

‘Against Agonistic Liberalism: Milbank and Pabst’s Relentless Pursuit of Radical Anglican Thomism’

(review of John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*, Future Perfect series (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016). x + 407 pp. £24.95. ISBN 978-1-7834-8649-6 (pbk)

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There is no doubt that within the world of Christian social thought the appearance of this book by John Milbank and Adrian Pabst has been something of a marvel. Like some great mythical beast, it has arrived on the battlefield bristling with ideas, trampling underfoot or imperiously putting to the sword all those who venture opposition, striving to reverse the tide through the sheer weight of its presence. Milbank’s extensive earlier work in the area dates back to his enormously influential *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Blackwell, 1990), while Pabst is the author of the highly impressive *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Eerdmans, 2012) and co-editor of *Blue*

Labour: Forging a New Politics (I.B.Tauris, 2015), a collection of essays which works out in the British context some of the practice for which *The Politics of Virtue* is the theory.

The central argument revolves round an account of the liberal tradition, which the authors take to have a unified ontological core and to be the dominant ideology of the modern period. Although the social and cultural rights-liberalism of the left and the economic market-liberalism of the right occupy opposing ends of the conventional political spectrum, they exist in a 'secret collusive harmony' (13), in that each of them is simultaneously atomising and authoritarian. The development of liberalism is traced back to certain later mediaeval and early modern accounts of nature and grace that became influential in the Reformation period: by contrast with patristic and Thomistic accounts that were happy to assert a *concursus* between divine and human action, these more voluntarist and univocalist accounts set them in competition, rendering the human realm amorally devoid of grace. The culmination of this is found in the Hobbesian ontology of violence, in which the natural war of all against all is countered by the invention of a collective Leviathan to whom sovereign power is granted in exchange for protection. (Locke is drafted in alongside Hobbes – with no evident concession to the

Cambridge School's view of him as a relatively traditional natural law thinker who regarded Hobbes as an intellectual nightmare.)

This represents the heart of liberalism's ontology. It underlies, on the one side, the development of capitalism, mediated through the eighteenth century argument that private vice is miraculously transformed into public benefit through the providential operations of the invisible hand. The self-interested, utility-maximising behaviour of *homo economicus* is natural solely in Hobbesian terms, yet when taken with claims about the 'natural' scarcity of goods and the ontology of violence, it constitutes a 'triple anthropological pessimism' (48) that undergirds the allegedly natural workings of unfettered market liberalism.

Left-leaning liberalism, on the other side, is indebted to Rousseau's romantic individualism in thinking of the individual as naturally good and society as the source of envy and rivalry. Yet the contrast with Hobbesian liberalism is superficial, for the mistrust in shared traditions and the institutions that embody them leads left-liberalism to seek for people's 'chaotically various individual desires' (27) to be emancipated from social norms that are perceived to be merely conventional and arbitrary, and to call

on the state's assistance in doing so. The upshot has been a steady undermining of the personal and intermediate forms of association that compose the thick texture of human life, leaving individuals progressively more exposed to direct state power. Increasingly unable to draw on these associational resources, individuals have to engage with each other through the distancing and impersonal mechanisms of the market, which reinforces the power of those who benefit from market transactions – both the state as self-interested regulator but also those with the economic capacity to bend the market to their advantage.

The 'liberal right as the party of greed and the liberal left as the party of lust' (27, one of their numerous *bon mots*) harbour more in common than either might care to admit, both ontologically and at the level of political and economic outcome. The assumption of the underlying violence of human relationship, the clash of wills which can only be resolved by market competition or state *fiat*, the replacement of mutual relations of trust by contracts with strangers or by subjection to bureaucratic classification – all point to a metacrisis of liberalism. Thus is disclosed the metaphysical nihilism of the age, which simultaneously abstracts and materializes, abstracting from reality by representing persons as brute individuals, shorn of their embedded

social identities, while rendering reality the more purely material by denying that goodness is intrinsic to nature. Deprived of their ontological coherence, human beings disintegrate, pulled apart in two ostensibly opposed directions: on the one hand, the subhuman reduction to natural evolutionary contingency and, on the other, the transhuman transcendence of that same contingency.

