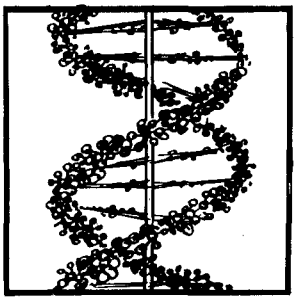
How Critical is the "Crisis" of Liberalism?

On the Self-Destruction of Freedom—By KENNETH MINOGUE



IN 1964, a well-known American political theorist introduced a collection of political essays with a section "On the Crisis, So-called, of Liberalism."[1] He was writing of a different crisis, and probably of a different liberalism, from what we may experience today, for times change and places make a difference. But he was undoubtedly right to indicate in his title a certain scepticism about the whole idea of a "crisis of liberalism." In doing so, however, he did not for a moment deny that liberalism faced serious dangers. Our problem is to disentangle the idea of a "crisis of liberalism" from the attention-grabbing rhetoric of publicists, and to consider whether the idea of crisis might play a more serious role in the business of understanding liberalism and its perils. The point from which we may begin is the observation that the term "liberalism" itself only became current in Europe during the 1830s, and that it was only a short time later (in 1847–48) that Marx and Engels declared that the closely related thing which they then called "bourgeois society" was in crisis. We thus find that liberalism was *born* to crisis.

Many of its elements were in place long before it had a name. Individualist ideas of rights were central to Enlightenment thought, and are often traced back to John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1690). But that work, in its turn, merely formulated ideas which had long been advanced in forms we should easily recognise as liberal. Some of these ideas were theological, and had to do with the invention of the new moral organ called a "conscience." Others were political, and stemmed from the revival of classical republicanism inspired by the writings of Machiavelli. Altogether then, it makes good sense to identify the term "liberalism" with the political ideas which have made modern Europe a distinctive civilisation. In all other civilisations, some idea of justice as right order has always harmonised the values of society; but, in Europe, freedom was unleashed as a coordinate value, and the consequences were in the highest degree dynamic. Modern industry was the most important of those consequences, and the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 may be understood as a howl of rage and pain demanding the restitution of justice and right order.

Born in crisis, Liberalism has remained ridden by crisis ever since. This term "*crisis*" is of Greek derivation, and gains its force from its medical usage as describing the climax of some illness at which the patient will either die or recover. A crisis is thus a matter of life or death, and the only reason the term can be used, over and over again, to describe recurring conditions in modern Europe is that we have tamed the term by metaphor, and that we often think of our world as a succession of discontinuities (or "revolutions") rather than in terms of the changing fortunes of one stable, and continuous, form of life.

The conceptual problems arising from the idea of "crisis" can be solved by recognising that what pre-eminently characterises a modern society is a love of dramatic changes and catastrophes which, with our addiction to hyperbole, we insist on calling "crises." In traditional societies, as we imagine them to be, change usually happens slowly, within the firm corsetry of the prevailing idea of right order. This does not stop catastrophes from happening—an incursion of Mongols, plagues, a succession of bad harvests—but it does mean that traditional societies resemble those lead-weighted toys which always tend to return to their original position. We, by contrast, suffer from the restlessness diagnosed by Pascal; and everything, from morals to technology, is in a ferment of change. Skirts move like yo-yos between the ankle and the pelvis, and we have hardly learned to use the gramophone before we must begin mastering tapes. Practices as disparate as family life and the writing of novels are thought to be subject to successions of crises; and old forms are ever dying. Meanwhile, on the periphery of our lives, Communists and other believers in steady-state living keep up a kind of crisis-babble, eternally announcing the final crisis which portends the onset of a revolutionary transformation.

The truth, however, is that we have become rather addicted to our crises, as anyone who reads the newspapers can see perfectly well. Crises are, to put it vulgarly, fun. No doubt they are always painful for those most affected, but they also provide challenge, novelty, and an opportunity for new people to come forward and shine. Modern Europeans have tamed the crisis, just as they have tamed the sea and the sky. The crises of the modern world are like the thrills and spills of the fairground: they are manageable forms of excitement with the

[1] David Spitz, *Essays in the Liberal Idea of Freedom* (1964), Foreword.

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risk of a nasty accident, but so circumscribed that they don't usually get out of hand.

