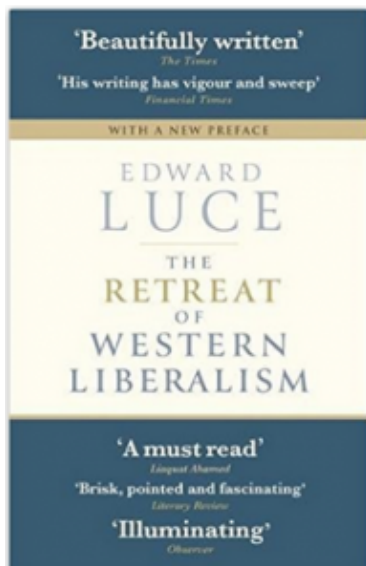




BOOKS IN CONVERSATION: THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE BOOK OF ACTS

The Crisis of Liberal Democracy



It's a serendipitous experience to read books across different genres and make connections that stretch you. Two books by the *Financial Times* columnist, Edward Luce have done this for me recently: *Time to Start Thinking: America in the Age of Descent* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012) and *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2017). Each articulates a concern about the crisis of Western democracy apparent in many books and articles.^[1]

In *Time to Start Thinking* (written in 2012) Luce augurs the ascent of Trump and our contemporary socio-economic anxieties describing the spread of hollowed-out towns across America's heartland, and anticipating Packer's *The Unwinding* (Faber & Faber, 2014). He sees ours as a context in which 'every day' Americans are in a spiral of economic decline that is eviscerating security, family and place. These books press into a central issue of our time: the emptying of the middle class which has embodied the American Dream and the liberal democratic promise of progress for all citizens. More and more people are falling out of the middle class, finding themselves on the losing end of globalization (aka neoliberalism). The very liberal democracies that produced the middle classes have become the agents of their demise. Liberalism, the replacement narrative for Christianity, has become the grave digger of the class it produced so effectively in the post-World War 2 era. As a result, people have lost confidence in the basis for their hopes and aspirations, namely, those social, economic and political forms built since the end of World War 2. In this context, many look for the strong leader promising a return to the post-War golden age.

What's to be done?

The question Luce's books raise is: What's to be done? The responses books like Luce's offer remain locked inside the choices that shaped the twentieth century, but we no longer live in that world. The challenge confronting the West (and its churches) is that if we remain inside the analyses offered by people like Luce then the options are already defined, making it impossible to address the crisis with a different imagination. Responses to the question of what's to be done still revolve around the means of fixing or reforming the existing forms of political and economic life. Other forms of response are

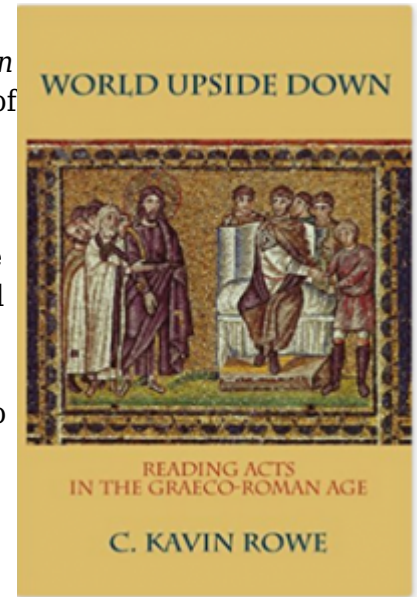
considered illegitimate. There is a stream of responses to the crisis of the West from within the reigning political and economic systems bequeathed by the twentieth century (liberal democracy shaped by neo-liberalism). These responses involve 'fix' 'reform' and 'return' narratives. The approach is to describe the crisis (of liberalism, or neoliberalism, or capitalism, or the Protestant churches), in order to propose how to fix (reform) democratic liberalism, or capitalism, or the church. These 'fix' proposals are embedded in the ideological divisions of the twentieth century and, indeed, of modernity itself. They are expressed in the political or economic terms of, for example, the left or the right which seem to be the only options on offer. Proposals for fixing the crisis of liberalism are based around such notions as 'progressive (an arrogant word all in itself) or conservative; the political right or the political left, neo-liberal or managed capitalism and so forth. One reads these proposals with an unsettling sense that such choices feel more and more threadbare and less and less convincing.

This dynamic characterizes the Protestant denominations. In their own crises, analyses and proposals are of this 'fix', 'reform' and 'return' variety. It's as if there's a death grip that keeps producing a need to hold on tight and work hard to try and fix what one has built. There is no future in this direction. One is reminded of an image Herbert Marcuse used over half a century ago just as the middle classes entered their golden age. In that post-war era the middle class was the aspirational norm across Western democracies. It was a period which, today, looks more and more like a momentary economic 'Golden Age.' Marcuse critiqued the one-dimensionality of this apparently endless Golden Age of Western liberalism because, in its bargain with capitalism, he saw the middle classes losing their capacity to grasp the terribly limiting choices of a consumerism that characterize the individualism of everyday life. In the new consumer culture this middle class had enormous choice within an extremely limiting domain of imagination. Their new freedom and economic power gave them choices between white or speckled green toothpaste, they could pick a blue or a black Volkswagen, Ford or Chevy. For Marcuse, the middle class was swallowed up in false choices all orientated around 'getting ahead', progress, and self-determination. Luce captures this underlying absurdity when he quotes from Jan-Werner Muller: 'The third-way turned elections into a mere choice between Coke and Pepsi.'

