a term of abuse in America.

[3] Throughout the following the terms 'Liberal' or 'Liberalism' (with an upper-case 'L') refer to the political parties that historically have adopted the name, up to and including the Liberal Democrats. The use of 'liberal' or 'liberalism' (in the lower case) refers to the set of ideas and ideologies which obviously inform the Liberal parties, but which are not confined to them.

[4] Steed, M. 'Tradition', 42.

[5] These ideas and their Christian ramifications will be explored in full in subsequent sections.

[6] *The Liberal Magazine* vol. XLIV, April 1936, 89–95.

[7] Steed, M. 'Tradition', 44. For the influence of Lollardy on British culture, see especially works by Diarmaid MacCulloch such as *Reformation,* Penguin, 2004.

[8] Douglas, R. *Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties,* Hambledon and London, 2005, 6.

[9] Richard Cobden, 1840 letter in Raymond Cowheard, *Politics of English Dissent,* Epworth, 1959, 132.

[10] Bradley, I. *The Optimists,* Faber & Faber, 1980, 112.

[11] Quoted in Read, D. *Cobden and Bright,* Edward Arnold, 1967, 32.

[12] Douglas, R. *Liberals,* 9.

[13] Steed, M. 'Tradition', 47.

[14] *On Liberty* remains the 'book of office' of the Liberal Democrat party.

[15] Douglas, R. *Liberals,* 19.

[16] Bradley, I. *Optimists,* 101.

[17] Gladstone, W. *Gleanings of Past Years I,* 1879, 158.

[18] Steed, M. 'Tradition', 50.

[19] Bradley, I. *Optimists,* 100.

[20] Congregationalist Liberal MP Wilfred Lawson in the *Times,* 9 Sept 1879, in Bradley, I. *Optimists,* 111.

[21] Bradley, I. *Optimists,* 113.

[22] Harrison, B. *Drink and the Victorians,* Faber & Faber, 1971, 162.

[23] See especially Shannon, R. *Gladstone: God and Politics,* Continuum, 2008.

[24] Quoted in Whyte, F. *Life of W. T. Stead vol. I,* Jonathan Cape, 1925, 52.

[25] Of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (a leading Liberal newspaper) Cardinal Manning said: 'When I read the *Pall Mall* it seems to me as if Cromwell had come to life.' Quoted in Robertson-Scott, J.W. *The Life and Death of a Newspaper,* Methuen, 1952, 242.

[26] Bradley, I. *Optimists*, 102.

[27] *Hansard* 3rd Series CCXVI, 1873, 24.

[28] Bradley, I. *Optimists*, 109.

[29] Gladstone reflecting on his 69th birthday. Quoted in Shannon, *Gladstone,* 306–307.

[30] For an extensive literary overview, see Shannon's introduction to *Gladstone: God and Politics*. Bemused biographers include John Morely and Roy Jenkins.

[31] Lorenzo, D.J. 'Gladstone, Religious Freedom and Practical Reasoning' in *History of Political Thought* XXVI.1, Spring 2005, 90–119, 94.

[32] Douglas, R. *Liberals*, 20.

[33] Gladstone, W. *The State in its Relations with the Church* vol. I, 1841, 4–5.

[34] Gladstone, W. *State* vol. II, 282–283.

[35] Ibid., 177; See Shannon, R. *Gladstone 1809–1865,* Chapel Hill, 1984, 113–114; Lorenzo, D.J. 'Gladstone', 99.

[36] See for example Gladstone, W. *Gleanings* vol. III, 102–125.

[37] Shannon, R. *Gladstone,* 54.

[38] Gladstone, W. *Gleanings* vol. VII, 123–125.

[39] Gladstone, W. quoted in Morley, J. *Life of W.E. Gladstone* vol. II, Edward Lloyd, 1902, 502.

[40] Gladstone, W. quoted in Lorenzo, D.J. 'Gladstone', 114. See also Gladstone, W, *State,* and *Gleanings* vol. III, 224–273.

[41] Lorenzo, D.J. Gladstone, 110.

[42] *Hansard* 26 April, 1883, 1174–1195.

[43] As well as Douglas, R. *Liberals*, another recommended historical source is the website for the Liberal Democrat History Group: www.liberalhistory.org.uk.

[44] Steed, M. 'Tradition', 50. John Bright's rhetoric was especially notable for this feature.

[45] Ibid., 52.

[46] Muir, R. *Liberalism and Industry, Towards a Better Social Order,* Houghton Mifflin, 1921, 197.

[47] 'What We Stand For' *Social Liberal Forum* (www.socialliberal.net)

[48] See 'Social Liberalism' in Brack, D. and Randall, E. (eds.) *Dictionary of Liberal Thought,* Politico's, 2007.

[49] Steed, M. 'Tradition', 57. The Catholic and Liberal MP David Steel was involved in this campaign at an early stage in his career.

[50] Nick Clegg writing in *The Guardian,* Friday 14 May 2010.

[51] It is also worth noting in passing that key contributors and editors to both books are Christians.

[52] Howarth, D, 'What is Social Liberalism?' in Brack, D., Grayson, R.S. et al (eds.) *Reinventing the State*, Politico's, 2007, 4.

[53] Ibid., 7.

Part II: Liberty

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5.1)

One cannot have liberalism without *liberty*. A generalised sense of liberty and freedom infuses all facets of Western society. More specifically, the tendency towards freedom informs all Liberal political decisions. In this part the essay moves from history to looking at the ideological roots and theological dimensions of liberty. Freedom is a crucial component of Christian doctrine. In turn, Christianity has contributed to liberal conceptions of what it is to be free. As noted, there are two main conceptions of liberty at play in modern liberalism. These can be roughly identified as autonomous liberty (freedom *from*) and teleological, or purposeful liberty (freedom *for*).[1] Part Two concludes with an examination of these two conceptions and their relation to Christianity.

The high value that Western culture places on 'liberty' is easily taken for granted. *Of course* liberty is a natural right. *Obviously* freedom is a basic human value. The preamble to the American Declaration of Independence, that great document of liberal confidence, proclaimed in 1776 'We hold these truths to be self-evident ...' Yet

against this assumption, Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson reminds us

> There is nothing at all self-evident in the idea, or, more properly, the high esteem in which we in the West hold freedom. For most of human history, and for nearly all of the non-Western world prior to Western contact, freedom was, and for many still remains, anything but an obvious or desirable goal.[2]

Patterson points out that there is no shortage of other ideals that historically have been, and demonstrably still are, of far greater importance for other cultures. The list seems endless, including the pursuit of glory, honour, military valour, family success, nationalistic triumph, hedonism, nirvana, the true faith, secularism, justice, progress, material wealth, ecological harmony and more. What the list often does not include — except in those cultures most aligned with Western liberalism — is 'freedom'.

Freedom has long been a core value of Western society, however it has not always had the front and centre attention that

it enjoys today. The notion has its firm political roots in the democracy of classical Greece and the imperial peace of Rome. The value was generated from within these societies as they wrestled with the existence of slavery and the experience of social stratification. However, it was the injection of Christian thought and values that made 'freedom' the overarching value for what would become modern liberal societies. It was in Christendom that Christianity became 'the first, and only, world religion that placed freedom – spiritual freedom, redemption – at the very centre of its theology.' In this way freedom became enshrined in all Western peoples. 'Wherever Christianity took root, it garnered converts not only to salvation in Christ but to the ideal of freedom.'[3]

This is in contrast to the story a certain section of modern liberalism likes to tell about itself. A prime example can be seen in the philosopher A.C. Grayling and his surprising claim that 'The history of liberty proves to be another chapter ... in the great quarrel between religion and secularism for without the latter there would (because there could) be no liberty at all.'[4] Yet this sort of claim is un-historical and demonstrably false. Our modern senses of liberty are inextricably linked – positively and negatively – with Christian notions of freedom. These notions themselves have grown from theological reflection on the nature of God and the world on the one hand, and from practical ethical assessment of human nature in the other. We can see how this is so by turning to an examination of some central tenets of Christian thought.

Something from nothing

If God exists in any way like the Christian story of God says he exists, *then* that God is the ground of all creation, the one in whom we all live and have our being.

The story of 'freedom' has its beginning here, at the beginning of everything.

The Christian articulation of 'God as Creator' says something about God, but it also says a lot about creation. The Christian doctrine of creation is not to be confused with the rather recent and muddled noisy conversation being had in some circles over *Creationism*. Historically, the Christian theology of creation is not about the mechanics of the generation and formation of life, but instead is a deep and rich reflection on the nature of reality. Properly speaking, Christian thought is less concerned with the how of creation than it is with the why. Why is there something rather than nothing? What does it say about the stuff of nature to say that some*thing* has been carved out of *no*thing?

The heart of the Christian doctrine of creation is the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* – that God created something out of nothing, and, crucially, that this something might just have easily have not happened at all. Matter did not *have* to exist, there is no

compulsion driving the universe. In other words, freedom is built into the fabric of creation. Christian thought taught that the world was entirely God's creature, called from nothingness, not out of need on his part, but by grace. The doctrine of creation is the doctrine of God's free action producing the world as a free gift of love.

In terms of the history of thought, this marks a revolution. The pre-Christian classical world-view, with its notions of controlling fate and necessity that binds all creatures, gods and men was re-worked by the Christian imagination. People and the world exist by God's choice, for his pleasure and his love. Furthermore, God does not *need* creation and was not forced to bring the world into existence. The world was not fated to exist; it is, fundamentally, free. As we shall see, modern notions of liberty have their provenance in serious engagement with this Christian idea, tracing its logical implications and working out the ramifications for reality, morality and politics.

Christ-ians not God-ians

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1.1)

Our archaeology of 'freedom' has started with God, as all endeavours must for the Christian, and indeed as everything logically must if God, in fact, exists. However, the concept of freedom did not derive from abstract reflections on the mystical forces worked by a distant deity. For the Christian, God is only known through Jesus Christ.

One of the most striking features of the first Christian communities is their belief in the divinity of Jesus. Far from being an idea somehow added to pure, primitive Christianity by later generations, the earliest Christian documents we have (i.e. Paul's letters, the Gospels and other books of the New Testament dating within living memory of Jesus' original disciples[5]) reveal a diverse number of groups employing a variety of literary, philosophical and lyrical ways to describe the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Such documents are testament to the thought processes of the earliest Christian communities as they worked out the implications of their growing belief that the man who walked amongst them was also — somehow — divine.

Within the Christian scheme Jesus Christ is the revelation of God. When we hear his words we hear God's Word. When we follow his actions, we follow God's intent. When we aspire to living Christ-like lives we aspire to godliness. In short, Christian thought on the nature of God (and thus on God's creation) cannot be done unless it is done through Jesus. And Jesus Christ is always with us through the sending of his Spirit. It is only through the Holy Spirit that men know God, experience the presence of Christ, and are inspired and enabled to live lives of truth and goodness. In this way, the early

Church's trinitarian formulations are, at base, attempts to preserve the first, the best and the most startling features of Christian belief. The trinity is a way of describing the God who is above all things, the God who is in all things and the God who is with all things.

What does this have to do with freedom? When it comes to discerning the nature of God and creation, the doctrines of the incarnation and the trinity are inseparable from the doctrine of creation. If *creatio ex nihilo* provides the means for understanding the nature of free nature, then the becoming of God as man and the relation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit provide the means by which we might imagine the nature of divine freedom and thus freedom itself.

A well-known and classical feature of Divinity is *omnipotence*. That a god should be all-powerful, unrestrained and unbounded is not unique to Christianity. The picture of freedom that is most naturally derived from this is an ideal of radical self-realisation, whereby nothing can hinder the aims of the one who wills. Perfect freedom, then, might follow some version of a Nietzschean 'Will to Power' whereby freedom means the absence of all restraint including internal weakness and the claims of others.

However, unlike these other versions of perfectly realised freedom it is salient

to consider how, through the Christian doctrines of the trinity and incarnation, the absolute freedom of God is conceived. Within the Christian system God's freedom is always directed towards *relation* or *communion*. Rather than representing some intangible ideal of unfettered power or self-realisation, in the words of the Protestant theologian Karl Barth, 'God's freedom is not merely unlimited possibility or formal majesty and omnipotence, that is to say empty, naked sovereignty.' Instead, in his own freedom, God 'above all willed and determined himself to be the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit.' [6] Barth points out that this is not abstract freedom; it is not the freedom of the radically isolated and aloof individual. For the Christian conception of freedom the implications are clear. Even the highest expression of perfect freedom is not one of solitary detachment. 'In God's own freedom there is encounter and communion ... there is majesty and humility, absolute authority and absolute obedience; there is offer and response.'[7]

For Christian thought then, God's freedom is for the relation of his trinitarian self. In creation, God's freedom was for the stuff of existence. In the incarnation, God's freedom is for mankind. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the Father of the Prodigal Son, the Good Shepherd and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian concept of God cannot be had apart from having a God who, in his omnipotent freedom, chose

to bind and commit himself to humanity and human history.

Here we can see the two senses of 'freedom' at play. The tension between the freedom of autonomous self-assertion and the freedom for engagement and relational flourishing is evident within theological reflection on the character of divine omnipotence. Historically this tension has been even more manifest in reflection on the nature of human liberty.

Freedom for

Traditionally, the classical and early Christian sense of 'freedom' was primarily that of *telos* or purpose. To say that a person is free in this sense is not to say that a person enjoys the ability to follow through with whatever he or she wills. Instead, freedom means being at liberty to realise one's true essence, and thus flourish.

