

## **The Social Imaginary of Christian Conservatism**

### **ABSTRACT**

The claim that various critics of modernity have put forth, from Edmund Burke to John Milbank, is that liberal democracy in its most common economic form of market capitalism has created a new type of totalitarianism through its imposition of cultural homogeneity. In this new order, the political has been obliterated in favor of an abstract universalism that corrupts traditional forms of social solidarity and extinguishes the critical capacities contributing to oppositional resistance. These thinkers contest that democracy cannot be the sole aim of society since it is devoid of any inherent meaning beyond parliamentary functionalism. When it is limited to institutional definitions, and narrowed down to a purely political scope, democracy lacks any sustainable value-system around which a society may organize a coherent set of prerogatives and goals. In what may seem a counterintuitive move, this paper seeks to explore the ideas of a number of these anti-Enlightenment, anti-liberal, Christian conservatives at a conference on multiculturalism and religious liberties. The rationale behind this paper is that such an investigation will allow us to reexamine liberal post-Enlightenment political theory and the metaphysical presuppositions upon which it is based. The examination of these religious critiques of modernity presents us with the opportunity of rethinking the process by which life has been politicized since the Enlightenment and its implications to our thinking of the present. A critical and constructive engagement with theologically-oriented critiques of liberalism may hopefully help restore our faith in democratic institutions and facilitate a tolerant and open society.

## The Social Imaginary of Christian Conservatism

In one of the first pages of his book, *St. Paul: The Foundations of Universalism*, Alain Badiou makes the seemingly outrageous claim,

There is nothing more captive, so far as commercial investment is concerned, nothing more amenable to the invention of new figures of monetary homogeneity, than a community and its territories.... What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge - taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities - of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a godsend! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth!... Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action... The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole (11).

Badiou's flippant caricature of contemporary identity-politics pronounces a stance which resonates with classic conservative critiques contesting the political, metaphysical and epistemological foundations of liberalism. Badiou's critique of the liberal notions of universality based on respect of cultural difference is that their outcome is social homogenization in service of capitalism. Identity politics, and the logic of minoritarian discourses it entails, supposedly give visibility to non-hegemonic groups in society, but in fact, are nothing more than a façade that contributes to the legitimacy of the existing exploitative order. Moreover, there is an insidious element to multiculturalism, an exclusionary logic that when examined closely reveals itself to be the flipside of a fascist *weltanschauung*: “The most consequential instances of identitarian politics, such as

Nazism, are bellicose and criminal. The idea that one can wield such categories innocently, even in the form of French Republican identity, is inconsistent. One will, of necessity, end up oscillating between the abstract universal of capital and localized persecutions” (12).

The philosophical position which Badiou presents here, one which I wish to expand on through a number of theological critiques of modernity, argues that politics is not a self-contained realm of human association and that its evaluation requires an external vantage point that goes beyond the principles of secular reason. The theological critiques of modernity that can be traced back to Burke and de Maistre provide us with a thorough examination of liberal-democracy and its secular-humanist foundations. The Christian conservative authors I have chosen to examine in this paper, specifically T.S. Eliot, John Milbank, de Maistre and Edmund Burke, believe that to understand the present you need something outside the structures inherited from the Enlightenment tradition, arguing that faith is indispensable to any viable critique of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, T.S. Eliot elaborates his vision of a culturally religious society, as a solution to the challenges of modernity. Christianity, as a cultural institution rather than an ecclesiastical structure, allows us to criticize the current political and economic conditions. The problem with liberal-democratic politics, according to Eliot, is that it is wholly organized around content-neutral institutions that lack any substantial values besides the individual liberties they seek to guarantee. This condition renders today's society mainly a "negative" one, in that it lacks any positive unifying message. The "negative culture" of liberalism exhibits the West's greatest weakness, the susceptibility to market forces which in the absence of any higher driving force, have the

