Is the Christian believer conservative or liberal?

Paul O’Callaghan

To cite this article: Paul O’Callaghan (2019) Is the Christian believer conservative or liberal?, Church, Communication and Culture, 4:2, 137-151, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2019.1616580

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2019.1616580
Is the Christian believer conservative or liberal?

Paul O’Callaghan
School of Theology of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT
The study attempts to clarify whether the label ‘conservative’ describes the identity of a Christian believer more accurately than that of ‘liberal’. After sketching the anthropological dynamic of the conservative and liberal tempers, the author proposes that both elements are to be found in true Christian identity, though each and every Christian needs to integrate them, overcoming the sinfulness that blocks this integration: the Christian receives in faith from God in Christ through the Church a divine treasure of word and grace, and should ‘conserve’ it not out of a spirit of sterile, traditionalist nostalgia but with a deep sense of gratitude; yet that divine treasure needs to be freely interiorised under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and communicated in hope to future generations of believers; free interiorising and generous communication involve a ‘liberal’ spirit. In this way, it should be possible to overcome the all-too-frequent, simplistic antagonism between the labels of conservatism and liberalism applied to Christians. The personal synthesis between conservatism and liberalism that Christians carry out involves three polarities: between nature and freedom, between the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit, and between faith and hope.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 20 March 2019
Accepted 4 May 2019

KEYWORDS
Conservatism; liberalism; anthropology; freedom and grace

Introduction
Should a Christian believer be a conservative? Or is it more in keeping with Christian faith and life and identity to be a liberal? The terms ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ of course are used frequently in political, economic and religious discourse… perhaps excessively, and not always with due precision. But the issue is an important one, because in recent years distinctions between Christian believers are not generally centred on issues of an ecumenical kind (whether one is Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Evangelical, Pentecostal, etc.), or on one’s state in the Church (priest, religious, lay person), but rather on attitude, temperament, style and personality. And this has been distilled down into the somewhat simplistic distinction between ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’. For good or for ill, the term ‘conservative’ is usually...
attached to those who are ‘traditionalist’ or right wing, whereas ‘liberal’ is a label marking those who are progressive and left wing. This makes for a straightforward way to identify, understand and contrast persons, positions and institutions. However, given the complexity of private and public life, of theological thought and spiritual life, the respective designations frequently provide more heat and smoke than light.

This paper will not attempt to undertake a thorough study of the political and social side of conservatism and liberalism… topics that have been amply considered by a wide variety of authors. Rather we shall concentrate on the personal dynamic of conservatism and liberalism in the everyday life of believers.

1. The ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ temper

Perhaps the first thing to observe is that the designations ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ are, at heart, temperamental and personal in kind, what O’Hear calls the conservative and liberal ‘temper’ (O’Hear 1998). Let us consider this first.

In effect, some people want to hold on to what they have, what has been handed on to them, what comes from the past; they strongly prefer experience and practical wisdom (Berkowitz 2019). They may do so either out of fear of losing what is good for the sake of what is promised as better, or out of a sincere attitude of recognition and thanksgiving for what has been placed at their disposal by those who went before them. They may wish to hold on to anything and everything they find pleasing or just or true or valid or beautiful: ethical behaviour, ideas, laws, relationships, religion, good wine and food, property, vehicles, comfortable armchairs, holiday locations … or whatever. Conservatives at heart are home birds. Tradition is a key term here, as the Latin word traditio indicates (it means ‘handing on’): conservatives strive to hold on to what has been handed on to them.

A temperamental ambivalence may be observed here, however, in respect of the motivation conservatives have for holding on to what they have received, an ambivalence situated somewhere between fear and insecurity on the one hand, and sincere recognition and appreciation on the other. On the one hand, in effect, conservatives are sometimes afraid of losing what they have, maybe lazy, not always generous with what they have, though generally contented and complacent with life as it is, frequently nostalgic, usually more realistic than idealistic, inclined to bring others to adjust to their priorities, ‘for their own good’, attached to predictability, acceptant and defendant of the collectivity, of the status quo, of things as they are. As a result, they may be perceived as authoritarian, sometimes pessimistic.