For Plato and Aristotle, and also for some Church Fathers, liberty means freedom to live a life of virtue. This is determined not according to each individual's opinion or desire, but instead according to a reasoned, disciplined and shared reflection on 'the good'. Purposeful freedom seeks emancipation from whatever constrains human flourishing. As well as other people, things or events, often what most constrains us is our own untutored passions, our ignorance, our compulsions and our irrational choices.[8] Liberty of this sort often means precisely liberty from the bondage

of our own wills for the purpose of reaching something greater than the isolated, unaided self could hope to attain.

We shall see below how political, secular liberalism has retained a form of purposeful liberty. However, it is religions, especially including Christianity, which have kept 'freedom for a purpose' most alive. On a practical level, this can easily set Christian life and practice at odds with a culture intent on the other form of freedom. For the American social theologian Stanley Hauerwas, the Christian's liberty is precisely the liberty of a life lived according to a good purpose:

> The salvation promised in the good news is not a life free from suffering, free from servitude, but rather a life that freely suffers, that freely serves, because such suffering and service is the hallmark of the Kingdom established by Jesus. As Christians we do not seek to be free but rather to be of use, for it is only by serving that we discover the freedom offered by God. We have learned that freedom cannot be had by becoming 'autonomous' – free from all claims except those we voluntarily accept – but rather freedom literally comes by having our self-absorption challenged by the needs of another.[9]

Freedom from

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity

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is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another.[10]

The freedom to serve an overriding purpose outside of the self runs directly against the dominant account of freedom since the eighteenth century. Teleological freedom *for* still has a voice within modern Liberals and liberalism,[11] however, its impact on the cultural imagination has been severely undermined by the power of freedom *from.*

The story told by the late Enlightenment is the story of human history developing to the point where persons are increasingly free from whatever constrains their own heroic will. Liberation means liberty from those antique notions such as divine purpose, overarching truth or natural law which might place unwelcome constraints upon self-determination. In this process, individuals are set free from those arbitrary authorities, traditions and institutions which claim intellectual and moral monopoly over persons. It is this story, or a variation of it, which Grayling and others have in mind when they narrate the typical story of liberty as being won from religion.

It is testament to the strength of this narrative that 'choice' is the value assumed by all sides in most of the ethical and political debates of the present age. This sense of liberty dominates to the extent that the ethicist Stephen Mott can say that freedom from 'arbitrary external authority' is a basic hallmark of liberalism, and the political theologian Robert Song identifies the human agent as 'sovereign chooser' at the heart of much modern liberalism.[12]

It is worth noting, however, that contra Grayling and other cheerleaders of the Enlightenment, the principle of autonomous freedom is not actually a principle of *rationality*. 'Freedom for us today is something transcendent even of reason... [Freedom] is its own justification.'[13] Instead, the chief value of this freedom is the inviolable liberty of self-determination — 'free-choice' is the ultimate arbiter of 'freedom'. The will is sovereign not to the degree that it is rational or 'enlightened' but only so far as it is beholden to nothing else. The lengths to which the self is constrained by nothing greater than itself is the measure of its liberty.

The strong association of 'freedom' with the 'will' tends to uncouple the will from reason. In turn this tends to render freedom to be a matter of pure choice. Freedom is not seen to lead towards an ultimate horizon, or to adhere to the content of what has been chosen. Instead freedom's end is in the act of choosing itself. The proper term for the philosophical principle of choice operating in a fundamentally directionless environment is *nihilism*.

To identify this ethos of modern liberalism as nihilistic is not necessarily to apply a term of abuse. It is an appropriate label insofar as nihilism is simply the rejection of a governing reality defining 'the good'.[14] Neither need the designation 'nihilism' be synonymous with anarchy or violence. As liberal philosophers such as John Gray have pointed out, a major task of the plural society is to learn how to live in a world with non-reconcilable world-views.[15] In this context nihilism is likely to be seen as a valid approach. Indeed, if there are no transcendent truths, if there is no ultimate horizon and no direction for human flourishing, then a thoroughgoing nihilism is the most honest and practical philosophy that we have.

Nihilism based on the autonomous freedom from authority, restraint and ultimate purpose may well lead to a peace of sorts. But this peace would be a far cry from the peace sought by liberal societies informed by Christianised principles. Even the non-Christian or secularist liberal might blanch at a world where autonomous nihilism is given free rein. To see how this is so it is worth briefly looking at the most articulate visionary of the unfettered individual, the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

For Nietzsche, religion — specifically Christianity — was ultimately the result of frightened humans seeking to escape from the harsh demands and realities of life.

The Christian concept of a god — the god as the patron of the sick, the god as a spinner of cobwebs, the god as a spirit — is one of the most corrupt concepts that has ever been set up in the world ... God degenerated into the *contradiction of life.* Instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yea! In him war is declared on life, on nature, on the will to live! God becomes the formula for every slander upon the 'here and now,' and for every lie about the 'beyond'! In him nothingness is deified, and the will to nothingness is made holy![16]

Unlike many of the current crop of so-called 'New Atheists' filling the bookshelves, Nietzsche was no lazy despiser of a straw-man version of Christianity. Even his (admittedly spiteful) description of the one for whom 'nothingness is deified, and the will to nothingness is made holy' is not far off from one of Christianity's earliest ethical and Christological formulas:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2.5–7, NIV)

When Nietzsche rejected Christianity he was rejecting a view of the world and of

the divine that Christians themselves can recognise.

> No one would understand such a god: why should any one want him? ... [T]imorous and demure; he counsels "peace of soul," hate-no-more, leniency, "love" of friend and foe. He moralizes endlessly; he creeps into every private virtue; he becomes the god of every man ...[17]

Nietzsche appreciated the deep roots of Christian thought and the implications of the doctrine of the God-Man for freedom, life and society. Rather than pretend that one could have the 'goods' of a Christian society without Christianity, Nietzsche took seriously the idea of a world without transcendent values. The setting of his famous pronouncement 'God is dead ... and we have killed him'[18] has nothing to do with philosophically proving the non-existence of a deity. It is instead a serious and insightful attempt to trace the social and ethical implications of a culture that is functionally atheistic.

In such a world, Nietzsche recognises that there can only be individual lives thriving at the expense of others. There is no law of restraint, only a drive for autonomy and dominance which Nietzsche terms the 'Will to Power', or the 'instinct to freedom'.[19] Nietzsche proclaims the *Übermensch* (Overman or Superman) as the ultimate ideal and end goal of humanity. The Superman

is someone who has so refined his Will to Power that he has freed himself from all outside influences and created his own values.[20] No one, not the weak, the poor, the slow or the old, has a right to claim on the good-will of the strong ones who live in azure isolation from the rest and from each other. For nihilism, there is no 'right', only 'might'.

Here, then, is the peace offered by supreme autonomous freedom.

Fantastical self-authorship

Very few cultural-political systems actively pursue the ethic of the Superman; those that do tend to inspire World Wars. Yet one need not look only to fascistic and genocidal regimes in order to see the adverse effect that philosophies of nihilistic individualism can have on society. The sense that freedom means freedom from anything that prevents individuals from becoming 'sovereign choosers' remains the dominant sense underlying our current Anglo-American liberal culture.

The harm to society wreaked by relentless individualism, a culture of instant gratification and the equation of 'citizen' with 'consumer' is well known. There is no end to the ink spilled by columnists, politicians and religious writers wrestling with the problems of our increasingly shallow, brutal world. Often Christian commentators are among the most strident critics. For the radical Marxist-Catholic critic Terry Eagleton:

Self-authorship is the bourgeois fantasy par excellence. Denying that our freedom thrives only within the context of a more fundamental dependency lies at the root of a good deal of historical disaster.[21]

The Protestant theologian Wolfgang Pannenburg suggests that our culture is in danger of dying as a result of its godless liberty:

> The dissolution of the traditional institutions of social life including family and marriage for the sake of promoting the emancipation of the individual leaves the individual to the fate of increasing loneliness in the midst of a noisy machinery of 'communication'. It is not likely that secular societies will be able in the long run to survive the consequences of the much-touted emancipation of the individual. In some parts of the world, secular culture survives because it lives off the substance of whatever in Christian tradition and morals has not yet been used up in the process of secularisation.[22]

For the philosopher Roger Trigg, regarding the Christian roots of modern values: 'Remove the foundations and the superstructure will eventually totter.'[23]

Whether these critics are overly pessimistic or merely realistic in their analysis remains to be seen. It should be noted, however, that it is not only Christian theologians who are concerned about the corrosive influence of 'freedom' operating in a void bereft of transcendent value. Liberal thinkers have long been at the forefront of those attempting to find solutions for a society broken by the individualistic version of liberalism. Navigating between the competing versions of freedom is the source of much liberal endeavour.

For all liberals or historians of liberal thought, the tension between the liberty of the individual and the ability to promote a flourishing society needs to be preserved. So for example, the philosopher (and since 2008 the leader of the Canadian Liberal party) Michael Ignatieff argues that the problem with most contemporary political systems is not that they are individualistic so much as they operate with an absence of any account of 'the good'. Without this, he notes, individuals are led to believe that any and all their needs and desires are legitimate.[24]

At the end of his groundbreaking sociological study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber suggests 'the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.'[25] This sense of 'calling', for Weber, constituted one of the fundamental elements of the rise of modern culture. Will individuals be able to look beyond themselves, will they be able to persevere at their endeavours even in the absence of immediate gratification in a world which rejects belief in transcendent

purpose? Weber is doubtful. 'The modern man is in general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve.'[26]

Impersonal law

The liberal impulse is always one in reaction against the arbitrary authority of kings, popes and other monopolies of power. Yet at the same time liberalism seeks the regulation of social life by universal and impersonal laws. There are strong strands within the tradition that seek to ground liberty and purpose in something other than a named, personal and specific deity. While the 'traditional control mechanisms of the Church, class, and political order were held to be unnatural'[27], candidates for alternative versions of the transcendent included such forces as History, Necessity, the World–Spirit, Deism, Laws of Nature and the Market amongst others. Politically, these turns to the 'transcendent' are inevitably worked out through emphasis on the rule of law, and in the provision of legal guarantees protecting individuals from overwhelming power or personalities. In economics, impersonal market forces and objective contract law replace dominant individuals or groups. Liberals have long sought non-interference from government, the abolition of monopolies and free-trade for this reason.

In the name of liberty, liberals promote fiscal, racial, gender, civic, national, local and personal freedoms. Yet, as a result of the competing natures of freedom *from* and freedom *for* these claims inevitably clash. The will of the individual will often impinge on the general good of wider society, and *vice versa.* For example, does the autonomous liberty of a single, teenage girl who wishes to have a baby on state benefit trump the values of responsible parenthood that contribute to social stability? How far should a liberal society allow the freedom of speech exercised by a racist bigot?

The well-known liberal strategy for practical politics in these matters is to refer to the harm principle from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty.* For Mill, individuals should be free to do anything that does not result in harm to other individuals. Society may only restrict individual freedoms if the exercise of those freedoms brings demonstrable damage to others.

> The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.[28]

The principle attempts to hold together the two types of freedom. On the one hand, the possibility that there might be a 'physical or moral' good of an individual is not denied. On the other hand, Mill steps back from allowing the state or other corporate authority to determine or influence this good.

However, by holding up 'harm' as the only case where intervention is warranted, Mill has not escaped succumbing to the highly individualistic nature of liberal freedom. Here again we see that 'liberty' can ultimately only mean that which does not coerce or restrain an individual and the general concept of 'harm' becomes difficult to articulate. Notoriously, the notion of harm is also endlessly contestable – it has no morally neutral definition. For example, the right to suicide is considered by many liberals to belong to the sphere of individual freedom. However, it is arguably harmful to others if I kill myself. Not only do I set a precedent to the vulnerable, ill or elderly that their lives, too, are not worth living, I am also removing myself from the common life by withholding my contribution to society. Or, to take the example of the freely speaking racist, a typical liberal response is to allow the speech but intervene at the point of physical damage. Yet the cultural and psychic blot that bigotry makes in the communities where it exists is also damaging in that it prevents those people from living lives to the fullest. The speakers, as well as the listeners, are hurt by racism even if it never leads to physical violence. Such arguments can only be made if a prior commitment to a narrative of human flourishing is in view, but this is precisely the sort of commitment that Millian liberals cannot make. By being reticent to name 'the good', Mill is also unable to name 'the harm'.[29]

Positive and negative freedom

Liberal politics necessitate a balancing act between the two types of freedom at work. In practical terms, liberal policy differentiates between 'negative' and 'positive' freedom. Negative freedom refers to the legal guarantee of private space from public interference. Negatively, the state agrees not to intrude. This corresponds most closely to autonomous freedom *from* and to Mill's rule of harm, and as such it shares in the problems posed by those principles.

Positive freedom can refer to the ability to pursue long-term goals unhindered by ignorance or untutored passions and corresponds most closely to purposeful freedom *for*. Attempts to legislate this sort of freedom are fraught with difficulties. A modern liberal government that actively seeks to educate its citizens regarding the good life is playing with the same fire that classical liberalism sought to put out. Common liberal debates in this area include discussing how many public resources should be used to supply the means by which individuals can reach self-fulfilment. How should education be provided and, crucially, what should educators teach? A current hot topic in this area is that of faith schooling. Should a liberal state provide funds for faith schools? Should it allow faith schools at all? If so, to what extent should liberal values be enforced in the curriculum of these schools?

Ultimately, secular liberalism is unable to answer these questions without falling foul

of one or more of its foundational premises. It is in the face of intractable problems such as these that liberal freedom is traditionally extended only as a matter of expanding the options of choice and no further. Positively, the liberal state provides the infrastructure and resources (for schools, hospitals and the like) that form the context of the choice – but it refrains from helping its citizens to choose *well*. Here, the negative freedom ensured by the state comes into play. People may choose rightly or wrongly – all that matters is that they are free to choose.

