

CHAPTER I

Liberal society and political theology

A Christian Sociology recognises that there are objective social relationships which can be judged better or worse from a doctrinal Christian standpoint. The Church historically and actually has something to say about the nature of government, the liberty of the person, economic justice and the right distribution of property. The key word of this sociological question for the Christian is *justitia*, which transcends questions of personal attitudes and connotes a 'rightness' in political economic and other social relationships themselves for the Christian faith to proclaim.

(V. A. Demant, *Christian Polity*)

And the world which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new
 Hath really neither joy, nor love nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, no help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

(M. Arnold, *Dover Beach*)

My aim in this book is to consider two themes which can be kept separate, but which I shall interrelate. The first theme is the nature, scope and, more radically, the possibility of political theology, by which I mean the possibility of relating Christian beliefs in a coherent and rigorous way to the problems of social, economic and political organisation. The second set of issues has to do with the moral foundations, if any, on which modern democratic liberal societies in the West rest. I relate the two themes in the following way: if we assume that liberal societies

need to have some kind of moral foundation and be based upon a substantial set of moral beliefs, then how far can or should Christian beliefs contribute to that set of beliefs which would be foundational for liberalism? Indeed, even if it was thought that Christian beliefs were relevant and important in this context, should beliefs on which a liberal society rests owe anything at all to a comprehensive and metaphysical belief system which is not at all universally shared in a liberal and pluralistic society? It is often argued that in some sense a liberal democratic state has to be neutral between conceptions of the good¹ and, if it is, in what sense, if any, could it draw from the Christian traditions of social and political thought for its own moral justification? So the problem on which I wish to focus is the moral basis of a liberal society and the role, if any, that Christian belief can or ought to play in the justification of that set of beliefs. I shall say more about the problem of the moral foundations of liberalism shortly.

Before moving to that discussion, however, it might be that any way of posing the problem is question-begging – not just in terms of the assumption that liberal society needs a moral basis, but whether it is, in fact, possible to develop a Christian political theology. Is it possible to draw out of Christian beliefs anything very determinate in terms of social, economic or political insights, or is it better to see Christianity as more concerned with issues of private and personal morality and personal salvation? Only if it is possible to claim that Christian beliefs could produce a reasonably determinate set of social and political insights would it make sense to link, as I want to do in this book, questions relating to Christian beliefs about politics with issues to do with the moral foundations for liberal democratic societies. If social and political theology is impossible, then it is rather redundant to go on to ask what could or should be the role of Christian beliefs about politics in justifying the moral framework of a liberal democratic and pluralistic society.

¹ See, for example, R. Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, pp. 181–213, 335–72; *Taking Rights Seriously* Duckworth, London, 1977, pp. 240–78.

Hence, these are my two themes and, as we shall see, their explication leads into very many extremely complex questions.

The book falls into three parts. The five chapters in Part I will look in some detail at the complexities involved in the idea of a political theology: to examine whether and how Christian beliefs can be regarded as entailing political principles. Part II will look at a number of inescapable moral problems relating to the organisation of a liberal society. These have to do with issues to do with freedom, social justice, human rights and the market order. Part III seeks to unite the two themes of Christian beliefs and the moral basis of liberalism in ways which, I hope, draw from the depths of the argument dealt with in the previous two sections and to focus on the question about the relationship between religious beliefs and the moral bases of a liberal society.

Before embarking further, I want to go back briefly to the issue of the moral basis of liberalism. It seems clear that, after a brief period of intense optimism following the end of the Cold War, an optimism perhaps best exemplified by Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* in which he argued that in a sense we know the final form of human history: namely, a liberal democratic society and a market economy, we are now, only a short time later, much less certain about the place of liberal societies in the history of humankind. Liberal societies face many challenges: two of the most obvious of which come from a resurgent political nationalism and militant and fundamentalist forms of religion. Both of the movements embody considerable moral force and fervour and, as such, they might be thought of as moral as much as any other kind of challenge to a liberal political order. They are particularly acute challenges precisely because there is a degree of confusion about the sort of moral foundations on which liberal societies are based and, indeed, whether the idea of moral foundations has any sort of place in thinking about modern politics.² The reason for

