

Nic, John, Fr James, Sandy from the University of Notre Dame Australia, guests, professor Pabst. How do we make sense of the world of Donald Trump, Brexit, Viktor Orbán, Pauline Hanson and the like? For a long time the pollsters and pundits told us in grave or smug tones that it was impossible that such people or ideas would win the day: in the end the people and their would-be leaders would fall in line with the traditional political choices, if tweaked a bit. They were proved very wrong, and this highlighted a real deficit in our political and cultural analysis that a new generation of thinkers such as Adrian Pabst are at last filling in for us.

Dr Pabst has demonstrated tonight that the contemporary political picture is much more complex than the commentators with their simple left-right binaries allowed. He considered the role of faith in contemporary ‘populist’ politics, the role of ‘secular liberalism’, and the role of nationalist, traditionalist and other atavistic ‘fundamentalism’. He concluded with some brief reflections on the thought that “if perverted religion represents a global threat, it is even more so the case that in revealed religion lies social salvation” – a claim that I, for one, would like to see expanded.

Adrian’s provocative title – *Vox populi, vox Dei* (*the voice of the people is the voice of God*) – goes back at least to the 8th-century Saxon divine Alcuin, who warned the Emperor Charlemagne against the ‘madness’ of being ruled by the crowd; via the 14th-century Archbishop of Canterbury,

Walter Reynolds, who insisted against King Edward II that the people sometimes know best; through the 18th-century Whig tract, *The Judgment of Whole Kingdoms and Nations*, which suggested they always do, since no divine or natural law favours one system of government or one ruler over another; to Ayn Rand's 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* where the aphorism sums up all that is worst about collectivism – which brings us back to Alcuin. In the Catholic theological tradition there is a parallel idea of the *sensus fidelium* which invites at least as many interpretations and critiques, and carries some parallel wisdom and dangers. Many are the individuals, groups and ideologies who have sought to co-opt the supposed 'will of the masses' or 'wisdom of the people' for their own purposes. Dr Pabst's thought is that, well understood, *vox populi vox Dei* allows that 'the people' are not a homogeneous mass granting authority to certain elites, but a source of a "dispersed and variegated" wisdom, of "diverse talents and insights", who can help to lead and serve. Religious notions of reciprocity, grace or gift, and self-sacrifice are crucial here; we think of the Lord's repeated teaching on authority amongst Christians as service and His own gesture of washing the disciples' feet.

As Dr Pabst's paper unfolded, it emerged that, while they have some 'family resemblances', there is more than one creature that goes by the name of 'populism', just as there are many liberalisms, secularisms and fundamentalisms, but that they all draw upon or react to streams of religious thought and practice. Popular commentators – and perhaps many of us also – all-too-often throw these labels around carelessly and treat the members of each class as all of a piece.

Take the contemporary applications of Jesus' teaching on rendering unto Caesar what is rightly Caesar's and to God what is rightly God's. What 'secularity', laïcité or the separation of Church and State means in France, the U.S. or Australia can be quite different in practice. Traditionally in this country it has meant that the spheres of church and state are seen as distinct, if overlapping, and are informed by different goals, principles and leaders. Those operating in each sphere make space for each other and often leave each other well enough alone. In some matters they have been critics of, checks upon or rivals with each other; in other matters they have been close collaborators, such as in support of families, education, healthcare and social welfare. Such a live-and-let-live but collaborative secularity was promoted by Christians such as Augustine and Aquinas, and helped guard against both theocratic and atheist dictatorships. But increasingly today liberal secularism would relegate religion to a very narrow private sphere, excluding faith and the faithful from any role in civil life, including politics, education, health and welfare, denying charitable status and government grants and contracts to faith institutions, and increasingly dictating 'politically correct' terms with respect to curriculum, enrolment and employment policies, and the like. 'Secular' can mean very different things in different mouths or contexts.

Likewise the tag 'liberalism' can be applied to some very different political and cultural phenomena. To the extent that it is a recognition of the intrinsic and transcendent dignity of every individual it can again be said to have a biblical basis as much as a secular philosophical one.

Catholic natural law scholars such as John Finnis and Robbie George, who I think have a lot to teach us, have been tagged by critics as ‘whig Thomists’ (as if this were the child of a monstrous union). It is undoubtedly true that they have sought to root ‘liberal’ concepts such as natural or human rights in the Christian tradition and especially the thought of St Thomas Aquinas; but these same outstanding Catholic thinkers have been major critics of much that goes by the name of liberalism in modernity. As Pabst observes, “Without any sense of the good we share with others, liberal freedom cannot decide what should be allowed and encouraged and what should not”. There are no liberal equivalent of the *Aeneid* or the Gospels to express in narrative forms a rich conception of the good life and common projects that serve the whole human person. Pabst observes that in its fear that recognising and valorising any particular conception of truth, goodness or beauty is inevitably tyrannical, and secular liberalism “replaces any appeal to the transcendent good with an immanent politics of contract and rights”, a metaphysic that is “nominalist, voluntarist and atomist” and an anthropology that is profoundly pessimistic. This then plays out in various directions, most of them “illiberal and balkanising” and all of them diminishing the human person.

‘Populism’, too, is often used as a term of disapproval by elites troubled by the anti-establishment air of those popular movements they cannot easily co-opt or neutralise. Dr Pabst has demonstrated tonight that populism is in fact “a complex phenomenon full of contradictions and paradoxes”, nowadays often in revolt against the spiritual and moral emptiness and the economic inequities of liberal culture and economy.

Populism, he observes, has often drawn on religious thought and practice for inspiration or decoration. But when we think of Jesus addressing crowds of five thousand or so, it was not with any notion of the infallibility of majorities but it was with a deep respect for each person before Him and for that communion of saints He was calling them to become.

Dr Pabst's fourth chapter tonight concerned possible religious responses to populism. Serious Christians, he points out, do not fit the neat left-right divides. They reverence marriage, family and life highly (which the left often does not) but reject the right's adulation of wealth and privilege. So, too, the universalising and localising features of religions like Catholicism do not match up neatly with nationalisms and fundamentalist ideologies – and when they do, it is always deeply destructive for religion. Only transcendent or revealed religion can offer an external critique of these immanentist and confining political and cultural patterns. But religious institutions and individuals must beware aping the secular tropes of management culture and identity politics, and becoming mere NGOs. Spiritual and corporal works of mercy – not just secular do-gooding, but serving the most disadvantaged out of love for the image of God in them, and with a view to offering them genuine riches from the Church's liturgical, catechetical, artistic and pastoral treasury – are serious answers to the -isms and hungers of the age..

We thank Dr Pabst for pointing us in such a direction. His thought helps confirm us in our Christian 'irrelevance' to many contemporary liberal,

secular, fundamentalist and populist projects; and encourages us in our much greater ‘relevance’ as motors of healthy and holy ‘Personalist’ ways forward for our civilisation.