



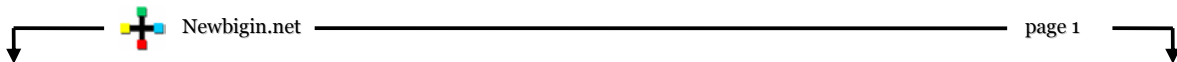
The Free Society

(90fs)

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A few days before his death on 27th February Alan Booth sent me a paper on the role of Christianity in shaping Europe. It was, like everything he wrote, brilliantly clear and perceptive. His sudden death is a great blow for all who are concerned with a Christian impact upon public life. Booth spoke of the significance for the whole of European thought of the collapse of the Marxist regimes and went on to speak of three elements which would have to be the pillars of a common European society: political democracy, the role of law and free markets. Whatever qualifications one might wish to make, especially about the third of these, it seems to me that without these there will not be a 'common European home'. But the point that surely needs to be made is with regard to the foundation on which these three pillars rest. None of them stands unless there is a very strong foundation, normally – like most foundations – invisible, in the shared beliefs of people about what human life is. And these beliefs – like other foundations – can be eroded and washed away if they are not protected.

Political democracy can become the tyranny of majorities over minorities unless there are beliefs about the respect which is due to every human being. Hitler was, after all, elected to power by democratic vote. The independence of the judiciary and the rule of law do not exist unless those who hold power recognize that even overwhelming power must bow before truth and right. And free markets become the arena of ruthless oppression if those who operate them know no higher law than the law of the market.

Widely shared beliefs among whole populations about the supremacy of truth and right over power and profit do not come about automatically or accidentally. Normally, over the span of human history that is known to us, they have been nurtured through religious traditions which teach people to believe that – in spite of appearances to the contrary – there is a source of truth and right in the very being of the cosmos, something which gives meaning to life as a whole. The proper attitude to this source has been reverence, and therefore religious worship has been the way in which the central direction of meaningful life was affirmed – in spite of acknowledged failure to live in accordance with what worship affirmed. This has been true of the great enduring

civilizations of India, China and the house of Islam, as well as those societies whose religious traditions (often much closer to the Bible than those just mentioned), we are pleased to call 'primitive'. It is these long enduring religious traditions which create and preserve the foundation on which freedom under the law can be built.

The barbarian tribes who found their home in the western part of the Eurasian land mass were very slowly shaped into a coherent society with certain shared beliefs about human life, and the religious power which shaped them (always imperfectly) was Christianity, a Christianity which had taken into its lifestream much of the humanist culture of Greece and Rome. For a thousand years the building which stood at the centre of each town or village was the one marked by a cross – the central Christian symbol of the mystery of truth and right in a world which contradicts it.

The last 200 years of Europe's history has seen an experiment unique in human history, the attempt to found public life on other beliefs, beliefs which affirmed the liberation of human reason and conscience from any transcendent or supernatural reality. The last hundred years has seen the working out of this belief in the turning of reason against reason itself (for the critical principle must necessarily attack the critical faculty of which it relies) until the point is reached where there is no arbiter beyond the will to power. The state, claiming absolute power, becomes the only arbiter of truth and right and the guarantor of well-being. The collapse of that claim in Eastern Europe leaves a gaping hole where the foundations ought to be. The only community which at this moment stands ready to offer a new foundation is Islam. We must now reckon with Islam as a major actor on the stage of world politics in the 21st century.

Most Europeans shun the prospect of an Islamic theocratic state. What is affirmed is the ideal of a free society, with freedom to think and say what we please. But here we are in danger of pursuing illusions. On subjects of which I know nothing I am free to say what I like. The more I learn about the reality, the more my freedom is limited. There is a reciprocal relation between freedom and reality. It is only in freedom that I can begin to apprehend reality; and in so far as I apprehend reality my freedom to speak about it is limited by that apprehension. Freedom which is simply freedom to say what one likes can only be destructive of any grasp of reality as meaningful. A free society cannot be an open society – open to any sort of nonsense. It can only be a society dedicated to the enterprise (which must be free) of seeking to apprehend reality as meaningful. And without some widely shared beliefs about reality as meaningful, society must disintegrate or fall victim to tyranny. The 'open' society of the Weimar Republic was the perfect seed-bed for National Socialism. That terrible scenario could be repeated.

The 'apprehension of reality as meaningful' which made possible the civilization of Europe was provided by Christianity. There is no real alternative if there is to be a 'common European home'. Unlike Islam, and in spite of the Constantinian version of Christianity, Christians cannot advocate a theocratic state. The reason is in that central fact which Islam must deny, namely that when the Son of God took flesh as part of history, he was crucified by those powers which represent the supremacy of truth and right. The union of power with truth and right lies beyond death and resurrection. No civic or ecclesiastical order can be equated with the kingdom of god. But Christians can affirm that the only foundation on which a free society can rise out of the present Europe is the Christian tradition which formed Europe as a distinct society. The foundation of which I speak is not political power. It calls for an evangelization of Europe which is not revivalism but that radical conversion of the mind which will enable people to see that the public doctrine that

has shaped Europe for 200 years is false and that the forming and nourishing of Christian minds, as well as hearts and wills, is the only way to provide a foundation on which the pillars of a free

society for Europe can rest. And if laying foundations is labelled 'fundamentalism', we shall have to learn not to be frightened by that label.

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