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2006

Review of: The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism, by Christopher J. Insole

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Recommended Citation

Stiltner, B. "Book Review: The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19.2 (2006): 247-51. Web.

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Review of: *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism*, by Christopher J. Insole. London: SCM Press, 2004. viii + 200 pp. pb. £ 30. ISBN 0-334-02957-0.

Appeared in: *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19.2 (2006): 247–51.

ISSN: 0953-9468 / **EBCSO Accession Number:** 21901919

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Against the grain of much contemporary Christian theology, Christopher Insole's *The Politics of Human Frailty* takes on the challenge of theologically defending political liberalism.

Specifically, he defends a strand of political liberalism 'informed by the theological conviction that the human person is a creature incapable of its own perfection, although nonetheless called to and made for this perfection' (p. vii). Insole, University Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion at the University of Cambridge, attends to philosophers and theologians primarily in the British tradition, but also on the American side. Insole advances his argument mostly through readings of other authors. Positively, Insole reads both early liberals, such as Edmund Burke, and (more surprisingly) contemporary philosophers, such as John Rawls, as thinkers with whom Christians need have no quarrel. Those who come up for criticism in the book are not contemporary liberals who are hostile to religion, but communitarian-minded philosophers, theologians, and politicians—from early American evangelicals to the contemporary Radical Orthodox theologians—who would impose on society a grand plan for the common good. In the Augustinian worldview that Insole commends, such grand planning is a road to ruin, for it soon runs roughshod over human individuality. Political thought and institutions must instead be sensitive to our fallen condition.

Since the term ‘political liberalism’ is sometimes narrowly associated with Rawls, it is important to understand the sense in which Insole uses it. Political liberalism is ‘the conviction that politics is ordered towards peaceful coexistence (the absence of conflict), and the preservation of the liberties of the individual within a pluralistic and tolerant framework, rather than a search for truth (religious or otherwise), perfection and unity’ (p. 5). Insole begins the book with examples of theological criticisms of political liberalism as individualistic, atomistic, and unconcerned with community and tradition. He says that even those who present such a critique in a nuanced fashion (such as Robert Song and Oliver O’Donovan) still fail to appreciate the broad benefits of liberalism. Having framed the debate historically, Insole turns to evidence from historical and contemporary writers. Burke, often presented as a ‘conservative’ but really representing the classical strand of political liberalism, is one of the heroes of the narrative. Burke has a ‘profound and passionate sense of human imperfectability, facility, and complexity, which gives his thought an allergy to metaphysical generalization, extremism and progressivism’ (p. 33). Owing to this sensibility, Burke criticized both the French Revolution and the heavy hand of British rule in India and America. His support for rational, ordered liberty reflects his perception of a natural-theological order that is beyond human construction; however, it is an ‘obscured order’ that humans cannot claim to understand fully. Thus, there are warrants in Burkean liberalism both for valuing religious traditions and for forbidding the state to take official positions on questions of religious truth.

Obviously, historical context matters. The modern political liberal John Rawls cannot be placed alongside Burke to reveal perfect correspondences. Indeed, the word ‘liberalism’ did not come into use until after Burke. But Insole places Burke and Rawls in a single genealogy, suggesting that the differences between them are fundamentally practical ones regarding the best

way to preserve liberal protections (p. 22). Rawls has come under steady theological and communitarian criticism for his requirement of public reason, which obliges citizens and leaders in a liberal society to present a rationale for the use of coercive power in terms that all citizens can understand. Insole notes that the principle of public reason is an ethical ideal (not a law), is limited to rationales for coercive power, and still allows citizens to make religiously based arguments as long as they can also provide secular ones (Rawls's famous 'proviso'). Therefore, Insole defends Rawls against the objection that this principle is unfair to citizens who are religious believers. Two features of this justification for public reason receive particular attention from Insole. First, he defends Rawls' notion of reciprocity, a negative Golden Rule ('do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you') with respect to coercing others to your political point of view. Second, Rawls acknowledges the complexity and obscurity of political judgments. According to Insole, both these features of Rawls's theory match with Burke's commitments and, importantly, with a Christian anthropology of human frailty. He likewise finds parallels between Rawls and the theological hero of the narrative—Richard Hooker. Like Burke, Hooker lived too early to be called a 'political liberal' in any recognizable sense, but he lent theological argument to a political tradition that presaged liberalism. In the context of 1590s, when radical Puritans sought to purify the Church of England of Catholic elements, Hooker's distinction of the visible church and invisible church had ecclesial and political ramifications: it ruled out the Puritans' intolerant judgment of fellow Christians and forbade the government to do God's work of saving souls.

