Disagreeing with a Judgemental World

The touchstone of contemporary apologetics is not *rationality* ("Is belief in God logical?") but *ethics* ("Is belief in God morally wrong?")

Often, a religious person is portrayed as a caricature: It is supposed that belief in God involves submission to absolutist and outdated moral stances. This necessarily involves the believer repressing both their naturally inquisitive mind and their naturally tender conscience. It is concluded that the religious believer has therefore embraced a sociopathy that has some good but a lot of bad and is ultimately reprehensible.

It is an understandable picture. Much has been done in the name of God that *is* reprehensible. Some fundamentalist frameworks *do* lead to the repression of intellect or conscience or both. This is the case, however, for tyrants of both religious and non-religious persuasions. It's enough to make you sceptical about the natural goodness of humanity!

But the caricature remains. It is simply presumed. The other day a young Christian I know was accosted out of the blue with the assertion, "You hate me because I'm gay and you're a Christian." It's not just a sexuality thing. Replace the word "gay" with some other descriptor (e.g. "muslim", "atheist", "scientist", "person who likes to have fun") and the dynamic remains. It is how young people of faith are

treated in the prevailing popular mood.

Ironically, of course, those who assert the caricature are actually reflecting it. It's a gavel-banging declaration: **"I judge that you are judging me and so I condemn you for it."** There is no enquiry in this statement, no generous observation or gracious listening. The caricature is projected onto the "other" irrespective of whether it fits or not. The particular dignity, principles, thoughts and feelings of that person are irrelevant: they are guilty by association with an abstraction!

We need to lead our young people into understanding this dynamic and responding in an opposite spirit, one that truly demonstrates gentleness and grace without conforming to the pressures and assumptions of a judgemental world.

The real danger is that we Christians come to agree with the caricature ourselves. We can come to accept the judgement that "we" (for some definition of us religious folk) are, by that very fact, dangerously judgemental. And then our judgemental reflection, our projection, is placed on God himself. Our wrestle with the Bible and with godly principles of Christian living collapses into a capitulation: "What God does and says is judgemental and so I judge him worthy of condemnation."

In some ways this is no surprise. It is not for no reason that the the biblical account of humanity's fall begins with a questioning of God's character. "*Did God really say? God knows that you would become like him.*"

We capitulate to the caricature when we agree with its assertion. "You're right, the Bible is clearly outdated and doesn't speak the truth as we know it." When we do this we are simply making God in our own image. The end game of that is tyranny and philosophical anarchy: There is no higher authority or principle to appeal to; we have a cacophony of

individuals asserting that what they say is true is actually what is true.

We capitulate to the caricature when we reinforce the assertion by combatting it on its own terms. "You're the one who is wrong, the Bible condemns you! You must submit or be damned!" By this we become part of the tyranny, just another one of the voices claiming that their truth wins.

We can only avoid capitulating by turning not to ourselves and some sense of self-righteousness, but by embracing confidence in the trustworthiness of God's character. That is, by growing in *faith*.

The way forward is to deliberately choose a posture of *trust* in God as a good parent. Trust is earned, and can be nurtured. It involves honesty, and takes risks: *"Yes, this part of the Bible is difficult to read. But let's wrestle with it, let's grapple it. If we stand over it we will not learn anything, but if we begin on the foundation that God is good, how then are we confronted, provoked, taught, and grown by what we read and see?"*

We know from our own experience as children of the times when we questioned our parent's character, particularly when we were being disciplined, or when a family decision takes a difficult path. But we grew to trust. And we came to understand what was going on, and to even respect and agree with what we were taught through those times. Our trust grows, and we are shaped, corrected, and transformed as we go on that journey.

This posture helps us, then, to relate to others. We don't meet judgementalism with judgementalism. We respond with the truth ("What you say I believe is not actually the case.") and an invitation to journey ("This where I've come from, this is what I'm learning at the moment. Where are you coming from?"). Or, as St. Peter did saith:

