

Back to the Future: Confronting the Market State by Re-Affirming the Common Good An Essay in Political Theology

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REA: A Journal of Religion, Education and the Arts, Issue 7, 2011, <http://rea.materdei.ie/>

Introduction

This paper will explore the concept of the 'prevailing age' and its implications for theology. I specifically chose the term 'prevailing age' rather than that of the 'secular age' used by Charles Taylor because I believe that 'secular' alone is not sufficient to define our prevailing age.

The paper sets out to do two things. First it attempts to explore what is peculiar to the prevailing age. Here I will draw on Taylor, specifically his views on social imaginaries, and on an American constitutional lawyer, Philip Bobbit, who deals extensively with what he calls the 'market state'. Having sketched what I see as particular to the prevailing age, I will then explore the implications for theology, more particularly for political theology, using the work of David Hollenbach.

Current Social Imaginaries

I turn first to Charles Taylor. Taylor claims that 'we' share a legacy dating from Grotius and Locke which sees society as existing for the (mutual) benefit of individuals and the defence of their rights. Further, this conception of moral order has evolved and has been moulded by newly emerged social imaginaries over the last four centuries. A social imaginary is a way in which people conceive of their social existence and it describes how they see themselves fitting together with others. It is a way ordinary people think of their social surroundings, based on theories often only in the possession of a small minority, and which make possible common practices and a widely

shared sense of legitimacy. Social imaginaries are both descriptive and prescriptive. They describe the way people believe things to be, but also how people think they should be. Taylor outlines three social imaginaries that have wrought the transformation of our conception of this moral order – the economy, the public sphere and the sovereign people.

The Economy

The first 'social imaginary' introduced by Taylor is 'the economy'. In the eighteenth century the conception of order begins to be seen in a new light. An 'interlocking set of activities of production, exchange and consumption, which form a system with its own laws and its own dynamic' becomes part of the imaginary through which people see their society. This is of course famously illustrated in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. The 'invisible hand' operates, securing mutual benefit, while individuals pursue their own ends. The crucial factor here is that this enmeshing of individuals in mutual benefit is not an order of collective action. Indeed 'the "market" is the negation of collective action' (Taylor 2007, 183).

The Public Sphere

Taylor next presents us with the imaginary of the 'public sphere'. There are numerous public spaces where debate takes place, but there is an overarching common space where members of society meet through a variety of media – print, electronic and face-to-face – to discuss matters of common interest leading to a common mind. This is a locus which potentially can engage everybody and lead to a common mind. Thus constituted, it has acquired a normative status; government ought to listen to it. Crucially, this has come to be seen as an essential feature of a free society - and this public sphere is outside power. It is not itself an exercise of power. It is an 'outside' thing that checks power, and it is constituted solely by the common actions of discussion and debate themselves. There is no need for some action-transcendent or higher order power to instantiate it. It is instantiated by itself, by the discussion in the public sphere.

The Sovereign People

The third imaginary which Taylor suggests underpins the modern self-perception of society is the concept of the 'sovereign people'. Hierarchy, kings, lords and masters have given way to this concept of the sovereign people. An idealised Natural Law has been appealed to; for instance in the USA, 'truths held self-evident' are evinced by 'we the people'. The shift has been to see elections as the only source of legitimate power.

The Direct Access Society

The three social imaginaries described above – the economy, the public sphere and the sovereign people – now underpin how we see our society operating. They have led us to a direct access society. No longer is access to opportunity mediated by some higher power as was the case in previous vertical societies. The principle of modern horizontal society is radically different. Each of us is equally distant from the centre. The three imaginaries are radically secular, in the sense of being of this age, and needing no action-transcendent origin.

The Emergence of the Market State

My second interlocutor is the American constitutional lawyer Philip Bobbitt, who suggests that we are moving from the nation state to the market state. Bobbitt suggests that the Peace of Paris, signed by the members of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in November 1990, marked the end of what he terms the Long War, and led to the triumph of parliamentary democracy. The Long War of the twentieth century established which form of the nation state would be in the ascendancy. The Long War began in August 1914, with the outbreak of World War I and continued to the last decade of the century. It was a war between three competing versions of the nation state – parliamentary democracy, fascism and communism. Parliamentary democracy emerged ascendant.

Bobbit, however, suggests that the nation state in our time is already in decline. It is withering and being replaced by the market state. The nation state is threatened on a number of fronts:

(1) It can no longer guarantee the security of its citizens. Weapons of mass destruction mean that borders are no longer secure. Security threats do not even necessarily come now from other states.

(2) Trans-national threats – disease, displacement of populations, climate changes – also ignore borders.

(3) In welfare matters the nation state is also vulnerable. Bad monetary policies anywhere in the world are reflected within minutes on the Reuters screens in the trading rooms of the world. The control of the private movement of capital has given way to the virtually uninhibited flow of capital internationally. A consequence is a threat to the ability of nation states to be able to provide continuous improvement to the welfare of their peoples.

(4) Again, at the level of communications there is erosion, erosion of national cultures. Equality between ethnic groups is a threat to the nation state.

