

Liberality versus Liberalism

John Milbank

Today we live in very peculiar circumstances indeed. The welfare of this world is being wrecked by the ideology of neo-liberalism and yet its historic challengers – conservatism and socialism -- are in total disarray. Socialism, in particular, appears to be wrong-footed by the discovery that liberalism and not socialism is the bearer of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’. If the suspicion then arises that perhaps modernity and progress are themselves by no means on the side of justice, then socialists today characteristically begin to half-realise that their own traditions in their Marxist, Social Democratic and Fabian forms have been themselves too grounded in modes of thought that celebrate only utility and the supposedly ‘natural’ desires, goods and needs of isolated individuals.

For these reasons, there is no merit whatsoever in the contention of the ageing left (Habermas, Hobsbaum etc) that we are faced with an abandonment of progress and the enlightenment by a postmodern era. To the contrary, it is clear that what we are now faced with is rampant enlightenment, after the failure of secular ideologies derived from the 19th C – socialism, positivism, romantic nationalism, communism -- that sought to some degree to *qualify* enlightenment individualism and formalism with organicism, distributive justice and socio-historical substance.

Instead, in the face of a very peculiar situation, we need to take the risk of thinking in an altogether new way that will take up the traditions of socialism less wedded to progress, historical inevitability, materialism and the State, and put them into debate

with conservative anti-capitalist thematics and the traditions of classical and Biblical political thought which may allow us to see the inherent restrictions of the parameters of modern social, political and economic reflection. Our perspective may remain basically a 'Left' one, but we need to consider the possibility that only a re-alignment of the Left with more primordial, 'classical' modes of thinking will now allow it to criticise currently emerging tyranny.

This should include at its centre an openness to religion and to the question of whether a just politics must refer beyond itself to transcendent norms. For this reason, in what follows I have undertaken the experiment of thinking through a Catholic Christian approach to the social sphere in the light of current reality, in the hope that this will have something to offer not just to Christians, but to a degree also to Jews, Muslims and people of no religious persuasion whatsoever. I do not choose to insult the latter by concealing in any way the religious grounds of what I wish to say, nor my view that a predominantly secular culture will only sustain the neo-liberal catastrophe.

The documents of Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, appear in retrospect to have been in some ways over-accepting of modern liberal democracy and market economics. This is historically understandable – since the Church needed to move beyond a previous endorsement of reactionary and sometimes absolutist monarchy, and static and hierarchical economic systems linked to unequal landholding.

Today though, we need to recognise that we are in a very different situation. First of all, recent events demonstrate that liberal democracy can itself devolve into a mode of

tyranny. One can suggest that this is for a concatenation of reasons: an intrinsic indifference to truth, as opposed to majority opinion, means in practice that the manipulation of opinion will usually carry the day. Then governments tend to discover that the manipulation of fear is more effective than the manipulation of promise, and this is in keeping with the central premises of liberalism which, as Pierre Manent says, are based in Manichean fashion upon the ontological primacy of evil and violence: at the beginning is a threatened individual, piece of property or racial terrain. This is *not* the same as an Augustinian acknowledgment of original sin, perversity and frailty – a hopeful doctrine, since it affirms that all-pervasive evil for which we cannot really account (by saying for example with Rousseau that it is the fault of private property or social association as such) is yet all the same a contingent intrusion upon reality, which can be one day be fully overcome through the lure of the truly desirable which is transcendent goodness (and that itself, in the mode of grace, now aids us). Liberalism instead begins with a disguised naturalisation of original sin as original egotism: our own egotism which we seek to nurture, and still more the egotism of the other against which we need protection.

Thus increasingly, a specifically liberal politics (and not, as so many journalists fondly think, its perversion) revolves round a supposed guarding against alien elements: the terrorist, the refugee, the person of another race, the foreigner, the criminal. Populism seems more and more to be an inevitable drift of unqualified liberal democracy. A purported defence of the latter is itself deployed in order to justify the suspending of democratic decision-making and civil liberties. For the reasons just seen, this is not just an extrinsic and reactionary threat to liberal values: to the contrary, it is liberalism itself that tends to cancel those values of liberality (fair

trial, right to a defence, assumed innocence, *habeas corpus*, a measure of free speech and free enquiry, good treatment of the convicted) which it has *taken over*, but which as a matter of historical record it did not invent, since they derive rather from Roman and Germanic law transformed by the infusion of the Christian notion of charity which, in certain dimensions means a generous giving of the benefit of the doubt, as well as succour even to the accused or wicked. For if the ultimate thing to be respected is simply individual security and freedom of choice (which is not to say that these should not be accorded penultimate respect) then almost any suspensions of normal legality can tend to be legitimated in the name of these values. In the end, liberalism takes this sinister turn when all that it endorses is the free market along with the nation-state as a competitive unit. Government will then tend to become entirely a policing and military function as J.G. Fichte (favourably!) anticipated. For with the decay of all tacit constraints embedded in family, locality and mediating institutions between the individual and the State, it is inevitable that the operation of economic and civil rules which no individual has any longer any interest in enforcing (since she is socially defined only as a lone chooser and self-seeker) will be ruthlessly and ever-more exhaustively imposed by a State that will become totalitarian in a new mode. Moreover, the obsessive pursuit of security against terror and crime will only ensure that terror and crime become more sophisticated and subtly effective: we have entered a vicious global spiral.

