

The End of Liberalism? What the Euro-tribal churches are missing.

The late German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, suggested that when a world order breaks down, people begin to think about what is happening (Hegel's 'Owl of Minerva'[1]).[2] By this standard we're experiencing a fundamental breakdown of the current world order as demonstrated by a spate of books and articles arguing that the conditions of the West involve the end of such primary ideological narratives such as liberalism, neo-liberalism and, to some extent, even democracy itself.[3] The American editorialist, David Brooks, began a recent *New York Times* op-ed with the words, 'Everybody agrees society is in a bad way...'. [4] Adrian Pabst, the British political philosopher began a recent op ed article in the *New Statesman* with the sentence: 'Across the West, the old centre is coming apart'. [5] The editor of the conservative, *National Affairs*, Yuval Levin in his 2016 book (written before either the Brexit vote or the Trump election) states that 'The first decade and a half of the twenty-first century has been a frustrating time for Americans...polls and elections attest to the exceptional pessimism and unease...we have not been happy with the state...of our common life'. [6] The American academic, Anthony Esolen's book, *Out of the Ashes* is a blunt confrontation with what is viewed as a liberalism that has hollowed out Western civilization. [7] A more measured, but equally challenging, book by the British theologians/philosophers, John Millbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* argues for the recovery of a Classic and Christian 'politics of virtue' in the face of the failure of liberalism across the West. [8]

One of the latest entrants into this broadening conversation on both sides of the Atlantic is the work of the American political scientist, Patrick J. Deneen (Associate Professor of Political Science at Notre Dame University) in his provocatively titled book, *Why Liberalism Failed*. [9] Many other titles could be added to this list but this is sufficient to indicate the level of debate and conviction arising around the last surviving and dominant ideology of the modern West: liberalism. [10] The purpose of this brief review is not to analyze or assess any of these books in themselves but, rather, to point out to leaders of churches and church systems in North American and the UK some major, fundamental questions confronting what we call the West that are being missed, neglected or ignored by euro-tribal churches in their continued concern to save, renew, remake and fix themselves.

This Journal has sought to engage questions of Christian identity and role in a transforming West in a number of ways. The book review, [The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Book of Acts](#) [11] proposed that movements of fix and reform within these churches are missing the point of what is happening across our societies and fail to provide the kind of missional imagination they so sorely need. The video interview with Sally Mann (see the [Beyond the Billboard](#) issue of the Journal [12]) as well as the [Webinar conversation](#) proposed that these attempts at fixing, bringing fresh expressions or new proposals for reform are like trying to make a broken old billboard look vital again when the issue is no longer the billboard but what God is already up to 'beyond the billboard'. The defaults to proposing such technical and programmatic approaches as 'innovation' centers or 'adaptive' change or the formation of agile and flexible organizations are all part of the varied efforts to fix and keep focused on the 'billboard'. God is pressing these churches in a radically different direction. Can they

rediscover a genuinely Christian social imagination and practice in relation to the underlying liberal ideological basis of the modern West that continues to shape the euro-tribal churches whether of the left or the right?

The books mentioned above propose that the modern, liberal Western imagination is at the root of our current crises and malaise. Liberalism isn't something that needs to be fixed or adjusted; it is the problem. The challenge isn't fixing but the construction of a fundamentally different imagination rooted in the Christian and Classic understandings of virtue and the Good. Liberalism is an ideology these books declare in no uncertain terms. It is the last of the powerful twentieth century ideologies that wrestled for ascendance - fascism, communism and liberalism. It was liberalism which, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, was declared the winner, signalling of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama). It has become the all-encompassing ideology of the elites (whether of the right or the left) since its beginnings more than half a millennium ago as well as the basis of the American constitution. In this sense, liberalism is the inherited civilizational narrative of the West. Deneen, in the introduction to his book describes that ideology as follows:

A political philosophy conceived some 500 years ago, and put into effect at the birth of the United States nearly 250 years later, was a wager that political society could be grounded on a different footing. It conceived humans as rights-bearing individuals who could fashion for themselves their own version of the good life... Political legitimacy was grounded on a shared belief in an originating 'social contract'.^[13]

The basis of this liberalism is the autonomy of a self-making individual operating within a social contract with others. The experience of the West coming apart is directly related to this pervasive ideology. What these books are arguing is that the challenge before the West is not fixing or adjusting liberalism, with its emphasis on either the free market or a statist society, but its replacement. Liberalism, they argue, is the root cause of the financial crises, the sense of dispossession, the return of a divided upstairs and downstairs society and of a new aristocracy. These, they argue, are the only winners in neo-liberalism, the only beneficiaries of an ideology which confers rights to the individual to accrue wealth at all costs to others and the creation.