Bobbit is suggesting that no nation can assure its citizens of protection from weapons of mass destruction. No nation state can effectively control its own currency. No nation state can protect its own culture and its own way of life. No nation state can protect its citizens from trans-national threats such as disease or climate-related threats. Hence, the market state which depends on international capital markets and multinational business to create stability. Its governance institutions are less representative than those of the nation state. It assesses its economic success in terms of the extent that it can secure more goods and services for its citizens, but it minimizes its distributive function. It exists to maximise the opportunities of its people, and its yardstick for evaluation will be the quantifiable. It will be largely indifferent to norms of justice, and it will be difficult to get people to make sacrifices for a state that does not promote their cultural values. In summary it will exist to reflect, implement, and diversify individual choice.

The Prevailing Age: Implications for Theology

Let me now pause and review what has emerged from my two authors. They come from two different disciplines, and are embarked on two different journeys. Nonetheless, each ends up looking at the market, explicitly so in the case of Bobbit, and in Taylor's case by focusing on the 'economy'. Each is looking at the market in both a descriptive and a prescriptive manner. They both suggest that the concept of 'market' in defining the state is descriptive, describing the prevailing conception of the state that is in common currency. At the same time they also seem to suggest that that concept is prescriptive. Moderns expect things to be such. I do not read either Taylor or Bobbit as suggesting that this conception of the state is normative – no, prescriptive. Moderns expect things to follow such a pattern, expect that this is the way things should be. Moreover, the 'prevailing age' that I have identified using these two authors is one redolent of the 'tolerance' of radical liberal individualism.

The implications of this world view are manifold. I identify here only four that are, I believe, salient for theology, more specifically political theology. First, we are here dealing with a conception of how people relate to each other in an altogether more secular way than heretofore. I use 'secular' here in Taylor's sense. It is a society that is because it is. This is the way we relate to each other. There is no action-transcendent provenance. Second, the 'invisible hand' of the economy trumps all attempts to describe how we might organise civil society. Collective action cedes to individualism. Professional economists will of course protest against my interpretation of the 'invisible hand' here, and explain that an unregulated market is not conceivable. Perhaps this is one area where theologians and economists might engage. When is a market not a market? Third, the rules that will apply between states in a society of market states will be dominated by commerce, not by law, as was the position in the case of the society of nation states. Witness the place of gas in the EU/Russia balance. Indeed the forces used by the market state will be markedly different from those used by the nation state to maintain order. Consider, for instance, the war in Iraq (2003) and the

forces used by the USA there. Private military companies or private military contractors (PMCs) featured commonly. They supplied security for government employees. Fourth, the market is not, and does not see itself, as a distributor of justice. It works by different laws. Where in this scenario should justice figure?

A Suggested Path: Re-instating the Common Good

I conclude by suggesting that we need, as David Hollenbach the American Jesuit theologian suggests, to re-assess the attitudes that shape the way we live together, our public philosophy, or what Michael Sandel calls 'the political theory implicit in our practice, the assumptions about citizenship and freedom that inform our public life' (Sandel 1996, 4). I suggest that the concept of the 'common good' is an instrument apposite to this purpose. I am persuaded by Hollenbach's theological reflection which leads him to what he terms a 'pluralistic-analogical' understanding of the common good. He sees the liberal 'tolerance' perspective, rooted in liberal individualism, as blocking action. He proposes an alternative – intellectual solidarity based on the dignity and human rights of individuals who are fully defined as persons because they live in relationalities. He further grounds his position theologically by appealing to analogical personalism, which sees the human person in an analogical position to the perfect Persons of the Triune God, who are defined in their relationality. The human person, analogically, finds definition also in relationality, but is separated from others by finiteness.

So, in a 'pluralistic-analogical' understanding of the common good, Hollenbach sees the person called to relationality with other individuals, pursuing solidarity in the multiple 'societies' of relationship in which he or she finds him or herself, but realising that the ultimate good is eschatological. This perspective sees human persons relating to fellow human persons in a plurality of fora, only one of which is the state, pursuing a transformation of these fora in anticipation of the ultimate common good. Indeed this analysis implies the distinction between the state and civic society. Civic society is wider than the state and the common good is 'an ensemble of goods that

embody the good of communion, love, and solidarity to a real though limited degree in the multiple forms of human interaction' (Hollenbach 2002, 136).

Conclusion

My argument is that 'secular age' is not sufficient to describe the current age. I have chosen an alternative, if awkward, description, the 'prevailing age'. That age has implications for how we assess the attitudes that shape the way we live together. Because it is so firmly rooted in the value of 'tolerance' and the need to enhance the capacity for individuals to enlarge their potential for so-called self-realisation, it eschews any notion of solidarity. Indeed it could be argued that it may ultimately in its radical individualism and prescriptive outlook contain the seeds of its own destruction precisely because it ignores the demands of solidarity.

I do not however contest the 'givenness' of the 'prevailing age'. I broadly accept the arguments that Taylor makes using his 'social imaginaries'. Equally I broadly accept the Bobbit argument that we are confronted with 'market state' values at the end of what he describes as the Long War. However, I argue that our response needs to confront these givens and offer an alternative way of living together. My suggestion is that we need to move beyond the state and take account of civic society. From a theological perspective I am arguing, with David Hollenbach, for an envisioned concept of the common good. I am suggesting that the political domain has the potential for a partial embodiment of the full human common in a politics that seeks greater human solidarity, not just toleration or the protection of individuals in the 'prevailing age' (see Hollenbach 2002, 136).

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