> *…in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16)*

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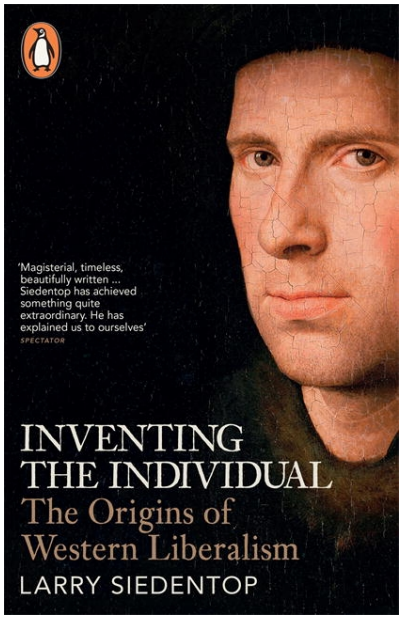
Review: Inventing the Individual – The Origins of Western Liberalism



Cultural assumptions have historical roots. It is incumbent upon anyone who takes part in public debate or social engagement to explore them. In the current moment there is a growing appreciation that when it comes to the self-evident truths of the Western world – things like human rights and democratic values – our roots are firmly and inextricably embedded in our Christian heritage.

This conclusion is not simply the stuff of political rhetoric of the *Christian Concern* variety, nor even of decent apologetics like that of CPX or the recently released *Jesus the Gamer Changer* series. It's the stuff of thorough historiography. Larry Siedentop, formerly professor of

Intellectual History at Sussex University, and fellow of Keble College, Oxford, and Lecturer in Political Thought, gives us this stimulating monograph.

Like any careful teacher, Siedentop précises himself throughout. His epilogue, "Christianity and Secularism" contains a summary of the basic building block of his argument:

> *More than anything else, I think, Christianity changed the ground of human identity. It was able to do that because of the way it combined Jewish monotheism with an abstract universalism that had roots in later Greek philosophy. By emphasizing the moral equality of humans, quite apart from any social roles they might occupy, Christianity changed 'the name of the game'. Social rules became secondary. They followed and, in a crucial sense, had to be understood as subordinate to a God-given human identity, something all humans share equally… In one sense Paul's conception of the Christ introduces the individual, by giving conscience a universal dimension… Through its emphasis on human equality the New Testament stands out against the primary thrust of the ancient world, with its dominant assumption of 'natural' inequality. (pp352-3)*

Siedentop is not, nor does he read like, a New Testament exegete or biblical theologian; he's a political philosopher. But his grappling with biblical texts is robust and fair and his understanding of early and middle Christian history is useful as a history text in its own right.

His last chapter, "Dispensing with the Renaissance" reveals his programme. The fundamental tenets of Western liberalism (moral equality and "natural rights" of individuals, representative government and institutions, and freedom of enquiry) were not novel discoveries of the modern age.

> *…I am not suggesting that the Renaissance did not matter,*

> *that it did not channel human thought, feeling and expression into new forms… But what I am maintaining is that as an historiographical concept the Renaissance has been grossly inflated. It has been used to create a gap between early modern Europe and the preceding centuries – to introduce a discontinuity which is misleading. (p337)*

His preceding chapters justify a continuity. Upon the Pauline building block of the salvation of "individual souls", which counters the priority of aristocratic or familial obligations, he notes the "demolition of ancient rationalism" that was eventually completed by Augustine (p104). Early monasticism avoids compromise with the "aristocratic world" (p93) and implements an "utterly new form of social organisation" based on "voluntary association, in individual acts of will" (p94). By the time Charlemagne attempts to reprise a Roman-like imperial rule, the "individual began to emerge as the unit of subjection, a social role as well as a moral status" (p154).

It is intriguing to see how the role of the church in the post-Carolingian feudal period *prevents* a recourse to an aristocratic illiberal world. Concepts that might now be caricatured as theocratic overreach were actually forms of emancipation. The church's insistence of marriage as a sacrament undoes the last vestiges of absolute slavery (p171) by preventing men and women being bartered and bred. The sense of "divine right" of kings is actually a great leveller (p174); the king is not king by some ontological natural attribute, but by divine providence, and is therefore obligated to God as much as any other individual.

It's a flip-side consideration that has contemporary impact. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a thoughtful person who was well versed in anti-discrimination law. In conversation about how I would approach a certain subject I began with the words, "Well, we're all sinners." To her look of dismay at such an unfortunate premise, I noted that that

this understanding is fundamentally *egalitarian:* No one can claim moral authority in and of themselves, we are all sinners. The crescendo of self-righteousness on all sides of contemporary debates indicates the value of humility that a mutual recognition of the divine could bring.

