

The Scottish National Party in Theological Perspective

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Many commentators are predicting that the SNP could play a key role in the outcome of the 2015 General Election. They have surged in the polls following a tumultuous 2014 in which they led Scotland to a historic referendum on independence, which was rejected by a significant but not large margin. Few commentators outside Scotland know much of the history and background to the party. Many Christians also remain uneasy about explicit avowals of nationalism. This article explores the background to the rise of the SNP and suggests a theological route to evaluating nationalism and nationalist parties.

Introduction

On September 18, 2014, as Scotland went to the polls in the historic referendum on independence called by the Scottish government, the party of government, the Scottish National Party (SNP) had around 23,000 members. By December 2014, three months after losing the referendum, SNP membership had grown by 300% to 92,000 members. Despite operating only in Scotland, they had become the third party of UK politics with more members in January 2015 than the Liberal Democrats and UKIP combined.¹

The fevered conditions of the referendum and the intense competition for votes between Labour and the SNP in Scotland witnessed ongoing attempts by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives to brand the SNP as 'narrow nationalists' and 'separatists'. Scottish political commentator Gerry Hassan has been one of a number of voices warning that Labour have been blinded by the depth of their hostility to the SNP. The rise in membership and in support for the party suggests that such strategies of disparagement do not appear to be gaining traction. The support for YES from many artistic and cultural figures on the political left, along with the addition of high profile recruits, like Scotland's Makar (national poet) Liz Lochhead in November 2014, have rather augmented and reinforced perceptions that the SNP is a progressive force.

Some commentators within Scotland and many outwith Scotland have struggled to understand the nature of the party, hampered by their tendency to associate nationalism solely with right-wing, racist and essentialist views and confused by the open family feud on the Scottish Left between nationalists and unionists. I declare an interest as an SNP member, but hope that this article will add some political and theological depth, breadth and context to your understanding of the SNP, without undue partisan bias.

Origins

The SNP was founded in 1934 following a merger of two rival movements, the National Party of Scotland and the Scottish Party. It won its first Westminster seat in 1945, but held this only briefly and did not win another Westminster seat until Winnie Ewing won a famous by-election victory in Hamilton in 1967.

Separate political organisation for home rule in Scotland outside of the established political parties only began in earnest in the 1920s and 1930s. Even then, there were often reasons to question how earnest some of the activity was, with a quixotic, eccentric and at times neo-fascist fringe to various groups in these decades

as well as a romantic Communist strain running through them. The remoteness of power allowed free rein to fantastic and idealist politics (and policies).

Then, as now, this was also a cause which attracted some of Scotland's most gifted poets, writers and artists, with Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) prominent among them from the 1930s onwards. MacDiarmid, one of the great European poets of the twentieth century, colourfully embodies some of the contradictions inherent in the making of a distinctive strain of twentieth century nationalism in Scotland. A founding member of the National Party of Scotland (NPS) in 1928, he was famously thrown out of the NPS for being a communist and expelled from the Communist Party for being a nationalist!

This combination of nationalism, internationalism and communism or socialism would be shared by many who were influenced and inspired by the so-called Scottish Literary Renaissance² of the 1920s and 1930s, although some held it within Labour and alongside a politics of 'home rule' rather than joining the SNP. Some of the later struggles of the SNP to establish its political identity, and the pointed critiques of its political opponents up to the present time, have their roots in the mixed ideological bag of its founding members.

In their 2008 introduction to Scottish politics, McGarvey and Cairney comment that 'for the first few decades of its existence [the SNP] was little more than an unsuccessful minority political movement'. However from the 1960s it began to gather momentum, with a steady process of growth, change and consolidation of its ideological identity, along with improvements to its party organisation, underpinning a growth in membership from 2000 in 40 branches in 1962 to 120,000 in almost 500 branches by 1968. Belying its earlier ideological eclecticism, the SNP was also consolidating its identity as a 'social democratic' party.³

Labour's (narrow) win in 1964, after what Harold Wilson dubbed '13 wasted years', was completely dependent at the UK level on their dominance in Scotland, where they won 43 seats to the Conservatives' 24, with the Liberal recovery from near parliamentary extinction in Scotland still amounting to only a rump of 4 seats.⁴ Labour won again and more convincingly in 1966, increasing their majority in Scotland again, but the first signs of shifting tectonic plates came in November 1967, when Glasgow solicitor Winnie Ewing won a remarkable by-election for the SNP in the Labour heartland of Hamilton, with 46% of the vote.

After Hamilton

Hamilton was a political earthquake which changed politics in Scotland, moving the SNP from joke to threat overnight and beginning a serious and often bitter rivalry between them and Labour. Edward Heath, leader of the Tory opposition, responded within months with his 1968 'Declaration of Perth' in which he committed the Conservatives (many of them dissenting) to a devolved Scottish assembly. Wilson and Labour responded a year later with a Royal Commission on the Constitution chaired by Lord Crowther. While the threat level had increased and the other parties were now taking nationalist challenges seriously in both Scotland and Wales, the dominant view across both parties was still that this was a bandwagon which would lose momentum and a threat which could be managed out of existence.

Despite the false reassurance of a poor SNP result in the 1970 General Election⁵, this was not to be and after another sensational by-election win in Govan 1973, by Margo MacDonald,⁶ the decisive electoral breakthrough for the SNP followed in February 1974, when they won 7 seats and 22% of the Scottish vote. The ideological changes of the early 1960s had been reinforced in the intervening years and Gerry Hassan notes that:

In the 1970s the SNP had self-proclaimed centre-left policies: its February 1974 manifesto called itself a 'programme of social democracy', while the October 1974 manifesto was subtitled 'A Programme for Social Democracy'.⁷

The SNP had also boosted its radical credentials in one other key respect. While Labour had swiftly abandoned its briefly held unilateralist position, the SNP developed a strong anti-nuclear weapons position in the 1960s and has held to it ever since, marking a clear contrast with Labour from that time on and further inflecting its own brand of nationalism in contrast to British post-imperial defence policy.

Reaction to the 1974 election result was swift and, for Labour, a messy and divisive process. The new Labour government instantly reversed its manifesto position and made a hasty commitment to enact devolution. In the second 1974 election, the SNP did even better, leaving the Tories trailing in third place, as they secured 30% of the Scottish vote. The fact that their seat total increased only to 11, behind the Tories' 16 despite beating them in the popular vote, deepened the party's commitment to securing proportional representation for future elections. But the SNP were becoming the second force in Scottish politics, after Labour, and crucially, were now second to Labour or the Conservatives in 42 constituencies.⁸

Explaining the rising nationalist vote

Across the spectrum of historians, political scientists and political commentators there has been a wide degree of consensus that the rise of electoral support for the SNP from the late 1960s to 2011, was greater than the rise of support for either nationalism or independence. A vote for the SNP has often not been a vote for independence, but a protest vote against both Labour party establishments and Westminster governments of both hues (who have been seen to take Scotland for granted) and an 'advocacy vote' for those who were seen as most committed to defending Scottish interests within the UK. An economic strategy built on the assumption of endless supplies of cheap oil hit the buffers when OPEC shocked the world economy with price rises in 1974. The rise in oil prices followed soon after large scale discoveries of oil in the North Sea, a factor which was used skilfully by the SNP to make 'crude' electoral capital from 1971 onwards,⁹ and a key factor behind their success in that year's elections. When Edward Heath led the Tories back to power after the second 1974 election, they were a minority government in Scotland for the first time. A Liberal revival in England was not matched in Scotland. The Conservative Party was already well into an extraordinary long-term decline in support within Scotland, from the dizzy heights of 1955, when they had won over 50% of the total vote.

Four factors – economic decline, North Sea Oil, a decline in Britain's international standing and entry into the EEC – were all key drivers of nationalist support at the polls. Labour won in 1974 with a new set of commitments to devolution and published its proposals for a Scottish assembly in 1975 just as the country began to sail into troubled economic waters. The government was forced to concede a referendum on the assembly proposals and this was then subjected by opponents of devolution, including Labour opponents, to a further requirement that unless 40% of the electorate as a whole were in favour, the proposed new Scotland Act would fall.

The referendum in March 1979 was a turbulent affair, with almost all Tories opposed and with Labour in Scotland still deeply divided. Scottish Labour MP Tam Dalyell famously raised 'the West Lothian question' as an unacceptable by-product of asymmetric devolution: whether Scots MPs should be able to vote on issues for England, which English MPs could not vote on for Scotland. The SNP supported a YES vote but scorned the weakness of the powers to be given to the assembly, as did some Labour dissidents who formed a breakaway Scottish Labour Party. The outcome was good for no-one. YES outweighed NO by 51.6% to 48.4% of those voting,¹⁰ but the YES vote was only 32.9% of the Scottish electorate as a whole and well short of the 40% threshold. The Scotland Act fell and devolution was dead in the water, a defeat resented by those who felt they had won and a pyrrhic victory for those who had lost the popular vote.

The Labour government then fell at the hands of an SNP-tabled vote of no confidence, a payback for Labour's failure to deliver devolution, which has ever since been the occasion for bitter recriminations by Labour

against the SNP as 'Tartan Tories' who let Thatcher in. The SNP lost 9 of its 11 seats at the subsequent general election, ushering in a period of internal division and discord, which included the establishment of the 79 Group, by Alex Salmond, Stephen Maxwell, Margo MacDonald and others, dedicated to taking the party to the left. The Thatcher years saw the party live through its internal struggles and recover from them, as a growing anti-Thatcher and anti-Conservative mood in Scotland began to help their cause. Having been briefly expelled from the party in 1982, 79ers began to consolidate their power in the party in the late 1980s, with Alex Salmond's election as National Convenor in 1990 a sign of their influence.