By coming back to 'choice' as the end goal we can see that in the battle to keep both senses of freedom intact, in fact it is the autonomous freedom of self-realisation that ultimately must win out in liberalism.

> Because freedom is granted to the sphere of conscience that does no harm to others, liberals have sought to allow others to be free to live out their own beliefs rather than impose their view on them. This has led to the compartmentalisation of life under liberalism: the separation of faith from the public square, and the secularisation in confining religion to one sphere and role in life.[30]

Rather than enforcing a public life guided by Christian (or other religious) principles, liberals tend to look to impersonal 'society' itself as a 'spontaneous and self-adjusting order'.[31] Liberalism sees authority as a constraint on desire, not as providing the space in which free actions are given their basic rationality.[32] For this reason, all government is a product of the consent of individuals – it is ultimately self-imposed by society, and not by divine fiat.

Thus it is true that with liberalism there is 'an absence of a positive unifying core for its social philosophy.'[33] As we have seen and shall discuss further, this absence has contributed to very real and very bad problems. However, considering the historical and present dangers posed by regimes enforcing their vision of 'the good' upon everyone else, liberalism may well turn out to be the least worse option. Certainly it is not necessary to liberalism that it must be inimical to Christianity. Indeed, Christians often make the best liberals. Christian communities can exist and thrive in liberal societies. Due to their non-reconcilable views of liberty, however, what they cannot expect is that modern liberal societies will be *Christian*.

This need not pose an insurmountable problem for the modern, politically liberal Christian. That no society can be *made* to be Christian, and indeed, that there is no such thing as a Christian society, only Christians within society, is itself a deep Christian truth which is related to the category of 'the individual'. The origins and role of 'the individual' for liberalism and for Christianity is the topic of the next part of this essay.

Notes

[1] The distinction is commonplace. See for example Giddings, P. 'The Political Parties and Biblical Principles', in Chaplin, J. (ed.) *Politics and the Parties,* IVP, 1992.

[2] Patterson, O. *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture,* I.B. Taurus, 1991, x.

[3] Ibid., xvi.

[4] Grayling, A.C. *Towards the Light,* Bloomsbury, 2007, 8.

[5] The literature is extensive. See for example Baukham, R. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses,* W.B. Eerdmans, 2006.

[6] Barth, K. *Humanity of God,* Collins, 1971, 67.

[7] Ibid., 68.

[8] Bentley Hart, D. *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies,* Yale University Press, 2009, 24.

[9] Hauerwas, S. *After Christendom,* Abingdon Press, 1999, 53.

[10] Kant, I. *What is Enlightenment?* 1784.

[11] See for example Paul Marshall's introduction in *The Orange Book* and David Boyle's essay 'Liberalism and the Search for Meaning' in *Reinventing the State*.

[12] Mott, S.C. *A Christian Perspective on Political Thought,* OUP, 1993, 132; Song, R. *Christianity and Liberal Society,* Oxford University Press, 2006, 40, 41.

[13] Bentley Hart, D. *Delusions,* 5.

[14] Ibid., 21.

[15] See Gray, J. 'Liberalism: An Autopsy' in *Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings,* Allen Lane, 2009.

[16] Nietzsche, F. *The Anti-Christ,* 1895, §18.

[17] Ibid., §16.

[18] Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science,* §125.

[19] Nietzsche, F. *The Will to Power,* posthumous 1901.

[20] See for example Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* 1885.

[21] Eagleton, T. *Reason, Faith and Revolution,* Yale University Press, 2009, 16.

[22] Pannenberg, W. *Christian Spirituality,* Westminster Press, 1983, 89–91.

[23] Trigg, R. *Free to Believe? Religious Freedom in a Liberal Society,* Theos, 2010, 23. Trigg's and other's intimation along these lines is discussed below and in the following part.

[24] See Ignatieff, M. *The Needs of Strangers,* Viking, 1985.

[25] Weber, M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Unwin University Books, 1970, 182.

[26] Ibid., 183. Other commentators who see the destructive force of liberalism which has sloughed off its religious reference include Demant, V.A. *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism,* Scribners, 1952; Heimann, E. *Reason and Faith in Modern Society,* Wesleyan University Press, 1961.

[27] Mott, S.C. *Perspective,* 132.

[28] Mill, J.S. *On Liberty,* Oxford University Press, 1998, 14.

[29] John Gray commends Mill on this point for being a 'proto-value-pluralist'; however, Gray also recognises that Mill's attempt to affirm the variegated forms of human life at the same time as promoting one form of rational consensus liberalism leads to the foundering of his project. See Gray's introduction to *On Liberty,* OUP, 1998 and his essay 'Modus Vivendi' in *Anatomy,* 47–48.

[30] Mott, S.C. *Perspective,* 144.

[31] Ibid., 132. See also Wolin, S. *Politics and Vision,* Princeton University Press, 1960.

[32] Song, R. *Christianity,* 217.

[33] Mott, S.C. *Perspective,* 144.

Part III: The Individual

If liberty is the pudding of liberalism, then 'the individual' is the proof. Neither 'freedom from' nor 'freedom for' make sense unless they flower in the life of an actual person. For liberalism, freedom is only secondarily related to groups, governments and nations. First and foremost, freedom belongs to individual human beings.

In the first section we briefly examine the place of the 'individual' in liberal and Liberal Democrat thought. Liberal beliefs in the unassailable dignity, freedom and rights of the individual owe much of their articulation to Christian theology. The modern sense of the importance of the human being is intimately connected to historical Christian thought. Two key areas in particular are worthy of attention. With 'the individual' always in view, we will look at Christian reflection on the meaning and importance of *faith.* Then we will consider the ethical implications of the *neighbour.* In both cases, the vision for Christian life and practice shares much with hallmarks of political liberalism.

That there are multiple points of connection between modern liberalism and Christianity should come as no surprise. We will see how it is that Christianity's high emphasis on individual identity led to the invention of what it now means to be a person, and to have individual human rights at all. It is not at all certain, however, how well equipped modern liberalism is to sustain its belief in the inviolable rights of the human being when this belief is explicitly divorced from the context of Christianity. To this end we will examine the track record of liberal society on this front.

Protecting and promoting the individual is very important for the Liberal Democrats. Liberal commentator Simon Titely speaks for many in the Party when he writes:

> We need a truly liberal definition of individual freedom. Real liberation is about meeting the innate human need for 'agency', the ability to influence and change the world in which one lives. Power must be devolved so that people may take real and meaningful choices about their lives, not merely consumer choices.[1]

David Laws is proud of the fact that his Party speaks up for the freedom of the individual:

Consistently Liberal Democrats have been willing at our conferences (to the frequent despair of our leaders and press advisors) to discuss and debate difficult issues involving the rights of minorities, and we have argued for measures to secure individual liberty against state and majority tyranny.[2]

Nick Clegg declares:

I believe that there is the liberal heritage and tradition which is a really great one. It goes right back to the eighteenth century and is a philosophy that believes in the primacy of the individual, that power should be dispersed.[3]

Cogs and Kings

A common criticism of liberalism is that the focus on 'the individual' can and does often lead to an ideology of *individualism*. Here, the individual is considered to be so paramount that no wider claims of tradition, history or society are seen to have any purchase. Individualism has no satisfactory theory of society, advancing as it does an atomistic vision of the world in which persons are supposedly most free and most authentic when they operate in an environment of pure self-sufficiency. At the individualistic end of the liberal spectrum (Conservative American Republicanism or Libertarianism, for example) we see that persons effectively become little kings of their own worlds.[4]

Critics are right to point out that such an environment is, in fact, based on a total fallacy. Humans are social beings and cannot exist in a cultural and relational vacuum. However, the liberal value of the individual need not necessarily be individualistic. By prioritising persons over groups, liberals are not saying that humans do not need association, merely that the group is not the most important thing about a person. Liberals remind us that it is individuals who make up society, not the other way around. To confuse this relation is ultimately to risk seeing persons as merely expendable in the face of 'development', 'history' or 'culture'. It was this 'progressive' philosophy that underwrote Stalin's murderous regime and Hitler's genocidal master race. If the extreme end of liberalism is the person as 'little king', then the extreme end of fascistic or socialist ideology is the person as a 'little cog' in the machinery of nation and state.

Liberal philosophers and politicians who defend the rights of the individual are often protecting actual persons from being subsumed into the vague aspirations of the state. Abstract 'social goods' are not worth having if the individual needs and rights of living, breathing persons are trampled as a result. In fact, the liberal philosophy of the individual maintains that unless individual freedom is preserved, there can be no society at all. Far from promoting selfish individualism, liberal political philosophy holds that only free individuals, freely

congregating and cooperating with each other, can build community.

The conception of the human agent is crucial for liberalism. Many philosophical accounts of modern liberal society see the self as fundamentally detached from outside contingencies, being related to them only through choice and consent. At times this self-sovereignty effectively takes the form of nihilism (see Part Two). However, every strand of liberalism values and assumes individuality without necessarily endorsing individualism. It assumes that individuals are unique and can be distinguished one from another. It also assumes that individuals can be distinguished from 'an unindividuated whole'.[5] As opposed to rival conceptions of human identity, this means that the individual cannot be fully explained by his relation to the group, a nation, the Spirit of the Age, a movement of history, a stage of cultural development and so on. Furthermore, following Kant, individuals share *universal* values that trump *particular* traits.[6] With universalism, features such as race, class, gender and wealth are considered irrelevant with respect to rights and the law. By definition, universalism transcends histories and cultures: human rights, for example, are applicable at all times and in all places.

The Christian individual

The Christian vision departs at key places from the liberal vision, as we shall see below. That being said, there are many points of congruence between the liberal individual and the Christian individual. Christianity too, places a high value on persons relative to groups. The New Testament routinely sets a Christian's allegiance to a singular and personal God against any competing claims of allegiance to family, government or nation. As with liberal politics, this is not to say that the Christian individual is necessarily individualistic. The imagery driving the earliest vision of the Christian life is corporate, most notably in Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom, the establishment of the *ekklesia* (the political and religious association translated as 'church') and in Paul's metaphor of different members constituting one body of Christ, to name but a few examples. However, just as liberalism logically prioritises individuals before groups, so too the theology of the earliest Christians writing in the New Testament denies that participation in the Kingdom of Heaven relies on prior membership of a certain group, religion or culture. The Christian life is predicated on persons who have been 'born again', and who can, as individuals, confess with their mouths 'Jesus is Lord.' (John 3.3; Romans 10.9) This has nothing to do with their prior class, gender or cultural alignment. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3.28 NIV)

Furthermore, within Christianity the category of 'the individual' is more

important than merely describing the proper priority for group formation. A robust conception of 'the person' is crucial for the most important aspects of Christian life and thought. There is a strong line of Christian theological tradition that holds that if humans are not essentially free individuals then the entire Christian rationale for the Creation of the world is rendered incoherent: take away the priority of personhood and faith becomes a pointless virtue, love for neighbour is undermined, and love for God is impossible.

The opposite of faith

Come unto me, all you who that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11.28, KJV)

There is a great deal of nonsense written about 'faith', both by Christianity's fashionable despisers and by its champions. A common picture, attacked and defended in equal measure, is of a vision of faith that believes against all odds and against all logic. Sometimes the purest faith is seen to be that which survives in spite of reason. Here, 'faith' belongs in the category of the intellect – but only a negative form of intellect whereby questions, evidence and doubt are anathema to true faith. Philosophically, the name for this position is *fideism* and there are some Christians who think and act as if this is what faith is. The angry army of rational secularists who decry this way of life have picked a worthy target. In turn, the bookshelves are groaning with

published ripostes from Christian authors keen to distance themselves from their fideist cousins *and* their rationalist enemies. These highly educated authors are keen to demonstrate how evidentially credible, reasonable and intellectually compelling their faith is.

Only a fool or an obtuse critic intentionally ignoring basic facts of history could fail to recognise Christianity's inextricable role in the formation of modern philosophy, art, science and ethics, or could claim that the religion is utterly bereft of positive contributions to the life of the mind. Yet even when attackers attack – or defenders defend – these reasonable contributions, they fail to properly cover the gamut of *faith*. Both sides have departed from the original understanding of the matter at hand.

Historically, Christian thought and theology recognises that 'faith' is not a category of the intellect so much as it describes a movement of the will. Christian faith is not intellectual assent to a set of propositions such as the trinity, atonement or even the existence of God; it is instead the expression of personal trust in an individual person, namely Jesus, who says 'come unto me.'