² For this view see R. Rorty, *Contingency Irony and Solidarity* Cambridge University Press, 1989, *passim* and *Objectivism Relativism and Truth* Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 197.

the challenges are numerous, and in these introductory remarks, I shall note them rather than discuss them in detail, since this will come later in the book. I shall sketch out some of the often quoted challenges to a liberal social and political order to illustrate where many critics of liberalism see its moral weaknesses lie.

There are, first of all, the cultural critics of liberalism who argue that, because liberal societies place such value on individualism and individual choice, such societies do not offer very much by way of an endorsement of a public and collective realm in which collective values can be pursued and given legitimacy. On the contrary, it is argued that liberal societies seek only to sustain a framework of rules for the private pursuit of goods through individual effort and mainly through the market. The formulation and maintenance of these rules which are to do with maintaining the framework of individual choice is about as far as a liberal society goes in terms of a public and collective common good. This conception is well explained by Charles Larmore:

To avoid the oppressive use of state power, the liberal goal has therefore been to define the common good of political association by means of a minimal moral conception . . . the terms of political association must now be less comprehensive than the views of the good life about which reasonable people disagree . . . fundamental political principles must express a moral conception that citizens can affirm together, despite their inevitable differences about the worth of specific ways of life.³

It is argued by critics that, as such, liberalism has a very attenuated idea of a common life and does not meet the needs of human beings – particularly the needs for a sense of belonging, for solidarity with others, and for a sense of ‘being at home’ in the world.

At the same time, it is argued, the liberal looks to neutrality from the state. It is not the job of the state to favour one conception of the good over another. We have no rational way to arbitrate in an objective way between different conceptions

³ C. Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 123.

of the good held by individuals and groups in society and, if the state is to treat individuals with equal concern and respect, it cannot institutionally favour one conception of the good over another. Neutrality and impartiality are among the chief virtues of public institutions for the liberal. This view is sometimes, although not necessarily, associated with an attitude of moral subjectivism. That is to say with the idea that morality is a matter of individual choice and that clashes between such values mean that, since there is no sense in which one person's moral view can outweigh that of another, then politics is turned into bargaining between different moral positions and is nothing more elevated than that. Even if one does not take the view that values are subjective, it is still possible to argue, as many liberals such as Isaiah Berlin do, that not all values are compatible or commensurable and that there will be endemic clashes and disputes about the order of priority in which values are put. These can only be reconciled by human choice – choices which are frequently tragic or agonistic. Thus, to favour one conception of the good over another in the constitutional arrangements of a liberal society would be to reflect one way of reconciling values over others. There is no way a political perspective can track a comprehensive and coherent moral reality – choice has to be at the heart of the ordering of values. Thus Berlin argues: 'Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose and every choice may entail an irreparable loss'.⁴ It is sometimes claimed to follow from all of this that a liberal society is more concerned with *rights* rather than with views of the *good*; more concerned with a theory of citizenship focussed on the needs of human beings whose essence is understood in terms of agency and autonomy, as centres of choice rather than a more substantial sense of common identity and common purpose. The politics are *nomocratic*, concerned with rules and rights, rather than *telocratic*, which would be concerned with a set of common goods and

⁴ I. Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal' in *The Proper Study of Mankind* ed. H. Hardy and R. Hausheer, Chatto and Windus, London, 1997.

purposes.⁵ It is argued that telocratic politics requires a comprehensive doctrine which will embody an overall conception of human purposes and human flourishing. Lacking such agreed comprehensive doctrines in Western societies, we should affirm a minimal political good based upon rights to equal freedom and autonomy, not a specific conception of both the good and virtue.