There are other strands of liberal tradition, of course. Insole contrasts the Burkean-Rawlsian strand with a more overtly religious strand in order to show that the former better respects his interpretation of Christian anthropology. A popular American strand of liberalism

weaves together passion for freedom and democracy with a Calvinist-Puritan eschatology that pits forces of good against evil. This ‘crusading liberalism’ believes that America has a unique, God-given mission to bring freedom and democracy to the world. Insole finds evidences of crusading liberalism in President George W. Bush’s speeches and in representative earlier figures such as Jonathan Edwards, President John Adams, and Social Gospel preacher Josiah Strong. (Here and elsewhere, Insole acknowledges the dangers of distortion that come with categorization. His goal is to write down a popular American tune so that we can hear how many disparate figures weave notes of that tune into their sermons, speeches, and writings.) Despite its commendable zeal for improving society, this liberalism violates much of the liberal spirit: it misses Burke’s caution about grand planning. Identifying these weaknesses enables Insole to criticize the assumptions of ‘the war on terror’, the extreme passivism of Christian pacifists, and the extreme activism of the anti-globalization movement. His Augustinian eschatology recommends humility and ‘negotiated, time-consuming, and politically fraught’ processes of reform rather than dramatic revolutions (p. 123).

The final move in Insole’s argument is to censure Radical Orthodoxy. Radical Orthodoxy is the project of mostly Anglican theologians, spearhead by John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock. It condemns post-Enlightenment liberalism for embracing atomism and a will-to-power; it rejects many theological attempts to correlate faith and secular reason; and it stresses ecclesial practice as the animating force of a distinctive community. For reasons suggested at the beginning of this review, Insole finds these writers’ charges against liberalism wanting, and he discerns in their Orthodoxy several recommendations that violate his Augustinian view of human frailty. Radical Orthodoxy also violates what Insole sees as Anglicanism’s fine theological sensibility, which is its refusal to limit the scope of the universal

church. Insole compares Radical Orthodox theologians with Royalist theologians during the Stuart dynasty of the early 1600s. These Royalist theologians' interpreted natural law to support political programmes directly. They were comfortable identifying the visible with the invisible church, and having the monarch supervise both. Insole aligns himself with the common-law movement of the day, which took the alternative of humility, moderation, and pragmatism. The common lawyers were humble about their power to understand obscured order, and thus were cautious about enacting a political common good.

Insole's defence of political liberalism on theological grounds is refreshing and needed. As one can see, Insole's use of authors is wide-ranging—and in this review, I have only touched on about half of the major figures he discusses. This wide historical reading is more often found among communitarian-minded philosophers and theologians than among liberals, so it is refreshing to see Insole try to beat the communitarians at their own game. Insole's wide-reading and shifting between past and present thinkers often makes the argument dizzying, but the book repays careful reading. Insole has a fine touch with non-theological figures, and draws as much of his argument from them as from theological sources. His method is bound to raise concerns about whether he does justice to all the figures he treats and whether his analogies between past and present take adequate account of social-historical location. When so many figures are treated in a mere 200 pages, historians and experts in the thought of specific thinkers will find points on which to cavil. It would then be important to remember Insole's purpose of theologically defending political liberalism by drawing out compatible theologians and political thinkers in certain eras of English history. Insole is aware of the risk of stretching his historical analogies and reading figures selectively, and that awareness keeps him from overreaching.

A more important line of criticism asks Insole to acknowledge what happens in others strands of liberalism. For all of liberalism's benefits, critics are not drumming up baseless charges when they say that political liberalism in practice can isolate and burden religious believers. Examples that give concern include France's ban on Muslim schoolgirls wearing headscarves, U.S. judicial opinions that burden Native American users of sacramental peyote, and U.K. anti-terrorism initiatives targeted at mosques. On the level of theory, liberal reformers from Jeremy Bentham to Sigmund Freud to Richard Dawkins have argued that religion should be thoroughly marginalized. In light of such examples, Insole's sympathetic reading of liberalism must be coupled with two other approaches. The first is to acknowledge and analyse strands of liberalism that have been decidedly hostile to religion. The second is to develop a positive account of how churches, religious citizens, and theological ideas play a constructive role in liberal democracies. Insole gives some indications of these contributions sprinkled throughout his narrative; it is likely that they point to one or more coherent models of Christian political engagement that still avoid the dangers of intolerant grand-planning. One cannot expect Insole to have fully taken on these other two tasks. But as he asks the theological critics of liberalism to take a more complete view of liberalism, they may rightly ask the same of him. Bringing together defences and criticisms will yield a full and fair theological appreciation of political liberalism.