In the face of these realities, authors of these books argue, the primary energies of leaders and elites is still to propose ways of fixing liberalism (whether of the left in terms of statism or the right in terms of a broader freedom of the market to work and lift all boats) from within the basic tenets of liberalism. The overarching ethos of our time, they argue, is one of a nostalgia, a longing to recapture some point in the recent past that represents the high mark of liberalism be that the 60s with its opening up of personal freedom in revolutionary ways or, in the 80s when the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions restored market economies. But, these books argue, such nostalgic moves toward restoration fail to grasp that the basic disease is liberalism itself.

There is much that is worthy of our engagement in these books. The arguments being made cannot be lightly dismissed. In a forthcoming book, *Practices for the Refounding of the Church*^[14] Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson (two members of the Editorial Board of this Journal) argue that the euro-tribal churches acquiesced to the liberalism that has formed the modern West, shaping themselves to either the right or the left of its agenda by making God

useful to the core belief of liberalism, namely, the primacy of the self-making individual. Those who are making this critique of the West and its malaise are pointing back to the basis of the West in Christian imagination, in the cultivation of virtue wherein the person is rooted in local communities of accountability and practices to and with one another, where the fundamental political questions are not about rights but accountability and belonging, where there are core practices of receiving and being shaped in local contexts and where money is not an end in itself.

The challenge of our moment involves the ways the euro-tribal churches continue to focus on the 'billboard – on how to fix it, how to develop fresh expressions of it, how to reform and renew its life when God's Spirit is calling these churches into practices that return them into 'parishes',^[15] into the local, into a civil oeconomia,^[16] into the everyday life of the local, into a life shaped by Christian virtues toward the other. These are the more basic challenges for Christian life which, if neglected, will continue to render the euro-tribal churches even more irrelevant in the question of the remaking of the West.

^[1] Hegel described an 'Owl of Minerva' which 'spreads its wings only within the falling of the dusk.' Wisdom can only be gained retrospectively, reflecting on the events we have experienced, rather than from some objective, analytical standpoint.

^[2] Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016)

^[3] Regarding the latter (democracy) see David Frum, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (New York: Harper, 2018) and Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Toronto: Random House, Canada, 2018) as well such works as Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (Cambridge, MASS: Zone Books, 2015) and Jennifer Welsh's, *The Return of History* (Toronto: Anansi, 2016).

^[4] David Brooks, 'How Democracies Perish', *New York Times*, January 11, 2018.

^[5] Adrian Pabst, "Why Edmund Burke is a philosopher for our troubled times", *The NewStatesman*, December 16, 2017.

^[6] Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in an Age of Individualism* (NY: Basic Books, 2016), 13.

^[7] Anthony Esolen, *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture* (Washington, DC.: Regnery Publishing, 2017)

^[8] John Millbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

^[9] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CN.: Yale University Press, 2018).

^[10] In France the political philosopher, Pierre Manent's, *Beyond Radical Secularism* is addressing the same underlying questions about the nature of liberalism in the West. In a

different way, Mark Lilla's recent book *The Once and Future Liberal* (NY: Harper Books, 2017) is engaging these questions from the perspective of the Left as is Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (NY: Zone Books, 2015).

[11] Alan Roxburgh, 'The Crisis of Liberal Democracy and the Book of Acts', *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue 10, Winter 2018. <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/liberal-democracy-acts/>

[12] Sally Mann and Alan Roxburgh participated in a conversation and webinar, all published together as videos in the issue 'Beyond the Billboard', *Journal of Missional Practice*, issue 9, Autumn, 2017. <http://journalofmissionalpractice.com/category/issue-9/>

[13] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CN.: Yale University Press, 2018), 1.

[14] Alan J Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of the Church* (NY: CPI, 2018)

[15] Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM, 2017)

[16] Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, *Civil Economy* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2015)