In the face of this neo-liberal slide into despotism, Catholic Christianity needs once more to proclaim with the classical tradition it carries – and which tended to predict just such a slide of a ‘democratic’ ethos into sophistic tyranny -- that government is properly mixed. Democracy, which is ‘the rule of the many’ can only function

without manipulation of opinion if it is balanced by an 'aristocratic' element of the pursuit of truth and virtue for their own sake on the part of some people whose role is legitimate even if they remain only 'the few' although they should ideally be themselves the many. Democracy equally requires the 'monarchic' sense of an architectonic imposition of intrinsic justice by a transcendent 'One', however constituted, that is unmoved by either the prejudices of the Few or those of the Many. (One can think here, perhaps, of the legitimate European outlawing of capital punishment, against the wishes of the people.) In addition, the Church needs boldly to teach that the only justification for democracy is theological: since the people is potentially the *ecclesia*, and since nature always anticipates grace, truth lies finally dispersed amongst the people (although they need the initial guidance of the virtuous) because the Holy Spirit speaks through the voice of all. *Vox populi, vox Dei* alone legitimates democracy, not the view that the collective will, simply because it represents a highest common factor of arbitration, should always prevail.

But to say this is to ask that we subordinate contract to gift. A government may be contractually legitimate as elected and its laws may be legitimate as proceeding from sovereign power, but such arrangements can be formally correct and yet lead to tyranny – as the Nazi example and now the Bush example so clearly show. So beyond this it needs to be supposed that the truth lies with the people somewhat in the way that truth lies in the Church for St Paul: namely that the body of Christ receives from the Holy Spirit -- who is life and gift -- a life of circulation which is the exchange of gifts. Different people and groups have different talents and insights – these they share for the good of the whole body. The people give their goods to the head of the

Church who is Christ: in like manner the people should give their gifts of insight and talent to the sovereign representative who acts in their name.

Inversely the sovereign power must think of itself as distributing gifts – gifts of good governance and ordering, not simply as imposing a fiat in order to expand the utility and productiveness of a nation-state. This is an outrageous notion – for example Blair’s racist view that Britain should only accept ‘skilled’ immigrants and refugees who can increase the gross national product. A government that gives must pursue the intrinsic fulfilment of its citizens. To rule in this way means that the subjects of rule can participate in this ruling, can appropriate its task to themselves. To be ruled renders them indeed ‘subjects’ even in the ontological sense, since thereby something is proposed to them that can form their own good if they respond to it. And no-one is self-originated.

This means that to be a subject of a ‘crown’ (in an extended sense) is actually a more radical idea than to be a citizen of a republic in the contractualist sense of Rousseau (not necessarily in the ancient Roman sense). For the citizen is a natural individual before the State comes into being and only a citizen as co-composing the state. This means that he is always implicitly threatened by what Giorgio Agamben calls ‘the state of the exception’: if he lapses back into being a natural individual like the denizens of Guantanamo Bay, he now lacks all human dignity. This will only be granted to him as long as the contractual co-composition of the State holds good. By contrast, if one has what one may metaphorically describe as ‘constitutional monarchy’ (I am not necessarily advocating it in the literal sense) then according to natural law and not just natural right, the sovereign authority is only ‘subjecting’ men

because it is obliged to offer them the gift of good co-ordination of diverse talents and needs. St Paul desacralised and redefined human rule as only concerned with justice and not with the protection of religious power or a domain – hence no human animal can fall outside this beneficent subjecting (in principle) which is in excess of contract. For this reason, the Christian principles of polity stand totally opposed to any idea of the ‘nation state’ as the ultimate unit and rather favour at once the natural pre-given ‘region’ on the one hand, and the universal human cosmopolis on the other.

This positive feature of ‘monarchy’ does not of course mean that the ‘monarchic’ power should not be elected. To the contrary, it should be regarded as able to give rule because it has first been constituted by the mass donation of varied talents and points of view.

This perspective however, should encourage us to revisit notions of ‘corporate’ authority that are characteristic of Catholic thought and linked with the principle of subsidiarity. Not all bonding and grouping happens at the central level and there is not first of all an aggregate of isolated individuals. To the contrary, people forever form micro-social bodies, and governments should treat people not according to formal abstraction but as they are – in regions, metiers, local cultures, religious bodies etc. We will not be able peaceably to accommodate Islam within Europe if we do not treat with Islam as a ‘political’ body and not just as a mass of individual believers – a notion which is foreign to Islam itself.