Surmounting internal tensions

Alongside the ideological struggle of the 1970s and 1980s, ran a disagreement about political strategy which is usually expressed as a struggle between *gradualists* and *fundamentalists*. The gradualist position advocated softening the focus on outright independence in order to build confidence and support among the Scottish electorate. The late 1980s slogan *Independence Within Europe* was a moment of gradualist genius, setting the demand for independence within a broader, internationalist commitment which offset accusations of separatism and narrowness. In contrast, the decision in 1989 not to participate in the Scottish Constitutional Convention, reflected a 'fundamentalist' suspicion of half-way measures. From the early 1990s until 2011, the pragmatic gradualist strategy of incremental progress towards independence was firmly in the ascendancy. This and the huge influx of new members in late 2014 means that these older fault lines have been overtaken by events. With a referendum having been held and lost, there was no hesitation about participating in the 2014 cross party Smith Commission on increased devolution. In contrast to 1989, any future UK Constitutional Convention (Labour's current proposal) will almost certainly involve SNP participation.

Towards devolution

Thatcherism became deeply and widely unpopular in Scotland during the 1990s, fuelled by a rash decision to introduce the detested Poll Tax in 1987, and to do so in Scotland a year before it was introduced in England. The Thatcher question came to be characterised in terms of a 'democratic deficit', which was now expressed in national terms: Scotland voted Labour, but under the current constitutional settlement, it got Conservative rule. The perception of a democratic deficit deepened between 1979 and 1997, through almost two decades and four general elections in which Scotland voted consistently and overwhelmingly¹¹ for parties of the centre and left, but was ruled by Conservative Governments. It was a period which destroyed the Conservative's electoral base for first-past-the-post elections north of Berwick and ended in a rout at the 1997 General Election, after which they had no MPs left in Scotland. These were years which saw Labour in Scotland finally unite around a commitment to devolution which commanded clear support across the party.¹² It was also a period which further reinforced the left-leaning identity of the SNP.

In the wake of the referendum defeat and the election of the first Thatcher administration, a new body, the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly (CSA) was created in 1980. Out of that came a drafting committee which prepared the 1988 Claim of Right for Scotland,¹³ leading in 1989 to the establishment of the Scottish Constitutional Convention which finally published its blueprint for devolution, *Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right*, on St Andrew's Day 1995.

While Labour was central to the Constitutional Convention process, the presence of other political parties and of representatives from the churches,¹⁴ trade unions, business and third sector groups led to a proposal which, not least in its espousal of proportional representation, went beyond Labour's own previous policy position. McGarvie and Cairney observe that:

When a political consensus amongst three of Scotland's four main political parties, as well as important institutions in Scottish civic society, coalesced around the constitutional convention, Scottish constitutional change became almost inevitable.¹⁵

The scheme finally proposed by the Convention was given strong support by Labour leader John Smith and Shadow Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar. Smith famously described devolution as by now representing 'the settled will of the Scottish people'.¹⁶ The Convention scheme, which had been part of Labour's election manifesto, formed the basis for the Scotland Act 1998, enacted as one of the early measures of the 1997 Labour Government after a referendum in September 1979 saw Scots give a clear Yes-Yes vote, with 74% in favour of a parliament and 64% supporting tax-varying powers. Although the SNP had left the Convention process, it campaigned strongly for a Yes-Yes vote in the referendum, with only the Conservatives and a few renegade Labour figures left to oppose the parliament in principle. It was a decisive outcome, greeted with a mixture of relief and exhilaration by activists. Conservative opposition had been rendered irrelevant by the party's utter humiliation in the 1997 General Election, when it was left with no parliamentary seats at all in Scotland.¹⁷

The passage of the Scotland Act led, in 1999, to the creation (or reconvening as Winnie Ewing famously declared at its opening) of a devolved Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, elected by proportional representation,¹⁸ with limited tax varying powers. A key feature of the initial design of the devolutionary settlement was a presumption that powers were devolved, unless specifically *reserved* to the Westminster parliament.¹⁹

Since devolution there have been four elections to the Scottish Parliament, leading to two Labour-led coalition administrations in 1999 and 2003, one SNP-led coalition administration in 2007 and one SNP majority administration in 2011. The system of proportional representation was assumed by many to mean that no one party would ever win an overall majority, but this assumption was shattered by the extraordinary surge of support for the SNP in the 2011 elections, in which they won 69 seats and an outright majority.²⁰ Alex Salmond was returned as a Nationalist First Minister of Scotland for the second time. With the other parties and the UK government accepting the SNP majority as constituting a mandate to do this, the party immediately moved to implement its manifesto proposal for a referendum on independence.

In the post devolution era, the orthodoxy has been that, with a few exceptions, Labour's most able figures have still headed for the larger stage of Westminster, while the SNP in contrast has kept its best talents at Holyrood. The return of a majority SNP government in 2011 was aided by widespread perceptions that the previous minority SNP administration had been a talented, competent and pragmatic social democratic administration. Although Salmond was something of a Marmite figure with the Scottish public, he was regarded as a tenacious advocate of Scottish interests and Nicola Sturgeon (former Health Secretary and Deputy First Minister) and John Swinney (Financial Secretary and now Deputy First Minister) grew in stature during their years in government.

The SNP in 2015

The dust is still settling from the 2014 referendum result, which at 55% NO to 45% YES, was clear but close enough to cheer the losers and concern the winners. Alex Salmond immediately resigned as leader, triggering a leadership election in which his deputy Nicola Sturgeon was returned unopposed and become First Minister of Scotland on 19 November 2014. The SNP's spirits were quickly buoyed when the after-effects of the massive political mobilisation of the referendum campaign began to become clear. An unprecedented 300% rise in party membership was accompanied by soaring ratings in opinion polls. Nicola Sturgeon embarked on a national 'tour' to meet the SNP's membership, which saw venues sell out, including the 12000 seater Glasgow Hydro. The perception of YES losing the referendum but achieving a broader change of perceptions was fuelled by a leadership crisis for Labour in Scotland, when Johann Lamont resigned, accusing the UK party of treating Scottish Labour like a 'branch office'. She was succeeded by Blairite MP Jim Murphy on 13 December 2014, with Kezia Dugdale MSP elected as his deputy, leading for the party at Holyrood.

Alex Salmond indicated in November 2014 that he would stand for election as a Westminster MP in May 2015. Predictions early in 2015 were that he would be successful, along with an increased number of SNP MPs, with some polls predicting the SNP could hold the balance of power in a hung parliament.

It is still very early to assess the significance of the referendum process, but the massive voter turnout of 84.59% bears witness to a remarkable mobilisation of political energy and involvement. For the SNP itself, the party barely had time to reflect on its 'defeat' due to being overwhelmed by the immediate surge in new members. The referendum campaign had reinforced core party themes of social justice and a drive to reduce social and economic inequality, alongside opposition to nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. What had been less convincing was the economic case for independence and in particular the response offered to the unionist parties closing ranks against sharing sterling. Uncertainty over the currency and over the wider economic case had combined with promises of new powers, to persuade 55% of voters to stick with the union. The immediate challenges for the SNP in 2015 and beyond are to adjust to its greatly increased membership, to continue to perform well in government at Holyrood and to play as skilfully as it can, whatever hand it is given by the outcome of the May 2015 General Election. In the longer term, the economic case for independence will have to be rethought if it is ever to be re-presented in the hope of a different outcome.

Thinking theologically about the SNP

In *Honey From The Lion*²¹ I explore the tangle of theological and ethical issues at stake in a Christian pledging support for a 'nationalist' party. Closing on those issues, involves a good deal of work preparing the ground by reflecting on definitions of nationalism, examples of nationalism (e.g. anti-colonialist movements such as the ANC) and the implicit nationalism of UK parties which disdain the explicit nationalism of parties such as the SNP.

Within Christian theological circles, this conversation is significantly underdeveloped, with most thinkers having kept the ethical critique of nationalism developed in response to 1930s fascism on a parallel track to their support for anti-colonialist 'liberation' nationalist movements and their practical political defence of their own nation-state. We inherit a widespread theological incoherence about nationalism, which often manages to simultaneously condemn, approve and exhibit it in different contexts. If we join this to a considerable level of ignorance about the nature and history of progressive nationalist parties like the SNP, we begin to understand why an article like this is necessary.

To trace the evolution of mainstream Scottish nationalist opinion from the 1930s onwards, is to witness the creation of a hybrid political philosophy whose nationalism also identifies as internationalist, multi-cultural, liberal, civic and social democratic. It is this balance of ideas and commitments which has to be understood and engaged if critics, including theological critics, are to move beyond uninformed prejudice.

As a Reformed Christian, I begin my political theology of nationalism by reflecting on human stewardship of creation, reading cultural and linguistic diversity as in principle a gift of God, linked to a vocation of stewardship and an ethics of neighbour love. I am my sister's keeper and she is mine. The blessings of Babel, instead of being read as a divisive blight on human existence, can be read as a providential diversification of resources for identity construction. Seen in this way they become vital assets in resisting the fascistic and imperialistic towers built from 'ein Volk, ein Reich, eine Sprache'. Stewardship of cultural diversity, commitment to translation and language learning and resistance to cultural homogenising, become ways of living out the Creational mandate and the Pentecostal anointing. Our political discipleship in the present takes place against an eschatological horizon in which we journey to the city in which we find every tribe and language and nation, into which the glory of the nations is brought.

I suggest that in response to this theological account of human peoplehood, a critique of nationalism needs to be developed which incorporates baptismal renunciations of the world (imperialism), the flesh (essentialism)

and the devil (absolutism). Reformed Christian thought can make its way through these renunciations to a post-Barmen nationalism, in which our allegiances to nation are always set under our confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. No Christian can ever say 'my country right or wrong', because they are committed to a doctrine of creation in which all are made in the *imago dei* and to a doctrine of redemption in which water is thicker than blood.

What is left after these narrations, renunciations and confessions is not nothing. It is a chastened and humbled stewardship of human diversity, for which nationalism names a prudential judgment about 'whose writ should run where and why'. This judgment can maintain its own vigilance against being corrupted while still acting as a powerful organising logic for a political project. Would the pursuit of independence, of the creation of a new nation-state, enable the pursuit, in Augustinian terms, of better objects of love?