Milbank and Pabst's response to this lies in a recovery of several crucial ideas: first, of the ancient and Christian understanding of human beings as animals who do not transcend but fulfil their animal nature in the fashioning of political societies; second, of the Christian idea of the person, one who is not a merely repeatable and substitutable members of a species, but is absolutely unique whilst also intrinsically constituted in relation to others through shared participation in a transcendent *Logos*; third, of the idea of the good not as a willed imposition on an otherwise indifferent universe, but as integrally related to the natural flourishing of all things. Socially and politically this works out in terms of an emphasis on habits and institutions that reflect and enable the communal nature of human beings, expressed through the principles of gift-exchange and reciprocal 'non-compulsory compulsion' (71) that animate human society. However theirs is an advance on standard communitarianism, which they fault for lacking a serious engagement with structural political-

constitutional issues and failing to realize that markets themselves are not simply amoral but necessarily have a *telos*.

Their account of the metacrisis of liberalism is followed by an exposition of the analogous metacrisis of capitalism. This is not fundamentally an issue of the recurrent cyclical crises that plague capitalism, but of its proclivities both towards abstraction from the real, productive economy, and towards materialisation and quantification of the non-material and non-quantifiable. These tendencies comprise the logic of the capitalist perversion of the market economy, not of the market economy as such: for capitalism depends on financial speculation and material aggregation, and is not just a means of production and exchange. In fact, because capitalism is indifferent to meaning and real difference and is therefore a solvent of them (its processes render equivalent a silk blouse and a poison gas, as Carl Schmitt put it), it is a means of destruction before it is a system of production. However their proposed alternative is not the conventional social democratic tax-and-spend response to neo-liberalism. That nostrum of the centre-left doesn't address the intrinsically amoral nature of capitalism, but rides the tiger in an effort to tame it; it fails to see that Keynesian regulation is in truth no more than a necessary self-correcting moment within capitalism's own inherent dynamics; and it only

provides enough redistribution to palliate, but not enough to prevent the growth of a new class of the hyper-wealthy. Rather, Milbank and Pabst's preference is for the civil economy model initially elaborated by Adam Smith's Italian contemporary Antonio Genovesi and currently advocated by Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni. For Genovesi, the butcher, the brewer or the baker do not have to set benevolence in opposition to their own interest: unlike for Smith, people's natural sympathies extend to the economic contracts they enter into, and they cannot be happy if other people are unhappy ('no human being not even the most cruel and hardened can enjoy pleasures in which no one else participates' (quoted, 138)). There can be a genuinely shared interest, which dissolves some of the familiar dichotomies of capitalism: self-interest vs altruism, gift vs contract, visible hand vs invisible hand. From this basis they develop large numbers of themes, in which reasonable profit and mutual benefit are not construed as antithetical, competition and cooperation are held in productive tension, firms are driven by social and environmental as well as financial goals, priority is given to investment in the real economy, workers are rewarded with just wages and consumers with just prices, economic regeneration is linked with cultural renewal and civic pride, local and regional banks are supported, welfare is mutualised, vocational training strengthened, ownership of capital much more widely distributed.

A review can do scant justice to the wealth of ideas to be found here. Subsequent parts of the book rehearse other metacrisises and propose alternatives. The metacrisis of democracy is met by the mixed constitution alternative; the metacrisis of culture is contrasted with an account of culture as formation; and finally, the metacrisis of the nations is countered by their proposals for a new international order. While at least some of the ideas throughout the book will be familiar to students of Catholic and more broadly Christian social thought, in truth the breadth of their treatment and the sheer brazen confidence with which they treat ideas ranging from the metaphysics of mediaeval nominalism to proposals for a revised (British-led!) European Union as a model for the global future, traversing all historical and disciplinary stops in between, mark this out from the vast majority of writings in Christian social ethics. Everyone familiar with the book will have their own anthology of memorable pronouncements they find either brilliant or exasperating. For this reader one unexpected pleasure was their counter-suggestible rehabilitation of the idea of aristocracy, on which they have pleasingly complex views. Drawing out some of the logic of representation, which is practically and theoretically inescapable in a democracy of any size or complexity, aristocracy names the necessity of a constitutional role for a limited number of