The Australian Prime-Minister Gough Whitlam (London Telegraph, 19.10.1989) claimed that ‘conservatism is basically pessimistic, reformism is basically optimistic’. Elbert Hubbard, an American writer, observed light-heartedly that ‘A conservative is a man who is too cowardly to fight and too fat to run’ (Epigrams). U.S. President Woodrow Wilson is said to have written: ‘A conservative is someone who makes no changes and consults his grandmother when in doubt’ (cit. in Zabel and Christopher 2011: 242). But on the other hand, as often as not they are humbly grateful to God for what they have received and express their gratitude by using it as it was made to be used and by not letting go of it. These are the conservatives: they hold on to what they
have, for as time goes by such things will remain as they always were; permanence is of the essence. *Nihil novum sub sole*, says the book of Qohelet (1:10), ‘there is nothing new under the sun’. In brief terms, we might say that the conservative is a believer.

Yet other people are convinced that what *has been handed on to them*, what they have received from the past and from others, *is imperfect or even decadent*, and needs to be renewed or changed. Besides, they *feel free, entitled to and capable of* doing so: ‘by definition’, Maurice Cranston says, ‘a liberal is a man who believes in liberty’ (Cranston 1967: 459). They are convinced that change and progress are possible and necessary, whether in law, or structures, or established ways of doing things. Liberals are substantially favourable to individual rights and freedoms, impatient with fixity, often willing to discard what they have received from others, from the past. They are often diffident towards tradition. ‘Freedom is normatively basic, and so the onus of justification is on those who would use coercion to limit freedom. It follows from this that political authority and law must be justified, as they limit the liberty of citizens’ (Gaus, Courtland, and Schmidtz 2018: 1.1). This may be called the ‘fundamental liberal principle’ (Gaus 1996: 162–166).

Again an important ambivalence may be found here of a temperamental or personal kind, for the liberal thrust may be motivated either by a sincere and generous desire to improve things and overcome evil and wrong in society, or alternatively by an improper lack of appreciation of what has been received from the past or from others. ‘American liberalism,’ wrote John Dewey, stood for ‘liberality and generosity, especially of mind and character.’ In effect, people may be excessively sure of their ideas or projects, more idealistic and theoretical than realistic, less prepared to listen and learn, to rectify or correct their ideas or vision as needs be, unhappy with their own identity; they may be impatient, restless and agitated, easily disposed to allow ‘others’ to change them, more individualistic than collectivistic. These are the *liberals*: they want to change things; time, not permanence, is of the essence: they live for the future, dreaming about *the new heavens and the new earth* that the book of Revelations speaks of (21:1–4). The liberal fundamentally *hopes*.

2. The complex dynamic of the conservative and the liberal

Ludwig von der Marwitz, a nineteenth-century Prussian and founder of conservative ideology, describes the conflict between conservatism and liberalism as ‘the war of those who have no property against those who do, of industry against agriculture, of buying and selling against stability, of crass materialism against God’s established order, of vain profit against the law, of the present moment against the past and the future, of the individual against the family, of speculators and counting houses against fields and trades, of bureaucracy against conditions that have arisen out of the nation’s history, of acquired learning and vain talent against virtue and honourable character’ (cit. in Arendt 2007: 107).

Speaking of conservatives, Scruton (2014: 7) observes that ‘their position is true but boring … that of their opponents exciting but false’. For this reason, he adds, conservatives may have a kind ‘rhetorical disadvantage’ with respect to liberals. As a result, as Charles D. Broad says, ‘conservatism has suffered philosophical neglect’ (Broad 1913:
396–7; Hamilton 2016. 1), whereas liberalism has been deeply and repeatedly studied and critiqued (Deneen 2018; Kalb 2008; Milbank and Pabst 2016). Scruton cites the historian Robert Conquest to the effect that ‘everyone is right-wing in the matters he knows about’ (ibid., 9); he likewise mentions Matthew Arnold who criticised liberalism saying that ‘freedom is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere’ (ibid. 17). In favour of conservatism, Scruton says that ‘we have collectively inherited good things that we must strive to keep’ (Scruton 2014: 6). Thus, he concludes, ‘the value of individual liberty is not absolute, but stands subject to … the authority of established government … The conservative will seek to uphold all those practices and institutions through which habits of allegiance are acquired’ (Scruton 1980: 19, 30).

Conservatives have a more concrete and local view of human nature, he says, as distinct from an abstract or universal one more typical of liberals. Conservatives such as Scruton commonly regard ‘human beings as frail creatures of limited sympathy not easily extending to those remote in space or time’ (Hamilton 2016. 1.4). O’Hear (1998) observes that ‘conservatism is an approach to human affairs which mistrusts both a priori reasoning and revolution, preferring to put its trust in experience and in the gradual improvement of tried and tested arrangements’.