I understand very clearly why the language of nationalism continues to make some people uneasy. Many existing definitions of the term have an ethical deficit built into them which is unacceptable from the perspective of Christian ethics. Theological justification of support for nationalist projects and parties necessarily involves contesting those definitions and deficits. In his 2006 volume *Rethinking Nationalism*, Jonathan Hearn's preferred conceptuality of nationalism as 'claim-making' offers a helpful rubric for this, which does not pre-load the term with either ethical credit or deficit.²² It leaves Christians with work to do in assessing the claims made in any given context. The landscape of international relations (or global politics if we want to escape the 'n' word) in 2015 is crowded with conflicts which force us to confront questions about the negotiation and recognition of national identity. Talk of 'nation building' in Iraq, Afghanistan or South Sudan, of the integrity of the nation in Ukraine and of unionist and nationalist parties in Northern Ireland call for us to develop and refine our political theology and theological ethics in relation to nationalism.

My own belief in the possibility of getting honey from the lion in the 2014 Scottish referendum reflected my sense that the character of Scottish nationalism described above (liberal, civic, internationalist etc.) allowed and even invited a Christian who held these theological commitments to consider supporting it, since it had already made some of the key self-limiting renunciations which the gospel would insist upon for any political credo. Continuing support for the SNP will need to be accompanied by continuing vigilance and a critical reflection upon its record in office and in seeking office. By way of contrast, the UK state continues to exhibit disfiguring democratic deficits in the form of the distortions of the first past the post electoral system, the standing offence of the unelected House of Lords, with its Anglo- and Anglican-centric biases and the extreme concentrations of wealth and power in the south-east of England. Both Labour and the Conservatives still aspire to win big and to win dirty under FPTP, in a way which I take ethical offence at.

For myself, I intend in 2015 to vote for a party committed to internationalism, to nuclear pacifism and the end of Trident, to a humane asylum policy, to equality for women, to greater economic equality, to a humane criminal justice regime, to proportional representation and green energy. I remain very clear headed about the limitations of all mainstream political parties and the temptations they face in pursuit of power. However, I do believe it is possible for a Christian who has searched their conscience and reflected theologically upon the potential evils and dangers of nationalism to belong to and vote for the SNP. In fact, the explicit nationalist commitments of the party may encourage believers to undertake a clearer ethical audit of this dimension of party identity and programme than is often ventured by Christians within 'unionist' (i.e. British Nationalist) parties. The rise of UKIP, the salience of EU membership as a General Election issue and the decision by David Cameron, hours after the Scottish Referendum result, to lead on English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) are all developments which involve Christians reflecting on UK politics in engaging with questions of nationalism and national identity. We need to accept that challenge and address it.

Suggested Further Reading

- Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller, eds., *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Language* (Editions Rodopi B.V., 2004).
- Doug Gay, *Honey from the Lion: Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism* (SCM, 2014).
- Gerry Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009).
- Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism – A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
- Neil McGarvey and Paul Cairney, *Scottish Politics: An Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- Brian Taylor, *The Road to the Scottish Parliament* (Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

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- ¹ Richard Keen, “Membership of UK political parties – Commons Library Standard Note SN05125” (30 January 2015), <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN05125/membership-of-uk-political-parties>.
- ² Nowadays read as part of the international movement of literary modernism; see Lyall and Palmer McCulloch, *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1.
- ³ Introduction to Neil McGarvey and Paul Cairney, *Scottish Politics: An Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- ⁴ A UK majority of 4 was achieved via a majority in Scotland of 15.
- ⁵ This led Ted Heath to drop the Tories’ commitment to devolution, on the grounds that the nationalist threat was receding.
- ⁶ The presence of high profile women ‘winners’ in the 1960s and 1970s has been a significant feature of the SNP, which has continued to prove its openness to women in leadership through the rise of Nicola Sturgeon.
- ⁷ Gerry Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 4.
- ⁸ Between the elections, Labour had experienced an internal party debacle on the devolution issue, with their Scottish executive rejecting all the options for constitutional change set out in a Spring 1974 White Paper from the British Labour Party. The Scottish Labour Party was still not united or settled in its will to see devolution. There were severe tensions between the desire of some Scottish activists to resist appeasement and fight the nationalist threat on traditional socialist terms and the anxieties of a British leadership, which feared it might never win another UK majority unless Labour responded to Scottish aspirations for greater home rule. A ‘bloody’ Special Conference was held in August 1974 in Glasgow, when the issue was hammered out in a series of bitter debates and the British party line was finally enforced via the trade union block vote.
- ⁹ The slogan was crude on crude: “It’s Scotland’s Oil!”
- ¹⁰ Turnout was only 63.8%.
- ¹¹ In each of these elections, the combined support for Labour, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats (or Liberals and SDP) exceeded 68%.
- ¹² “[The post-97 government] had no choice but to satisfy the demands of the Scottish and Welsh party contingents, by now firmly converted to ‘home rule’”. Tom Nairn, ‘Break-up: Twenty-Five Years On’, in Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller, eds., *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Language* (Editions Rodopi B.V., 2004), 22.
- ¹³ See full text of the Claim along with 15 commentaries (all written by men!) in Owen Dudley Edwards, ed., *A Claim of Right for Scotland* (Polygon, 1989).
- ¹⁴ The Convention was chaired by Canon Kenyon Wright of the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland were both actively involved.
- ¹⁵ McGarvey and Cairney, *Scottish Politics*, 28.
- ¹⁶ Brian Taylor, *The Road to the Scottish Parliament*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 317.
- ¹⁷ This was of course a consequence of the grossly unfair FPTP system, but it is hard to feel sorry for Conservatives disenfranchised by this, since they have been such resolute defenders of it. Ironically, Conservatism in Scotland has been ‘saved’ by both the Parliament it opposed and the electoral system of PR which it also opposed, allowing figures such as Annabel Goldie to emerge as a significant presence within the Scottish parliament in its first decade.
- ¹⁸ The scheme involves constituency votes on a FPTP basis, with proportionality achieved through the election of additional members from regional lists.
- ¹⁹ For a list of reserved and devolved areas see McGarvey and Cairney, *Scottish Politics*, 2.
- ²⁰ The rich irony here was that FPTP, retained at Westminster to avoid the evils of weak coalition government, delivered a coalition at Westminster, while PR at Holyrood, designed to make governing majorities hard to attain, delivered a majority government.
- ²¹ Doug Gay, *Honey from the Lion: Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism* (SCM, 2014).
- ²² Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism – A Critical Introduction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Christianity and conservatism: trust, civil society, enterprise and internationalism¹

Joshua Hordern

As a form of political reasoning and practice, conservatism has much to commend it. Its characteristic focus on the what, why and how questions of conservation provides a helpful guide for thinking about politics. Attentive to these questions and inspired by Christian political thought, this vision of conservatism emphasises trust, both divine and creaturely; the interrelation of civil society with government; responsible enterprise; and sober internationalism.

Introduction

The goal of this *Ethics in Brief* is not to make the case to vote Conservative at the 2015 election but to articulate a vision for conservatism which is inspired by Christian thought. Such a vision *might* encourage Christians to vote for, join and reform the Conservative Party. But it would be equally successful if it informed those with an opposing or no party allegiance of the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition and contemporary face of conservatism and the Conservative Party.

The Conservative Party has never been an officially Christian party but has long been informed by Christian thought and practice. From a contemporary perspective, both national and global, politics cannot afford to ignore such influences nor those of other religious traditions. From schooling to prison reform, from the burgeoning Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches to the Church of England, and from international development to geopolitics God is always on the scene. Political parties will serve people better if they do not neglect this, especially when distinguishing *between* religious traditions, a form of wisdom which is very necessary today in our globally intersecting environment. Religious literacy is an essential – not just desirable – feature of any plausible claim to political leadership in the twenty-first century.

History and diversity

Analysing the relationship between British political conservatism and Christianity will mean entering a conversation constituted by centuries of thought and practice. The conversation has at times assumed that the match between conservatism and Christianity sits so deep within British national life that it is unnecessary to articulate its significance. Indeed, one Conservative MP retiring in 2015, James Arbuthnott, felt that he had to disguise his lack of faith and could only 'come out' as an atheist on the floor of the House of Commons when he had already announced his intention to stand down.²

He is not alone. There have always been significant challenges to the marriage of conservatism and Christianity. A long-standing sceptical tradition of conservatism has recommended various degrees of separation. Non-conservative but deeply Christian voices have urged divorce. In 2015, far gone are the days when the Church of England was regarded as the Conservative Party at prayer. Recent trends towards secularisation and religious diversification have changed the Party's demeanour. Its membership is, like the rest of the population, less aligned with religious faith – let alone established Anglican Christian faith – than a hundred or even thirty years ago. Importantly, a wider range of religious faiths now play a part both in UK national life and the Conservative Party, from Islam to Roman Catholicism.

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To provide some context for Arbuthnott's declaration, consider two approaches which have arisen in the history of British conservatism. Both are intellectually and historically respectable but offer different angles on conservatism and the Conservative Party. First, there is a conservatism which is atheist or, at least, agnostic, well-represented by

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another retiring MP, David Willetts. On this view, conservatism does not benefit from reference to God but is sufficiently supplied by examination of the nature of humanity alongside principled and pragmatic decision-making.³ Second, there is a stream of conservatism guided and sharpened by theological commitments. Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli and the Cecils (Robert and Hugh) were, in sometimes controversial ways, deeply influenced by Christian thought.⁴ Today, the discussion threads of the website, ConservativeHome, are replete with politico-theological comment.