Today, for a majority of people, this middle class is a lost dream. The options presented to address the crisis are stuck within the limits of right and left, progressive and conservative options formed from twentieth century ideologies. In a parallel manner, Protestant denominations travel a similar path, trapped in an imagination of fix and return with limiting choices between right and left. These solutions, whether progressive or conservative, leave them inside a limiting 'Coke'/'Pepsi' world. The French theorist, Bruno Latour, perceptively framed the problematic nature of these solutions when he wrote that we're now living 'in a history utterly different from that of the twentieth century.'^[2] A different narrative is required from fix and reform, right or left, progressive or conservative.

Acts of the Apostles and another book

While reading Luce I was also reading a completely different genre, C. Kavin Rowe's *The World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (OUP, 2009). Rowe is a New Testament scholar. What has the crisis of Western liberalism to do with a book like *Acts*? Rowe makes the connections proposing that Luke, the author of *Acts*, does not view the early Christians as intending to 'tweak' (read 'fix', 'return', 'reform' or 'make work again') religious life but to effect 'the destruction of an entire mode of being religious' (21) at the base of socio-political life in the world of the late first century. (Make no mistake, neo-liberalism is a way of being religious.) On the contrary 'Luke's criticism...aims at the very foundations that support the edifice of pagan religiousness in the effort to break the entire structure...' (22). 'Religiousness' here is nothing like 'religion' in the contemporary West. To aim at the foundations of pagan religiousness is to take direct aim at the political, economic and social basis of society. It was radically seditious activity. The language Rowe uses to describe this agenda is 'collision'. The nature of that collision was clear to Luke and the earliest followers of Jesus. It involves a community, shaped by allegiance to Jesus, who formed their identity around God as the primary agent in the world. This involved far more than an adjustment of parts of one's life in 'an otherwise unaltered basic cultural pattern.' It called for 'the cultural explications' of God's identity in their contexts (18). Such an explication meant collision not restoration or fixing which is why: 'Contrary to much received scholarly wisdom, in *Acts* the gospel does not routinely meet with exuberant acceptance among gentiles' (23).



Fix, Reform and 'God as useful' to liberal democracy - cannot engage the crisis

As Mark Lilla expressed in *Stillborn God* (Knopf Doubleday, 2007):

[We] are separated from our own long theological tradition of political thought by a revolution in Western thinking that began roughly four centuries ago. We live, so to speak, on the other shore...since we no longer understand those things, it is no longer certain that we understand ourselves...the actual choice contemporary societies face is not between past and present, or between the West and the 'rest'. It is between two grand traditions of thought, two ways of envisioning the human condition. (4-13)

If such is the case, can the crisis of the West, so well explicated in Luce's books, be addressed from within the narrative foundations of this liberalism? Can the crisis of the Euro-tribal churches be addressed by fix and reform? Surely, human thriving and human freedom must have another basis than the social contract of the self-making individual or some charter of the rights and freedoms of that individual? In the liberal democracies of the West God's purposes (telos) and agency have been re-interpreted in two ways - either in a reduction to the personal, inner-space of private experience or as being useful for the fulfillment of whatever concerns and issues are paramount within liberal democracies at any particular moment.

How does Rowe's argument engage this crisis of liberal democracy and a broad mistrust in solutions of fix and reform? For Rowe, modern liberalism is a whole religious structure, a wedge between the citizens of the West and the God revealed in Jesus Christ. For Rowe *Acts* calls for the reconstruction of the entire pagan society around a different telos, one that simply cannot be reduced to its own categories. This is why, in Philippi, Christians are accused of 'turning the whole world upside down', of being seditionists and treasonists, of having another King which was not Caesar or, by extension, not liberalism (or socialism for that matter), not progressivism or conservatism, but another culture. *Acts* is about collision not fixing; it is a rejection of the prevailing statecraft not an agenda to make God useful in its fixing. For Christians, the crisis of the West must occupy our energies and love. But it cannot be addressed from within the assumptions of that liberalism based as it is on the wager that societies and selves can thrive without reference to God.

[1] See, for example, the *Guardian* article by Paul Mason "Democracy is Dying - and its startling how few people are worried", July 31st, 2017 as well as Wendy Brown's 2015 *Undoing of the Demos and Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010) along with Marl Lilla's *Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (2007) and his more recent *The Once and Future Liberal* (2017)

[2] Heinrich Geiselberger (editor), *The Great Regression*, Polity Press, 2017, p.79



Alan Roxburgh

TMN founder, consultant, pastor, teacher and writer with more than 30 years experience in church leadership, consulting and seminary education.

[Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Full Bio](#)

Alan on [Amazon](#)