

Book Review: 'Inventing the Individual' by Larry Siedentop

Review of Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Milton Keynes; UK: Penguin Random House, 2015)

When I'm in London one of my great delights is to make forays to several 'favorite' locations. One involves food, the other books. This past April I was picking through a selection of books at Hatchards Booksellers on Piccadilly Street where I came across the newly released paperback version of Larry Siedentop's, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. First published in 2014 this is a must read for anyone committed to addressing Newbigin's question about a missionary engagement with the late, modern West, especially its North Atlantic form. True confession - this book reads like a good thriller. It had me hooked by the end of the Introduction; I couldn't put it down until all 363 pages were absorbed and massively underlined. In fact, somewhere around the first hundred pages I wrote on its title page: 'This is an amazingly beautiful, hopeful history that turns so many of our ideological claims about modernity on their head.' Every thoughtful Christian desiring to grasp the historical roots of our current situation will find in Siedentop a masterful guide and midwife.

Siedentop is a US born academic who has taught at Oxford University for most of his academic life, though he is American born and educated at Hope College, Harvard, and Oxford. He is a Fellow of Keble College and Faculty Lecturer in Political Thought. As the title of his book suggests, he is investigating the sources and emergence of the modern idea of the individual and liberalism, of how those conceptualities came to be embedded in the origins of what today we know as the modern West. Liberalism, today, is more often that not read as the pervasive form of social, political and economic life in the West and, as such, the acid that has taken the place of Christian narrative. In some very basic ways both individualism and liberalism have come to be viewed as, if not enemies, at least primary protagonists for Christian imagination in the West (sometimes expressed under the rubric of 'secular humanism'). One runs into this assumed narrative all the time among Christian leaders. In a recent workshop, for example, I invited a group of church leaders to present a list of critical issues/challenges they wanted to address that day. One that came near the top of the list had to do with how the church could address a liberal, secular society and its rampant individualism. Behind the question lays the commonly held assumption that liberalism, the individual and their commitment to that concomitant partner, secularism, are the enemies of Christianity to be confronted. Siedentop demonstrates how this dichotomy represents a tragic misreading of the relationship, one that makes it increasingly difficult to both understand and address the challenges confronting the West today and certainly misdirects any missiological engagement with our own culture.

Like Lesslie Newbigin, Siedentop pushed against the commonly accepted interpretations of Christian history in the West and the modern experiment. One encounters a deeply embedded ideological imagination in both ordinary and academic conversations around this question of modernity and the Christian story in the West. In a recent radio dialogue around the relationship of scientific inquiry to democratic freedom this normative ideological frame ran through the assumptions of the interviewer and his panel of professional scientists. Its basic viewpoint is that after the tragic loss of the Greco-Roman world in around the 5th – 6th centuries the 'West'

descended into a Dark Ages to be gradually replaced by a Middle Ages. All this was shaped by the religious obfuscations of the Church to science or the freedom of the individual (the classic illustration everyone wants to use and misuse is Galileo's confrontation with the church). Then, like a miracle of light shining into the darkness there came the Renaissance, that beautiful moment when some in the West rediscovered the classical Greek world with its notions of art, beauty and the freedom of the individual. It was this re-discovery and reconnection that saved the West and brought it into the bright light of the modern age, as we moved forward into the Enlightenment, the emergence of modern science and a self emancipated from the chains of the church.

Siedentop re-writes this narrative and upends its assumptions. He shows how both liberalism and the individual are the children of the emergence and the development of the Christian West. Indeed, the emergence of the individual and the creation of socio-political forms that protect and make the individual so central in the West are the products of Paul's fundamental conviction about what had happened to the relationship between God and the world in Jesus Christ. The liberal idea of the individual was created by Christian imagination from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries in Europe not in the Greek city-states which were defined by static, hierarchical views of humanity within which there could be no development or freedom in any of the senses we understand today. In Siedentop's words:

... the conviction that uncoerced belief provides the true foundation for 'legitimate' authority was itself the product of Christianity... presenting the process of secularization as the 'rebirth' of ancient humanism can be so misleading. For it ignores the moral conviction that led to the ancient theory of natural law being recast. It was that moral conviction which led to 'rights' becoming fundamental to the discourse of liberal secularism. But an understanding of that connection was lost in the heat of early modern battles against the church" (335-336).

It was that moral conviction at the deepest level – the moral and intellectual level – the church had won the struggle for the future of Europe. The church had projected the image of society as an association of individuals, an image which unleashed the centralizing processes of Europe (346).

For Siedentop this common, everyday notion that the Renaissance was a massive turning point in human imagination from the dark control of religion has been grossly inflated. 'It has been used to produce a gap between early modern Europe and the preceding centuries – to introduce a discontinuity which is misleading' (337). The view that the Renaissance and its aftermath were the advent of the modern world is mistaken. What Christianity accomplished in the West was to turn a moral claim about the relationship of every human being irrespective of status (Greek 'natural law' in the 'great chain of being') into social and political status (a primary claim of liberalism). But there has been, in Siedentop's language, a 'civil war' raged in North Atlantic West, in which religious belief is set against liberalism and secularism (the latter two being seen by the former as largely 'godless'). It has, therefore, come to be mostly assumed that these two combatants are irreconcilable. But it has been Christianity in the West that supplied the ground of and for human identity and the freedom of the individual. It was, and I would argue still is the case, that Christian moral beliefs (basic convictions of the Christian narrative materialized into practices of everyday life) are the ultimate source of the social

revolution that made and make the West. For Siedentop, secularism, properly understood:

...can be seen as Europe's noblest achievement which should be its primary contribution to the creation of a world order...Secularism is Christianity's gift to the world, ideas and practices which have often been turned against 'excesses' of the Christian church itself. (360).

Of course this will be immensely confusing for many Christian leaders, a confusion that proves his point about how deeply we have lost touch with the sources of our story. Secularism now resides at the heart of our 'civil war'.

It is a challenging and disorienting time not only for Christian identity in the West but for Western identity itself. The two are inextricably woven into a single history which for too long has been denied or ignored in the 'civil war'. In this critical moment the Christian churches have an immense role to play and a deeply rich story from within which to act. But these are revolutionary times . In the US,,for example, see Chris Hedges influence, one of an emerging group that recognizes that in too many ways the forms of social and 'democratic' life in the West are past fixing – there is a need for revolution.[\[1\]](#) The great tragedy is that in so many ways the churches have lost their nerve. They have lost the core moral imperative of the Gospels wherein Paul saw that through Jesus Christ, everything had been set on a new moral foundation centred on the idea of the individual and the shaping of a different society. Siedentop provides us with an angle, a lens, from which to re-enter the narrative of Christian imagination in the West, to be again that gospel people in an emerging dark time. If the churches don't do this – they are over in their present forms.

[\[1\]](#) Chris Hedges, *Wages of Rebellion: the Moral Imperative of Revolt* (Toronto: Knopf, 2015)