Questions of conservation

It is natural for conservatives to consider some of this history because it focuses conversation on *what* should be conserved from the past. They want to discover what aspects of their nation's tradition should be treasured and developed and, conversely, what should be downgraded and terminated. Attention to history avoids abstraction and, while allowing for 'big ideas', focusses on questions of practical politics. But beyond this *what* question, such conservatives want to know *how* and ultimately *why* they should conserve whatever it is that they value. These *what*, *how* and *why* questions are what I will call the 'questions of conservation'. For such conservatives, asking and answering these is what political wisdom is – selectively and judiciously retrieving, maintaining and developing, sometimes innovatively, certain features of a society's life, knowing how and why one is doing so.

These 'questions of conservation' imply that conservatives are inherently open to change. To decide what, why and how to conserve is also to decide what can and should change. Conservatives should make *judgments* about what they conserve and that process of judgment necessarily entails that some things are not conserved. The idea of political 'judgment' requires explanation. Oliver O'Donovan defines it as an '*act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context*'.⁵ Note especially that it is the *preceding act or existing state of affairs* which is to be judged. Judgment is inherently *retrospective* since the present is always becoming the past. But judgment is also *prospective*, focussed on the future – it is a *new public context* which is established, in intelligible relation to the old but nonetheless distinct. For example, the British parliament's decision to extend the democratic franchise in the Reform Act of 1832 was a judgment that conserved parts of the old system as good, but not others. Changes were made to establish a new public context which was judged better than what was previously in existence. The fact that this Act faced opposition from 'conservative' quarters shows that conservatism is not always willing to make changes for the better. But the desire to conserve is compatible with many forms of change. Innovation is essential to a conservatism which addresses contemporary challenges.⁶

Continually asking and answering the questions of conservation – 'what' to conserve (and what to change), 'why' and 'how' – is the heart of a wise conservatism. This process of questioning provides the conditions for well-ordered practical reasoning about politics. Just as a person's heart must keep pumping, so these questions must keep on being asked and answered or else conservatism will seize up and die. But these questions need structure if their answers are not to be simply arbitrary. Vigour and structure for conservatism's heart comes from its major arteries. The ones principally considered here are trust, civil society and internationalism. They frame questions of public policy which have faced and will face us, such as marriage, constitutional reform, economic life and European policy.

Trust

The first artery is trust, a subtle feature of life which opens up the very meaning of conservatism and the purpose of the Conservative Party. For the sake of this theological discussion, trust should be understood under a double aspect: divine trust and creaturely trust.

Divine trust

The eighteenth century MP, Edmund Burke, often thought of as a 'conservative', held that people with any degree of political power ought to be 'strongly and awefully impressed with an idea that they act in trust' and must account to God for their behaviour.⁷ To elaborate, consider two basic claims of Christian faith. First, the Psalmist sings for joy because 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all its people; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters'.⁸ All the earth, all the non-human natural world and all the nations belong to God because they were created by God. This is God's *good* creation which is, accordingly, a worthy object of the questions of conservation.

Second, Christianity holds that this good creation became imperfect because of human sin and oppression. Humanity's own imperfection is a permanent feature of this sorry state of affairs, contributing to a failure to know the world rightly and a concomitant failure to seek justice in action. The reality of imperfection and sin, along with the ambiguous status that this gives government as an institution providentially given by God to order a fallen world, is a key dimension of a plausible conservative political theology. The good news of the gospel is that now 'in [Christ] all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). The work of God is not to dispense with the world but to bring its disparate parts into harmony under one head, Jesus the crucified and risen Lord. Just so the creation, including all that has emerged in human life – all political traditions, parties and institutions, all businesses and markets, all art, music and culture of every form, all voluntary societies and associations, all hospitals, schools, universities, prisons and emergency services, all forms of transport, all families and the entire civil service – indeed, all things, tangible and intangible, belong to God. All these things have good purposes in human life which have to be sought out, conserved and developed until Christ's return.

Christianity claims that the creation, though fallen, is an inheritance, a trust which is entrusted to human creatures by God the Father and Jesus Christ. Humans have been entrusted with a world which they are called to conserve and so glorify God, benefit each other and maintain the non-human creation. This primary form of trust permeates all others – our accountability to God in trust is always an accountability for how we have handled that trust for each other and the non-human world. So when we ask 'why conserve anything?' the basic Christian answer is that God entrusts us with a trust, a good, though fallen creation now held together in Christ.

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The very goodness of the yet fallen world provides the rationale for conservation. The presupposition of the world's imperfection, especially humanity's sorry state, combines with the affirmation of creation's continued goodness to inspire conservative action.

Creaturely trust

Trust takes four creaturely forms, all of which derive from divine trust.

First, there are *inherited trusts* received from past generations. Just as God has given us the world as a trust so we pass on what we perceive to be goods as trusts. Political liberty is an inherited trust, passed on from those who fought and died in the two world wars in order to preserve the United Kingdom against mighty enemies. The National Health Service, opposed by Conservatives in the post-war period, was bequeathed to later generations as a trust to be conserved and developed for the sake of the common good. There are also many other inherited trusts which, though not held in common nationally like the NHS or the BBC, are still communal in their orientation. There are family businesses and family wealth, community organisations, local parks, charitable institutions, schools and many other goods things which are passed on as inherited trusts. Unlike God's gifts, however, what is passed on generation to generation is not always good. The UK's current vast debt burden is unlikely to be received as a token of affection by children yet unborn.

Second, inherited trusts engender what we will call *intergenerational trust*. Such trust is an active, attitudinal relationship which is *mediated by inherited trusts*, subsisting between older and younger generations and also between the dead, the living and those yet to come. The dead of the Somme, the Battle of Britain and D-Day stand in this relation to us as do pioneers of public healthcare. Intergenerational trust grows precisely through the reception of goods from past generations which have sought the good of future generations. The knowledge that you have been *cared for* and *loved* by your elders is the soil in which this intergenerational trust grows. This trust lies deep within conservatism and humanity itself as it reflects the bond between God and creation.

Third, there is trust as it exists now between current living members of our community and nation. This *social trust* is distinct from, though often dependent on, the two other inter-human forms of trust. It consists in that mutual reliance on others which leads people into enduring long-term commitments such as marriage, extended family, business, political parties and institutions, charitable activities and religious groups. Of course, some of the people from whom we have received an inherited trust will still be living with us and so, in that sense, intergenerational trust exists in the contemporary moment as one form of social trust. But social trust in general *grows out of* the way we have been treated by those around us, especially those older than us, and then *flows into* our relationships with our contemporaries.

Such an account of trust holds universal appeal but draws deeply on conservative instincts. Many conservatives, whether theologically informed or not, will recognise instantly that to receive good things as an inherited trust and to pass them on in good order to the next generation is basic to a life well lived. Such conservatives believe that we are constituted by our social relationships and especially our family, locality, religious grouping and nation. In these settings we learn human interdependence. We do not make contracts with our parents at birth but rather, as infants, depend upon them to do us good. In this way we learn to trust. Trust anchors us in this reality and prevents flights of fancy into abstract utopianism or fictional social contracts which ignore the frailty and temporal quality of human life. Trust in the collective wisdom and foresight of previous generations is often wiser than merely one's own generation's understanding. The accumulation of many generations' understandings offers more stability to society than the ideas of the moment. The past's wisdom is itself a trust we need in order to handle the goods we receive in trust and so act wisely in the present and into the future.

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Inherited trusts, intergenerational trust and social trust are core to conservatism, as Burke understood. But none of this implies uncritical acceptance. For the very idea of holding an inheritance as a trust implies responsibility for properly assessing and stewarding it. Trust is not uncritical or unintelligent but rather ready to make judgments in order to conserve the inheritance. Critical conservatism takes seriously the practice of judgment. Government makes judgments about inherited trusts just as, in an analogous way, families make judgments about an inheritance. To be in a relationship of trust is not necessarily simply to maintain in its current state the inherited trust bequeathed to us. Our true obligation to our forebears is expressed precisely through critical judgment on such trusts. Effective judgment, looking both to the past and the future, creates the conditions, 'the new public context', where trust itself can be renewed as together we gain greater clarity about the value and purpose of our inheritance and the rationale for its critical conservation. The extent to which private actors, such as charities and businesses, can enhance the quality of our inherited NHS – if at all – is one such judgment.

Such an account stands in effective opposition to the Thatcherite-preferred economist Friedrich Hayek's dismissal of conservatism as being naturally unable to 'offer an alternative to the direction in which [a society is] moving'.⁹ Such a conservatism also doubts Hayek's confidence that 'moral beliefs concerning matters of conduct' can be properly privatised and sealed off from wider social concerns without evacuating those moral beliefs of their power to provide the conditions in which an economy can flourish.¹⁰ For many contemporary conservatives, it is trust-filled relationships which we value as we work for the good of generations yet unborn, honour the memory of our parents and, for some, live within a church tradition which fills our lives with colour, purpose and inspiration for public service. We understand that there are covenants of trust which permeate generations. These are not only familial or ecclesial but also social and political. When we contribute to and reform a long-standing communal project such the NHS or an established wealth-creation organisation, we are seeking to hold responsibly and critically a trust inherited from previous generations.

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Marriage and trust

Let me take an example to illustrate the point. The growth of suspicion directed towards Christianity and Christians was given energy by the governments led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.¹¹ These two Christian socialists became almost as distrusted by many Christians as Margaret Thatcher did by the left-leaning leadership of the 1980's Church of England. A deep ignorance of Christians' lives was endemic among leading voices in New Labour. Their religious illiteracy and ideological antipathy resulted in employment law which enforced a government-sponsored concept of equality upon all religious organisations. This leaden-footed approach understood little of the subtlety of religious organisations and showed profound disrespect for great religious traditions. The most bizarre move was the (unamended) Equality Act's idea of dividing employees of Christian organisations into two groups: one for those who spent most of their time teaching and performing ritual functions in the church – the ministers, vicars, etc.; the other for those who did not spend most of their time doing this. Churches and other Christian organisations were allowed to use moral tests to 'discriminate' (in the language of the Equality Act) over appointments of the first kind but not with respect to the second.

