Prologue: What is the West About?

Does it still make sense to talk about 'the West'? People who live in the nations once described as part of Christendom – what many would now call the post-Christian world – seem to have lost their moral bearings. We no longer have a persuasive story to tell ourselves about our origins and development. There is little narrative sweep in our view of things. For better or worse, things have just happened to us.

Some may welcome this condition, seeing it as liberation from historical myths such as the biblical story of human sin and redemption or a belief in progress 'guaranteed' by the development of science. Others will argue that a more inclusive narrative about globalization has made anything like a Western narrative not only obsolete but also morally dubious.

I cannot agree. If we look at the West against a global background, the striking thing about our situation is that we are in a competition of beliefs, whether we like it or not.

The development of Islamic fundamentalism – and the terrorist movements it sometimes inspires – is the most obvious example. A view of the world in which religious law excludes a secular sphere and in which the subordination of women compromises belief in human equality is incompatible with moral intuitions widespread in the West. And that is only one example. The transmuting of Marxist socialism into quasi-capitalism in the world's largest country, China, provides another. In China the governing ideology has become a crass form of utilitarianism, enshrining majority interests even at the expense of justice or human liberty. That, too, offends some of our deepest intuitions.

But do these intuitions mean that the West can still be defined in terms of shared beliefs? It can offer beliefs usually described as
‘liberal’. But here we immediately encounter a problem. For in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists, and indeed in the eyes of not a few in the West, liberalism has come to stand for ‘non-belief’ – for indifference and permissiveness, if not for decadence. Why is that? And is the charge justified?

This book is an attempt to find out. Its argument rests on two assumptions. The first is that we are to understand the relationship between beliefs and social institutions – that is, to understand ourselves – then we have to take a very long view. Deep moral changes, changes in beliefs, can take centuries to begin to modify social institutions. It is folly to expect popular habits and attitudes to change overnight.

The second assumption is that beliefs are nonetheless of primary importance, an assumption once far more widely held than it is today. In the nineteenth century there was a prolonged contest between ‘idealist’ and ‘materialist’ views of historical change, with the latter holding that social order rests not so much on shared beliefs but on technology, economic interdependence and an advanced social division of labour. Even the declining appeal of Marxism in the later twentieth century did not discredit that view. Rather, in a strange afterlife, Marxism infiltrated liberal thinking, creating a further temptation to downgrade the role of beliefs. That temptation became all the greater because of the unprecedented prosperity enjoyed by the West after the Second World War. We have come to worship at the shrine of economic growth.

This book, by contrast, will take moral beliefs as seriously as possible, by looking at a series of ‘moments’ when changed beliefs began to impact on social relations over a period of nearly two millennia. That is not to say that beliefs have been the only cause at work. The story of Western development is not simple or unilinear. No cause has been uniquely powerful at all times. Nonetheless, it seems to me that moral beliefs have given a clear overall ‘direction’ to Western history.

So I tell a story about how the ‘individual’ became the organizing social role in the West – that is, how the ‘civil society’ which we take for granted emerged, with its characteristic distinction between public and private spheres and its emphasis on the role of conscience and choice. It is a story about the slow, uneven and difficult steps which have led to individual moral agency being publicly acknowledged and protected, with equality before the law and enforceable ‘basic’ rights.

A fundamental change in moral belief shaped the world we live in. But this is not to say that those who introduced or promoted that change foresaw or desired its eventual social consequences. My story is, in part, about the unintended consequences of that change of belief. Tracing those consequences is an important part of the story of Western liberalism.

Today many people in the West describe themselves as Christians, without regularly going to church or having even a rudimentary knowledge of Christian doctrine. Is this just hypocrisy or ignorance? Perhaps not. It may suggest that people have a sense that the liberal secular world they live in – and for the most part endorse – is a world shaped by Christian beliefs. If so, by describing themselves in that way, they are paying tribute to the origins of their moral intuitions.

Is it mere coincidence that liberal secularism developed in the Christian West? This book is an attempt to answer that question. Telling a story about the development of a concept over two millennia is, to say the least, not fashionable. Understandably, historians have become nervous of anything like teleological argument, surveying the damage done by historicist theories of ‘progress’ put forward in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I have tried to avoid that danger.

Nor is that the only danger. The division of intellectual labour and the sheer accumulation of knowledge today pose a great risk for anyone trying to pick a way through such a long period. Specialists are bound to have reservations, noticing omissions and distortions, if not outright mistakes. But must we abandon the attempt to identify and follow longer threads in historical development? In my view, that would be too high a price to pay.

Inevitably, this book is a work of interpretation rather than of primary scholarship. It draws on sources which I have found to be the most penetrating and original, selected from the myriad of sources available. The process of selection has, I am sure, left many valuable sources aside. Nonetheless, there are a number of historians, living and dead, whose writings strike me as both towering achievements and crucial aids in pursuing answers to the questions I explore. I am greatly indebted to their example. They are the real heroes of this
book: Fustel de Coulanges, François Guizot, Brian Tierney, Harold Berman and Peter Brown. If this book does nothing more than draw their writings to the attention of a wider readership, it will have achieved something. Yet my hope is that this book may also contribute to a better understanding of that liberal tradition which is at the core of Western identity.

A lifetime of reading, conversation and argument has shaped the pages that follow. Some of the most important friendships which have influenced me are now, alas, matters of memory: friendships with Paul Fried, Myron Gilmore, John Plamenatz, Isaiah Berlin and John Burrow. Burrow read the larger part of the manuscript before his death, providing, as always, comments that were penetrating, helpful and witty. Others who have read and commented on virtually the whole manuscript include Guglielmo Verdirame, Henry Mayr-Harting, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Edward Skidelsky. Their comments and criticisms have been invaluable. To Guglielmo and to Henry Newman I owe a special debt – for innumerable evenings when conversation ranged over all the issues of our time. Their generosity and loyalty helped to make this book possible.

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LAS
Keble College, Oxford,
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