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<sup>1</sup> This intellectual tradition is fraught with anti-Semitic, anti-democratic sentiment. Is the exclusionary and bigoted nature of Eliot, Burke, Taine, and Schmitt's writings inherent or tangential to their respective philosophies? This question is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that there are strong structural affinities between the recurrent xenophobic, nationalist motifs and the anti-democratic ideas produced over the past three centuries. John Milbank addresses this issue, stating, "Our problem today then, compared with fifteen years ago, is that we are now far more honestly aware that the most incisive thinkers of modernity belonged to the political right and that some of them were at least semi-complicit with Nazism: Joseph de Maistre, Auguste Comte, Cortes, Schmitt..."(xiv). It is my opinion that anti-Enlightenment, anti-capitalist, anti-cosmopolitan politics need not necessarily regress into anti-Semitism. Such is the case of radical orthodox philosopher John Milbank, whose Augustinian philosophy seeks to implement an "ontology of peace" in place of what he considers to be the ontological violence of secular politics.

capacity to dictate the conditions of the present. Democracies that lack a coherent spiritual and moral compass gradually come to resemble the totalitarian regimes they officially renounce, since their public agendas become usurped by the financial oligarchies that prescribe their development.

That liberalism may be a tendency towards something very different from itself, is a possibility in its nature. For it is something which tends to release energy rather than accumulate it, to relax, rather than to fortify it. It is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something definite. our point of departure is more real to us than our destination; and the destination is likely to present a very different picture when arrived at, from the vaguer image formed in the imagination. by destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of *getting on* to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanized or brutalized control which a desperate remedy for its chaos (1960, 12).

Eliot's arguments up to this point can be said to be taken directly from the anti-rational, anti-revolutionary intellectual tradition started with Edmund Burke (1729-1797). Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* asserts that abstract liberty is meaningless, and perhaps even harmful when it is unrestrained by traditional social structures guided by religion. By opting for traditional government and political institutions, Burke claims, “we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties” (120). The organic logic of behind this view dictates that societies cannot be molded according to a preconceived notions or philosophical hypotheses. Communal life must grow out of

the existing foundations of a longstanding social order. It cannot be established on the principles of natural rights, but on the necessary restraints needed to curb the passions of individuals. Burke asserts that a healthy society can only be one that respects monarchy, religion and aristocracy. The rebellion against these traditional modes of communal coexistence endangers society by leaving it susceptible to tyranny of economic expediency. Burke argues that total democracy risks the danger of sliding into its polar opposite of violent despotism, since the rule of the majority may lead to the oppression of the minorities living alongside it.<sup>2</sup> Revolution tears down the edifice of the old in hope of establishing a new egalitarian order but by destroying the old regime, it also loses its checks and balances and ends up creating an oligarchy. This new democratic society is grounded on one thing only - the circulation of capital.

In similar vein Eliot argues that by denying cultural specificity in favor of abstract universals, liberal philosophy supplants order with chaos. "The attitudes and beliefs of Liberalism," argues Eliot, "are destined to disappear, are already disappearing. They belong to an age of free exploitation which has passed; and our danger now is, that the term may come to signify for us only the disorder the fruits of which we inherit, and not the permanent value of the negative element. Out of Liberalism itself come philosophies which deny it" (1960, 14). What is so insidious about liberalism, in Eliot's view, is that in the cacophony of cultural perspectives, society lacks the unity to resist the cynical and unequal distribution of resources. The irony is that in a "mass society organized for profit" the multiplicity of opinions and views creates a chaos that eradicates the public sphere. The destruction of a common culture devastates the possibility of meaningful political action. Without cultural continuity and traditional social structures that preserve it, freedom and education become meaningless, because there is simply no standard to measure them by. In fact the only shared standard that secular liberalism has

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<sup>2</sup> A good example of this claim, is Burke's statement: "Of this I am certain, that in a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority, whenever strong divisions prevail in that kind of polity, as they often must; and that oppression of the minority will extend to far greater numbers, and will be carried on with much greater fury, than can almost ever be apprehended from the dominion of a single scepter. In such a popular persecution, individual sufferers are in a much more deplorable condition than in any other. Under a cruel prince they have the balmy compassion of mankind to assuage the smart of their wounds; they have the plaudits of the people to animate their generous constancy under their sufferings: but those who are subjected to wrong under multitudes, are deprived of all external consolation. They seem deserted by mankind" (229).

is that of power: "The obvious secularist solution for muddle is to subordinate everything to political power: and in so far as this involves the subordination of the money-making interests to those of the nation as a whole, it offers some immediate though perhaps illusory relief" (1960, 33).