To re-insist on monarchic, aristocratic and corporate dimensions is in one sense conservative. Yet I am in fact a socialist of sortsmy case is rather that

democracy will collapse into sophistic manipulation as Plato taught, if it is not balanced by the element of 'education in time' which requires a certain constantly self-cancelling hierarchy. The hierarchies of liberalism are in fact absolute spatial hierarchies of fixed power: one can climb up the ladder of power but only to displace someone else. The purpose of control here is simply utility and not the sharing of excellence. By contrast, the genuine spiritual hierarchy (after Dionysius the Areopagite) is a hierarchy that for human spiritual beings is endemic to time: in which pupil may overtake master and yet there should be no jealousy by the hierarch of the potential of the temporarily subordinate, because excellence is intrinsically shareable. Today, especially in Britain, all education is being subordinated to politics and economics. But a Catholic view should teach just the reverse: all politics and economics should be only for the sake of *paideia*.

This means: make time equal to space or even primary. Unqualified democracy has a kind of spatial bias -- it supposes that we are all contracting individuals within a sort of eternalised *agora*. But this is to deny *life* – indeed it is part of the culture of death of which Pope John Paul II spoke – for life flows as a perpetual *glissando* through time. Life is not simply democratic, because it is both spontaneously creative and giving: with the arrived child, something new emerges. We must give to this child nurture, but from the outset the child reverses this hierarchy by revealing his unique creative power of response. No democratic contract can be involved here: pure democracy tends to deny the sanctity of life, the importance of the child, the procedure beyond mere political participation to old age and death.....its 'normal' person is rather the freely choosing and

contracting autonomous 31 year old. But *no* human person is forever like this; it is rather only a moment in a coming to be and passing away.

A politics subordinate to education -- and so to the various traditions of wisdom, including religious traditions which can alone undertake a real *paideia* -- can be truer to life as such, and also will be bound to ask questions about the final end of life. For only if life is deemed to have such a final end can every moment of life in fact be granted value. At this point it is not, after all, that one is straightforwardly advocating the primacy of the temporal dimension over the spatial one. Nor an aristocracy of *paideia* over a democracy of the *agora*. Indeed there can also be a bad modern, liberal mode for the dominance of time over space. For it is actually the case that pure spatialisation will *also* tend to subordinate every given spatial form to the process of time leading towards the future. But not the time of gift: rather the empty time of pointless accumulation of a new spatial hoard of 'wealth'. By contrast, time can only be the time of gift where time is providing gradually the way to eternity beyond time. From this perspective every formed spatial stage of the way has an aesthetic value in itself and is not subordinate to future production.

Hence pure contractual democracy is spatial and yet in fact it nihilistically evacuates material space in favour of an abstract time always to come and so always perpetually postponed. On the other hand, a mixed government grounded in eternal law sanctifies local spaces in their actual temporality and does not subordinate them to the pure *glissando* of mere process.

So in the face of the crisis of liberal democracy, Catholic Christian thought (including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and even some Reformed strands) needs to return to certain older themes of its critique of liberalism, but for radical and not conservative reasons. The ‘modernity’ of liberalism has only delivered mass poverty, inequality, erosion of freely associating bodies beneath the level of the State and ecological dereliction of the earth – and now, without the compensating threat of communism, it has abolished the rights and dignity of the worker, ensured that women are workplace as well as domestic and erotic slaves, and finally started to remove the ancient rights of the individual which long precede the creed of liberalism itself (such as *habeas corpus* in Anglo-Saxon law) and are grounded in the dignity of the person rather than the ‘self-ownership’ of autonomous liberal man (sic).

The only creed which tried, at times valiantly, to challenge this multiple impoverishment -- communism -- did so only in the name of the subordination of all to the future productivity of the nation, and ignored people’s need’s for an aesthetic and religious relationship to each other and to nature. What must rather challenge liberalism is a truer ‘liberality’ in the literal sense of a creed of generosity which would suppose, indeed, that societies are more fundamentally bound together by mutual generosity than by contract.....this being a thesis anciently investigated by Seneca in his *De Beneficiis* and in modernity again reinstated by Marcel Mauss.

This is not, of course, to deny that merely ‘liberal’ measures of contract are not ceaselessly necessary to safeguard against the worst tyrannies, nor that we do not often have to resort to them in *lieu* of more substantive linkages. For these reasons I

am *not* seeking to push a liberal approach altogether off the political agenda. Instead, the argument is that contract can never be the thing that fundamentally brings people together in the first place, nor can it represent the highest ideal of a true distributive justice. So before contract, since it is more socially real, lies the gift, and ahead of contract, since it is more socially ideal, lies once again, the gift.