IF THIS IS ACCEPTED as a true account of how we live now, then a real "crisis of liberalism" would have to be a kind of *meta*-crisis, a crisis in our crisis-ridden practices, a crisis to end all crises. In Communist language, such a thing is called a "revolution", and what it promises is the replacement of the anxiety of constant change by a rational set of arrangements for satisfying a fixed repertoire of desires which are referred to, in Marxist discourse, as "needs." This leads me to focus this discussion on two central questions: first, what is a "meta-crisis" of liberalism? Secondly, what are the real dangers facing our liberal civilisation as the 20th century draws to a close?

Anyone who wishes to see what a real crisis of liberalism looks like need go no further than the rest of the world. Over the last few centuries, Western manners and technology have spread to every corner of the globe, and exerted a powerful attraction. Few traditional societies have not suffered from the erosion of their traditions by the impact of the West, and given that the only way to keep up with Western power was to follow Western technology, they have all been tempted in varying degrees to establish liberal political institutions: parliaments, political parties, and the rest. What has usually, though not invariably, resulted has been a parody of liberal institutions, and in many cases the fear of disorder has led to an autocratic reaction in an effort to supplement the waning cohesion of tradition. The frenzy of Iranian politics is perhaps the best illustration of this process; the recent pendulum swing from democracy to (yet again) dictatorship in Nigeria underscores it. Nothing could testify more clearly to the attraction of Western practices than the violence of their rejection. And the problem faced by the peoples of other civilisations results from the fact that the enjoyment of liberal freedoms is only possible on the basis of a complicated set of restraints and inhibitions, invisible to the naked eye, which constitute the hidden foundations of a liberal society.

For liberty is a skill which Europeans have been developing over many centuries, and the problem of non-Europeans is like that of spectators who wish to imitate a sportsman or an artist performing effortlessly, as it seems, all manner of brilliant feats, without realising that this skill is the outcome of much patient self-discipline of which the spectator knows nothing. It all *looks* so easy: throw away the crutches of an all-prescribing tradition, and walk. All that is needed, it often seemed to outsiders, was to pick up some patter about freedom, democracy and rights, and everyone could enjoy the free and easy ways of the Westerner, with his apparently effortless combination of casualness and efficiency. As with most things in life, the benefits are more visible than the costs; and of the costs of liberalism, there are two kinds. One is to be found in the undesirable consequences of so much freedom—such as loneliness, commercialisation, a certain measure of personal corruption and the inevitable vulgarity which results from unchaining the *vulgus*. These things may well be the price we must pay in order to enjoy our own liberties. But my concern is with a different kind of cost, a cost without which liberalism would not be possible at all; and to understand this more subtle type of cost, we need to consider precisely what it is that is absolutely central to liberalism.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS of answering this question, and the first can be explained most easily if we consider how individuals were bound by authority in the Middle Ages. Everyone had a master, and that master himself had a master, all the way up to the King in one sphere, and the Pope in another. And above both of these supreme personages stood God himself. Further, in everyday life, the possibilities of change were circumscribed by customs and traditions which to a very large degree determined everything from vocation to marriage. Step by step, these restrictions were dissolved. Calvin and others stood for "Christian liberty", though they often had a most repressive way of organising it. John Milton stood for easier divorce, and an end to the censorship of publications. John Locke could recognise authority, but thought it ought to be "representative." Mary Wollstonecraft thought that women should no longer live in tutelage to their husbands. Step by step, over a very long time, individuals acquired right after right to determine virtually all the details of their own lives: what job they would take; in which country they might live; whom they would marry; what religion they would profess; how they would dress; what opinions they would utter, and what books they would read.

Now, each of these collapses of an outside authority multiplied occasions for choice. Most people saw no need to think much about religion in earlier societies: they accepted it from the local vicar. Now they were required to make up their mind on such important matters as the existence of God. As this process continued, decisions were taken out of the hands of parents, elders, magistrates, nobles, priests, kings and other notables, and put into the hands of ordinary people. At nearly every dramatic point in this progress of liberalism, prophets warned of the imminent collapse of civilisation, but it has not happened yet, and the fact that we have gone so far and can still maintain an orderly and peaceful society seems to show that "liberalisation" is easy and relatively costless.

The central problem, however, is *how* is it possible at all? If you unleash the desires and inclinations of ordinary men and women, you would seem to run the risk of precisely the disorder from which the authority of government had been required to rescue mankind. How is it that we have so far avoided such a disaster?