Without a common platform of shared values and beliefs that comprise Christianity, society's lowest common denominator becomes the material benefits to be reaped by each one of its members. The abandonment of a whole philosophy of life, one inherent in Christianity, creates a "totalitarian democracy." It creates a state of total conformity, "without respect for the needs of the individual soul; the Puritanism of a hygienic morality in the interest of efficiency; uniformity of opinion through propaganda, and art only encouraged when it flatters the official doctrines of the time" (1960, 18).

Eliot's proposed Christian solution is less clear than one may originally be led to think. The "positive" Christian society that he has in mind does not manifest as many prescriptive attributes besides its reactionary negation of technological progress. And yet, Eliot's Christian society functions as a heuristic that allows him to critique contemporary culture for its faults and misguided assumptions. The immediate ramifications of Eliot's vision for a multi-cultural society, unrealistically come to mean that society requires a majority of Christians for it to maintain its positive cultural characteristics. At the same time, Eliot's analysis very insightfully singles out one of the faults of liberalism - its theoretical separation of politics from religion and culture. Is Eliot nostalgically reminiscing about the pre-modern English Parish? I think not. What he is doing, is emphasizing the role religion previously had in the organization of society and its place in the shaping of the public sphere. When Eliot talks about Christianity, he is not so much concerned with the question of faith so much as he is looking for a shared framework that will facilitate cultural consensus and create the critical categories that will allow for the clear-sighted appraisal of secular liberalism.

In a manner reminiscent of Eliot and Burke's critiques, radical orthodox theologian, John Milbank also denies the possibility of secular politics, arguing that only a theological vision can "challenge the emerging hegemony of neoliberalism." Liberalism, he claims, has turned into a form of political tyranny that presents itself as

tolerant and open, but rests on arbitrary-positivist assumptions. While secular Enlightenment philosophies insist that religious formations are manifestations of a cynical will to power, they do not present an alternative ontology prior to religion as a ground reality. In fact, Milbank claims, all post-Enlightenment thought is itself theological in nature, with the sole difference that it seeks to veil its metaphysical assumptions under the appearance of full transparency. Secular liberalism veils its mytho-religious elements, but never actually does away with them. Liberal politics is Machiavellian in the sense that it is purely shifted towards the management of the population in the most effective manner, rather than displaying any deeper concern with the moral consensus of a community. Philosophically, liberalism is rooted in the pessimistic vision of society as compromise; it merely seeks to mitigate the Hobbesian state of war of all against all.

In the wake of de Maistre,<sup>3</sup> Milbank argues that the atomistic perception of “natural man” as isolated individual in the writings of Hume and Locke limits the moral scope of their moral anthropology. The autonomous picture of man later evolves into a political theory which values private property and personal safety above all else, leaving very little room for ideas of common good or elaborate modes of communal living

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), an Ultramontane, Catholic communitarian, follows Burke’s interpretation of the French Revolution, stating that the universal-secular ideals on which the revolution was based have destroyed authoritarian rule on which social order is founded. De Maistre explains his anti-revolutionary position through an elaborate critique Enlightenment liberalism’s social anthropology. De Maistre accuses liberalism of abstracting man into an idea which has no holding reality. The disembodied ideal of man as bearing some natural- innate essence is pure fiction. There is no pre-social existence: “The isolated man is therefore by no means the *man of nature*.... Every question about the *nature* of man must be resolved by history. The philosopher who wants to show us by *a priori* reasoning what man must be does not deserve an audience. He is substituting expediency for experience and his own decisions for the creator’s will... Thus, properly speaking, there has never been a time previous to society for man, because, before the formations of political societies, man was not a complete man, and because it is ridiculous to seek the characteristics of any being whatever in the embryo of that being” (McClelland, 39-40). It is only through the existing social structures bestowed by theology that social bonds can be maintained. With this realization, it becomes clear to de Maistre that reason is a threat to social order. Rationality does not lead to moral consensus. Moral authority can only be bestowed upon society from the outside, from a God, from a tradition handed down to the people through their historical tradition. It cannot be validated or ratified by a public majority. States are not the product of voluntary association based on rational choice, but require divine intervention. They cannot be hypothetically thought out, because a nation is not simply a group of people who abide to a common constitution, but rather a group that shares a whole way of life: “The *natural* constitution of a nation is always anterior to its *written* constitution and can dispense with it.” A constitution cannot be written by man, since man “cannot bestow rights on himself; he can only defend those which have been granted to him by a superior power” (McClelland, 45).