Seen in its cultural context, it is significant that Jesus' oft repeated phrase 'believe in me' is a phrase with strong socio-political overtones, commonly associated with other radical leaders and would-be revolutionaries

of the day. In effect Jesus is asking people to join his social movement. In the New Testament, the characters who Jesus asks to believe in him are not being asked to believe in six impossible things before breakfast. They are being asked to leave their old lives and to follow a person – to share his vision for a new way of living.[7] People faced with the faith decision are being asked to make this sort of choice. Jesus' call to have faith in him is morally demanding and culturally audacious, but it is not *unreasonable*. It is because of this personal and wilful character of faith that some Christian commentators have pointed out that the opposite of faith is not reason – it is offence.[8]

Offence may be directed against the humbleness of the person asking others to join his movement. Or, one might balk at the person's grandiose claims. Or, one might recoil at the personal and social implications of accepting the call to belief. Whichever form it takes, 'offence' stands opposed to 'faith'. Unlike matters of reason, which rely on logical propositions and conclusions that must be assented to as a matter of course, faith is a matter of the *will* following knowledge of what Jesus asks of us. There is nothing obvious or commonsensical about Christian faith, for it constantly skirts the edges of social good taste and moral acceptability. It is important to note that in the New Testament and subsequent Christian theology, the person faced with the choice of faith in Jesus is fully free not

to make that choice. Indeed, as a matter of statistics, throughout history the majority of people faced with the question of following Jesus have chosen not to. Lest any Christian think that this is only because people have not met 'the real' Christ, it is worth remembering that the ranks of those offended by the demands of faith include the multitudes of first-hand witnesses contemporary with Jesus as recorded in the gospels.[9] By the same token, how many ranks of people inhabiting the 'comfortable pew' of their church are able to assent to various Christian propositions and yet have never faced the possibility of offence that Jesus poses? There is a strong line of Christian thought that holds that unless the individual faces this challenge to the will, they cannot be said to have faith.

Historically, it is the contours of this kind of faith, and a full examination of its implications, that has contributed to a liberal sense of the individual. Matters of the will cannot be anything other than matters of personal decision. Depending on the one of whom it is being asked, Christian faith may be an issue of obedience, of dependence, of courage or of humility. Crucially, however, for the Christian it is also an issue of the free choice of a free individual and, significantly, it is always required of each member of the Christian group, rather than of the group itself. Historically Christians have been at the forefront of defending this vision of faith in the name of the free individual, often

against the state or other Christian groups. For example, in the sixteenth century radical Anabaptists sought to preserve free personal faith in the face of culturally monolithic Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism. In turn, it was Protestant and Catholic opposition to the domination of the atheist state that contributed much to the downfall of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century. In Britain and America, it was the preservation of exactly this freedom of individuals to make the choice of faith that drove Nonconformism in the nineteenth century and contributed to the development of modern, political liberalism. Today freedom of belief and freedom of religious association are among the most basic rights valued by the Liberal Democrat party and informing their policy.

Good and bad neighbours

Who is my neighbour? (Luke 10.29)

Famously, Christian ethics centre around the double love command to 'love the Lord your God' and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (see Luke 10.25–37). The social vision at the heart of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan has now become so commonplace that we tend to forget how subversive it was for the first communities who heard it. Yet as the Christian imagination increasingly fades in the modern West, this vision is becoming radical once again.

The story revolves around the question of who is the proper recipient or target of social responsibility. The young man who asked Jesus 'who is my neighbour' was effectively seeking a social loophole. Who do we have to spend emotional and material resources on and who are we allowed to exclude? Who has the right to make a claim on our care, and who does not? When we consider the issues that dominate the modern British political conversation – immigration and asylum, taxation and wealth redistribution, resource allocation in schooling, healthcare, foreign aid and the like – we see that by no means are the young man's questions unique to first century Palestine.

The sting in the tale that Jesus tells is that 'the neighbour' is not someone who can be defined along cultural, religious or ethnic lines. In the first place, the Good Neighbour is the one who sees another person in need and does something about it. In the second place, one's 'neighbours' are precisely and simply that – they are the people who live in proximate relation to each other. Responsibility and duty for care are not to be restricted to those who share in abstract notions such as 'nation' or 'religion' – they apply to the people who live in your actual and local neighbourhood even if they do not share your colour, your language or your beliefs.

It is just such a vision of real people rather than amorphous, impersonal groups that

underwrites human rights and the liberal value of the individual. Here also we see how the Liberal Democrats' consistent commitment to internationalism on the one hand and to localism on the other can be explained along the lines of the Good Neighbour. Neither faceless bureaucracy nor arbitrary nationalistic divisions should be allowed to get in the way of meeting the actual needs of existing individuals.

Yet modern Western societies, while 'liberal' in many ways, have not tended to embrace these values. Since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nationalism has increasingly come to dominate political discourse and the source of people's self-identification. The drift towards relying on state solutions to local problems and the relative apathy shown by individuals in terms of community participation is also apparent in our cultural history. It is telling that often the two bitterest pills electorates are asked to swallow when considering the Liberal Democrats are the party's international outlook and its local commitments. The popular press distrusts any party that refuses to thump the tub of nationalism, and the political establishment resists the kind of restructuring that would be required if power was to be decentralised to the extent that the Liberal Democrats desire.

Paradoxically, Liberal Democrats are often dismissed as being insufficiently patriotic *and* overly concerned with petty local

concerns. The fact that these accusations have purchase says far more about the loss of a lively sense of neighbours as persons in common culture then it does about the legitimacy of liberal ideology. It is a curious feature of the present age that the values of neighbourliness are often dismissed as old-hat, and yet are rarely seen at the political and cultural level. Over familiarity with the theory of the Good Neighbour has perhaps blinded us to the fact that it is almost nowhere put into practice. Yet the suggestion that it is the real persons living near us, and not groups or ideas, that should form the basic unit of our ethical concern is a suggestion that Christians and liberals alike can support. Considering the shallowness, brutality and isolation of the present age, it is perhaps an old idea whose time has come again.

The category of 'the neighbour' is social dynamite, threatening to rupture many of the habitual and unexamined assumptions of our society. 'Neighbourliness' implies a concern and responsibility for persons that goes beyond patriotism, nationalism, impersonal bureaucracy or any other form of abstraction that allows individuals to be lost in the crowd. For these reasons, the Danish philosopher and social critic Søren Kierkegaard considered 'the neighbour' to be one of Christianity's greatest inventions. 'No one in paganism loved the neighbour; no one suspected that he existed.'[10] Yet it is not only the neighbour that was invented by Christianity. The 'neighbour' as a social

and political category arose from Christian reflections on the ethical demands of Jesus. Likewise, Jesus' emphasis on trusting him rather than being offended at him created a situation in which faith in God cannot be had apart from a personal and free decision to love, a freedom to which every person has equal access. It was attempts to be true to these two aspects of Christian belief and action that gave rise to the invention of the human being as we understand it today, and in which liberal ideology places such great stock.

Invention of the person

The proposal that Christianity stands on the side of the dignity of every human life is not an easy sell to many modern observers. It is not hard to find examples of sexism, racism, homophobia, class bigotry, violence, abuse and neglect in the historical and present life of the churches. Christians have certainly not held back when providing their detractors with ample ammunition with which to attack.

Nevertheless, it is an often-overlooked fact of intellectual history that the moral outrage rightly expressed at each wasted life is *Christian* moral outrage. That each human life is valuable and important, and that every person commands dignity regardless of his or her class, nation or status is far from a universal truth acknowledged by all peoples everywhere.

Casting his eye back to pre-Christian civilisation, the classicist and Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart suggests that

> It would not even be implausible to argue that our very ability to speak of 'persons' as we do is a consequence of the revolution in moral sensibility that Christianity brought about. We, after all, employ this word with a splendid indiscriminate generosity, applying it without hesitation to everyone, regardless of social station, race or sex.[11]

It was not always so. The Latin *persona* refers to the mask or effigy that powerful families were allowed to display on their graveyard memorials. In Roman law, the term 'person' was reserved only for those men of enough wealth and social standing to have a 'face' before the court. Those who had no face, and thus no legal standing, included the majority population of women, slaves, the poor, foreigners, criminals and children.

That even (or especially) these people were owed special honour and regard was a complete novelty and offence unknown before the Christian era. The early Church was primarily known for the care that Christians took even over the poor, old and sick members of other religions.[12] Christianity forbade the normal practice of exposing unwanted infants (usually girl babies) to hasten their death. It insisted on

providing proper provision and dignity for women and widows unable to contribute to society. Christian husbands were forbidden to divorce their wives, and the man's body was considered to belong to the woman's. After the institution of Christianity in the Empire, Emperors such as Constantine and Theodosius conformed the law to Christian precepts. All women were to be spared publicly humiliating and trivial divorces. Those that did divorce were allowed to keep their betrothal gifts and dowries and so were not left destitute. Young girls were protected from forced marriages. A man who forced his daughter into prostitution lost all legal authority over her. Slave girls abused in the same manner were to be granted their freedom.[13]

As a deeply engrained social and economic construct of every human culture on earth, the practice of slavery and bonded servitude obviously remained in place for a long time, even in Christianised society. However, as a result of Christianity, the attitude towards slaves was considerably altered. For example, slaves were admitted into the church as full members, and enjoyed unheard-of positions of leadership. The equality of all persons in the name of Christ worked its corrosive effect on this longstanding institution as slaves saw themselves in a new light and slave masters acquired a conscience hitherto unknown in history. It should never be forgotten that where and when slavery was abolished, it was done so for explicitly Christian reasons

and with appeals to the Christian conviction that a slave, too, was a man and a brother.

Society's attitude towards the role and place of women has undergone a similar 'slow-burn' effect. Like an old television taking a while to warm up before the picture appears, the fundamentally unique and startling Christian values of equality and dignity for all individuals have not enjoyed an instant effect on the cultures they inhabit. Yet here again, the early Christian era's institution of rights for women into the law should be seen for the innovation that it was. Furthermore, the roles provided by the Church in the Middle Ages brought opportunities for scholarship, leadership and innovation to women who would otherwise be confined to lives lived entirely defined by men. In Britain, movements such as the drive for Temperance and Suffrage, and the fight for prostitution reform laws were carried through by men and women – often intentionally Christian in their rhetoric and usually Liberal in their politics.

The idea that there is a universal human dignity, and that every person is an individual who can be wronged against, is the bedrock of any modern understanding of human rights. If it was not for the Christian 'invention' of equal persons in Christ, our account of what it means to be a person at all would be vastly different. The Western conscience has been formed by Christian moral ideals. The point, we should hasten to add, is not that Christianised

civilisations know nothing of the evils of sexism, racism or prejudice. The point is that we know and feel that these things are evil.

> Once a person or a people comes to recognise an evil for what it is, even if that evil is then allowed to continue for a time, in whole or in part, the most radical change has already come to pass ... For what it is to be human has been, in some real way, irrevocably altered.[14]

Humanistic liberalism and human rights

The Liberal Democrats have positioned themselves as champions of individual rights.[15] According to Nick Clegg, 'Civil liberties and individual freedoms are part of the DNA of the Liberal Democrats.'[16]

The jewel in the liberal crown is the protection of individuals through the preservation of their human rights. Yet while freedom of belief is protected, and an individual's right to live according to conscience is defended, the rhetoric of human rights has become resolutely secular. Humans are not valuable because God values them, but because humans do. The dignity and worth of all persons regardless of age, race, sex or station remains a universal ideal, but the historical Christian rationale for this ideal no longer forms part of the appeal. This of course is as true for the Liberal Democrats as for any other modern political party or public body extolling human rights. In the face of

confidence in humanistic human rights it is worth questioning the extent to which these laudable goals can be preserved when the Christian framework has been removed.

Many commentators point out the dangers and dead ends facing a system of values which seeks to transcend all human cultures and yet which does not recognise the religious value of transcendence.

The British political theologian Luke Bretherton is realistic about the post-Christian nature of liberal society. At the same time he is not optimistic that the secular human rights system is an adequate substitute for the 'concrete social and political relationships in particular places' that Christianity can provide.[17]

Notwithstanding liberalism's aim of protecting the individual from impersonal forces, a non-transcendent account of human rights tends towards creating complex, abstract well-ordered legal systems — in other words, self-referential and self-perpetuating bureaucracies. In order to avoid placing all the power in the hands of a privileged *someone*, a system is contrived in which no *one* has power. Rather than focus on the moral reform and excellence that makes for an individual's responsible wielding of power, the liberal system relies on a series of checks and balances whereby the system itself generates and safeguards the responsibility for human rights. Yet, as Bretherton points out, the problem is that

despite the rhetoric, human rights are not actually self-perpetuating or all-pervasive.[18] In the absence of a lively sense of existing 'before God', liberal human rights must continually turn towards self-authentication for its validity.

The political philosopher Roger Trigg says of Christianity's contribution to Western politics: 'A belief in the importance of the individual is its product.'[19] However, he is quick to note that without reference to Christianity it becomes difficult to explain why each individual matters equally, or why we should refrain from imposing our beliefs on others.[20] Likewise, for the Bible Society's Parliamentary officer, David Landrum, when it comes to maintaining human rights, 'without the eternal, it is impossible to argue for the inalienable.'[21] For Robert Song, secular liberalism is led, predictably, to seek ultimate value only in itself. Without a sense that there is a greater reality underlying social life or a higher purpose to which humans are called, politics is not seen as the transitory and fragmentary thing it actually is. 'Transcendence is unavoidable: either it will be offered through the religion or religions of the society, or it is liable to be established by the demonic absolutisation of the liberal state.'[22]

Are these critics, and others like them, simply being pessimistic; aggrieved that Christianity is no longer the common sense of a more humanistic and rational modern age?

Inhuman humanism

Little did we guess that what has been called the century of the common man would witness as its outstanding feature more common men killing each other with greater facilities than any other five centuries together in the history of the world.[23]

The history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has amply demonstrated how, even for states that loudly declare their commitment to human rights, the moral justifications for the use and limits of force against individuals come unstuck time and again. 'The social order betrays in its everyday practice that it does not and cannot believe in the spiritual values it supposedly holds dear.'[24] Social commentators (Christian and non-Christian alike) are right when they point out the (often literally) fatal disconnect between the lofty aims of secular liberal humanism and the reality of the liberal states which proclaim them.