representatives; and it is better for the body politic if these are role models (i.e. 'virtuous') rather than self-serving careerists. But representation (here the Christological logic is plain) also implies embodying those one represents, and since human beings have geographically and socially formed identities, so aristocracy is also about both the representation of localities, regions and minorities upwards to national and supra-national government, and the recognition of the reality of those lower identities through devolutionary federalism. Above all aristocracy elevates the rule of virtue, of those who are 'skilled, generous and wise at every level of society from the plumber to the wing-commander' (7), not (*of course*) about the legitimization of corrupt elites. And paradoxically this could be a profoundly democratising insight, for everyone whatever their background shares in wisdom about something.

However there are themes to which they pay lip service but which they could easily have developed more hospitably. As a way into this, consider first what they mean by a 'metacrisis'. A metacrisis is not an ordinary crisis, a cyclical or short-term or externally-caused event of the kind that all systems face from time to time. Nor, importantly, is it a final crisis, the result of a series of contingent circumstances which bring a particular social or economic order to an end; for in the future that system or something like it could always be

resuscitated. No, a metacrisis is fundamentally the crisis of an *idea*, the laying bare of internal contradictions that were always present. This underlies their analysis of liberalism, for the problem with liberalism is metaphysical before it is ever political or economic or cultural. The spirit of the age is the target of their diagnosis, and it is their confidence in their identification of this animating principle which enables them to brush aside all alternative readings of liberalism: that it should be understood in terms of overlapping family resemblances; or that we should talk with John Gray of liberalisms in the plural; or that ideas which have conventionally been attributed to liberalism should rather be credited to classical republicanism, as J. G. A. Pocock influentially urged now over forty years ago. All forms of liberalism in the end revert to their Hobbesian type, degenerating into the oscillation between atomism and collectivism. The possible exceptions to this are the more organicist late-nineteenth-century liberalisms of T. H. Green or L. T. Hobhouse, but these are briskly declared to be not 'exclusively or even predominantly liberal' (34).

So far, so Hegelian, one is tempted to say. But their version of a metacrisis doesn't give rise to its dialectical successor, at least not in any mechanical or historically necessary way. No future is announced that was not

present before. No resolution emerges that consigns the past to the past. On the contrary, it turns out that the post-liberal is the pre-liberal in all but name, and, despite occasional protestations, their rendering of it in practice is marked by an extreme reluctance to concede that there is anything of significance to be learned from the encounter with liberalism which might render post-liberalism 'post-' in anything other than a chronological sense: what after all could be learned from nihilism? Their idealism is in truth more Platonist than Hegelian: their hope is rooted not in any historical teleology, but in recovery of the abiding truths that are the shared patrimony of pre-modern wisdom, that goodness runs with the grain of the universe, and therefore that in the long run virtue pays off, there being no final conflict between nobility and practical realism. In fact for them if a future is announced it lies in the past: if for Hegel the end of history was to be located in the nineteenth century, in the sense that the truth about social order was then finally known, all subsequent events merely bringing the facts into line with the idea, for Milbank and Pabst the end of history is to be found in the thirteenth century, or to be precise, in the thirteenth century as articulated in the Anglican polity of the sixteenth century, all else being footnotes.

This does not make theirs an exercise in nostalgia, as they rightly plead, or at least it need not. For what they are articulating are permanent possibilities for thought and, appropriately contextualised, for action, and the potential for instantiating these lies in principle in the future as much as ever in the past. Nevertheless their determination to look to the future with so much evident enthusiasm for the past, particularly when taken with their penchant for anti-modern contrarianism (anaesthetics are over-rated, I think I remember reading), does give their work an unnecessarily fogeyish cast. Apart from making it likely to lose them a large part of the audience that they richly deserve and that badly needs to learn from what they have to teach, it is also in danger of missing an important feature of how we learn from history.