(Milbank, 29). This negative definition of liberty comes to be perceived as the exercise of personal choice and arbitrary personal power, but not much more. It seems obvious to Milbank that under such conditions, the liberal discourse nurtured by the philosophical writings of Hume, Hobbes and other Enlightenment figures, should limit its range to a political economy that seeks to minimize hostilities but lacks a comprehensive vision of collective good.

By refusing foundationalism in ethics, one refuses mainly the attempt to define the goodness of an ethical action in terms of some more fundamental, 'non-moral' good which can be non-controversially recognized by everyone - such as a state of emotional happiness, instinctual sympathy or the preservation of human freedom (339).

Milbank concludes that only a theological critique of the present can overcome the stalemate of liberal-democracy and its enslavement to market capitalism. All immanent critiques of late-capitalist society fail, he claims, because you cannot critique capitalism in terms of its own contradictions. A transcendent paradigm is required which has an alternative ontology and persuasive counter-narrative of similar universal scope. In contrast to Eliot, Burke, and de Maistre, Milbank does not propound an organic-hierarchical society, but in similar vein, he questions the presuppositions of secular freedom, and subjective autonomy which he claims alienate our relationship to nature and each other.

What these positions share is the claim that politics cannot be disentangled from morality, and morality will always be a religious matter. The claim found in Burke, Eliot, and de Maistre is that all practical grounds for social norms and morality grow out of customs and traditions that have existed throughout history. Values cannot be invented *ex nihilo* on abstract philosophical grounds, but are embedded in our ways of life. Furthermore, this conservative tradition argues that modernity and the social crises commonly associated with it, such as alienation, reification, and class strife are the products of the liberal thought that grounds the philosophical infrastructure for

contemporary democracies. This conservative stance accuses liberalism of being technology-centered, content-neutral, and oriented towards consumption and production. The social bonds that are established in liberal-democratic, secular societies cannot supplant the religious foundations of traditional society, without losing their political stability (Holmes, 6-7).<sup>4</sup> The dismissal of religion from the public sphere leaves the polity without any shared values besides their mutual dependence on the market economy. This situation renders society fragmented in that its central principles reinforce individual wants and desires instead of facilitating a general consensus. The claim Burke so emphatically makes, and one which repeated by de Maistre and Eliot, is that all humanism is inextricably tied to religion, and those who try to assume a secularized ethic, suppress the religious roots that nurture morality and guarantee its continuity. What seems to be the core fault of a secularized liberal human ethic is that it places its faith in individualism and intellectualism. But individualism and reason fall short of substituting religion, which is the only reliable pillar of human dignity and coexistence.

The advantage of these various political theologies is that they effectively uncover the paradoxes of liberal modernity and allow us to reassess the concept of the state. What they all point out is liberalism cannot adapt itself to politics because it cannot account for the theological roots of the political. Moreover, what post-Enlightenment liberalism is trying to replace political theology with is simply inadequate. What Eliot, Milbank and other theologically-oriented thinkers are keenly aware of is that politics separated from ontology and morality restricts possibilities for social action and meaningful change. The idea of a religious politics of virtue is meant as an alternative to modern state rationality, which they find lacking. While I do not agree with this position, what I find so appealing about it is that in contrast to secular critics of liberal-modernity such as Giorgio Agamben, who only account for a negative reading of democracy, the conservative stance presented here tries to give a positive-restorative account of what an alternative to the present might look like.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a point where the conservative narratives of liberal democracy overlap with Marxist culture industry-like critiques a la Adorno and Horkheimer. See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

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