The obvious problems with this approach were that (i) most vicars, curates and youth workers do not spend most of their time teaching and performing rituals and (ii) that organisations require doctrinal and moral integrity across their entire staff team in order to function effectively. However, a little-observed feature was their quite unconscious, un-progressive attempt 'to turn the clock back' to darker days when Christian people were separated into two classes – the religious or clerical leadership on one side and the rest on the other.

Equality was debased in New Labour's hands and ended up being used to crush diversity, the very thing they had intended to promote. The idea that any group – such as Catholic or other traditionalist churches – might think differently from the government on issues in human sexuality met with strong opposition.

Ironically, the Conservative-led coalition have, whether consciously or not, aped New Labour's approach. Consider the Coalition's Equal Marriage 'consultation' exercise which did not ask *whether* the government should bring forward legislation to make it possible in law for people of the same sex to marry but rather *how* this should be done. The point here is not the moral rights or wrongs of the substance of the Equal Marriage Act, which would be a subject for another occasion.¹² Rather, the issue is the ignorance shown towards churches and marriage as inherited trusts. At the heart of the problem was the government's use of the term 'religious marriage'. It was intended to mark out marriages solemnised or begun in settings such as Church of England or Roman Catholic churches.

The crucial missing distinction is that, for these churches, there is no such thing as a 'religious marriage' *in addition to* something else called 'civil marriage'. There may be different *ceremonies* – some civil and some religious – but there is one institution, passed on generation to generation. There are variations in the way marriage looks but not a variation as to whether it requires members of the opposite sex to join together. To adapt a phrase deployed by various Conservatives including Iain Duncan Smith, who eventually gave his support to the Equal Marriage Act, 'there is such a thing as marriage; it's just not the same as a ritual'. In assuring the faithful that 'religious marriage' was being preserved, the Conservative-led coalition government showed that they did not actually understand what they were doing; or if they did, then they were proceeding in a highly cynical manner, unworthy of a British government. I set the second option aside as unfairly imputing false motives. Instead, it is enough to observe that the Christian idea of marriage as the most basic inherited trust, a social institution which pre-exists the state and which is not subject to legal positivism, has become obscured in the understanding of many in the political elite.

However, there is no Christian wisdom to be found in *complaining* about being misunderstood by elites. Such a victim posture is not the vocation of churches. Churches should use the extensive political liberty they enjoy to witness to an alternative way of living characterised by the grace, mercy and moral wisdom found in Jesus Christ.

For Christian liberty is not dependent on 'religious freedom' as such.¹³ Though it is good for governments to promote the flourishing of religious faith and the pre-political institutions such as marriage to which, alongside many other churches, the Church of England bears witness in its official teaching documents, it is not a necessary condition for the fruitful work of the Kingdom of God. Christians must not fall into the statist trap of becoming a supplicant people, praying to government for scraps. Creaturely life and human redemption is guaranteed not by national tradition or government but by the promises of Almighty God which received their decisive 'yes' in Christ Jesus. Social trust and trust in Christ, the Creator of true social life, will grow best when the churches live by this gospel so that the overflow of their Spirit-filled faith enriches the communities, neighbourhoods and institutions in which they dwell.¹⁴

Government, civil society and enterprise

The second artery of the conservative heart is a distinction between government and civil society. Roger Scruton, the conservative political philosopher, argues that the core of a people's life is 'a non-political idea of membership'.¹⁵ This membership is 'non-political' in the sense that it does not, in itself, depend on the coercive power of government. Government may protect such membership but government does not create it. Government may represent such membership but government does not conscript it. When, as parodied above, contemporary Conservatives say 'there is such a thing as society; it's just not the same thing as the state',¹⁶ they are gesturing in this direction.

Civil Society

'Civil society' captures forms of belonging which are substantial but non-political. Phillip Blond describes civil society as 'everything that ordinary citizens do that is not reducible to the imposed activities of the central state or the compulsion and determination of the marketplace.'¹⁷ With the important proviso that the marketplace is not *essentially* uncivil, a point we will revisit later, this is a helpful summary. The kind of creaturely expressions of community which constitute civil society include families, churches, charities, credit unions, friendships, musical

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traditions, trade unions, businesses, literary circles, lunch clubs, sports teams and educational institutions of various sorts. These are the 'little platoons' of which Edmund Burke famously wrote. Of most importance in these last five years have been the advances in education policy, allowing much greater flexibility for parents, teachers, charities and religious organisations of various sorts to bring their wisdom to bear on educating the young. While failures in such a policy are inevitable, the large number of successes will, over time, come to outweigh these precisely because they draw on the ingenuity of a free people who desire what is good for their children and the children of others.

Constitutional change

What is civil society's importance for the constitution of the nation? A distinction between state and civil society combined with a belief in the wisdom held in civil society institutions puts an effective check on the ambitions of a strong state. A strong civil society allows for slow, considered change rather than sudden, radical upheaval, upheaval which can be particularly dangerous to those who are not protected by wealth or position.

A key conservative question for the UK is how the conditions for the maintenance of a rich, strong and diverse civil society may be protected constitutionally. The monarchy represents civil society by being a family affair which, while holding political authority, does not exercise it coercively. Instead, it invests itself not in party politics but in the many forms of civil society, thus conserving civil society's manifold strengths. But a second key form of protection for civil society is an unelected House of Lords. Although this topic will not raise the electorate's pulse level, it remains vital. The disastrous fate of the Conservative-led Coalition's proposals for reform of the House of Lords during 2010-2015 is to be warmly welcomed by those who care about slow change and civil society. However, as with the question of Scottish independence, people should not be surprised if this question resurfaces in the aftermath of the 2015 election. The substantial conceptual question concerns legitimacy. The presupposition behind a substantially, predominantly or wholly elected House of Lords is that it will have greater legitimacy because all voters are equally entitled to elect many or all of those who will be making the law that all will equally be under. However, some powerful officials clearly have legitimacy without being elected, such as judges, whose judgements set precedent and form case law. Not even the USA – that most self-consciously democratic of nations – allows the people to decide directly on Supreme Court appointments.

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The Lords will be seen as legitimate if they rightly judge what will conserve the common good of the people, ensuring that legislation is conceived and drafted with attention to the many dimensions of civil society from which the Lords are drawn, including the Church of England and many other religious groups. While a second chamber should not by convention stop the elected government of the day, it should prevent government from pushing through legislation too quickly. An elected Lords would destroy one of our constitution's key barriers against the sectional interest and party ambition, whereby people forget or wilfully ignore the nature of wider civil society and the inherited trusts which society enjoys.

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Enterprise

All this attention to trust and civil society may strike some as implausible considering the Conservative Party's record in recent decades. Someone might say, 'Surely the Conservatives believe, first and last, in the free market? And the free market has no instinctive respect for the past but operates by creative destruction. So what's all this talk about *conservation*?' This is indeed a widespread perception of the Conservative Party. And it has more than a grain of truth, especially in the neo-liberal strand which has lately been prominent. But conservatism has typically supported economic activity in relation to the social fabric. Scratch beneath the surface and most conservatives will say that the meaning of markets is not found within markets themselves. The idea of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnicompetent free market is neither a necessary nor even a very prevalent dogma of the Conservative Party or conservatism. Even those who believe that the market can answer a wide range of national questions believe that the market is an aspect of conservation, a daily plebiscite deciding on what should be conserved rather than a daily revolution, overturning all established valuations.

The Conservative Party should rightly remain the party of enterprise and personal responsibility. Moreover, these are far from being alien to Christianity but fulfil the creation mandate to steward the earth justly and make it fruitful. This is why a focus on a strong and flexible economy which gives opportunity for employment and enrichment is a proper goal of a Christian politics. A dependency culture may make the rich feel better about their wealth but will not help people who can work to provide for themselves. Christian conservatives will rightly encourage wealth creation and fair employment in conjunction with profitability and robust competition. But

conserving wealth creation serves a higher goal, namely conserving people and communities. Businesses may become uncompetitive because of global markets beyond the control of employees. But people survive the failure of businesses. Civil society, represented by the state, must be on hand to conserve them alongside fresh business enterprises which serve genuine needs in the market. Of course state action to conserve those without work or in ill health is itself made possible by those who create wealth and are taxed accordingly thereby ameliorating, to some extent, the effects of intergenerational disadvantages. But again, the way to overcome intergenerational failures, such as massive debt problems, is not increasing debt but rather enterprise and wealth creation, whereby as many as possible find meaningful work to pursue. Unmanageable debts are no part of Christian or indeed any wisdom tradition. But creating opportunity, wealth, freedom *and* social protection, amidst a fallen world, are honourable Christian goals.

International affairs

One cannot speak of business and employment without addressing international affairs. The character of a nation-state's appearance on the international stage is formed by the quality of its government and civil society but especially by its trade and diplomacy. Political theology from the book of Revelation to today has warned against trusting in trade or in alliances rather than trusting in God. A nation's best hope remains faith in Jesus Christ. Grand plans for international integration, however well-intentioned, appear in a murky light as covert bids for domination. However, there is also good theological reason for scepticism towards a pull-up-the-drawbridge nationalism which fails to see the purposes of Providence operating above and between all nations.

Such crude anti-internationalism exists today as an unwise underside of British political life, particularly in the context of the threat of UKIP. Euroscepticism has a proper place in conservative thought. Without pronouncing on the European project as a whole, there are good reasons for doubting the long-term benefits of laws which do not arise in a way which people can understand or recognise as their own. Conservatives have typically been localists and defenders of national sovereignty because they believe that only those laws which arise within the local or national context in which people live will have the capacity to have a purchase on people's wills. Burke, like most conservatives, had no inherent disrespect ~~for~~ those beyond the British Isles but regarded national sovereignty and the rule of law with reverence. Conservatives are concerned that a nation's laws, wherever they are made, should not fall into disrepute.