Inevitably, proponents of secular humanism pit a glowing narrative of enlightened progress against the violence and repression of religious (read: Christian) society. Yet if there is no transcendent source of the Good there is no limit to human will. There is no way to say that a human project is inherently irrational or abominable. The belief that human nature, free of faith which looks beyond the horizons of the self, will naturally make society more just,

more rational and more humane can only be had with a profound — even intentional - ignorance of the rivers of blood that have been spilled in the name of 'human progress'. From the French Revolution to the nationalist genocides of Europe, America and Africa, from the camps of Auschwitz to the Cambodian killing fields, from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to the Communist regimes of Joseph Stalin, Nicolae Ceausescu and Enver Hoxha, the modern age has seen, without a doubt, more individual human beings killed and enslaved then ever before. These lives have been — and continue to be — destroyed not because of Christian doctrine but for revolutionary, nationalist, scientific, rational, anti-religious, and humanist reasons. 'No cause in history — no religion or imperial ambition or military adventure — has destroyed more lives with more confident enthusiasm than the cause of the "brotherhood of man".'[25]

The challenge facing all liberal movements such as the Liberal Democrats which have assumed the mantle of valuing human rights is not that humans do not have rights. It is that secular liberalism is incoherent in articulating these rights, and for that reason is inevitably and demonstrably impotent when it comes to defending these rights against concerted, anti-liberal attack.[26]

It is not only nationalism or other culturally imperialistic movements that have been able to easily steamroll over liberal objections. In this light it is significant that while they disagree about everything else, both rapacious capitalism on the one hand and materialist socialism on the other tacitly agree that there is no intrinsic worth in individual human lives. For these instrumentalist world-views ('the ends justify the means'), persons are only valuable insofar as they consume, contribute or abrogate all individuality for the sake of the movement or market of which they are a part.

For the language of human value to have meaning, it must refer to persons who are valuable in themselves and not according to what social function the person represents. Only a non-instrumental view can underwrite liberal individualism, freedom and human rights. Here, humanist liberalism is in trouble. It wants to oppose the de-humanising utilitarianism of the materialists, but has disallowed the reality that underwrites its own framework. Can one hold to the intrinsic worth of all humans if you do not allow for the divine purpose that constitutes that worth? Liberalism which wants to be both atheistic and transcendent will, ultimately, only be able to cling to a shallow version of humanist principles. Nationalism, cultural imperialism, communism and capitalistic cultures of immediate gratification actively seek, and at their best countenance, the death of thousands so that their chosen way of life might continue undisturbed. A programme of universal humanism that truly values

individual persons requires more than a rhetoric of freedom and dignity that melts away in the face of rival utilitarian and deeply *inhuman* powers.

The onus is on secular liberalism to demonstrate that its vision of human rights is robust enough to withstand these forces. So far, arguably, its track record has not been good enough to instil much confidence. For its part, Christian liberalism already has a strong intellectual tradition of grounding human worth in the person's freedom for flourishing according to the divine purpose of love and faith. Occasionally in history, this theory has even worked itself out in practice to astonishing effect, as with the recognition of the humanity of women and children in the fourth and fifth centuries, the abolition of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, civil rights in the twentieth and opposition to communist regimes in the twenty-first. That secular liberalism should not and cannot be forced to accept Christianity is obvious. In any case, such compulsion is anathema both to liberalism and to authentic Christian faith. Liberal Christians will never impose faith on others, yet conversely it is absurd that some strands of modern liberalism, including factions within the Liberal Democrat party, actively oppose Christian civic participation. The success of Christianity at creating communities of flourishing, well-socialised individuals, coupled with the repeated failure of secularism to provide the same, is

all that serious Liberals should need to see to know that Christianity is a friend to the liberal vision of humanity. The creation of a social space in which free associations are at liberty to work out the implications of their faith and other visions of the good life is another key tenet of liberal thought. Here, fairness, tolerance, and the enabling of 'social experiments' come to the fore. These all fall under the rubric of our final pillar of liberalism, and thus it is to 'equality' that we now turn.

Notes

[1] Titely, S. 'Me Myself and I' in Brack, D., Grayson R. et al (eds.) *Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21st Century,* Politico's, 2007, 88.

[2] Laws, D. 'Reclaiming Liberalism' in Marshall, P. and Laws, D. (eds.) *The Orange Book,* Profile Books, 2004, 23.

[3] Nick Clegg writing in *The Guardian,* 1 May 2010.

[4] See the discussion of 'sovereign choosers' in the previous part.

[5] Song, R. *Christianity and Liberal Society,* Oxford University Press, 2006, 41.

[6] The process of making universal moral decisions without allowing for particular exceptions forms the core of Kant's 'Categorical Imperative' in *Critique of Practical Reason,* 1788.

[7] On the fundamentally social and political nature of 'belief' in Jesus in its first century context see Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God,* SPCK, 1996, 258–264.

[8] On this point see especially Kierkegaard, S. *Training in Christianity,* 1848, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1981 and Bonhoeffer, D. *The Cost of Discipleship,* 1937, trans. R.H. Fuller, SCM, 1966.

9 It is worth noting that it is immediately *after* he provides a list of miracles and acts of social justice that he has enacted that Jesus is compelled to say 'Blessed is he who is not offended at me.' See Luke 7.18–23.

10 Kierkegaard, S. *Works of Love,* 1847, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong, Princeton University Press: 1998, 53.

11 Bentley Hart, D. *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies,* Yale University Press, 2009, 167.

12 The North African plague in 251–266 saw Christians staying to serve the ill of Carthage and Alexandria, often at the loss of their own lives. Even hostile pagan historians such as Ammianus Marcellinus commended Christians for these and other acts. Similar stories can be found in the city priests who stayed behind to minister to the victims of the Black Death in the Middle ages, and the many modern examples of Christian agencies providing the main or only source of aid to areas struck by disaster and war.

13 These are all features of the Code of Emperor Theodosius in the fifth century.

14 Bentley Hart, D. *Delusions,* 176.

15 'The Liberal Democrats are the only party committed to defending our most important rights.' libdems.org.uk/civil_liberties.aspx. See also the Liberal Democrat's proposed 'Freedom Bill': www.freedom.libdems.org.uk.

16 Nick Clegg writing in *The Guardian,* 13 April 2010.

17 Bretherton, L. *Christianity and Contemporary Politics,* Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 49.

18 Ibid., 48.

19 Trigg, R. *Free to Believe? Religious Freedom in a Liberal Society,* Theos, 2010, 26.

20 Ibid., 26.

21 Landrum, D. 'The Secular Mind and Human Rights Discourse' in *The Bible in Transmission,* Winter 2007.

22 Song, R. *Christianity*, 220.

23 Winston Churchill, MIT Mid-Century Convocation Address, 31 March 1949.

24 Eagleton, T. *Reason, Faith and Revolution,* Yale University Press, 2009, 46.

25 Bentley Hart, D. *Delusions,* 107. For an extensive list of numbers killed in wars and atrocities see the Online Historical Atlas maintained by the researcher and librarian Michael White: users.erols.com/ mwhite28/20centry.htm.

26 One of the most articulate critics of the humanistic attempt to ground human rights is the American political philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. See especially his *Justice: Rights and Wrongs,* Princeton University Press, 2007.

Part IV: Equality

The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity ... We reject all prejudice and discrimination based upon race, colour, religion, age, disability, sex or sexual orientation and oppose all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality ... [1]

In this part we will look at the form and role that equality takes for both liberalism and Christianity. Again, there are close connections between the two; however, it remains problematic to attempt a direct translation from the Christian sense of 'equality' and 'justice' to a liberal understanding of the same values. As well as socio-economic equality, other key facets to be considered in this part are fairness and tolerance. The subject of 'tolerance' is often seen as a feature of freedom. For our purposes, however, it also fits under the rubric of equality. Within liberal society, the liberty to pursue one's own goals and associate freely with others is a good that applies to every individual equally. Tolerance is as treasured as it is troublesome for modern liberal societies, and the section concludes by examining different approaches to tolerating 'experiments in living' equal to all.

In Liberalism, equality is a fundamental constituent of liberty. Philosophically, the logic of 'liberty' as an essential human right leads inexorably to a statement that such liberty must exist for all persons equally, regardless of their ability or social standing. Practically, people are not truly free unless and until they operate on a level playing field. Education, health, economics — inequality in these areas has tangible effects on a person's ability to choose his or her own path in life and is thus a grievous offence against liberal values.

Yet, historically for the Liberal parties, 'equality' has played second fiddle to other liberal tenets, most notably 'freedom' and 'individuality'. The reason is not hard to fathom. Equal distribution of wealth, information or any other social 'good' necessarily entails some state intervention and regulation over individual's lives and choices. Furthermore, the rise of socialism and communism saw the rhetoric of 'equality' become associated with the political left. Liberal champions of innovation, free markets and personal

responsibility understandably shied away from the Big State solutions implied by the language of egalitarianism.

The Liberal Democrat's ambiguous relationship to equality is occasionally made explicit, as in the influential 2002 policy paper *It's About Freedom*:

> We place the principle of freedom above the principle of equality ... when equality is pursued as a political goal, it is invariably a failure, and the result is to limit liberty and reduce the potential for diversity.[2]

Liberal Democrat MP Sarah Teather speaks for many when she writes: 'Liberals have never been preoccupied with equality *per se,* but rather preventing extreme levels of inequality that limit freedom'.[3]

Another indicator of the Liberal take on the issue is the party's linguistic emphasis on *fairness*. One Liberal Democrat MP interviewed for this present piece suggested that equality language has overtones of conformity, hence the preference for the rhetoric of 'fairness'. The MP Steve Webb, for example, has written entire pieces on Liberal approaches to fairness with scarcely a mention of the E-word.[4] At the same time, however, his subject matter deals with exactly the same material, statistics and arguments that others in the field use when discussing equality and inequality. Recent

party manifestos and campaign literature for the 2010 election confirm the trend.[5]

In reality there is no substantial difference in Liberal party thinking between the principle of equality and the principle of fairness. In theory and in practice the two terms are interchangeable. What is important is not the word used as much as the idea underlying the word. As we shall see, this idea of equality/fairness is central for liberalism and for the Liberal Democrats, despite any reticence they might show in their rhetoric. Liberal thinkers recognise that equality remains crucial to any coherent account of liberalism. The challenge is to find ways to talk about an equality that is not *coercive* but *liberal*.

Socio-economic equality

Those who pursue a fair society see that one that is truly fair cannot be bought at the price of suppressing the freedoms and diversity of individuals. And those who want people to be truly and positively free to maximise their potential realise that a passive and non-interventionist state is highly unlikely to achieve such a radical and liberating outcome.[6]

Liberals justify wealth-distribution policies on the basis that a measure of socio-economic equality is the ground from which all other liberal goods can grow. Liberalism is opposed to the conformity and centralised planning implied by socialistic egalitarianism, and thus liberals are always

walking the fine line between ensuring a level playing field for all and allowing personal freedom.

It is, in fact, *freedom* that is thought to best justify liberal, and Liberal Democrat, approaches to equality. Massive inequality and socio-economic deprivation is the main way that people's freedom is inhibited. The real-life impact of economic disparity on individual people's lives is significant.[7] Unlike in communism, economic parity across the board is not the liberal goal – personal liberty is the goal. Only insofar as state intervention allows for individual flourishing do liberals accept laws and regulations promoting economic equality.

The approach to liberal equality is not to create (or re-create) the centralised state. Liberal governments are ideally decentralised, with a system that rewards personal responsibility taken in leadership or initiative in business. Liberal equality does not seek to punish those who work harder, or better, than their peers, but they do wish to establish a system of equal access to resources. As key Liberal Democrat policy officer (and party historian) Duncan Brack notes: 'the redistribution of resources needed to reduce inequality must, to the greatest extent possible, equalise conditions (or endowments or birthrights), while respecting choices.'[8] This is what lies behind the traditional liberal discourse that speaks of 'equality of opportunity' rather than 'equality of outcome'.[9]

Liberals recognise that some inequalities will necessarily exist in a liberal society. Choices made in life do not lead all people to the same financial bracket or social standing. To this extent, the presence of some inequality of wealth or power in a society is evidence that the liberal system is working correctly. What is a problem is the systematic inequality that prevents a person's hard work or initiative from earning its rightful reward. Thus, Vince Cable can write that 'one aim should be to temper *extremes* of income and wealth inequality' while at the same time not decrying all wealth inequality as an evil in itself.[10] For Cable, as for other liberals, it is the size of the difference between rich and poor that is the problem. The ever-widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' in our Western societies creates a downward spiral for many people which no amount of personal discipline, decision-making or hard work will break. Conversely, a fortunate minority experience material wealth, educational opportunities and cultural comfort through no action or contribution of their own.

According to a strong strand of liberal thought, inherited success is no success at all. Certain human rights should not apply only to those lucky enough to have been born into a particular social stratum. The same impulse that drove nineteenth century Liberals to combat privilege is at work today in the Liberal Democratic emphasis on tax reform and a review of death duties, for example. Liberals are concerned with

breaking the inequality that stems from the unequal distribution of endowments, while at the same time creating a system that redistributes resources while preserving choice and incentive.

As Duncan Brack argues, this problem has been the main occupation of the leading lights of liberal thought.[11] For example, the American liberal philosopher John Rawls envisions a society in which institutions do not provide lifelong advantages to some classes at the expense of others. Rawls sees justice 'as fairness' and proposes an ideal liberal society in which economic and social advantages for the better off are justified only if they benefit the worst off.[12] So, for example, a system in which people earned their riches (say in a free market) is justifiable only if the poor in this system are better off than they would be in a more rigidly egalitarian world. Crucially, the Rawlsian poor will also have the opportunity to change their lot. Rawls argues that people who inherit their wealth or natural talents are not morally deserving of these advantages. Thus, the inequalities that exist in such a system cannot be vindicated on the basis that the persons 'at the top' somehow *deserved* their position. The social set-up can only be justified if it can be shown that the system is necessary for the good of everyone in it, especially the least fortunate. Rawlsian liberalism emphasises personal and political liberty rather than socially engineered wealth distribution, because it is these goods that best provide

the incentive and the opportunity for anyone in the society to rise to the top.