Critics of liberalism argue that these sorts of features put liberalism at a very sharp disadvantage compared with those rival movements, whether animated by religion or by nationalism, that pose part of the global challenge for a liberal society just because they do have a strong sense of their own moral basis and embody a robust sense of common identity.⁶ Even cultural critics of liberalism from within the Western tradition have seen a kind of void at the heart of what it takes to be an individualistic liberalism.

T. S. Eliot, a sympathiser with the Christendom position in political theology, in *Choruses from the Rock*, for example, evokes the lack of a sense of community in modern liberal society:

What life have you if you have not life together?
 There is no life that is not in community,
 And no community not lived in praise of God.

 And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads,
 And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour
 Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance
 But all dash to and fro in motor cars,
 Familiar with the roads but settled nowhere.
 Nor does the family even move about together,
 But every one would have his motorcycle,
 And daughters ride away on casual pillions.

He also evokes the loss of public meaning to life and the link between this loss of public meaning and a sense of the transcendent:

⁵ For the strategy of putting the right before the good see J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972.

⁶ See M. Sandel, 'Introduction' to *Liberalism and Its Critics* New York University Press, 1984. N. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1987.

Liberal society and political theology

7

Much is your reading, but not the word of God.
 Much is your building, but not the House of God.
 Will you build me a house of plaster, with corrugated roofing,
 To be filled with the litter of Sunday newspapers.

...

And the wind shall say: 'Here were decent godless people:
 Their only monument the asphalt road
 And a thousand lost golf balls.'⁷

On this view there is a void at the heart of liberal society which ultimately can only be remedied by a rediscovery of the transcendent: 'Can you keep the city that the Lord keeps not with you?'

Liberal society, in contrast, has been compared by one of its defenders to a hotel.⁸ In an hotel people come together under a set of rules which govern their interactions during their stay. The rules are meant to facilitate their private ends whatever they may be. Individuals are anonymous. If they wish to enter into group activities this is a matter of choice. The hotel does not itself, as a condition of being there, offer a sense of common purpose or common identity. The guests at the hotel have no positive duties to one another unless they choose to assume such obligations. The hotel is focussed on anonymity, privacy, contract and rules, not on a common purpose or a common notion of human fulfilment. Eliot points to a similar analogy in his poem:

When the Stranger says: 'What is the meaning of this city?
 Do you huddle close together because you love each other?'
 What will you answer? 'We all dwell together
 to make money from each other?' or 'This is a community.'

It is, however, instructive to compare this view with that of Barth in his influential essay 'The Christian Community and

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* Faber and Faber, London, 1963. It has to be said, however, that the basis of this view is rather ambiguous for Eliot. He once argued that it would be better to worship a golden calf than nothing at all, whereas in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (2nd edition, Faber and Faber, London, 1982) he argues: 'What is worse of all is to advocate Christianity not because it is true, but because it might be beneficial.'

⁸ By N. Barry in an unpublished presentation to the Speaker's Commission on Citizenship.

the Civil Community' in which he emphasises that, in the modern liberal state, ideas about the transcendent cannot be incorporated into the constitutional structure or for that matter public deliberation. He argues as follows:

The civil community embraces everyone living within its area. Its members share no common awareness of their relationship to God, and such an awareness cannot be an element in the legal system established by the civil community. No appeal can be made to the Word or Spirit of God in the running of its affairs. The civil community as such is spiritually blind and ignorant. It has neither faith, nor love, nor hope. It has no creed and no gospel. Prayer is not part of its life, and its members are not brothers and sisters.⁹

In the critics' view, such a conception of society is too attenuated because the duties of the citizens of a liberal society are reduced to the negative duties of mutual non-interference. Nomocratic or purposeless liberalism (purposeless, that is, in terms of its public dimension) stands in marked contrast to those more teleological forms of politics, whether nationalist or religious. Critics of liberalism have argued that all that liberalism offers is a cold politics of individual choice and rights that protect autonomous human beings who are the sources of such choices. On this view, we have to recapture ideas about community and common good as a basis for a new kind of politics that will go beyond individualist liberalism. Hence, the current popularity of 'communitarianism' both as an active response to the perceived deficiencies in liberal political theory and as a political movement which seeks to restore a sense of common value and purpose to Western societies. Under the influence of such pressure, theorists have sought to counter the idea of a fragmented, anonymous society, captured well in the 'hotel' image by comparing society with a family embodying mutual concern and a school for duty and obligation as well as rights. This view has popularity on both the communitarian right and left in politics¹⁰ which do have a strong sense both of collective purpose and collective identity.