THE ANSWER to this question may be found if we attend to the most striking feature of the way we live. We make our public decisions by way of parliaments in which different groups of representatives criticise each other. We dispense justice by way of a ritual in which two sides debate with one another. We organise our production by allowing different producers to make what they like and charge us what they will. Competition, in other words, is built into the way we live at almost all levels of society. Even in religion and philosophy, the truth is thought to emerge, if it ever does,

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from the conflicting arguments of different sects.

We live, in other words, in an *adversarial* culture; and this feature of our lives has in recent years become a subject of great interest because there has now emerged, in Japan, a type of culture which is radically different from ours—being essentially cooperative rather than adversarial—yet which can also successfully create a modern technological economy. Now, the emergence of the Japanese model to prominence—"Capitalism and the Buddhist ethos" might be the central theme of a Max Weber in Tokyo—is important morally and politically because it dramatises the possibility that we may be able to choose between an efficient economy, on the one hand, and the competitive liberal institutions which previously seemed to be the only foundation for such an economy. Socialism has long been the *dream* of such a dissociation, but its waking forms have been inefficient and, frequently, unpleasant. Japan is, potentially, efficiency purged of liberalism.

The fact that our culture is profoundly competitive, however, only makes our original problem more difficult. Even in highly cohesive societies, conflicts between communities, personalities, cults and interests often reach an intensity which leads to violence and even civil war. Man, we know, can become "a wolf to man", and without government we are prone to sink into a Hobbesian state of nature. How much more likely this must seem to be when the very practices of society not only encourage conflict, but would seem to legitimate it. And is it not further proof of this danger that the moment any state, even a liberal state, becomes involved in a war or some other type of crisis, popular sentiment quickly demands a government of all the talents. Indeed, within living memory, Europe was powerfully affected by mass movements which sought to replace the existing liberal democracies by dictators who would give "leadership to the nation" and thus unify its energies. Most European states in early modern times were ruled by absolute monarchs, and even today, Spain, whose problems with democracy led to civil war and dictatorship in the 1930s, is an object of nervous attention to all liberals. The problem may be put in the most general terms as follows: in a competitive culture, some people win and some people lose. It must therefore generate chronic inequality, and this will always tend to destabilise society. Such an argument is found in Book VIII of Plato's *Republic*, and it is also the basis of Marxist doctrine.

To mention the doctrines of Marx, who was a notable critic of liberalism from somewhere within the liberal tradition, is to invoke the comprehensive rejection of liberalism which is summed up in the entire Marxist criticism of "capitalism." And if we look briefly at the doctrines associated with that concept, we are instructed that liberalism not only creates the conditions for an unstable society, but, worse, is the outcome of the most selfish passions of mankind. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie had simplified life into the most abstract form of conflict: that between two selfish people both seeking the same thing, a form of conflict currently discussed by political theorists and economists as a "zero-sum game." Liberals have often been their own worst enemies, and they have certainly done immense damage to their cause by theorising the competitor as a man dominated by self-interest, and competition as a form of selfishness indifferent to the needs of others. Marx derived from Jeremy Bentham and other utilitarians the idea that the moral life under bourgeois society consists simply of mutual exploitation; and against this he juxtaposed the higher moral life of the socialist community.

All of these theories betray muddle and confusion, and they may be easily refuted by pointing to the testimony of experience. Is it really the case that European societies have exhibited nothing but a narrow selfishness? Have they not abolished slavery, set up hospitals for the sick, reformed prisoners, diffused education, and made provision for the needy? The idea that a *communal* being can never be selfish is, in philosophical terms, a category mistake: precisely because they are communal beings, they do not have individual desires, recognised as such, which they may selfishly indulge. But they may certainly construe the communal situation to their personal benefit. In the relations between, say, the Untouchables of India and the castes above them, the question of selfishness never arises; but unselfishness is far from guaranteeing that moral problems have been solved.

It is more important, however, to recognise the philosophical causes of this mistake. The cause lies in being unable to distinguish between *conflict* and *competition*. In a conflict, the parties may get what they want, or not get what they want, or compromise. Competition, however, is a type of conflict which takes place within rules, and whose model is a game. When I play tennis against an "opponent", I am certainly concerned to defeat him, but if the issue were merely a matter of victory or defeat, I could guarantee a flow of continuing successes by choosing feeble opponents. In fact, it is profoundly unsatisfactory to play feeble opponents; indeed, it is profoundly unsatisfactory to keep on winning. The reason for this is that at the heart of competitive games lies an essentially cooperative enterprise. From this point of view, each player *cooperates* in bringing out the skills of the other, and the pleasure we get from the game itself (by contrast with the distinguishable pleasure we get from winning) consists in the satisfaction we find in the qualities and skills drawn out of us by the excitement of the competition.