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However, none of this entails that Conservatives should not be engaged in international cooperation and large international institutions like those associated with the European Union. The threat of UKIP is that the resentment widely felt about the EU will not only prevent EU reform but also inspire a wider disengagement from world affairs. UKIP's lack of sensible comment regarding the ongoing crises in Ukraine and Syria should be a warning signal to Christians who are called to care about the *nations* as well as *this* nation. The UK's responsibilities to the human community remain as strong as ever: to project military power in service of the innocent oppressed who need it; to share wealth with the poorest; to build trade relations for the good of all; and respectfully to promulgate values among the nations while humbly though critically learning from each one.

Conclusion

The heart of conservatism beats with critical trust, civil society, responsible enterprise and sober internationalism. It is this vision which *may* commend itself to some Christians' political consciousness in this election year and, crucially, in the years between elections when government will require the prayers and participation of all the people if it is to know and seek the common good.

Suggested Further Reading

- Michael Alison and David L. Edwards, eds., *Christianity and Conservatism* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990).
- Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (Faber and Faber, 2010).
- Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection: The Religious and secular traditions of conservative thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (Faber and Faber, 1978).
- Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Macmillan, 1984).
- David Willetts, *The Pinch: How the baby-boomers took their children's future and why they should give it back* (Atlantic Books, 2002).

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¹ This essay draws on Joshua Hordern, *One Nation but Two Cities: Christianity and the Conservative Party* (Bible Society/KLICE, 2010).

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30848534>.

³ David Willetts, *The Pinch* (Atlantic Books, 2002), 86. For a similar approach, though one less sympathetic to religion, see Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (Faber and Faber, 1978).

⁴ For an interpretation of the history of the Conservative Party, see Part One of Joshua Hordern, *One Nation but Two Cities*.

⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

⁶ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Macmillan, 1984), 22ff.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (OUP, 1999), 86.

⁸ Psalm 24:1-2

⁹ Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (The University of Chicago Press, 1960), Appendix 'Why I am not a Conservative', section 1.

¹⁰ *ibid.* section 3.

¹¹ For evidence to support this claim, see Francis Davis et al., *Moral, But No Compass – Government, Church and the Future of Welfare*, (Matthew James Pub. Ltd, 2008).

¹² For commentary critical of the Coalition, see Julian Rivers, 'Redefining marriage: the case for caution', *Cambridge Papers* 21.3 (September 2012) <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/redefining-marriage-the-case-for-caution/>; Andrew Goddard, 'Reframing the Same-Sex Marriage Debate', *Ethics in Brief* 18.4 (Spring 2013) <http://klice.co.uk/uploads/Ethics%20in%20Brief/Goddard%20v.18.4.pdf>. For a critical view of the Church of England's opposition to Equal Marriage, see Nigel Biggar, 'Men and Women in Marriage: Does it Add Up?', *Theology* 117.2, (March/April 2014), 94-99.

¹³ Nonetheless, I note that the Conservative-led Coalition chose to oppose the Christian plaintiffs in four religious liberty cases considered by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013. For commentary see Mark Campbell, 'Strasbourg, Conscience and Religious belief', *Ethics in Brief* 18.5 (Summer 2013).

¹⁴ See Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 5.

¹⁵ Roger Scruton, 'In defence of the nation' in *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (Carcantet, 1990), 299-328, 303.

¹⁶ Gary Streever, ed., *There is Such a Thing as Society* (Politico's Publishing, 2002).

¹⁷ Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (Faber and Faber, 2010), 3.

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Christianity and conservatism: trust, civil society, enterprise and internationalism¹

Joshua Hordern

As a form of political reasoning and practice, conservatism has much to commend it. Its characteristic focus on the what, why and how questions of conservation provides a helpful guide for thinking about politics. Attentive to these questions and inspired by Christian political thought, this vision of conservatism emphasises trust, both divine and creaturely; the interrelation of civil society with government; responsible enterprise; and sober internationalism.

Introduction

The goal of this *Ethics in Brief* is not to make the case to vote Conservative at the 2015 election but to articulate a vision for conservatism which is inspired by Christian thought. Such a vision *might* encourage Christians to vote for, join and reform the Conservative Party. But it would be equally successful if it informed those with an opposing or no party allegiance of the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition and contemporary face of conservatism and the Conservative Party.

The Conservative Party has never been an officially Christian party but has long been informed by Christian thought and practice. From a contemporary perspective, both national and global, politics cannot afford to ignore such influences nor those of other religious traditions. From schooling to prison reform, from the burgeoning Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches to the Church of England, and from international development to geopolitics God is always on the scene. Political parties will serve people better if they do not neglect this, especially when distinguishing *between* religious traditions, a form of wisdom which is very necessary today in our globally intersecting environment. Religious literacy is an essential – not just desirable – feature of any plausible claim to political leadership in the twenty-first century.

History and diversity

Analysing the relationship between British political conservatism and Christianity will mean entering a conversation constituted by centuries of thought and practice. The conversation has at times assumed that the match between conservatism and Christianity sits so deep within British national life that it is unnecessary to articulate its significance. Indeed, one Conservative MP retiring in 2015, James Arbuthnott, felt that he had to disguise his lack of faith and could only 'come out' as an atheist on the floor of the House of Commons when he had already announced his intention to stand down.²

He is not alone. There have always been significant challenges to the marriage of conservatism and Christianity. A long-standing sceptical tradition of conservatism has recommended various degrees of separation. Non-conservative but deeply Christian voices have urged divorce. In 2015, far gone are the days when the Church of England was regarded as the Conservative Party at prayer. Recent trends towards secularisation and religious diversification have changed the Party's demeanour. Its membership is, like the rest of the population, less aligned with religious faith – let alone established Anglican Christian faith – than a hundred or even thirty years ago. Importantly, a wider range of religious faiths now play a part both in UK national life and the Conservative Party, from Islam to Roman Catholicism.

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To provide some context for Arbuthnott's declaration, consider two approaches which have arisen in the history of British conservatism. Both are intellectually and historically respectable but offer different angles on conservatism and the Conservative Party. First, there is a conservatism which is atheist or, at least, agnostic, well-represented by

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another retiring MP, David Willetts. On this view, conservatism does not benefit from reference to God but is sufficiently supplied by examination of the nature of humanity alongside principled and pragmatic decision-making.³ Second, there is a stream of conservatism guided and sharpened by theological commitments. Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli and the Cecils (Robert and Hugh) were, in sometimes controversial ways, deeply influenced by Christian thought.⁴ Today, the discussion threads of the website, ConservativeHome, are replete with politico-theological comment.

Questions of conservation

It is natural for conservatives to consider some of this history because it focuses conversation on *what* should be conserved from the past. They want to discover what aspects of their nation's tradition should be treasured and developed and, conversely, what should be downgraded and terminated. Attention to history avoids abstraction and, while allowing for 'big ideas', focusses on questions of practical politics. But beyond this *what* question, such conservatives want to know *how* and ultimately *why* they should conserve whatever it is that they value. These *what*, *how* and *why* questions are what I will call the 'questions of conservation'. For such conservatives, asking and answering these is what political wisdom is – selectively and judiciously retrieving, maintaining and developing, sometimes innovatively, certain features of a society's life, knowing how and why one is doing so.

These 'questions of conservation' imply that conservatives are inherently open to change. To decide what, why and how to conserve is also to decide what can and should change. Conservatives should make *judgments* about what they conserve and that process of judgment necessarily entails that some things are not conserved. The idea of political 'judgment' requires explanation. Oliver O'Donovan defines it as an '*act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context*'.⁵ Note especially that it is the *preceding* act or *existing* state of affairs which is to be judged. Judgment is inherently *retrospective* since the present is always becoming the past. But judgment is also *prospective*, focussed on the future – it is a *new public context* which is established, in intelligible relation to the old but nonetheless distinct. For example, the British parliament's decision to extend the democratic franchise in the Reform Act of 1832 was a judgment that conserved parts of the old system as good, but not others. Changes were made to establish a new public context which was judged better than what was previously in existence. The fact that this Act faced opposition from 'conservative' quarters shows that conservatism is not always willing to make changes for the better. But the desire to conserve is compatible with many forms of change. Innovation is essential to a conservatism which addresses contemporary challenges.⁶

Continually asking and answering the questions of conservation – 'what' to conserve (and what to change), 'why' and 'how' – is the heart of a wise conservatism. This process of questioning provides the conditions for well-ordered practical reasoning about politics. Just as a person's heart must keep pumping, so these questions must keep on being asked and answered or else conservatism will seize up and die. But these questions need structure if their answers are not to be simply arbitrary. Vigour and structure for conservatism's heart comes from its major arteries. The ones principally considered here are trust, civil society and internationalism. They frame questions of public policy which have faced and will face us, such as marriage, constitutional reform, economic life and European policy.

Trust

The first artery is trust, a subtle feature of life which opens up the very meaning of conservatism and the purpose of the Conservative Party. For the sake of this theological discussion, trust should be understood under a double aspect: divine trust and creaturely trust.

Divine trust

The eighteenth century MP, Edmund Burke, often thought of as a 'conservative', held that people with any degree of political power ought to be 'strongly and awefully impressed with an idea that they act in trust' and must account to God for their behaviour.⁷ To elaborate, consider two basic claims of Christian faith. First, the Psalmist sings for joy because 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all its people; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters'.⁸ All the earth, all the non-human natural world and all the nations belong to God because they were created by God. This is God's *good* creation which is, accordingly, a worthy object of the questions of conservation.

Second, Christianity holds that this good creation became imperfect because of human sin and oppression. Humanity's own imperfection is a permanent feature of this sorry state of affairs, contributing to a failure to know the world rightly and a concomitant failure to seek justice in action. The reality of imperfection and sin, along with the ambiguous status that this gives government as an institution providentially given by God to order a fallen world, is a key dimension of a plausible conservative political theology. The good news of the gospel is that now 'in [Christ] all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). The work of God is not to dispense with the world but to bring its disparate parts into harmony under one head, Jesus the crucified and risen Lord. Just so the creation, including all that has emerged in human life – all political traditions, parties and institutions, all businesses and markets, all art, music and culture of every form, all voluntary societies and associations, all hospitals, schools, universities, prisons and emergency services, all forms of transport, all families and the entire civil service – indeed, all things, tangible and intangible, belong to God. All these things have good purposes in human life which have to be sought out, conserved and developed until Christ's return.