Do we have to read the last four centuries exactly as they do? We should be clear that their totalising impulse, reading the age in terms of its governing idea, is the source of many of their most brilliant insights. But it all feels a bit relentless at times. Does it mean that there is nothing to be learned from the period in which liberalism has been dominant? If we are to affirm with Augustine the equidistance in relation to God of every period of history after Christ, might we not also wish to affirm that in the divine patience there may be unexpected beauty in every epoch, and that every age and every culture

may in principle be alert to facets of the good that are not so evident or accessible to others? Eras are inherently more complex, and the relation between their characteristic sins and their characteristic forms of good less easy to disentangle, than one might sometimes suppose from Milbank and Pabst's work. Their frequent disavowals and exceptionalising bear inadvertent witness to this: to take just one example, after attributing the quality and style of Italian cars, food, fashion and design to Italy's Renaissance heritage, by contrast with their mediocre American and therefore quintessentially modern equivalents, they then explain the evident excellence of some American products by resort to the claim that 'certain aspects of the Middle Ages and Renaissance survive in the United States as well' (145)!

Somehow we need to find a way of engaging positively and generously with the modern world in a way that doesn't deny the ontological violence which Milbank and Pabst have so acutely discerned at the heart of modernity, but that does allow us to move forward in a way that is substantially and not just chronologically post-liberal. To give one example, it would take really quite a small shift of emphasis to handle identity politics rather differently than they do. There is no doubt that the politics of gender, race, sexuality and so on have at times been marred by the agonistic features of the epoch in which they have

been born, but equally there is no doubt that addressing the dynamics of power and social recognition from the standpoint of those who experience exclusion is a gain, one which is widely identified with that same 'liberal' historical period. They do acknowledge something in the area in general terms, referring for example to 'oppressive and unjustifiable prejudices against women and minorities and intolerances of exceptions and complications' (88; cf. 55), but comments such as these wear an air of concession, and don't convincingly bring out the moral insight that recognition of the experience of exclusion surely represents. This has several unfortunate consequences. First, it increases the danger of their being co-opted by one side in the culture wars, ironically reinforcing a stand-off that it has been one of the major triumphs of the book to transcend. Second, it means that they fail to address adequately one of the most obvious and endemic dangers of the kind of associationism they urge on us, namely that communities find their identity in part by shared agreements about who to exclude. Third, it reduces the likelihood that there will be thoughtful engagement with their own insightful criticisms of formalist egalitarianism, and their intriguing if enigmatic (and perhaps alarming?) proposals for the 'inequality though equal social importance' of different social roles (14). And finally, it does not help us to advance towards the reciprocal recognition *as equals* that would distinguish a properly post-liberal organicism

from its feudal and pre-liberal predecessors that did not wrestle in the same way with these questions.

There are other parallel concerns which might be explored, for example with regard to the dangers of moral, social and political authoritarianism to which the liberal tradition was so sensitive in its own telling of its story, and which Milbank and Pabst themselves would share. In terms of a constructive vision, both this and the emphasis on mutual recognition as equals would be amongst the factors that could pave the way for an authentically post-liberal socialism – such as Milbank and Pabst themselves favour – one that draws inspiration from but extends the British tradition of ethical socialism represented by, variously, Edmund Burke, William Cobbett, Robert Owen, John Ruskin, William Morris, R. H. Tawney, and Dorothy L. Sayers. Such a vision would root social relations in trust and mutual concern rather than in impersonal contract, and would not confuse the common good with the accumulation of material wealth. It would, further, be open to the possibility that the most intellectually satisfying accounts of equality, freedom and representation are rooted within and not without the mainstream Christian theological tradition, and would find in the affirmation of a good that precedes

all our desirings the unexpected basis for a tolerant and genuinely pluralist society.

Working towards that is of course another matter. As they observe, one important part consists in re-imagining what we are already doing, appreciating that our habits are sometimes better than our theories, recognizing that we may already be less liberal and less capitalist than we think we are. But uprooting a society's metaphysics is not just a matter of reinterpretation. It also involves changing its practices, so that over time the assumptions of Hobbesian liberalism become simply unimaginable because they no longer correspond in any intelligible way to social experience. The practices and institutions that *The Politics of Virtue* proposes, and the means of achieving them, may not be dependent on the same putatively scientific understanding of history that bewitched earlier critics of liberal capitalism. But Milbank and Pabst's intent in joining the fray is undoubtedly as radical.