Siedentop's consideration takes us through the Cluniac reforms, in which the "purity" of monastic houses, and the freedoms of their volitional, individual members, were reinforced against local, feudal pressures. He demonstrates how the developing sense of papal sovereignty extended the moral sense of the "individual" such that it became a primary *social* role "shared equally by all persons" (p219). This inherently "bottom-up" conception shaped the development of canon law, as it grew to support the centralised papacy, bringing a form of universality of rights and obligations. Civil structures were only later to catch up and, in so doing, moved the social framework away from realms towards nation-states with an embryonic social contract. And finally, the philosophical pieces of liberalism are fully in place as the Franciscan movement, countering the scholastic infatuation with Aristotelian rationalism, emphasised divine freedom (free from the constraint of a more fundamental essence or ideal) and a consequent human agency.

And all of this before the Renaissance!

It is only in the tumult of the Reformation, as the *enforcement* of belief becomes a prevalent political and social reality, that Siedentop sees the liberal ideas becoming manifest as an anti-clericalism, sowing the seeds that germinate and grow throughout the modern period and even bear fruit today.

Sidentop's history-telling is compelling and convincing. All would do well to ingest it, certainly before rejecting *fait accompli* the Christian world view as inherently repressive and totalitarian.

But the bigger question this raises for me is something of a "so what?" There are two aspects to this:

Firstly, to the extent that liberalism is virtuous, how much does the current irreligious age put our liberalism at risk? Christian origins might be apparent, but not conceptually necessary for many thoughtful liberals. What do we lose if we lose the understanding of origins? What difference does it make?

I suspect the difference at this point is not sociological but epistemological, and we must perhaps consider different *instantiations* of liberalism in the contemporary setting. You can have multiple points of view that share Siedentop's liberal characteristics, but which vary greatly in application. The current differences on gender and sexuality are the prime example. For some, (ironically both traditional conservative and classical feminist), individual freedom is found in embracing and defending the biological aspects of human being as an essential part of identity. For others, individual freedom is to transcend or reject not just social constructions but the biological realities to which they attach. Both are "liberal" in their own internal sense, but are also at odds. From either point of view, the other constrains individual freedom.

I can therefore understand the argument by which the rejection of the Christian epistemological ground is seen as a path toward an illiberal "liberalism." This is evident in current popular rhetoric (the "intolerance of tolerance," "slippery slope" etc).

Secondly, to the extent that liberalism is not the gospel, what correctives are needed? We do well to focus on individualism, and recognise its primordial rejection of familial aristocracy. But where do concepts such as community and family and plurality enter in? There is power in introspection, but the gospel is more than just alleviating

the anxiety of the introspective conscience, it is about the commencement and completion of a *"chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation"* in which there is an *interdependence* of persons.

The postmodern reprise of both relationship and experience is a necessary corrective within the grand flow of philosophical history, and one that the Christian worldview is yet to adequately inform or harness. Any attempt needs a view of history that would learn a great deal from Siedentop.

A Parentless Church in the Orphaned West?

We have an ongoing task of considering the culture around us for the sake of the gospel. We *"live in the world"* but do not act like the world. Rather, we *"take every thought captive"*, which is not about our inner thought-life and has more to do with the task of simultaneously participating in and pushing-back at our surrounding culture.

The task involves this: What are some of the defining characteristics of the West? Where is the church capitulating to or, alternatively, *subverting* our cultural narrative with the gospel? They are the rubbing points of our mission, our proclamation, our relevance.

One Western characteristic we have encountered is the prevalence of *fear*. The fear of falling, particularly in the

middle classes, is a point of contact for the gospel of *trust* and *hope.*

A second characteristic is a peculiar individualism with an honour-shame shape. You're individually placed within a herd in which you are ranked by some descriptor such as school results, bank balance, or postcode. Honour and shame pertains to perceived movement in that rank. Perceptions as to where you stand matter as much as reality, and poor presentation can become self-fulfilling. This a point of contact for the gospel which honours individuals as image-bearers of God and values the body life of a renewed Jesus-shaped community.

A third characteristic is the subject of this post: It is a collective sense of ***parentlessness***. Our society exhibits aspects of *orphanhood*. And the greatest concern is the extent to which the church which prays "Our Father…" readily adopts this same sense in thought and practice.

What do we mean by it?

In vague and limited terms, some observations that describe this characteristic are:

"You are on your own." The community spirit, that vague but certain sense that we each belong to a "team" of some sort has waned. This does not preclude interaction, or times and places where people can connect and share in anything from frivolities to more serious causes; but in the end I am not my brother's keeper, and my neighbour and I owe each other nothing. "Pulling together" is only of utilitarian value, and not an end in itself.