Christianity claims that the creation, though fallen, is an inheritance, a trust which is entrusted to human creatures by God the Father and Jesus Christ. Humans have been entrusted with a world which they are called to conserve and so glorify God, benefit each other and maintain the non-human creation. This primary form of trust permeates all others – our accountability to God in trust is always an accountability for how we have handled that trust for each other and the non-human world. So when we ask 'why conserve anything?' the basic Christian answer is that God entrusts us with a trust, a good, though fallen creation now held together in Christ.

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The very goodness of the yet fallen world provides the rationale for conservation. The presupposition of the world's imperfection, especially humanity's sorry state, combines with the affirmation of creation's continued goodness to inspire conservative action.

Creaturely trust

Trust takes four creaturely forms, all of which derive from divine trust.

First, there are *inherited trusts* received from past generations. Just as God has given us the world as a trust so we pass on what we perceive to be goods as trusts. Political liberty is an inherited trust, passed on from those who fought and died in the two world wars in order to preserve the United Kingdom against mighty enemies. The National Health Service, opposed by Conservatives in the post-war period, was bequeathed to later generations as a trust to be conserved and developed for the sake of the common good. There are also many other inherited trusts which, though not held in common nationally like the NHS or the BBC, are still communal in their orientation. There are family businesses and family wealth, community organisations, local parks, charitable institutions, schools and many other goods things which are passed on as inherited trusts. Unlike God's gifts, however, what is passed on generation to generation is not always good. The UK's current vast debt burden is unlikely to be received as a token of affection by children yet unborn.

Second, inherited trusts engender what we will call *intergenerational trust*. Such trust is an active, attitudinal relationship which is *mediated by inherited trusts*, subsisting between older and younger generations and also between the dead, the living and those yet to come. The dead of the Somme, the Battle of Britain and D-Day stand in this relation to us as do pioneers of public healthcare. Intergenerational trust grows precisely through the reception of goods from past generations which have sought the good of future generations. The knowledge that you have been *cared for* and *loved* by your elders is the soil in which this intergenerational trust grows. This trust lies deep within conservatism and humanity itself as it reflects the bond between God and creation.

Third, there is trust as it exists now between current living members of our community and nation. This *social trust* is distinct from, though often dependent on, the two other inter-human forms of trust. It consists in that mutual reliance on others which leads people into enduring long-term commitments such as marriage, extended family, business, political parties and institutions, charitable activities and religious groups. Of course, some of the people from whom we have received an inherited trust will still be living with us and so, in that sense, intergenerational trust exists in the contemporary moment as one form of social trust. But social trust in general *grows out of* the way we have been treated by those around us, especially those older than us, and then *flows into* our relationships with our contemporaries.

Such an account of trust holds universal appeal but draws deeply on conservative instincts. Many conservatives, whether theologically informed or not, will recognise instantly that to receive good things as an inherited trust and to pass them on in good order to the next generation is basic to a life well lived. Such conservatives believe that we are constituted by our social relationships and especially our family, locality, religious grouping and nation. In these settings we learn human interdependence. We do not make contracts with our parents at birth but rather, as infants, depend upon them to do us good. In this way we learn to trust. Trust anchors us in this reality and prevents flights of fancy into abstract utopianism or fictional social contracts which ignore the frailty and temporal quality of human life. Trust in the collective wisdom and foresight of previous generations is often wiser than merely one's own generation's understanding. The accumulation of many generations' understandings offers more stability to society than the ideas of the moment. The past's wisdom is itself a trust we need in order to handle the goods we receive in trust and so act wisely in the present and into the future.

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Inherited trusts, intergenerational trust and social trust are core to conservatism, as Burke understood. But none of this implies uncritical acceptance. For the very idea of holding an inheritance as a trust implies responsibility for properly assessing and stewarding it. Trust is not uncritical or unintelligent but rather ready to make judgments in order to conserve the inheritance. Critical conservatism takes seriously the practice of judgment. Government makes judgments about inherited trusts just as, in an analogous way, families make judgments about an inheritance. To be in a relationship of trust is not necessarily simply to maintain in its current state the inherited trust bequeathed to us. Our true obligation to our forebears is expressed precisely through critical judgment on such trusts. Effective judgment, looking both to the past and the future, creates the conditions, 'the new public context', where trust itself can be renewed as together we gain greater clarity about the value and purpose of our inheritance and the rationale for its critical conservation. The extent to which private actors, such as charities and businesses, can enhance the quality of our inherited NHS – if at all – is one such judgment.

Such an account stands in effective opposition to the Thatcherite-preferred economist Friedrich Hayek's dismissal of conservatism as being naturally unable to 'offer an alternative to the direction in which [a society is] moving'.⁹ Such a conservatism also doubts Hayek's confidence that 'moral beliefs concerning matters of conduct' can be properly privatised and sealed off from wider social concerns without evacuating those moral beliefs of their power to provide the conditions in which an economy can flourish.¹⁰ For many contemporary conservatives, it is trust-filled relationships which we value as we work for the good of generations yet unborn, honour the memory of our parents and, for some, live within a church tradition which fills our lives with colour, purpose and inspiration for public service. We understand that there are covenants of trust which permeate generations. These are not only familial or ecclesial but also social and political. When we contribute to and reform a long-standing communal project such the NHS or an established wealth-creation organisation, we are seeking to hold responsibly and critically a trust inherited from previous generations.

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Marriage and trust

Let me take an example to illustrate the point. The growth of suspicion directed towards Christianity and Christians was given energy by the governments led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.¹¹ These two Christian socialists became almost as distrusted by many Christians as Margaret Thatcher did by the left-leaning leadership of the 1980's Church of England. A deep ignorance of Christians' lives was endemic among leading voices in New Labour. Their religious illiteracy and ideological antipathy resulted in employment law which enforced a government-sponsored concept of equality upon all religious organisations. This leaden-footed approach understood little of the subtlety of religious organisations and showed profound disrespect for great religious traditions. The most bizarre move was the (unamended) Equality Act's idea of dividing employees of Christian organisations into two groups: one for those who spent most of their time teaching and performing ritual functions in the church – the ministers, vicars, etc.; the other for those who did not spend most of their time doing this. Churches and other Christian organisations were allowed to use moral tests to 'discriminate' (in the language of the Equality Act) over appointments of the first kind but not with respect to the second.

The obvious problems with this approach were that (i) most vicars, curates and youth workers do not spend most of their time teaching and performing rituals and (ii) that organisations require doctrinal and moral integrity across their entire staff team in order to function effectively. However, a little-observed feature was their quite unconscious, un-progressive attempt 'to turn the clock back' to darker days when Christian people were separated into two classes – the religious or clerical leadership on one side and the rest on the other.

Equality was debased in New Labour's hands and ended up being used to crush diversity, the very thing they had intended to promote. The idea that any group – such as Catholic or other traditionalist churches – might think differently from the government on issues in human sexuality met with strong opposition.

Ironically, the Conservative-led coalition have, whether consciously or not, aped New Labour's approach. Consider the Coalition's Equal Marriage 'consultation' exercise which did not ask *whether* the government should bring forward legislation to make it possible in law for people of the same sex to marry but rather *how* this should be done. The point here is not the moral rights or wrongs of the substance of the Equal Marriage Act, which would be a subject for another occasion.¹² Rather, the issue is the ignorance shown towards churches and marriage as inherited trusts. At the heart of the problem was the government's use of the term 'religious marriage'. It was intended to mark out marriages solemnised or begun in settings such as Church of England or Roman Catholic churches.

The crucial missing distinction is that, for these churches, there is no such thing as a 'religious marriage' *in addition to* something else called 'civil marriage'. There may be different *ceremonies* – some civil and some religious – but there is one institution, passed on generation to generation. There are variations in the way marriage looks but not a variation as to whether it requires members of the opposite sex to join together. To adapt a phrase deployed by various Conservatives including Iain Duncan Smith, who eventually gave his support to the Equal Marriage Act, 'there is such a thing as marriage; it's just not the same as a ritual'. In assuring the faithful that 'religious marriage' was being preserved, the Conservative-led coalition government showed that they did not actually understand what they were doing; or if they did, then they were proceeding in a highly cynical manner, unworthy of a British government. I set the second option aside as unfairly imputing false motives. Instead, it is enough to observe that the Christian idea of marriage as the most basic inherited trust, a social institution which pre-exists the state and which is not subject to legal positivism, has become obscured in the understanding of many in the political elite.

However, there is no Christian wisdom to be found in *complaining* about being misunderstood by elites. Such a victim posture is not the vocation of churches. Churches should use the extensive political liberty they enjoy to witness to an alternative way of living characterised by the grace, mercy and moral wisdom found in Jesus Christ.

For Christian liberty is not dependent on 'religious freedom' as such.¹³ Though it is good for governments to promote the flourishing of religious faith and the pre-political institutions such as marriage to which, alongside many other churches, the Church of England bears witness in its official teaching documents, it is not a necessary condition for the fruitful work of the Kingdom of God. Christians must not fall into the statist trap of becoming a supplicant people, praying to government for scraps. Creaturely life and human redemption is guaranteed not by national tradition or government but by the promises of Almighty God which received their decisive 'yes' in Christ Jesus. Social trust and trust in Christ, the Creator of true social life, will grow best when the churches live by this gospel so that the overflow of their Spirit-filled faith enriches the communities, neighbourhoods and institutions in which they dwell.¹⁴

Government, civil society and enterprise

The second artery of the conservative heart is a distinction between government and civil society. Roger Scruton, the conservative political philosopher, argues that the core of a people's life is 'a non-political idea of membership'.¹⁵ This membership is 'non-political' in the sense that it does not, in itself, depend on the coercive power of government. Government may protect such membership but government does not create it. Government may represent such membership but government does not conscript it. When, as parodied above, contemporary Conservatives say 'there is such a thing as society; it's just not the same thing as the state',¹⁶ they are gesturing in this direction.