Tolerance and equality

Another feature of Rawls' influential liberal philosophy is that it is not just concerned with socio-economic inequality. Justice as fairness also attacks racial, sexual and religious discrimination. For all liberals, the personal freedoms enabled by economic equality are meaningless if they are not allowed to flourish in the cultural climate as well. Liberal societies are those in which individuals are able to make choices in thought, speech and deed. Here, the rhetoric of 'preference', 'personal lifestyle' and 'tolerance' comes to the fore. In general, liberals find it easier to talk about equality in terms of tolerance than about economic re-distribution.

For its cultural critics, including many in the Church, the liberal emphasis on tolerance is sometimes construed as shallow lenience, a mealy-mouthed position that is unable to stand up to real social evils. Yet the roots of liberal tolerance run deep and are a crucial component of any society in which members of minority groups (such as Christians) are allowed to thrive in peace and security.

Far from passively avoiding conflict, liberal tolerance arose from an aggressive protection of the equal rights of every person in the face of arbitrary power. Tolerance means that an individual cannot be treated differently by government or

institutional powers as a result of that individual's social status, cultural affiliation or personal conscience. Historically, this right has not been wrested easily from the claws of the privileged and established. 'Equality before the law' is the cry for toleration raised by women, ethnic minorities, the poor, the working and the middle classes, not to mention Nonconformists and other religious groups amongst many others presently enjoying peace and prosperity in the modern liberal age.

The historical roots of liberal antagonism against established classes and churches has given liberal tolerance an intentionally un-theoretical air. The practice of tolerance can be a way for diametrically opposed dogmatic groups to coexist peacefully in the same society without at the same time having to reach an ideological agreement. For liberalism, tolerance is the practice of guaranteeing access for all to the public space while at the same time refraining from making ethical, religious or philosophical judgements about the groups and individuals in that space. It is, first and foremost, a pragmatic, rather than idealistic, endeavour. 'Political liberalism begins from the facts of difference, and seeks to find a rational basis for a tolerant, liberal society which can accommodate that difference without resorting to metaphysical foundations.'[13] Hence the legalistic and eminently practical emphasis of the phrase 'equality before the law'.

That rational basis for a liberal society is best expressed through legal structures — tolerance is litigious and rights based, not moral or metaphysical. According to the liberal legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin,

> Liberalism commands tolerance; it commands, for example, that political decisions about what citizens should be forced to do or prevented from doing must be made on grounds that are neutral among the competing convictions about good and bad lives that different members of the community might hold.[14]

In his essay 'Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical', Rawls argues how it is that doctrines of 'the good' or of 'the self' or of religion are irrelevant to political liberalism.

> [Justice as fairness] presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve as a basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal persons.[15]

Rawls, it should be noted, is not an arch-anti-religionist. It is simply that the political, legal space provided by liberalism (and, liberals would argue, the space necessary if our modern, multicultural Western societies are going to survive) is one that cannot begin with reference to religion.

We try to avoid disputed philosophical as well as disputed religious questions ... not because these questions are unimportant [but because] the only alternative to a principle of toleration is the autocratic use of state power.[16]

In other words, the liberal state claims to be studiously agnostic (rather than antagonistic) about different conceptions of religion, the good life, or the source of human value.[17] We have already seen previously how this works itself out in liberal conceptions of freedom and the individual that differ from Christian conceptions of the same. Here, equality and tolerance support the necessary liberal decision not to make decisions about flourishing, ultimate ends and absolute truths. Liberal tolerance claims to refrain from making moral judgements. However, in theory it is more than amenable to allowing people within liberal societies to make the judgements themselves, based on public reasoning and communally agreed terms of discourse.

Where there are disagreements, then the only solution is to thrash it out in public – in a place of reasoned argument, dispassionate rules and impersonal judgements. The liberal turn to the law courts as the rightful home of toleration is no accident. Some things are too important to be left to private good will.

The Liberal Democrats are readily litigious when it comes to ensuring social justice and equality. Note, for example, the effort to equalize access to the democratic process in which the senior Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes has argued in favour of giving the three equalities commissions (Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission) 'greater powers to require equal opportunities in political parties.'[18]

Another example can be found in the vexed area of faith schools. After a heated debate at the March 2009 Spring Conference, the Liberal Democrats eventually thrashed out a policy on faith schools. Alone from the other mainstream parties, the Liberal Democrats decided to challenge unnecessary discriminatory school practices in admissions and employment. The theme running through the policy is that, just as faith schools themselves are a product of a tolerant society, toleration is to be legally enforced *in* the schools as well. While recognising the demand for and the existence of faith schools, the Liberal policy nevertheless ramps up the legal requirement for publicly funded religious schools to be inclusive in their admissions, teaching and employment practices. Schools would not be allowed to select pupils on religious grounds. They would be required to teach about other beliefs in a balanced way, and they would be legally compelled to end their opt-out from equalities legislation for staff in faith schools, except those responsible for religious instruction.

We recognise that all teachers (whatever their beliefs) have a duty to uphold the ethos of the school, but we believe that no teacher should run the risk of having their career options narrowed on the basis of their religious beliefs or their lifestyle. Nor should pupils be denied access to the best teachers as a result of discrimination on the basis of religion. Liberal Democrats have always opposed the exemption that exists in employment law allowing faith schools to reserve a proportion of posts for teachers who profess a specific religion.[19]

More recently, Nick Clegg earned headlines when, in an interview by Johann Hari for *Attitude* magazine, he expressed support for legal intervention on school policy concerning homosexuality.

Q: So you would have it as a legal requirement that schools would have to teach that homosexuality is normal and harmless and something that happens?

A: Yes – and crucially faith schools should have a requirement to have an anti-homophobic bullying policy at their school.[20]

Christian equality

Just as with 'freedom' and 'the individual', the relationship between Christian equality and Liberal equality is strong in theory and, often, in practice. Perhaps the most straightforward link is the concern for

social justice, which is usually expressed by Liberals and by Christians in terms of equality. The ground is well covered in Christian literature, and in some quarters it is considered commonplace. Andrew Bradstock sums up the line of thought well in two points:

The first is that the biblical teaching that all people are of equal value because they are created in God's image places certain demands upon communities with respect to social and economic arrangements – specifically, to ensure that none of their members is unable to meet their basic needs in terms of food, shelter and security. And second, that there are sound biblical and sociological reasons for governments consciously to pursue policies aimed not simply at relieving poverty but at narrowing the differential between 'rich' and 'poor' in society.[21]

Biblical material undergirding the Christian principle of social justice *via* equality is indeed strong. From the start in the book of Genesis all human beings derive equal worth for all, male and female, bear the stamp of God's image. The Old Testament is remarkably consistent in tracing the logical implications of this basic equality for matters of economic disparity:

He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God?
(Micah 6.8, NKJV)

The rich are not to exploit the poor. God is the champion and protector of those who are at the margins of society, and woe betide those who would treat them with injustice. Along with the Psalms, the prophetic voices of Isaiah and Amos are especially known for their excoriation of those who would 'trample upon the needy' (Amos 8.4).

Commentators are quick to point out that the Hebrew Scripture's concern for the poor does not stop at merely encouraging the rich to be responsible. Many of the laws of the Old Testament are aimed at constructing the just distribution of land and commodities, and deconstructing those systems that allow for the oppressive accumulation of wealth.[22]

Principles of equality and material equity in the New Testament are largely focused on the community of the followers of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven where 'the last will be first, and the first last.' (Matthew 20.16). In short, favouritism in the Church is forbidden because we are all one in Christ (see James 2; Colossians 3). Famously, for the earliest Christians this egalitarian status worked itself out in the sharing of possessions and equal access to wealth.[23] The Church's attitude to material wealth had wider implications.

Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away (Matthew 5.42, NRSV).

In this light, it is surely significant that Jesus is recorded as beginning his public ministry by directly aligning his mission with Isaiah's Jubilee declaration:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed: to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4.18–19, NKJV).

Perhaps the clearest expression of New Testament equality is the example of Jesus the 'Word become flesh' (John 1). The doctrine of the incarnation is the central, most explosive doctrine in the Christian canon: one of its main implications for ethics is its supreme vote of confidence in the life of the body and its assumption that because God became a human, all humanity might gain access to God. Christ giving of his flesh to all so that all might live is the locus of celebration of the Eucharist. Everyone kneels equally at the communion rail. Everyone partakes of the bread and wine if they are in Christ.

Therefore, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.
(1 Corinthians 11.33, NRSV)

Christianity pro liberalism

It is not surprising then that Christian Liberals such as Simon Hughes and Steve Webb should be so comfortable finding connections between their politics and their religion. The MP Tim Farron, another leading Christian Liberal Democrat, uses equality and justice language to encourage all Christians to vote for his party. In his essay 'Why Vote Liberal Democrat'[24] Farron marks out a space between the so-called 'social gospel' that ignores human individual sin and need for salvation on the one hand and those like the 'Christian Right' in America who ignore social justice in favour of personal (read: sexual) morality issues. For Farron, 'Both of these positions are deviations from the truth.'[25] Instead, Farron explicitly refers to the Old Testament prophetic tradition, such as the book of Amos, which holds both personal accountability and social concern together, and argues that it is *this* passion for social justice that motivates the Liberal party. 'Liberal Democrats understand that real freedom must be underpinned by fairness in our economy and by equality of opportunity in education.'[26] Farron decries the economic decisions that have been made in the past 25 years and which have led only to an immoral disparity between rich and poor. These decisions have not been made in some supposed 'neutral' moral vacuum, but instead have 'been based on a very particular set of values: principally greed and materialism.'[27] Farron ends his appeal by humbly suggesting that Christians should support the Liberal Democrats as 'a statement of our rejection of the shallow and amoral values' which lead to avoidable suffering in society.[28]

Farron, Webb, Hughes and others' commitment to Christianity and to social justice is not in question. What can be usefully, and – in keeping with the engaging and modest tone of Farron's piece – humbly put to these Liberals is the question of how much modern liberalism itself underwrites the shallow and amoral values they so rightfully deplore. Furthermore, the economic system within which we all must abide and which undoubtedly brings much suffering to the poor is itself clearly also a product of 'liberal' business practice and free-market ideology.

Christianity contra liberalism

The vast gap does not just exist between rich and poor. For all its original influence on liberalism, the difference between Christian and liberal understanding of fairness is widening. As liberalism has entered into its modern phase, sloughing off explicit reference to its Christian underpinnings, the mis-match between the Christian demand for social justice and the reality of liberal society is all the more marked. It may well be the case that Christian engagement with politics is best done within some sort of liberal context; however, the discrepancy between the 'equality' of liberalism and the 'equality' of Christianity is not insignificant.

Tim Farron touches upon one aspect of this discrepancy when he tries to put distance between his position and the position that seeks social transformation without personal salvation. Christians can agree with liberalism that personal responsibility and renewal is needed for social justice. Yet the Christian critic can put it to optimistic liberals such as Farron that liberalism alone is not sufficient to produce the goods. Along with liberalism, Christians recognise that social change requires a change in human individuals. Yet Christians know that before their communities can experience the positive equality of renewed persons living for each other, each person must first face the negative equal truth that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3.23). This is the theological reasoning behind Reinhold Niebuhr's criticism of liberal exhortations for social justice. It's not that society does not need justice, it is that the liberals 'have no understanding ... of the agony of rebirth required if the individual would turn from self-love to love.'[29]

It is problematic to attempt a straight translation from the biblical requirements of equality and justice to the liberal understandings of the same. This is especially true for Christians who view even the Old Testament's strictures for social justice through the lens of Christ and the people of God as defined by his followers. Significantly, the New Testament's radical egalitarianism and its vision for a communion of equals gathering round in Eucharistic worship of the God-man is one which is primarily and exclusively applied to the Church. There is no expectation that the life of the born-again will be understood or welcomed by those who do not proclaim Christ. Indeed, the opposite situation is true, with the overwhelming expectation being that the Christian's life will be a source of confusion, antagonism and offence to their neighbours.

It is possible to see some strands of social liberalism in the same light that Jesus saw the Pharisees. Like those zealous proponents of morality (recounted in Matthew 23.1–12) liberals are keen to lay down the requirement of personal responsibility, if not regeneration. Yet, like the Pharisees of old, social liberalism does not, and cannot, provide the resources necessary to help individuals bear the burden. It is along these lines that S. C. Mott mounts a critique of liberal equality. He agrees that the liberal commitment to the 'weak' is a major point of congruence with Christian ethics. Yet the problem with liberalism is not its statement of justice, but instead the context of that justice.[30] 'In liberalism the strategy for change is often weighted heavily toward equality of opportunity ... [yet] Equality of opportunity bears too heavily upon the weak.' The biblical demand for justice is left uncompleted 'within the inadequacies of the competitive economic world'.[31] The point is that simply removing the barriers to inequality is not sufficient. Inequality

damages people, and it is not enough to tell damaged people that now they are free as if this were the panacea. As for the 'strong' or the materially well off, more is needed than a general sense of 'social justice'. The content to this idea, what it entails and what it requires, is not simple, natural or a matter of course.