Cynical Leadership. Political leadership is a stark example. Here, leadership is not about inspiration, it is simply an algorithm, a feedback loop of wedge issues, focus groups, and the bartering of winners and losers in which principle is irrelevant. We have ideology but no ideals. We are called to self-interest but not to shared identity or purpose.

Statesmanship has been deconstructed. Our debates and votes have become mechanical spins of a sloganeered poker machine.

Fearful Silence. Perhaps as an overreaction to bygone paternalism, we lurch between fear of ourselves (that we might impose and control) and fear of rejection (that our pearls will be treated as swill). And so we tend to simply stop saying anything, one generation to another and each to their own. No one is raised up to purpose or vocation. Rather than being covered and nurtured and raised up into their potential, all must fight for their place, seek their own sustenance, and justify their value. Elders are just old people, and young people have a divine right to not only "find their way" but to do so from first principles, standing at the feet of fading giants. Withholding insight, we hold unthinking belligerence to be self-evident. The concept of "Founding Father" is extinct.

The end result has society bearing the hallmarks of orphanhood: An uncertain identity, an unanswered questioning of who *we* are; and a fear of rejection lingering as a subtle self-centredness that orbits the numbing false-comfort of entertainments. Our world is uncontrollable, and so we curl up into passivity, only bothering to be moved when there's something that "they" should do.

Now this is social commentary, not an observation of how well or otherwise mothers and fathers raise their children. Nevertheless, it does inform how family-life is pressured by prevailing assumptions of how things should be.

And it also informs the church's application of the gospel.

The gospel begins with a good good Father, who has *reconciled us to himself through Christ* and sends his Spirit by which we can respond with the rejuvenating childlike cry of *"Abba, Father."* The gospel invites us to turn to Christ, and so enter into the spiritual family that he heads. There we have

a certain identity, love that overcomes fear, and a call to purposeful action. Our heavenly Father knows us, takes risks for us, calls us into the fullness of ourselves in him, and so binds his people together with love, affection, mutual recognition and *godly provocation*.

The most inspiring Christian movements model this family. Irish band *Rend Collective* grabs hold of the Great Commission, and as *family* they go. We've seen people try to emulate the energy of youth festival *Soul Survivor* – big music and loud lights – and fail to see that it only works because those who make it happen do it as *family*.

Families share life, spur one another on, and *know* one another. Parents don't just instruct and teach, they *breathe life,* they feel the wellbeing of each member in their own bones. They pour themselves out and are wearied, for sure, but they *delight* and are rewarded by the family's growth. And all the while they hold their Father's hand.

Read Paul's letters and you see his apostolic *father* heart beating the whole time. He never goes alone. And he speaks of his people:

> *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 1 Thessalonians 2:19*

Yet for so many, the loneliest place on earth is the church pew. Church can be many things – a product to buy, a message to contemplate, a program in which to participate. Our strategies can be clever, and our structures professional and proper. Our job descriptions can be precise, and our line management clear and fair. But without a sense of family, our Christianity is paint-layer thin, deep gets swallowed up by shallow, and we are yet another dusty bowl in the world's wilderness.

The recent re-attention on discipleship steps towards the deeps we need to recover and re-dig. Discipleship involves a recognition of "household", the sharing of life, and training through apprenticeship. It invokes the "band of brothers" family as the outward mission is pursued.

The next step perhaps, is deeper yet; it is towards an apostolic *adoptive* heart, which doesn't just *train*, but *calls* and *covers*. This next step can't be manufactured. Perhaps it's simply what happens when the Father heart of God stirs us anew. But we know we need it, this world and ourselves.

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Pioneering Mission and Authoritative Dissent

It's always great to get in conversation with stimulating people who understand the dynamics of mission in the church and all that's in play and at stake when pioneering is needed. One of the things that happens is that words and phrases get used that state a concept or an experience that you've always been aware of but have struggled to describe. With new words comes an opportunity for reflection.

Recently we had cause to reflect on the concept of "dissenter." It's in two parts, **"pathfinding dissenter"** and **"authority dissenter."**

They're not terms we've coined. You'll find reference to it books such as Arbuckle's *Refounding the Church: Dissent for Leadership*, which I haven't read but plan to. It's in a whole bunch of pioneering ministry material, which you can google for, but which I also haven't read. All that I say below are my thoughts, capturing our experience through in these terms.

