

Matt Andersen

DPhil Candidate in Intellectual History at Brasenose College, University of Oxford
Editor, Oxford Centre for Intellectual History

Abstract: Christian Realism vis-à-vis the Liberalism of Fear

Postwar liberalism in the United States and Western Europe has often been subject to critique due to its pessimistic and anti-utopian tendencies. This is indeed the case in Samuel Moyn's groundbreaking new book 'Liberalism Against Itself'. Moyn condemns the Cold War liberal tradition as a betrayal of the spirit of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism, on the grounds that it abandoned its progressive, utopian, and optimistic outlook. According to Moyn, by abandoning the Enlightenment as a source for liberal knowledge, Western intellectuals such as Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr reinvented liberalism into a minimalistic creed and defined its highest goals as simply the protection of the individual from state violence. In doing so, liberalism became a doctrine that was more focused on the negative goal of avoiding totalitarianism than the positive vision of building more prosperous and just societies. It was self-described by one of its most influential acolytes, Judith Shklar, as a 'liberalism of fear'. Moyn argues this paved the way for the more individualistic and materialistic neoliberalism that emerged as the hegemonic doctrine in the late twentieth century, the ideology he regards as the root of all the West's problems.

In this iconoclastic takedown, the Christian intellectuals Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield are also swept into the critique. Moyn blames Niebuhr, Butterfield, and the broader transatlantic Christian realist tradition for reviving the Augustinian idea of original sin and using it as an ontological base for liberal theory. This only fuelled the pessimistic and unambitious brand of liberalism that was propagated during the Cold War. In this paper I will challenge this unfair critique of the Christian realist tradition by providing a more theologically holistic and historically contextualised presentation of the core presuppositions of the movement. Christian realism was a rich politico-theological tradition that emerged in Britain and the United States in the early 1930s, reaching its peak by the early 1960s. Christian realism is best understood as a discursive intellectual movement, rather than a fixed and stable idea with a clear and watertight definition. It was an attempt by theologians to superimpose the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological presuppositions from Jewish and Protestant theology to answer the pressing questions of social and political theory of the mid twentieth century crisis of democracy. While original sin was a key feature of the Christian realist tradition, its importance has been vastly overstated. The idea of sin was always counterbalanced by the Christian idea of hope and redemption. Far from a negative liberalism focused solely on avoiding the worst, Christian realism was an attempt by theologians to forge a middle way between pessimism and utopia.