But considerations about gift are relevant also to a second context for contemporary social reflection. This concerns the economic realm. Today we live under the tyranny of an unrestricted capitalist market. We have abandoned the Marxist view that this market must inevitably collapse and evolve into socialism. So we have thereby bid *adieu* to immanent, secular, historicist hope. But we have also largely abandoned the social democratic idea that the capitalist market can be mitigated. Here a Marxist analysis still largely holds good: social democracy was in the capitalistic interest for a phase which required a Keynesian promotion of demand; but it was abandoned when the excessive demands of labour together with economic competition between nation-states ensured that the generation of profits became problematic. It is true that neo-liberalism has scarcely solved the problems of relatively slow Western productive growth since the 1950's, but nevertheless the inherent logic of capital accumulation seems to prevent any current return to social democratic solutions.

Here again, Catholic social thought needs to remain true to its own genius which has always insisted that solutions do not lie either in the purely capitalist market nor with the centralised State. There is in fact no 'pure' capitalism, only degrees of this mode of production and exchange. Small-scale local capitalist economies are only in truth semi-capitalist, because they often exhibit a competition for excellence but not a

mutually-abolishing drive of companies towards monopoly (as was rightly argued by Fernand Braudel). This is because, in such cases, eg parts of North Italy and of Germany, a certain local culture of design excellence ensures that there is *no* pursuit of production *only* to make money nor any exchange of commodities *only* determined by supply and demand and not also by a shared recognition of quality – such that supply and demand plus the accumulation of capital for the future and offering of loans at interest for reasonable social benefit are themselves involved in an exchange in what is taken to be inherent value and not just formal, market-determined value. (This is not at all to deny that there will be always be a never foreclosed *debate* as to what constitutes intrinsic value.)

Given such a consideration, one can see that an element of ‘gift-exchange’ can remain even within the modern market economy. Producers of well-designed things do not just contract with consumers. The latter give them effectively counter-gifts of sustenance in return for the gifts of intrinsically good things, even though this is mediated by money.

From this example one can suggest that more of the economy could be like this. This requires indeed that local production is favoured of locally suitable things linked to local skills. We should import and export only what we have to or else what truly can only come from elsewhere – for I am not advocating asceticism! Rather the true hedonism of the genuine and its interchange. But if we receive only the exotic from elsewhere, then here, too, there can be a form of gift-exchange in operation. In actual fact, global communications and transport favour this: within a global village those in Europe wishing to receive the good gift of organically-farmed food can in exchange

pay a fair price for this which is a counter-gift ensuring that producers should not be exploited. (Nevertheless one should be on guard against situations where consumers are made to pay excessively in order to compensate for inadequate investment or excessive profit-making on the part of producers.)

It is also likely that Islam and Judaism will be sympathetic to this way of looking at things and in fact the best hope for Europe is the re-emergence, beyond the dominance of a worn-out *Aufklärung*, of a certain religiously informed but shared philosophic culture built around a wisdom tradition that re-awakens the old Western fusion of Biblical with neoplatonic (Platonic plus Aristotelian and Stoic elements) tradition. This alone will be able to provide ontological grounds for the possibility of a future achievement of social participation that is a real consensus --rather than the liberal semi- suspended warfare of plural co-existence. These adequate grounds concern the affirmation of an ontological participation of the temporal in eternal peace and justice; the 'memory' of a pre-fallen and uninterrupted mediation of this eternal peace to time; and finally the hope for a final eschatological re-disclosure of this peace here on earth.

Things like the economy of fair-traded food-items may not sound dramatic or decisive and indeed they remain pathetically marginal and often compromised, but nevertheless the extension of such gift-exchange bit by bit is the sure way forward rather than revolution, government action alone or else capitalistic solutions. Groups linking across the globe can ensure that something is given back to the earth and that genuine goods go into planetary circulation. We need once again to form systematic links between producer and consumer co-operatives and we need to see an emergence

of cooperative banking (perhaps supervised by Church, Islamic and Jewish bodies) to regulate and adjudicate the interactions between many different modes of cooperative endeavour. Only this will correct the mistake of all our current politics: namely to suppose that the ‘free market’ is a given which should be either extended or inhibited and balanced. For if the upshots of the free-market are intrinsically unjust, then ‘correcting’ this through another welfare economy is only a mode of resignation; moreover its task is sisyphian and periodically doomed to go under with every economic downturn.