The reality proposed by the Christian view of the human condition is that justice is not a matter of common sense. Scripture teaches that, left to our own devices, humans invariably choose paths of selfishness and oppression – a fact readily born out by socio-historical observation. If justice is truly to come about, then individuals must be renewed through the transformation of their wills and minds. What is more, this will not happen just anywhere. 'Society' is simply too vague and too impersonal a body in which to effect meaningful change.

Here, we see that the Christian context for justice is ecclesiological before it is sociological. As Stanley Hauerwas argues, 'the Church's social task is first of all its willingness to be a community formed by a language the world does not share.'[32] The Church's mission is to be faithful to Christ and only insofar as Christ is her aim will justice flow. There *is* equality for those re-made in Christ's image, and this equality *does* lead to a radical and lasting ethic of justice for the weak, the poor and the marginalised. This is the Kingdom of

God, the enduring justice that is the year of the Lord's favour. It is the social justice that breaks out 'on earth as in heaven' in numerous places and in numerous times in history when Christians have obeyed Christ, often (if not always) against their own, worldly best interests. Politics cannot simply extract this social justice from its Christian context and expect that it will survive intact. The shallowness and brutality of the modern age, heady with its own humanistic rhetoric, is testament to the failure of this particular experiment. By the same token, Christians should not be surprised when their values and activities are misunderstood or misrepresented by the wider society.

The heart of difference between the two 'equalities' is that the ground of liberal equality is the shared capacities of every human for reason, communication and action, an anthropological claim that must work itself out as equality before the law (it cannot work itself out in any other way). The ground of Christian equality is equality before God. Such a sense of equality naturally lends itself to the enshrinement of certain laws in order protect people, but people and their laws are not seen as the beginning and end of equality. The upshot is that the focus of liberal equality is necessarily human rights based. Its horizons are understandably restricted to those of humanity. Yet, despite much of liberal culture's claim to the opposite, these rights are far from self-evident or

self-perpetuating. Since these rights, by definition, apply to all people in all places, they admit of no distinctions and are thus *impersonal*. The focus of Christian equality, of course, is precisely in the opposite direction. While many Christians (certainly all Liberal ones) would affirm some version of human rights, their scope encompasses more than the merely human. To talk of equality before God is to talk of equal access to God. And to talk of access to God is to talk of mankind's need for God: man's sinfulness and God's love. In order to prevent flying off into vague abstraction, however, the Christian story roots talk of all-encompassing divine love into concrete expression. 'God' is not an unknown force of general well being, some sort of sentimental cosmic gas. Ultimately, to talk Christianly of God's love is to talk of God meeting each individual and unique person in the person of Christ. Within the scope of Christian theology and anthropology, only from this revolutionary *personal* encounter with Christ, which every person is equally free to accept or reject, will meaningful social justice result.

Already we are sliding into platitudinous territory. At its best, Christian theology resists academic abstraction for its own sake. Even if one has to pull back for a time into theory, eventually it must needs work itself out in praxis and the life of the actual Church. The social and individual transformations offered by Christian theology work themselves out in everyday life in numerous examples. From international aid agencies to prisons, homeless shelters to youth clubs, marriage counselling to hospice care, Christians routinely demonstrate their willingness and ability to take on the tasks of social work and justice that they talk about. Yet more and more, these activities are being carried out against a background of cultural liberalism which enforces the dichotomy between 'private' belief' and 'public' action. This public/private division is one of the most enduring features of modern social liberalism. It is also one of its most incoherent.

Public vs. private

Because freedom is granted to the sphere of conscience that does no harm to others, liberals have sought to allow others to be free to live out their own beliefs rather than impose their view on them. This has led to the compartmentalisation of life under liberalism: the separation of faith from the public square, and the secularisation in confining religion to one sphere and role in life.[33]

The idea that one's private religious beliefs should not intrude into the sphere of public life is well known and accepted amongst secular liberal theorists and is a common mantra amongst many liberal political practitioners.

The distinction is a direct result of the nature of humanistic liberalism and its need to enshrine in law only that which can be publicly communicated and agreed upon. In a liberal society, individuals are supposed to be protected from coercion at the hands of arbitrary power, be it state, class or religion. As we have seen, in the fight against coercive tradition, liberal freedom cannot be had by appealing to *another* rival tradition: this too, is ultimately no less arbitrary and potentially coercive than the current oppressive power. This is why Mott can rightly point out that with liberalism, there is 'an absence of a positive unifying core for its social philosophy.'[34] To put it more bluntly, modern liberals are prevented from appealing to Christianity when trying to describe the source and ground of that freedom which applies to all people equally. No less than other religions or ideological world-views, Christianity is exclusive and, to the extent that individuals choose not to subscribe or participate – excluding. It makes truth claims that are not compatible with the truth claims of other world-views. It makes statements about the nature of creation, the purpose of humanity and the person of Christ that are not accepted or understood by everyone. The common ground that the liberal project needs to find in order to ground its sense of freedom, individuality and equality cannot be found in Christian doctrine. It must be found in a sphere of life that, theoretically, is open to all regardless of religion or creed. It must be found in public reasoning, compromise

and the structures of the law. Hence the invention of the two spheres: That which cannot be justified in terms and language understood and accepted by all members of the public is relegated to the private. This is not to say that the liberal settlement is explicitly hostile to religion; it merely holds that in a modern society, no one doctrine (of any kind) can form the basis for political decisions involving the use of 'coercive public power', that is, rules of law that everyone must abide by.[35]

The main problem is that this differentiation is based on a category mistake. Religion, and certainly Christianity, is simply not a 'private' affair. Saying that Christianity is not merely private is not the same as promoting a theocracy in which all laws are 'Christian' laws. Religions are not private because they are social and historical entities, worked out in cultures and groups. The content of religion – its books, its centres of learning, its families and organisations – are all products of and contributors to the common life. Furthermore, most personal decisions made for religious reasons have public ramifications. This is obviously the case when Christian individuals decide to associate together in aid of a common cause, whether this be to abolish slavery, start a soup-kitchen or run a day-care centre. It is also the case for so-called individual acts. The woman who Christianly decides not to pursue her career through dishonest and unkind means and the man

who chooses to enter a monastery are both making personal decisions with wider implications. By refusing to go along with 'the way of the world', these individuals become public signs of a different way to live. The difference might be attractive, or it might be offensive, but it remains part of the warp and woof of social interaction all the same. Examples of these types, and countless more, are played out every day in every level of society. Christianity might be personal, but it is never, simply, private.[36]

The theoretical public-private dichotomy so necessary to the dominant form of political liberalism we have been considering does not actually work itself out in practice. This poses problems for liberal political regimes, and also for the Christian groups to which these regimes play host.

As the British political theologian Luke Bretherton points out, political liberalism is specifically predicated upon compromise and public reason. Generating consensus is a crucial value for liberal public discourse. Thus it is a sign of disrespect against individual freedom for a group to attempt to justify their public actions in terms that not every citizen can reasonably endorse.[37] Yet this is not a process always valued or aided or abetted by Christian discourse. Christians are used to acting in mysterious and counter-intuitive ways. Indeed, Christianity is predicated upon the gospel of a topsy-turvy Kingdom in which the first will be last, enemies are to be loved, and

freedom is to be found in submission to Christ, to name but a few crazy facets of the Christian story. From the start, Christians have been resigned to the fact that, not only will people not understand them – they may actively hate them (e.g. Matthew 5.11– 12).

To participate in liberal society on liberalism's terms, religions must be able to translate their 'goods' into language that all can accept or understand. These goods then become a matter of 'public reason' open to all and in accord with liberal conceptions of justice and equality. So it is that liberals (like Rawls) can claim that they are not necessarily opposed to religious ideas. It is simply that the ideas in and of themselves cannot be accepted as justification of public law until they have been translated into public language, a process Bretherton describes as that in which 'the liberal legal-constitutional order sets the boundaries within which politics takes place.'[38] The problem is that this does not reflect an accurate picture of full-blooded Christianity, and thus distorts both Christianity and the political regimes with which it must deal. The liberal system in effect demands wilful dishonesty on behalf of its participants, requiring them to hide the true reasons for their actions. This serves no one well.

In the laudable drive for fairness and tolerance, the liberal settlement attempts to iron out any wrinkle in the public discourse that might cause conflict. This, for example,

is the engine driving Rawlsian liberalism (amongst others). Yet honest disagreement over important issues is inevitable and even welcome if robust political solutions are to be found. 'What we need is a politics that can live with deep plurality over questions of ultimate meaning and can encompass the fact that many communities and traditions contribute to the common good – each in their own way.'[39] In short, the goal cannot be to banish all disagreement; that is a chimera. Instead the goal must be to learn *how* to disagree. Excluding all meaningful difference of outlook and opinion (by relegating religion to the private sphere, say) is not going to help in these matters, and is certainly not going to aid tolerance. True toleration of other groups can only occur if those groups are allowed to tell us what they actually care about and why.

Experimental liberalism

There is more than one way to be a liberal. Sometimes the streams of liberal tolerance get crossed. Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, provides one example of this. We have already seen above the *Attitude* magazine interview in which he tacitly agreed with a litigious liberalism requiring all schools to teach the same, publicly agreed and therefore 'tolerant' message on homosexuality.

Curiously, another type of 'tolerant' liberal is in evidence later in the same interview (tellingly left out of the excerpts made available to the wider media). When led to comment that his purported atheism made him more tolerant, Clegg was quick to correct the interviewer:

> Well, without taking a great swerve into my theological views, I'm not an arch-atheist, I'm much more confused than that. I have great admiration for people of faith and I sometimes think it would be great to have faith. It can be a great animating thing, but it can also drive people to very negative actions too. My wife is religious and our children have been brought up in her religion so I don't come at this with an anti-religious axe to grind. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that a religious impulse can be a force for good, for mutual understanding, for tolerance, for generosity, for love. But in the hands of people with a prejudice it legitimises deeply regressive, unpleasant views. [...] I see it [religion] in a much more nuanced way. It's a whole lot more complex than saying if you have faith you are susceptible to tolerating homophobia than otherwise.[40]

There is scope within the liberal tradition for a political and social settlement that recognizes the nuances and complications of religion in a modern, pluralist society. By raising his children as Catholic, and by acknowledging the social goods that come from allowing the Christian impulse to flourish, Clegg is here drawing from a line of liberal thought which emphasises

'experimentation' rather than 'litigation' as the best expression of tolerance.

It is something like this difference between two strands of liberalism that the British political theorist Jonathan Chaplin describes in terms of competing liberal 'regimes of tolerance'. 'An individualistic regime of tolerance favours equal treatment among individuals, while a pluralistic regime offers equal treatment among associations.'[41] The trick, as Chaplin rightly points out, is to know which side our liberal society should skew toward in its valuation of equality of tolerance. Chaplin observes that, in our modern age, the conflicts arising between people of religious affiliation and those with none largely arise as a result of a 'regime change' within liberal society. A society in which independent civil associations co-existed side-by-side in difference is morphing into one in which liberal governments attempt to apply 'universal public principles' upon civil society.[42] These principles are rights-based and individualistic, in that identical treatment is expected for each individual across the social spectrum, and regardless of group association. So, for example, Christian organisations may face legal punitive measures if they do not employ non-Christian applicants. The problem is that such a position, in the name of tolerance, soon ends up intolerantly trampling over the rights of people who wish to associate in groups that reflect their values or will promote their shared vision. The alternative

is a 'regime' that emphasises the plural nature of the groups jostling together within one culture. Pluralist regimes of tolerance, for example, would allow groups equally to determine their own internal employment practices, even if this means going against the majority society's sense of what is right. Chaplin points out that both approaches are working with a liberal spirit of tolerance and fairness. 'We cannot resolve which regime is the more "tolerant" merely by gazing at the abstract concepts of "tolerance" or "equality"'.[43]

The tradition of protecting *group* tolerance has a long and rich Liberal tradition in the United Kingdom. This is the liberalism of social experimentation seen in Nonconformist Christian political agitation and also in the humanist political philosophy of J. S. Mill. Mill's famous dictum was that liberty necessarily involves 'experiments in living':

> As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them.[44]

Here, tolerance is not conceived as bland or coercive agreement in a hypothetical public sphere, but instead equal freedom

for groups to work out their differing visions of the 'good life'. The liberal state refrains from making judgements, not by adopting a falsely neutral stance, but instead by allowing the social experiments to run their course.

In Mill's time, the dominant culture was not only Christianised, it was *Anglicanised*. True freedom and tolerance here meant granting groups with alternative social visions the space in which to thrive, or perish, as the case may be. The success of the humanist way of life, or the Nonconformist practice of religion, should not depend on the patronising goodwill of the Anglican establishment. Conversely, any failure that these groups experience should not be because of stifling or coercion by an outside force.

Today, demonstrably, the boot is on the other foot. In England, the population of committed Christians (of any denomination) is much smaller than the population of those with no religion.[45] For good or for ill, Christianity is no longer the shared consensus of the wider population. The Christian way of life and its justifications are not common sense. Indeed, many Christians, following the likes of a Kierkegaard, a Bonheoffer or a Hauerwas would say that whenever Christianity becomes the dominant culture it stops being *Christian*. Christianity's present position in society as a startling oddity is merely a long overdue corrective to a religion that has allowed

itself to grow complacent and common place.

Being the Church
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5.22–23)

Rather than expending many resources into preserving its status as the favoured and dominant cultural force, it seems sensible, if not expedient, for Christians in the UK to devote their time and energy into being faithful to Jesus' original call to do something new by following him and his example.