⁹ K. Barth, 'The Christian Community and the Civil Community' in K. Barth, *Selected Writings* ed. C. Green, Collins, Glasgow, 1989 p. 267.

¹⁰ See S. Kautz, *Liberalism and Community* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1995, ch. 1.

Compared with politics with a religious dimension, commentators on liberalism have often argued that liberalism offers a politics devoid of any consolation, of having nothing to offer the individual outside the circle of his/her own desires and choice. In this sense, it might be thought that liberalism perhaps holds up a rather optimistic view of the person. Eric Fromm¹¹ famously argued the case that, in fact, individuals will find it very difficult to cope with not only the anonymity of liberal society, which has been lauded by some theologians such as Harvey Cox,¹² but also the burden of personal judgement and choice in morality and politics, and that they are likely to fall prey to movements such as fascism and other totalitarian movements which offer a wider framework of meaning and significance to the individual than is available in liberalism.

We need to pause at this point to attempt to refine some of these issues. A nomocratic view of politics – one which puts rights and rules before the good and a sense of virtue can be seen to be the result of tendencies in modern thought and modern society which are sometimes mixed together but are conceptually distinct. Each of these different conceptualities poses questions about the relationship between liberal society and religious belief. We can distinguish at least the following strands of thought.

First might be the recognition of moral diversity – that is to say, the recognition that reasonable people can disagree about conceptions of the good. Indeed, it is possible for individuals and groups, while affirming their own comprehensive religions and metaphysical doctrines which yield the specific conceptions of the good that they hold, to accept that reasonable people can disagree with these doctrines. The political challenge here, then, is to provide a constitutional framework for dealing with reasonable disagreement. Such a political order, if it is to be secure, would then have to be seen as legitimate by people such as religious believers who accept that it is reasonable to disagree about such matters.

¹¹ E. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962, *passim*.

¹² H. Cox, *The Secular City* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, *passim*.

The second alternative might, following Charles Larmore,¹³ be called pluralism – that is to say a positive view that there may be many forms of human good and forms of human flourishing and that these are not necessarily compatible one with another. Again, on this view, the political problem is how to justify political principles to those who hold specific conceptions of the good while accepting that there may be many ways in which we could indeed flourish as human beings.

A third possibility, which is rather different from the other two, is scepticism. This would embody the claim that not only do human purposes and values diverge, but also there are no wholly compelling objective or intersubjective reasons which could be advanced for any particular conception of the good. In this sense a liberal political order is a response to doubt about, and ungrounded subjective preference for the different conceptions of the good held in a liberal society.¹⁴

A fourth alternative is rather different, namely, that a liberal society does embody its own specific and rich conception of the good – human autonomy and moral agency. That is to say that a liberal society is not just or even primarily a matter of devising principles to deal with moral diversity or moral scepticism but, in fact, is about procuring an institutional framework for the achievement of the overarching good of human autonomy. In this sense, liberalism would be perfectionist; it would be about the framework for achieving a specific conception of human good, namely an autonomous and self-directing life.¹⁵ The issue that this would pose for the religious believer invited to endorse such a conception of liberalism would be how far a religious believer could see as legitimate a political order which placed human autonomy at the centre of the value system animating a liberal society. If these are possible but not mutually compatible ways in which liberalism might be justified, they nevertheless embody different conceptions of the moral basis of a liberal society and, as I have suggested, pose rather different questions about the relationship between religious belief and political justification in a liberal society. These issues will be more fully

¹³ Larmore, *Morals* p. 122.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.