Instead, we need a different sort of market: a re-subordination of money transaction to a new mode of universal gift-exchange. This requires that in every economic exchange of labour or commodity there is always a negotiation of ethical value at issue. Indeed, economic value should only be ethical value, while inversely ethical value should be seen as emerging from the supply and demand of intrinsic gifts. For ethical value is not for Christianity just ‘virtue’: rather it is supremely informed by charity and therefore it is the forging of bonds through giving and receiving. Virtue is here ecstasised.....and therefore its context ceases to be simply, as for Aristotle, political, but rather becomes, as for St Paul also economic – the virtue of a new ‘social’ in the middle realm between *polis* and *oikos* that is equally concerned with political just distribution and with domestic care and nurture (the equality of women which stems from Paul, even though he could not see how far this must go, has profoundly to do with this) St Paul does not mention *arête*, though he does talk of the person who is *phronimos*. The latter is now more a giver and receiver of gifts than he is the attainer of a certain inner balance between reason and passion (as for Aristotle) as *Phillipians* especially shows. For St Paul, in speaking of *ecclesia*,

proposes a new sort of *polis* which can counteract and even eventually subsume the Roman empire – as the heirs of Abraham, Moses and Plato must today subsume the American one. This new *polis*, as Bruno Blumenfeld shows, as with Philo, is at once monarchic, headed by Christ, and drastically democratic in a participatory sense – the people are the body of the King; the King can only act through the people. Since virtue is now newly to do with the wisdom of love, virtue with Christianity gets democratised, and is indeed dispersed amongst the diverse gifts of the body of Christ which, as talents, also need to be constantly exchanged to realise the solidarity of the whole. As much later in Christian history (the 17thC) Pierre Bérulle suggested (though too much in the sense of Royal absolutism) human kingly rule is entirely Christological, since it echoes the kenotic and deificatory exchange of worshipping and worshipped (the King manifesting in a faint degree the glory of divine rule as such) that is fused in one corpus by the Incarnation.

The latter event creates a new paracosmic reality – a new order somehow embracing both God and the Creation and a new order which abolishes the previous dominance and semi-universality of the law, of *torah*, *lex* and *nomos* and so of all political process as such. The participation of the creation in God through the newly realised cosmic body of Christ ruled by the new order of love is utterly self-abandoning toward the good of the cosmic community of *esse* (as for Aquinas, there is only one divine *esse* in Christ for Bérulle). And it meets all the time with an equivalent divine kenosis: such that God now is – or is also and so is even in himself – simply a sharing of himself with the Creation, and yet this by free gift of love and not by inexorable fate of imminent pantheistic process which would tend always to appropriate the beings of the Creation. No – as created, things exceed both temporal process and fixed

form; out of these they constantly weave the exchange of *relation*, and relation persists all the way down, because the created thing is at bottom outside itself as relation to another, namely God who gives it to be. But the God who creates affirms this within himself as generation of the *Logos*, and affirms also the worshipping response of the Creation within himself as the procession of the Holy Spirit.

Yet to this infinite good within the Trinity is added the ecstatic mysterious ‘extra’ of finite dependence and finite worship. God, as both Philo and Bérulle in different eras said, lacks worship of himself, since he does not, as ontological rather than ontic, depend even on himself anymore than he causes himself. Yet in the Incarnation, suggests Bérulle, God ceases to lack even this.....and in coming to share God’s life we are returned by God in Christ always back to specifically finite excellence. The invisible points back to the visible as well as the other way round, as Maximus the Confessor says in his *Mystagogy*.

So with the Incarnation, for all that God, it seems, can receive nothing, it happens that God comes to receive our worship of himself by joining to the personhood of the *Logos*, our human worship. Thus in some mysterious way, it is not just that the finite receives in a unilateral way the infinite, nor that the finite returns to the infinite a unilateral praise. It is now rather true that there is an infinite-finite exchange of gifts – as St John of the Cross affirmed was the case in his experience of deification. And in this way Christ is now King upon the earth and so it follows that there should be always also a secular fusion of democratic dispersal with monarchic liberality and objectivity. Indeed this should run almost in the direction of monarchic anarchy, as clearly recommended by Tolkien in the *Lord of the Rings* (no law in the Shire; but the

orderly echo of remote kingship). Or (to use the local example) perhaps in the spirit of Robin Hood: like other legendary outlaws of the time of King John he had been declared ‘civilly dead’ (*civile mortuus*) outside the law and therefore outside humanity, with the price on his head equivalent to that of the head of a forest-wolf. He had been declared so by a feudal king who tended to reduce his rule to the self-interested formation of contracts, and so was eventually restrained by the counter-contract of the Baronial *Magna Carta* to which he was forced to submit. But Robin Hood in legend appeals to the King in exile (in later re-tellings this becomes John’s brother Richard, away on crusade), the King of natural law from whose legal domain no living human being can possibly be excluded. It is this natural law of fair distribution and generous assistance which Robin in the forest seeks to uphold, under the knowledge that its earthly sovereign representative remains in existence and may mysteriously show up at any time.....