> Religious communities are likely to be practically relevant in the long run to the degree that they do no first ask what is either practical or relevant, but instead concentrate on their own intratextual outlooks and forms of life.[46]

Do Christians think that their way of life leads to the healthiest families? Then perhaps they should spend less time fighting the marriages of others and prove it by living well as Christian families. Do Christians believe that they care best for the lost, the depressed, the lonely? Then leave off decrying so-called politically correct social services and get on with the job. Does Christian wisdom provide insights into literature, philosophy, science and

history? Then write fewer complaint letters to the editor and write more books instead. At all times, however, the question for the Christian living in a pluralist, liberal culture is not 'what are other groups doing' but instead, 'is the way we live together as true to Christ as it could be?'

In this way, Christians are simply attempting to do what Christians are supposed to do best, a process that Stanley Hauerwas often refers to as 'the church being the church.'

> I am challenging the very idea that the primary goal of Christian social ethics should be an attempt to make the world more peaceable or just. Rather, *the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church – the servant community*. Such a claim may well sound self-serving until we remember that that which makes the church the church is its faithful manifestation of the peaceable kingdom in the world. *As such, the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.*[47]

No less than any other ideological outlook, liberalism has proven itself at times to be inhuman, tyrannous, brutal, and idolatrous. It is not Christianity's task to baptise this form of culture *tout court* or bend to each of its whims. At the same time, the liberal 'person', liberal 'freedom' and liberal 'equality' have grown from Christianity. Affinity is to be expected, as uneasy as that affinity might be from time to time.

Christianity has given liberalism these gifts. In turn, the Church in the United Kingdom finds itself – once again – an experimental organisation, a minority group made up of individuals freely choosing to act according to their values. In such a context, and in such a world where Christians elsewhere are routinely killed and persecuted for their faith, British Christians can thank the Lord that they live among liberals.

Notes

[1] Preamble to the Liberal Democrat Federal Constitution.

[2] Liberal Democrat Policy Paper 50, *It's About Freedom,* Liberal Democrats, 2002.

[3] Teather, S. 'Education' in Astle, J. and Laws, D. et al (eds.) *Britain After Blair,* Profile, 2006, 112.

[4] See Webb, S. 'Free to be fair or fair to be free?' in Margo, J. (ed.) *Beyond Liberty*, ippr, 2007.

[5] 'Fairness' was the watchword for the Liberal Democrats campaign in 2010, who ran under the strap line 'Building a Fairer Britain'. See for example 'Why Vote Liberal Democrat?' published by the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, 2010.

[6] Webb, S. 'Free', 136.

[7] There is copious material tracking the social effects of inequality. See for example Julia Margo: 'a range of recent research has highlighted the pernicious impact of structural inequality on societies, pointing to its various implications for crime rates, health and happiness of population.' She cites Kahn, H. et al, 'Are geographic regions with high income inequality associated with risk of abdominal weight gain?' in *Social Science and Medicine* 47, 1998, 1–6; Wilkinson, R. *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality,* Routledge, 1996; Pearce, N. and Paxton, W. (eds.) *Social Justice: Building a Fairer Britain,* ippr, 2005; Layard, R. *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science,*

Penguin, 2005. See also Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better,* Allen Lane, 2009.

[8] Brack, D. 'Equality Matters' in Brack, D., Grayson, R.S. et al (eds.) *Reinventing the State* Politico's, 2007, 27.

[9] It is worth noting that Duncan Brack explicitly opposes this formulation, arguing instead for equality of outcomes as well as opportunities. By his own acknowledgment this position puts him in a minority of Liberal writers.

[10] Cable, V. 'The Economy', in *Britain After Blair,* 94. Emphasis added.

[11] Brack, D. 'Equality', 28. Brack names especially Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously,* Harvard University Press, 1978 and John Rawls.

[12] Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice,* Harvard University Press, 1971, revised 1999; *Political Liberalism,* Columbia University Press, 1995.

[13] Hampsher-Monk, I. 'Toleration, the Moral Will and the Justification of Liberalism' in Horton, J. and Mendus, S. (eds.) *Toleration, Identity and Difference,* Palgrave, 1999, 17.

[14] Dworkin, R. 'Foundations of Liberal Equality' in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values,* University of Utah Press, 1990, 13.

[15] Rawls, J. 'Justice as Fairness' in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, 1985, 223–251, 230.

[16] Ibid., 231.

[17] See Kernohan, A. *Liberalism, Equality, and Cultural Oppression,* Cambridge University Press, 1998, 2ff.

[18] Hughes, S. 'Democracy' in *Britain After Blair,* 275.

[19] Liberal Democrat Policy Paper, No. 89 'Equity and Excellence'.

[20] The interview was published in the January 2010 edition of *Attitude* magazine with a truncated version subsequently appearing in the *Independent* newspaper. Note that the quotations here and below come from the unpublished and unexpurgated transcript of the interview, provided to the present author by the Liberal Democrat party.

[21] Bradstock, A. 'Government and Equality' in Spencer, N. and Chaplin, J. (eds.) *God and Government,* SPCK and Theos, 2009, 182.

[22] See for example the division of land in Numbers 26 and especially the 'Jubilee' laws in Leviticus 25. Modern applications of these ancient principles can be found in the work of the Jubilee Centre, such as Schluter, M. and Ashcroft, J. (eds.) *Jubilee Manifesto,* IVP, 2005.

[23] See Acts 4 and the care that Christian communities evidently showed for each other in 2 Corinthians 8.

[24] Farron, T. 'Why Vote Liberal Democrat' in Lynas, R. (ed.) *Votewise Now!* SPCK, 2009.

[25] Ibid., 108.

[26] Ibid., 109.

[27] Ibid., 110.

[28] Ibid., 110.

[29] Niebuhr, R. 'Reunion of the Church through the renewal of the churches' in *Christianity and Crisis* 7, 1947, 5–7.

[30] Mott, S.C. *A Christian Perspective on Political Thought,* OUP, 1993, 142.

[31] Ibid., 143.

[32] Hauerwas, S. *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society,* University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, 11.

[33] Mott, S.C. *Perspective,* 144.

[34] Ibid., 144

[35] Bretherton, L. *Christianity and Contemporary Politics,* Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 46.

[36] On this see especially Spencer, N. *Neither Private nor Privileged: The Role of Christianity in Britain Today,* Theos, 2008.

[37] Bretherton, L. *Contemporary,* 46. Bretherton here references Rawls, J. *Political Liberalism* and Wolterstorff, N. *Religion in the Public Square,* Rowman and Littlefield, 1997.

[38] Ibid., 48.

[39] Ibid., 50.

[40] *Attitude* magazine transcript. See note 21.

[41] Chaplin, J. 'Understanding Liberal Regimes of Tolerance' in *Ethics in Brief,* 11.6, Spring 2007, 1.

[42] Ibid., 2.

[43] Ibid., 3.

[44] Mill, J.S. *On Liberty,* Oxford University Press, 1998, chapter III, 63.

[45] The best estimate for Sunday church attendance in 2000 was just below 8% of the population. See Brierley P. (ed.) *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends No. 3 – 2002/2003,* Christian Research, 2003, table 2.23.4.

[46] Lindbeck, G. *The Nature of Doctrine,* SPCK, 1984, 130.

[47] Hauerwas, S. 'The Servant Community: Christian Social Ethics' in *The Hauerwas Reader,* Duke University Press, 2001, 374. Original emphasis.

Conclusion

This essay on Christianity, liberalism and the Liberal parties has been undertaken in four main parts.

Part One did not pretend to offer a full account of the history of the Liberals, but instead deliberately focused on a few, foundational figures and movements which put their Christian stamp on subsequent iterations of the party. Radical campaigners in the eighteenth century, and then W. E. Gladstone and the Nonconformists in the nineteenth, made impressions upon liberalism that remained in spirit, even as the fortunes and policies of the parties altered in practice. We considered the family of moral attitudes and passionate concern — commonly known as the 'Nonconformist conscience' — which provided the backbone for much of the early success of the Liberal party, and continues to be felt today. Here also we looked at the matter of establishment. We suggested that historically, the longstanding Liberal drive towards church disestablishment would have been best served by paying attention to Christian pastoral and theological reasons for disestablishment, rather than the secular attempts which were perceived as punishing an otherwise well meaning and valid institution. Establishment is just one of the ways that Christianity is related to the Liberal party. From early 'free-trade' liberalism, through to the 'new liberalism' of the twentieth century and the 'social liberalism' of the twenty-first, Liberal attitudes to the state have adapted and changed. What remains however is a concern for social justice, a healthy scepticism of institutionalised privilege and a concern for those minority voices that majority common sense often threatens to quell. We maintain that these Liberal values owe much to Nonconformist Christianity and to Gladstonian political theology.

In the three subsequent parts we took a closer, Christian, look at the ideas underlying liberalism as it appears in our Western, modern, and largely secular age. Here, the concern was more with the general and philosophical components of liberalism rather than specific government programmes. However, as the Liberal Democrats are the main inheritors and guardians of the liberal tradition, we were always keen to keep an eye on their policies and thoughts. The essay identified three main components of liberalism: *freedom*, *the individual* and *equality*. Unsurprisingly, there is congruence and tension between Christianity and liberalism on these points.

Congruence, because Christianity has informed all Western ideologies, very much including the core principles of liberalism. The Christian contribution to liberalism runs deep. Freedom, the individual and equality all follow the rhetorical and logical contours marked out by Christian thought. Indeed, as we have seen, some argue that if it was not for the Christian revolution in the first and second centuries, we would not today know or enjoy what it is to be 'free', to be 'equal' or to have 'human rights' at all.

Where there is tension, the problems arise not so much because of liberalism *per se*, but instead with those strands of secularist liberalism that seem to wilfully deny or oppose the Christian contribution. It is these points that bring Christian liberals into conflict – or at least an uneasy relation - with secular liberals. In terms of 'freedom', the subject of Part Two, this is seen in the emphasis of a form of liberty that stresses freedom *from* anything that might fetter the choice of the inviolable individual. We argued that this equation of 'freedom' to mean 'doing what one wills' is a nihilistic philosophy, unable to provide the peace and flourishing that liberals rightly want for their society. Such freedom *from* is ill-equipped to do the job that modern liberals want it to do, as it cannot differentiate between good and bad, best and worst. Instead, we suggest that an equally liberal (and theological) sense of freedom *for* can help to meet the needs of individuals in a liberal society. Here, freedom is aligned

with purpose, it allows for meaningful discussion about means and ends, and it points towards the horizon of 'the good'. This second sense of freedom, while present in Christian life and practice, is not currently on the ascent within liberalism and has not been for some time, with unfortunate effects on society and the people who live in it.

The bloody result of humanistic liberalism's powerlessness to preserve humanity in the face of inhuman forces was considered in Part Three on 'the individual'. The invention of the 'person' – the sense that everyone has value and a purpose – is one of Christianity's greatest contributions to Western liberalism and the establishment of human rights. We saw how individual personhood is crucial for the Christian understanding of 'faith' and for 'love of neighbour' – two aspects of Christian doctrine with far-reaching historical and social consequences. The problem facing modern, secular liberalism is that it wants to keep all the social goods that come from Christian personhood, without reference to the transcendent reality in which the value of each and every human life is rooted. Again, the tension that arises between Christianity and liberalism is not that humans do not have rights; it is that in this, the bloodiest and most secular era in history, the jury must still be out on humanistic liberalism's ability to defend or justify these rights. The solution, for Christian liberals, is not to return to an

illiberal and unchristian theocracy. It is instead to continue to work for those forms of liberalism in which humans are best set up to flourish. This necessarily involves an individual's right to freely associate with groups that articulate and promote their distinctive visions for flourishing.

The fair treatment that a tolerant society must afford to different individuals and their social experiments is the subject of Part Four on 'equality'. Liberals recognise that educational, economic and other forms of social inequality constitute one of the greatest barriers to true human liberty. Christian theology, too, places a high value on the social justice that comes from equal and fair treatment of all people. Where Christianity and liberalism diverge is in the source and location of that equality. Christian anthropology and ethics is predicated on the equal value and access that all persons have before God. Liberal equality is non-transcendent and self-referential, grounding equality only in what can be commonly and publicly agreed upon. In practice this necessitates a turn to legality and the law. The result is the creation of the public and private sphere dichotomy so prevalent in current liberal culture. What can be communicated and agreed on by all become public goods: legal building blocks for a liberal and equal society. What everyone cannot affirm is tolerated (to varying degrees) as a private belief. The problem is that this dichotomy is incoherent. All religions

— certainly including Christianity — are products of a wider society and, in turn, have ramifications that cannot but work themselves out in that society. When members of faith groups are forced to pretend to be something that they are not for the sake of public access, then the persons and groups are not being tolerated for what they actually are. This serves no one well. Secular liberalism's attempt to tolerate religion as a private affair is thus doomed to fail. Indeed, it has been failing for some time.

Fortunately, the liberal need not abandon liberalism in the search for a solution. A rejuvenation of the liberal tradition of applying tolerance at a group level rather than a merely individualistic one mitigates the public/private confusion and marks a return to the original values at the heart of British liberalism. Here Mill's 'experiments for living' and the Nonconformist concern for allowing associations to sink or swim according to their own merits protected from stifling by the majority or institutionalised privilege comes to the fore. The section concludes with a plea to Christians to concentrate less on seeking to wield illiberal and unworkable political influence, and more on simply 'being the Church'. It looks to the wider liberal society to truly grant its Christian individuals free and fair opportunity to do just this very thing.

If anyone cares about the advancement of humanity, equality and liberty, they would do well to attend to the experiment for living that is the Christian Church – an experiment that has already yielded astonishing results and which has the potential to remain a critical but faithful friend to the people of our liberal society.

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