Civil Society

'Civil society' captures forms of belonging which are substantial but non-political. Phillip Blond describes civil society as 'everything that ordinary citizens do that is not reducible to the imposed activities of the central state or the compulsion and determination of the marketplace.'¹⁷ With the important proviso that the marketplace is not *essentially* uncivil, a point we will revisit later, this is a helpful summary. The kind of creaturely expressions of community which constitute civil society include families, churches, charities, credit unions, friendships, musical

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traditions, trade unions, businesses, literary circles, lunch clubs, sports teams and educational institutions of various sorts. These are the 'little platoons' of which Edmund Burke famously wrote. Of most importance in these last five years have been the advances in education policy, allowing much greater flexibility for parents, teachers, charities and religious organisations of various sorts to bring their wisdom to bear on educating the young. While failures in such a policy are inevitable, the large number of successes will, over time, come to outweigh these precisely because they draw on the ingenuity of a free people who desire what is good for their children and the children of others.

Constitutional change

What is civil society's importance for the constitution of the nation? A distinction between state and civil society combined with a belief in the wisdom held in civil society institutions puts an effective check on the ambitions of a strong state. A strong civil society allows for slow, considered change rather than sudden, radical upheaval, upheaval which can be particularly dangerous to those who are not protected by wealth or position.

A key conservative question for the UK is how the conditions for the maintenance of a rich, strong and diverse civil society may be protected constitutionally. The monarchy represents civil society by being a family affair which, while holding political authority, does not exercise it coercively. Instead, it invests itself not in party politics but in the many forms of civil society, thus conserving civil society's manifold strengths. But a second key form of protection for civil society is an unelected House of Lords. Although this topic will not raise the electorate's pulse level, it remains vital. The disastrous fate of the Conservative-led Coalition's proposals for reform of the House of Lords during 2010-2015 is to be warmly welcomed by those who care about slow change and civil society. However, as with the question of Scottish independence, people should not be surprised if this question resurfaces in the aftermath of the 2015 election. The substantial conceptual question concerns legitimacy. The presupposition behind a substantially, predominantly or wholly elected House of Lords is that it will have greater legitimacy because all voters are equally entitled to elect many or all of those who will be making the law that all will equally be under. However, some powerful officials clearly have legitimacy without being elected, such as judges, whose judgements set precedent and form case law. Not even the USA – that most self-consciously democratic of nations – allows the people to decide directly on Supreme Court appointments.

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The Lords will be seen as legitimate if they rightly judge what will conserve the common good of the people, ensuring that legislation is conceived and drafted with attention to the many dimensions of civil society from which the Lords are drawn, including the Church of England and many other religious groups. While a second chamber should not by convention stop the elected government of the day, it should prevent government from pushing through legislation too quickly. An elected Lords would destroy one of our constitution's key barriers against the sectional interest and party ambition, whereby people forget or wilfully ignore the nature of wider civil society and the inherited trusts which society enjoys.

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Enterprise

All this attention to trust and civil society may strike some as implausible considering the Conservative Party's record in recent decades. Someone might say, 'Surely the Conservatives believe, first and last, in the free market? And the free market has no instinctive respect for the past but operates by creative destruction. So what's all this talk about *conservation*?' This is indeed a widespread perception of the Conservative Party. And it has more than a grain of truth, especially in the neo-liberal strand which has lately been prominent. But conservatism has typically supported economic activity in relation to the social fabric. Scratch beneath the surface and most conservatives will say that the meaning of markets is not found within markets themselves. The idea of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnicompetent free market is neither a necessary nor even a very prevalent dogma of the Conservative Party or conservatism. Even those who believe that the market can answer a wide range of national questions believe that the market is an aspect of conservation, a daily plebiscite deciding on what should be conserved rather than a daily revolution, overturning all established valuations.

The Conservative Party should rightly remain the party of enterprise and personal responsibility. Moreover, these are far from being alien to Christianity but fulfil the creation mandate to steward the earth justly and make it fruitful. This is why a focus on a strong and flexible economy which gives opportunity for employment and enrichment is a proper goal of a Christian politics. A dependency culture may make the rich feel better about their wealth but will not help people who can work to provide for themselves. Christian conservatives will rightly encourage wealth creation and fair employment in conjunction with profitability and robust competition. But

conserving wealth creation serves a higher goal, namely conserving people and communities. Businesses may become uncompetitive because of global markets beyond the control of employees. But people survive the failure of businesses. Civil society, represented by the state, must be on hand to conserve them alongside fresh business enterprises which serve genuine needs in the market. Of course state action to conserve those without work or in ill health is itself made possible by those who create wealth and are taxed accordingly thereby ameliorating, to some extent, the effects of intergenerational disadvantages. But again, the way to overcome intergenerational failures, such as massive debt problems, is not increasing debt but rather enterprise and wealth creation, whereby as many as possible find meaningful work to pursue. Unmanageable debts are no part of Christian or indeed any wisdom tradition. But creating opportunity, wealth, freedom *and* social protection, amidst a fallen world, are honourable Christian goals.

International affairs

One cannot speak of business and employment without addressing international affairs. The character of a nation-state's appearance on the international stage is formed by the quality of its government and civil society but especially by its trade and diplomacy. Political theology from the book of Revelation to today has warned against trusting in trade or in alliances rather than trusting in God. A nation's best hope remains faith in Jesus Christ. Grand plans for international integration, however well-intentioned, appear in a murky light as covert bids for domination. However, there is also good theological reason for scepticism towards a pull-up-the-drawbridge nationalism which fails to see the purposes of Providence operating above and between all nations.

Such crude anti-internationalism exists today as an unwise underside of British political life, particularly in the context of the threat of UKIP. Euroscepticism has a proper place in conservative thought. Without pronouncing on the European project as a whole, there are good reasons for doubting the long-term benefits of laws which do not arise in a way which people can understand or recognise as their own. Conservatives have typically been localists and defenders of national sovereignty because they believe that only those laws which arise within the local or national context in which people live will have the capacity to have a purchase on people's wills. Burke, like most conservatives, had no inherent disrespect ~~for~~ those beyond the British Isles but regarded national sovereignty and the rule of law with reverence. Conservatives are concerned that a nation's laws, wherever they are made, should not fall into disrepute.

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However, none of this entails that Conservatives should not be engaged in international cooperation and large international institutions like those associated with the European Union. The threat of UKIP is that the resentment widely felt about the EU will not only prevent EU reform but also inspire a wider disengagement from world affairs. UKIP's lack of sensible comment regarding the ongoing crises in Ukraine and Syria should be a warning signal to Christians who are called to care about the *nations* as well as *this* nation. The UK's responsibilities to the human community remain as strong as ever: to project military power in service of the innocent oppressed who need it; to share wealth with the poorest; to build trade relations for the good of all; and respectfully to promulgate values among the nations while humbly though critically learning from each one.

Conclusion

The heart of conservatism beats with critical trust, civil society, responsible enterprise and sober internationalism. It is this vision which *may* commend itself to some Christians' political consciousness in this election year and, crucially, in the years between elections when government will require the prayers and participation of all the people if it is to know and seek the common good.

Suggested Further Reading

- Michael Alison and David L. Edwards, eds., *Christianity and Conservatism* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990).
- Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (Faber and Faber, 2010).
- Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection: The Religious and secular traditions of conservative thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (Faber and Faber, 1978).
- Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Macmillan, 1984).
- David Willetts, *The Pinch: How the baby-boomers took their children's future and why they should give it back* (Atlantic Books, 2002).

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¹ This essay draws on Joshua Hordern, *One Nation but Two Cities: Christianity and the Conservative Party* (Bible Society/KLICE, 2010).

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30848534>.

³ David Willetts, *The Pinch* (Atlantic Books, 2002), 86. For a similar approach, though one less sympathetic to religion, see Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (Faber and Faber, 1978).

⁴ For an interpretation of the history of the Conservative Party, see Part One of Joshua Hordern, *One Nation but Two Cities*.

⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

⁶ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Macmillan, 1984), 22ff.

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (OUP, 1999), 86.

⁸ Psalm 24:1-2

⁹ Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (The University of Chicago Press, 1960), Appendix 'Why I am not a Conservative', section 1.

¹⁰ *ibid.* section 3.

¹¹ For evidence to support this claim, see Francis Davis et al., *Moral, But No Compass – Government, Church and the Future of Welfare*, (Matthew James Pub. Ltd, 2008).

¹² For commentary critical of the Coalition, see Julian Rivers, 'Redefining marriage: the case for caution', *Cambridge Papers* 21.3 (September 2012) <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/redefining-marriage-the-case-for-caution/>; Andrew Goddard, 'Reframing the Same-Sex Marriage Debate', *Ethics in Brief* 18.4 (Spring 2013) <http://klice.co.uk/uploads/Ethics%20in%20Brief/Goddard%20v.18.4.pdf>. For a critical view of the Church of England's opposition to Equal Marriage, see Nigel Biggar, 'Men and Women in Marriage: Does it Add Up?', *Theology* 117.2, (March/April 2014), 94-99.

¹³ Nonetheless, I note that the Conservative-led Coalition chose to oppose the Christian plaintiffs in four religious liberty cases considered by the European Court of Human Rights in 2013. For commentary see Mark Campbell, 'Strasbourg, Conscience and Religious belief', *Ethics in Brief* 18.5 (Summer 2013).

¹⁴ See Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 5.

¹⁵ Roger Scruton, 'In defence of the nation' in *The Philosopher on Dover Beach* (Carcantet, 1990), 299-328, 303.

¹⁶ Gary Streever, ed., *There is Such a Thing as Society* (Politico's Publishing, 2002).

¹⁷ Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How the Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (Faber and Faber, 2010), 3.

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