In order for it to be possible that sovereign authority can exercise such a light touch, there must however, be a collective interest in a sustainable and stable economy in which each person enjoys what is legitimately his own because it meets some of his basic needs and allows sufficient scope for the exercise and marketing of his talents. Property, as Hilaire Belloc taught, needs therefore to be as widely and equally dispersed as possible, in order to ensure that people have real creative liberty, little interest in greed and a tendency spontaneously to form self-regulating mechanisms of exchange of benefits. Today very few people, even middle class ‘well-off’ people, possess any real property as opposed to a mass of temporary commodities that they have been more or less constrained into buying. For all the neo-liberal talk of freedom, it is not an accident that so few are allowed the kind of property that permits

one to leave a creative mark in the world. This is above all true of land – but we are made to pay most dearly of all and on almost life-time lease for the very space in which it is possible to sleep, make love, be born, die, prepare food, engage in play and in the arts. We should instead provide people as widely as possible with real property, commencing with landed property itself.

As I have just indicated, property that is to do with self-fulfilment rather than accumulation is the foundation for a free giving and receiving that begins to compose a wider social household. But here gift -exchange is not just a mode of economy, but also a mode of politics; its spontaneous formation of an ethos and of tacit conventions restricts, without entirely removing, the need for the operation of codified and enforceable law – though this is still somewhat required, especially in order to prevent any breaking of the norms of wide dispersal. Monarchy in some sense, as Belloc like Tolkien taught, enters into the picture here, because mass popular movements along with the centralising ambitions of the few can – as in fact occurred in the early modern period -- tend to subvert the more genuine operation of local participatory democracy that is linked to the dispersal of property whether in town or countryside. (In the Mediaeval case, especially in the towns.) Here the function of a somewhat ‘transcendent’ single power should be to secure, uphold and intervene occasionally in favour of, the subsidiary dispersal of power to its levels of appropriate exercise.

In this way, the function of the rule of ‘the One’ that I am invoking runs against, rather than in support of, the modern doctrinal and practical upholding of an absolute sovereign centre, which tends to ensure that even a supposed rule of the many – ‘the sovereignty of the people’ – is in reality an *over-emphatic* rule of the One.

We have seen that *ecclesia* names a new sort of universal polity, primarily democratic, yet also monarchic, which was invented by Christianity. But just how is this *ecclesia* constituted and how is it supposed to work? For St Paul it seems to be a kind of universal tribalism of gift-exchange over-against both local polis and universal empire. But how can this be? Gift-exchange is normally of sacred things amongst friends. With strangers one needs formal rules of contract to ensure mutual benefit. Things exchanged here get secularised. How can one return to tribalism and exchange gifts with strangers? Well, I have already indicated that there may be a virtuous dialectic at work here: the more we become strangers also the more -- potentially at least -- we become universal neighbours. We cannot achieve this as isolated individuals, but we can achieve this if across the globe localities and kinship groups still retain identity – as they tend to do, to assert themselves against anonymity – and yet ceaselessly exchange this with other groups: the way for example different folk musics remain themselves and yet constantly borrow from other folk musics -- like English Elizabethan folk-music from Celtic and Iberian sources. And today this goes on of course far more.

But there is another and specifically theological point. Christianity renders all objects sacred: everything is a sign of God and of his love. Moreover in Christ this is *shown again*, and he provides the *idiom* for rendering all sacred. Hence there need be no more neutral commodities just as there are no more strangers – not because we are citizens, even of *cosmopolis*, but because we are sons, daughters, and brothers in Adam and now in the new Adam who is Christ. We are literally one kin, as the

Middle Ages saw it – one kin both physical and spiritual; one kind under Christ. Thus we live by an exchange of blood, and charity is just this exchanging.

But is it? Is not charity the free one-way gift? But this makes love always sacrifice. But what is sacrifice, the ultimate free one-way gesture of love for? Surely to re-establish exchange. In this way sacrifice by no means escapes an economy, nor should it. And yet in gift-exchange, though there is equivalent return, the same thing does not come back. Something passes never to return at all. And for this reason no counter-gift ever cancels a debt but always inaugurates a new one. In the New Testament one finds both repeated unease (in both the gospels and the epistles) about gift-exchange as something pursued for the power of the benefactor, unlike the grace of God, and yet at the same time a continued insistence that God's grace must be actively received and responded to, and that the mediators of this grace, like St Paul himself, deserve acknowledgment and support – the tension between these two stresses underlies many tortured passages in his writings.

For this reason the gift is not a straight line, but nor is it a closed circle. Rather it is a spiral or a strange loop. Beyond the law of non-contradiction it is both unilateral and reciprocal. It spirals on and onAnd there is no first free gift because to give to another one must have received at least her presence. Likewise one cannot be grateful without a gesture which is already a counter-gift.