Such a situation is entirely different from a conflict between, say, two states for a piece of land, or for some other tangible asset. This means that competition is not to be properly understood as a pure species of conflict at all, because although it involves conflict, it also involves cooperation. Nor does it have anything very much to do with selfishness, for we are perfectly capable, as we play, of appreciating the skill, and often the generosity, of our opponent. It is true, no doubt, that we may become so preoccupied with winning the game that we construe it as a form of conflict; and if we care only about winning, we may be tempted to cheat, which is an infallible sign that competition has turned into conflict.

From a traditional point of view, then, a liberal society presents a profoundly misleading appearance. It looks like nothing so much as a continuous indulgence of quarrelling, whereas it is in fact a remarkably, if disguisedly, homogeneous association of people. The proof of this lies in the inventive way in which the citizens of a liberal state can cooperate in times of war or some other national emergency. Adolf Hitler

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appears to have miscalculated the likely social cohesion of the British in the 1930s on the basis of just such a misunderstanding of a liberal society. We may put the point the other way round: a liberal society is an instrument for turning conflicts into forms of competition, and thus eliciting from its citizens a disguised form of social cohesion which constitutes what I have called the hidden foundations of liberalism.

A DISTINCTION very much like the distinction I have sketched between conflict and competition has a long history in political thought.

Machiavelli, for example, argues that the conflict between the patricians and the plebeians in Rome actually contributed to the liberty of the Romans rather than threatening it.[2] It caused the constitution to be reformed, and it enhanced the *virtu* of the citizens. His argument was very far, however, from the conclusion that *all* conflict is invigorating. The test of its beneficial character was that when Rome herself was threatened, both patricians and plebeians united in her defence. For Rome in those days was a healthy republic, and the opposite of such a condition was called by Machiavelli "corruption."

Corruption signified that the citizens lacked patriotism and put their private concerns before the public good. Nor did it matter whether such private concerns were commercial or heroic—the prosecution of a vendetta against another family, for example, could be no less corrupt than taking bribes. All involvement in purely private interests threatened the state. This conception of virtue as the effect of a patriotic character in which all men's actions were subordinated to one ultimate standard, was characteristic of republican writers who took their inspiration from Machiavelli, including Montesquieu who contributed to liberalism the theory of the separation of powers.

THE EMERGENCE of a clear understanding of the nature of competition from a rather confused intuition that conflict may have some beneficial aspects took a very long time; and it remains, even today, caviar to the general. Those who actually did understand the issues raised by liberalism, however, all attempted to answer the question of how an essential unity could be conserved amid so much competitive diversity, and they usually answered it in terms of some dominant unifying passion that could override the dangerous potentialities of conflict. Many followed Machiavelli in believing a patriotic concern for the public good to be the one essential thing, while in more recent times this idea has been intellectualised into "an agreement on fundamentals." Such a view is stated clearly in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. "We hold these truths to be self-evident", it begins, and proceeds to enumerate the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The liberal experience of the Americans is surely the most significant of all national histories in the story of liberalism, for the United States actually had the problem, on the largest scale, of incorporating into a liberal society "barbarians" who had to be taught the usages of a liberal society, because they had had no real direct experience of such living. The solution was to build up patriotism by concentrating upon symbol and legend. This kind of social cement is, however, common to all societies; and no doubt some element of it is indispensable. But what has become increasingly clear is that liberalism, as the politics appropriate to life construed as a kind of competitive game, actually rests upon a *procedural* type of unity. Conflicts are to be adjudicated in terms of a recognised set of rules, and to most genuine frustrations there corresponds some hopeful course of action, either by appeal to a higher court, or by an attempt to gain political support in an attempt to change the law. One might say that everybody *agrees* on the rules of the game; but the reality is, more precisely, that nearly everybody *practises* this kind of law-channelled existence, whatever opinions may be uttered.

WE ARE NOW in a position to recognise what makes liberalism distinctive, and, by answering that question, to develop a serious idea of what a crisis of liberalism might be.

Liberalism may be defined in terms of two socio-political conditions to which it stands opposed. The first is the Hobbesian state of nature, characterised by reciprocal frustration arising from universal insecurity. The second is any form of despotism, in which *all* government, all ordering of human affairs, is concentrated in the state or some other single source of order, with the consequence that individuals are drained of moral autonomy and become entirely creatures of impulse and need. The master concept of this latter condition is satisfaction.

