

BOOK REVIEW

Theo Hobson, *Milton's Vision: The Birth of Christian Liberty*. London: Continuum, 2008. 178 pp. ISBN 184706342X (hbk), £16.99.

Theo Hobson has written a lively and readable portrait of a thinker he admires. His approach is significant in that he marries together the three aspects of Milton that are often only examined in isolation: the literary, the political, and the religious. Hobson defies the general consensus in putting a priority on the religious, allying it closely to the political in the form of Milton's commitment to liberty. As well as discussing the poetic works, Hobson places the religio-political tracts such as *Eikonoklastes* and *Areopagitica* in the religious context of the period and in relation to Milton's own explicitly religious instincts. He does so with many references to the present day (e.g. "the pope was about as responsible for 5 November as Saddam Hussein was for 11 September") and in an accessible style that is rare in serious theology. There is much to enjoy, provoke, and interest, but I am left with some underlying concerns.

I am not a Milton scholar and would not presume to arbitrate fully on the extent to which Hobson reads Milton correctly. But in the general thrust of the book I cannot help but feel that it is Hobson's definitions of "liberalism" and "liberty" that are being defended rather than Milton's. The constant drawing of contemporary comparisons and asides start to give the effect of an over-contrived demonstration of the relevance of Milton's liberal thought to our own circumstances. Certainly his attitudes to marriage and innate human freedom are progressive. But it might be a step too far to regard Milton as advocating what we would call a liberal society today, not least because of the complex ways in which Milton was caught up in the bloody politics of his own time. Clearly committed to the anti-monarchy and anti-Catholic causes, Hobson is, for example, very forgiving of Cromwell's own absolutism after the death of Charles I, attributing the draconian edicts of the Republic to the influence of the over-zealous Presbyterians. Equally, he ignores Milton's own illiberal disdain for the leadership of women in movements such as the Levellers and defends him from quite strong charges of anti-Catholicism with the slightly sinister remark that "liberalism must be robust to survive." The universal dilemma of liberal interventionism emerges here (what must liberals refuse to tolerate in the name of toleration?) and Hobson does acknowledge that Milton's allegiance to "Cromwell's proto-Blairite idealism" later gives rise to concerns about that most illiberal of forces, imperialism.

However, my chief misgivings are about what remains unsaid in this book. Given Hobson's insistence on the relevance of Milton's vision to our world today, we need to hear more about what Hobson wants us to take from Milton in terms of our understanding of the nature of the Church and its political role. This is a

central issue in Christian political theology: the definitions of church, world and Kingdom, and how they relate to one another to enact Christian vision. Hobson enthusiastically expounds Milton's iconoclastic theological radicalism that would sweep away all the institutional accretions of order and authority (even liturgy itself) which he saw as a betrayal of the early Christian community. Milton's view of Christianity is profoundly personalist with an exclusively "mystical" definition of the church as the spiritual community of those who believe, unbound by oppressive definitions of orthodoxy (including those set out at Nicaea) or oversight beyond the local congregation. While this might sound to many like a rather limp form of Protestantism, Hobson describes it as "a combination of 'back to Paul' and 'on to secular liberalism'." So in Milton's vision, as Hobson presents it, any substantial understanding of the Church dissolves into a live-and-let-live kind of nation state. Indeed, we are left with a rather unconvincing conclusion that "the reformed Christian state is a sort of church."

Although Hobson qualifies that his "theological agreement with Milton is not complete," his adulation for this vision of things is scarcely dimmed as he echoes to Wordsworth: "Milton should be living at this hour—we have need of him." But I found his abrupt conclusion left me unpersuaded that he had really made the case. Yes, we can point to instances of continued abuses of power in institutional churches. Yes, a strong case can be made for changing the nature of the Church of England's established role. But I do not see a strong enough argument that we would all be better off without institutionalized religion altogether. What about parts of the world where the structured institutional church really is bringing people liberty such as in the Liberation Theology of the Latin American Roman Catholic Church?

It is very unclear what Hobson's idea of a contemporary Miltonian vision would look like. He points to America for an example of pluralist congregationalism. But are we really to accept this as the Christian vision for society—the most unequal country in the world? He talks also about Christianity "breaking out of the church to *be culture*" (original emphasis). That is certainly a welcome contrast to today's popular sectarianism, but what would it really mean without an institutional church to sustain Christianity itself? For Milton, as for all radical Christian thinkers, the paradox is that at the end of the day the institutional church gave and sustained his own faith and thought. A healthy understanding of Christian life and liberty will need an institutional church to sustain it too.

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