The concept of **"pathfinding dissenter"** is readily grasped. Everyone understands that for something new to happen there needs to be a form of leadership that is constructively *discontent* with the status quo and simply refuses to agree that the way things are always done is the best way forward. This form of leadership, when done well, pokes and prods, questioning assumptions and the cultural "givens." The discontent is entered into and wrestled with, preferably in a gathering community of the like-hearted, and a pathway forward is discovered and followed.

To others, it may not look like a path. Indeed, it is sometimes the task of the dissenting explorers to "toss their caps" over an impossibly high wall so they can find their way. But this is why *dissent* is a good word to use. It's a disagreement with the presumed impossible, it blazes a trail, it gets new things done.

Gill and I have had the joy of walking with pathfinding dissenters. For us, the phrase was "damn the torpedoes" and for an all-too-brief season it was the way of new things.

It's the term **"authority dissenter"** that has intrigued me. But, of course, it makes sense also. The authority dissenter is the one who interfaces between the pathfinder and organisational structures. *They have authority, and they recognise, release, cover and connect with the constructive pathfinding dissenters.*

They have institutional authority but a pioneering spirit.

They also share the same constructive discontent. They also dissent from the cultural presumptions of the status quo. They also understand viscerally that new paths ahead need to be found and forged. And they champion and support the pathfinders, without getting in their way. They take their hands off, create the space, and protect where needed.

An ineffective nerdy analogy perhaps: It's the wisdom of Gandalf, and then Aragorn, who allow the ringbearer and his friends to forge their own path, while they get on with the jobs that need doing and the wars that need waging, all the while watching, believing, and drawing away the enemy fire.

Without the authority dissenter, the pathfinders will still go ahead – the pioneering spirit cannot easily be quenched – but they will do so disconnected. Their task will be harder and the pathfinders will struggle. But most importantly, the organisation will also be disconnected, without a way to follow along the new ways forward, and with a diminished sense of "blessing and being blessed in return."

The authority dissenter is a permission giver, but of a particular sort. Many effective leaders will hear proposals and the creative ones will give permission to make it happen. But the authority dissenter doesn't just give permission to what can be known ("Go and do what you have said you will do."), they give permission to the *unknown* ("Go, and may the Lord show you your path.")

Authority dissenters can cover the pathfinders in all manner of ways, from providing resources, to dealing with and removing bureaucratic overheads, to bringing people into community with one another. They are the champions that justify the pioneers to whoever sticks their nose in, so that the pioneers are released from the ever-present weariness of having to justify every step (and mis-step) to eagle-eyed naysayers.

And here is an important dynamic: the authority dissenter does not demand primary loyalty. The relationship with pioneers is not that of patron-client. It is a parental-release dynamic.

The analogy is this: I expect a certain high degree of loyalty from my children. But as they forge their own path, those loyalties will rightly and appropriately shift, most clearly towards the formation of their own family.

In pioneering it is the same: as pathfinders scale their walls and go through fire together there will be a mutual loyalty which should not be tampered with. As a pioneer leader passes through trials and moves in the charism that necessarily follows, their chief loyalty will be towards those they serve and serve alongside.

At this point, without an authority dissenter, the organisation will try and claim it's prize, or like a clinging mother-in-law, try to put it in its place and demand its dues. But the authority dissenter is there to make more room – the space given to the pioneer at the beginning of the journey is now extended to those who have been found at the end and along the way. Because it is clear: the new thing will expand in God's grace, and the old will either move and embrace it, reject and abandon it, or be cracked and broken by it.

The authority dissenter is there to be the point of embrace, taking upon themselves the points where it rubs and wears, mending the cracks, and helping the blessings flow both ways.

Gill and I have had "authority dissenters," whose authority was episcopal. It was a foundational blessing. In other ways, though, we've had to cover ourselves: arching our backs against church machinery that would squash the fragile new things that were growing. It's wearisome and wrong to run up and down the path, pushing with the pathfinders at one point, pushing back at the machinery at another.

My reflection concludes: The authority dissenter, the cover of

the apostolically hearted, is not just important, it is essential. We look for innovative pioneers to push us outwards. But that’s not enough. We must also incorporate into ourselves, and give authority to, those who can recognise, release, cover and connect with those who will do what we need to do next.