These two opposites of liberalism are the abstract polarities of much human social organisation, and may also be seen approximated to in cultures which have been touched by liberalism without ever quite mastering the skill appropriate to it. Russia is one example of this; and perhaps Spain might be cited as another. Screws are always being tightened or loosened, and it is difficult to dispense with them altogether. Now, if these antitheses may be seen as constituting the dialectic of politics in many countries, liberalism may be seen as the emergence of a way of life which avoids both. It does so by a novel extension of the idea of moral and political responsibility. Liberalism is the skill of individual self-government under the law, and for this reason, it has often been construed in terms of the idea of moral autonomy.

However pleased we may be with ourselves for possessing this skill, we ought not to fall into the error of imagining that others merely *lack* it. Such a mistake would prevent us from understanding the serious reasons people have for rejecting liberalism—reasons which are constantly being introduced into our political discussions by one of liberalism's indispensable partners, conservatism. We pay a price for all the skills we develop, and the price we pay for liberalism is, perhaps, a loss of spontaneity and of the warm cohesion of

[2] *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (tr. Christian E. Detmold, New York, 1950), Book I, Ch. 3.

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many small associations in other cultures. The liberal individualist is a character with a rich variety of interests and attachments; and he often pays for that variety by a certain lack of intensity in any particular preoccupations. Further, when human beings are liberated to express themselves, they often express unlovely aspects of their inner life.

Nevertheless, by contrast with the hothouse constriction of other societies, liberalism is the only garden in which a thousand flowers do actually bloom; and it has an attraction for human beings subject to alien despotisms such as to justify the widespread hostility and hatred in which it is held and with which it must learn to live. The mere existence of a liberal society, to which the refugees may flee, makes every other form of power insecure.

If liberalism is, then, volitional autonomy under the law, the only real crisis *of liberalism* [3] would be the destruction of that autonomy. Such a destruction could only be achieved in two ways.

Firstly, if the spheres within which individuals were autonomous were to be destroyed. Secondly, if the rules within which individuals live were to become commands issuing from a single despotic source. And we may, perhaps, distinguish different ways in which the free citizen of a liberal state might succumb to the slavery of life by commandment. The most obvious way is, precisely, falling under the sway of a despot, such as has happened in the totalitarian experiences of our century. The less obvious way would develop through a steady increase in the density of regulation to a point where it began to threaten the autonomy of individuals, because every step an individual thought of taking in pursuit of his own purposes would bring him into conflict with some regulation or other. This latter threat to liberalism would be peculiarly dangerous because it might happen very gradually and, since there are good reasons for every regulation, it might advance at every step under the names of virtue, compassion, justice, or the protection of the needy.

FUNDAMENTALLY, both these threats to liberalism can be reduced to the single principle in that any threat to moral autonomy is a threat to liberalism. Now just such a threat to autonomy might come not only from a steady increase in the density of regulation, but also from slow and steady changes in the public opinion of liberal societies.

Like all practices, liberalism is based upon a number of constitutive "myths" without which divergent practices would begin to develop. I call these beliefs "myths" because they take for granted—as undoubtedly true—propositions which philosophers in a university might well find it difficult to prove or even substantiate. The most important of liberal "myths" is that each person is psychologically independent and morally autonomous. The presupposition of a liberal society, which in this case we take from the Greeks, is that if politics can be based on persuasion between citizens, then man must be a rational animal. It follows that a passionate interest (one might even call it a morbid interest) in man as an animal victimised by his environment—his passions, his parents, advertisers, and the society he lives in, etc.[4]—may lead some people to an impatience with persuasion (for creatures, thus understood, cannot be *persuaded* to the right thing) and to an addiction to a dictatorship of the righteous. For this reason, most versions of "Positivism" represent a threat to liberalism, and in a society in which such doctrines run riot, we might well talk of a "crisis." Writing in the 1930s about the way in which a philosophical doctrine he called "realism" debased the value in ordinary life of ideals and principles, the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood wrote:

> "If the realists had wanted to train up a generation of Englishmen and Englishwomen expressly as the potential dupes of every adventurer in morals or politics, commerce or religion, who should appeal to their emotions and promise them private gains which he neither could procure them nor even meant to procure them, no better way of doing it could have been discovered."[5]

Just the kind of simple-minded scepticism about moral responsibility to which Collingwood objects is the first stock-in-trade picked up by the young in modern universities. Being thus persuaded that human life is not fundamentally distinguishable from meteorology, as consisting of swirling natural elements that carry us along with them, the young are all the more prone to explain the resulting anxieties by the "catastrophism" which currently feeds its morbid imagination upon visions of nuclear holocaust, widespread starvation, environmental destruction, and the sufferings of foxes.