And when one gives, for that unilateral instance one is a monarch. One stands, as it were, hierarchically above the one who cannot choose what you are going to give to him, say to him etc. No contractual liberalism can ever bind the oscillating aristocracy

of mere conversation. Likewise when one receives, for that instance one is a monarch receiving tribute, even if the roles will be reversed in the next instance. Thus to give, or to receive, is hierarchically and unilaterally to help continue a process that is nonetheless fundamentally democratic and reciprocal. Indeed charity as welfare and justice as equity have always been the prerogative of kings and empires rather than city-states all the way from Babylon to Elizabethan England. But charity is not just welfare, it is also, as the Middle Ages taught, the festive 'between' that binds people, like the state of grace between the beggar who blesses you and you who give your coin to the beggar.

We today, have totally divided reciprocal market contract from private free giving. And yet the latter remains secretly a contract and the former is also like the crossing of two unilateral gifts whose objects in no way mingle. Our situation therefore has crazy undercurrents that go unrecognised. Giving is, by contrast, only really free and liberal where it respects and helps further to create reciprocal norms. Contract is only really fair where there is a judged equivalence of objects and also a free mutual promotion by donation of the welfare of the exchanging parties.

Judged equivalence of objects. If all objects are sacred then, as for primitives, they possess a kind of animated force. Objects or their equivalents must return to their first owners or primal origins because they have in some sense personality. And this is the ecological dimension of gift-exchange. Humans identify themselves through the production and exchange of things: Marx was right. So inversely things are imbued with the story of human comings and goings. Objects naturally carry memories and tell stories: only commodified ones do not – or they tell shameful tales which they

also conceal. In a modest way, even the packet of fair-trade coffee can start again to be a mythical object with personality.

For Catholic Christians, this is as it should be. Everything is sacramental; everything tells of the glory of Christ and therefore every economy is part of the economy of salvation and every process of production and exchange prepares the elements of the cosmic eucharist. This was true for St Paul: his thought about grace is indissociable from his thought about the human exchange of talents and of material benefits. But the latter can only be a just exchange where there are constantly re-negotiated and agreed upon standards concerning the human common good: of what should be produced and with what standards; of whom should be rewarded and to what degree for the sake of further beneficial (to herself and the community) action by individuals. ‘To each according to his needs and from each according to his means’ should still be our aim; but outside a completely crass materialism the question is about legitimate and desirable needs and means and the ordering of diverse needs and means. Here the crucial paradox so often ignored by socialists (but not by John Ruskin) is that only where there is an agreed hierarchy of values, sustained by the constantly self-cancelling hierarchy of education, can there actually be an equal sharing (according to a continuous social judgement as to who will most benefit from such and such a gift etc) of what is agreed to be valuable. Without such an agreement, sustained through the operation of professional guilds and associations as well as co-operative credit unions and banks, there can only be market mediation of an anarchy of desires – of course ensuring the triumph of a hierarchy of sheer power and the secret commanding of people’s desires by manipulation.

For where there is no public recognition of the primacy of absolute good as grounded in something super-human, then democracy becomes impossible, for it is no longer supposed that one should even *search* for the intrinsically desirable. It then follows that people can only find out what they ‘should’ desire, or even about the possible objects of desire, from the very ‘mass’ processes that are supposed to represent only the general desires of the people. Liberal democracy is then doomed to specularity: the represented themselves only represent to themselves the spectacle of representation.

Moreover, a *purely* participatory democracy, without representation, is surely an illusion under any conditions, ancient or modern. For prior to the complex decisions made for itself by the multitude lie always persuasions by the Few and the many ‘ones’, while the execution of these sovereignly autonomous decisions involves once again heteronomous interventions by the One and the Few, since all cannot attend to the business of all, for all of the time. If there are no criteria for the legitimate operation of these processes of ‘aristocratic’ and ‘monarchic’ education and mediation, then the covert operation of these processes will corrupt any ventures in democratic participation, which most certainly should be promoted.

For there is simply no truth in the Marxist assumption that, once freed from the shackles of oppression, people will ‘by reason’ choose equality and justice: to the contrary, in the light of a mere reason that is not also vision, *eros* and faith, people may well choose to prefer the petty triumphs and superiorities of a brutally hierarchic *agon* of power or the sheer excitement of a social spectacle in which they may

potentially be exhibited in triumph. This is exactly why the vast numbers of the American poor are not waiting to rise up in revolt.....

For the same reason, ‘pure’ democracy would be a *mise en abyme*: one would have to have endless ‘primaries’ before ‘primaries’ in any electoral process. Instead in reality, at the end of the line always, someone puts herself forward as a ‘candidate’ (in some sense), someone stands up and says something that no-one has voted on or contractually agreed that she should say. Gift always precedes both choice and contract, because no formal pre-arrangements can entirely control the content of what we impose upon others in our words and symbolic actions which inevitably sway them in a certain fashion. In the United States, part of the problem is that there is a yearning for the madness of pure democracy: thus there is no ‘monarchic’ body that organises boundaries of voting districts, because this would be considered ‘undemocratic’. In consequence this task is left to the reigning political party and the resultant gerrymandering is seen as just a fact of life. In this way the lure of the democratic abyss abolishes democracy, whereas some admission of aristocratic and monarchic principles (as in Canada, for example) actually secures the space of the possibility of democracy.