The more people cease to believe that the autonomy of the individual is important in itself, the more they will concentrate upon generalised results, which means *imposing* supposed desirabilities by legislation. The liberal principle of "equality of opportunity," for example, is thought to be deficient if the opportunities offered do not produce what are regarded as the statistically desirable distributions of race, class, or sex. The individual's own endeavours may therefore be by-passed; and the required result imposed by legislation. In this manner, which is, of course, precisely despotic, the determination of human affairs as the outcome of multifarious human thoughts and decisions is replaced by a single bureaucratic imperative; and one more rigid feature is clamped upon liberal societies whose flexible creativity in earlier times derived precisely from the absence of such bureaucratic impositions.

Schools and universities are notable spheres of private initiative which have, in this manner, been recently subordinated to government policies. Their fate illustrates well the steady erosion of those spheres in which individuals could actually exercise their own judgment about how, and with whom, they choose to live. The reasons given for such intrusions into privacy are, of course, always of the most virtuous; for a sentimental rhetoric of virtue and compassion is the protective colouring of most contemporary political movements. Recently, this type of development has made notable strides, especially in the United States, where all discipline in schools is required by law to conform to all the requirements of "due process"; and even in families, where

[3] The contrast, in our current atmosphere of castrophism, is with ideas about the crisis of human life and its future on this planet.

[4] I have discussed this doctrine in "The Myth of Social Conditioning", *Policy Review* (No. 18), Fall 1981.

[5] *An Autobiography* (Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 48–49.

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children may appeal to public officials specifically charged with the protection of their rights against parents. One teacher restrained a student who was disrupting a test in school, and reported that the next morning, a complaint about his behaviour having been made, "the police came to my home and arrested me. They led me out of my home in handcuffs. . . ." [6] What is remarkable about such developments as these is that the most direct type of threat to a liberal society results from a purported *increase* in human rights. It thus illustrates that many of the main dangers to liberalism derive not from such classical liberal fears as censorship, governmental secrecy, and defects of civil rights (all of which are indeed dangers, though of a familiar and manageable kind) but from implementing what seem, on the face of it, to be impeccably liberal proposals.

[6] Cited from *The New York Teacher* by Gerald Grant in "Children: Rights and Adult Confusions" in *The Public Interest*, (69), Fall 1982, p. 95.

I CONCLUDE that there is an important place in liberal thought for some concept of the crisis of liberalism, but only after it has been very carefully disentangled from the more familiar "crisis rhetoric" to which we are so addicted. Monitoring the crisis of liberalism requires an analytical preoccupation with the character of liberal societies, which change subtly from year to year; and such monitoring is necessary because liberal societies are, to a degree way beyond any other form of human arrangement, a continual voyage into uncharted waters. Every situation we meet is new. The fact that so many crises in the past have come and gone has given us the courage and the confidence not to strip off all canvas every time there is a nasty swell. But it ought not to obscure the fact that merely because we got away with some bit of liberation in the past, a similar liberalisation now will have no dire consequences. With each generation, we drift further away from the many supports of the tradition from which we arose, and it remains an open question how much our stability and our success really depended upon such ballast. It is certainly diminishing rapidly.

Anobium Hirtum

Each bible wears its token scent,
Its snuff of dust, its guarantee,
Its brewed, unhealthy testament
To genuine antiquity,
While vague collectors potter round
And dip from book to fancied book,
Uncertain between quarter-bound
Old psalters and a Pentateuch;
Find quandaries in the piled, oblique
And faded Roman letters, hear
The rustle of a Standard Greek
Releasing its bacteria.
Alive on this ramshackle stall
Religion finds a resting place,
An unhygienic festival
Of love, humility and grace,
A Babel of resistant themes
Clapped up in boards as sunlight picks
Its way along the gingered seams
And kippers each stamped crucifix.
Although their languages are dead
These leaves and spines are running wild
And what turns on them overfed,
Abundant, multiple and spoiled:
This way, perhaps, the Word plays host
And Matthew, Mark and Luke and John,
The Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Incarnate are, and nourished on.

John Levett

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