The same abyss exerts its fascination when the Blair government – as obliquely indicated by Archbishop Rowan Williams in his Dimpleby lecture, and in his recent pre-general election public statement-- obscures the irreducible moment of non-democratic decision which it should be obliged to take responsibility for, in the name of appeal to ‘opinion-soundings’ and the like which purport to gauge not just what the people want but more crucially what they will permit a government to get away with.

Such apparent sensitivity to public opinion in reality subverts democracy, because it fails to acknowledge that democracy operates through an exchange of *trust* that also exceeds an impossible 'absolute' democracy. A government has been trusted to take its *own* decisions on the basis of justice and integrity, precisely because the electorate has previously endorsed its general principles, record and ethical character. No plebiscitary process of whatever kind can displace this 'monarchic' need for self-grounded decision taken 'under God', for the reason that the people can never collectively be placed in the exact position that an executive power should occupy: of being (ideally) of the right human type, having enjoyed the right experience, receiving the right information, being able as an individual or small-group mind to arrive at a complex conclusion on the basis of complex reasoning.

In consequence, for a government to pretend not to decide, or not to have to decide, will always be in reality to decide in a disguised way through manipulation of opinion, plus the following of the most debased mass-opinion or of the course that it can most easily get away with. And where a government has no sense that it has a duty to decide for justice and the long-term global and national good that is in excess of democratic norms, then its horizon for decision will be only that of increasing its own power and influence to the degree that this is seen to be compatible with remaining in power, retaining the good-will of its temporarily most powerful allies and procuring a sufficient continued popular assent. One can argue that the over-weening recent power of the British governmental executive as manifest especially in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, is linked not *just* to its contempt for accountability to the elected sovereign body of Parliament, but also to its evasion of a properly executive responsibility which would be take decisions and guide parliament on the

basis of intrinsic justice and the most long-term legitimate interests of the people on whose behalf it takes decisions. (In the case of Iraq, this included the British relationship to Europe.)

We need then, in the Europe and the World of the future, a new conception of the economy as exchange of gifts in the sense of both talents and valued objects that blend material benefit with sacramental significance. We need also to encourage a new post-liberal participatory democracy that is enabled by the 'aristocratic' process of an education that seeks after the common good and absolute transcendent truth. Finally, we need to see that it is equally enabled by a monarchic principle which permits a unified power at the limit to intervene in the name of non-codifiable equity - the liberal alternative to this being the brutal exclusion of those, like the inmates of Guantanamo Bay, who escape the nets of codes and are therefore deemed to be sub-human.

Does all this sound fantastic? No, the fantastic is what we have: an economy that destroys life, babies, childhood, adventure, locality, beauty, the exotic, the erotic, people and the planet itself.

Moreover, if we refuse a profound and subtle theological social carapace, we will not in the future necessarily recover secularity: instead we may witness the effective triumph (in power if not in numbers) of religious fundamentalism and especially Protestant fundamentalism, in cynical alliance with a liberal nihilism. For the formal emptiness of the liberal market and bureaucracy is now apparent to all: its heart will be filled with something, and especially with a neo-Calvinistic creed that justifies this

emptiness, because cumulative success in the reckoning to oneself of its void sums is seen as a sign of favour with another eternal world that alone really matters – although that, too, is conceived in terms of preferential absolute success in contrast with absolute failure.

Most, including myself, have hitherto supposed that the religious conflicts in Ireland are an anachronistic echo, in a remote corner of Europe, of ancient European conflicts. But then why have they flared-up again so recently (the latter half of the 20th C) and persisted so long? Is not Ireland somewhat like the United States, where a ‘belated’ avoidance of secular ideologies has turned imperceptibly into a foreshadowing of a time when those ideologies are exhausted? Here again, there is no progressive plot to history. What one has seen in the province of Ulster has often been a conflict between a bigoted, puritanical and hyper-evangelical neo-Calvinism on the one hand, and a largely reasonable, socially and political-aspiring Catholicism on the other – the murderous fanatics on the ‘Catholic’ side have tended to be so for socio-political rather than religious reasons. Moreover, Government responses to this conflict now seem, in retrospect, like dummy-runs for a global suspension of civil liberties in the name of anti-terrorism.

Certainly not in any straightforward fashion, but nonetheless in a real one, it could be that the Irish conflict is in fact a harbinger of a wider, future and much more complex and many-faceted new struggle for the soul of Christianity itself -- which may yet dictate the future of Europe and even of the world.