Kekes (1997: 368) argues likewise that ‘conservatism, with its defining scepticism and opposition to ‘rationalism’ in politics, contrasts with liberalism and socialism in rejecting a priori value-commitments. He says that conservatism adopts a stance of scepticism between extremes of rationalism and fideism (belief based on faith), and steers a middle course of pessimism between claims of perfectibility and corruptibility (Kekes 1998, 54, 89, 60). Conservatives aim to conserve the political arrangements that have historically shown themselves to be conducive to good lives thus understood (Kekes 1998: 27); they regard history [as] the best guide to understanding the present and planning for the future (Kekes 1997: 352)’ (Hamilton 2016. 1.3).

According to John Grey, ‘conservatism’s fundamental insight is that persons’ identities cannot be matters of choice, but are conferred on them by their unchosen histories, so that what is most essential about them is … what is most accidental. The conservative vision is that people will come to value the privileges of choice… when they see how much in their lives must always remain unchosen (Gray 2010: 159). For conservatives, society rests on prejudice, not reason; prejudice is not irrational, but simply unreasoning’ (Hamilton 2016. 1.2).

Following Anthony Quinton’s influential account of the history of conservatism, we may say that ‘conservatism is more neutral: political wisdom … is not to be found in the theoretical speculations of isolated thinkers but in the historically accumulated social experience of the [whole] community … [in] traditional customs and institutions [and people with] extensive practical experience of politics (Quinton 1978: 16–17)’ (Hamilton 2016. 1.4).

Strangely, both positions when taken in an isolated way – the conservative and the liberal – may turn out to be racist to some degree, the first in a synchronic way, the second in a diachronic way. In effect, the conservative thinks that his or her way of being and doing is the best, and tends looks down on his fellow human beings who are intent on change and reform, considering their position as mistaken, untenable, precipitated or immature. Yet liberals can easily look down on those who went before
them, for they take it for granted that the passage of time only produces progress and improvement, which automatically casts their predecessors in a negative light. Perhaps, for this reason, Chesterton spoke of ‘the democracy of the dead’ in his book *Orthodoxy*. By this, he meant that both the living and the dead should contribute to deciding what should be done in society. On the contrary, for Karl Marx, humans ‘make their own history, but [not] under circumstances chosen by themselves … The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living (Marx 1852: 15)” (Hamilton 2016. 3.3).

3. Conservative and liberal tempers in politics, society and economics

Things get more complex however when temperamentally conservative or liberal individuals get involved in society or politics or economics or education or religion or activities of any other kind. Political, social, economic and religious positions are easily labelled ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ on the basis of the personality types of those who support them and the positions they hold. The collective or public actions they carry out with the support and encouragement of like-minded persons take on the liberal or conservative profile of those involved. And so there arises a conservative or a liberal political programme, a conservative or liberal educational or economic policy, a conservative or liberal religion and so on. Things get more complex, I said above, because when a personal position takes on a collective profile, the dynamics of collectivism (typical of conservatives) and individualism (more typical of the liberal) get upset.

Let us put it this way: whereas it makes sense to speak of a ‘conservative agenda’, the notion of a ‘liberal agenda’ is more or less meaningless. Conservatives agree with others, though not with everybody, in holding on to things and promoting positions—usually inherited positions—they wish to defend as true and immutable; liberals at best agree on political and social structures and protocols to discuss things and arrive at an agreement, but since they insist on fundamental individual freedom of each person and the impermanence of reality, they have (or should have) no *a priori* positions to defend or promote. As the poet Frost (1964: 474) put it, ‘I’m liberal… I never take my own side in a quarrel’.

The following may serve as examples of the impossible complexity that arises when ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ tempers go public. A society that denies the right to life to the unborn, and does so over an extended period of time, should by right be considered conservative, because it attempts to hold on to a particular, received position. Strangely enough, however, the acceptance of abortion is normally presented as a liberal position. In fact, liberals, those who defend the rights and freedom of individual human beings over and against the collective rights of humanity, should by right reject the destruction of unborn life, because it makes their position – defence of the dignity of the individual – untenable. We can see that when people establish themselves in positions that are normally considered liberal, and do so over an extended period of time, they gradually become conservative or hardened precisely in those ‘liberal’ positions. We might say that it is not easy to be liberal for a long time (Rosenblatt 2018).
Another example may be cited. A nation motivated by a profound liberal spirit may struggle to obtain its independence and eventually reach it. This was the case of the Jacobin spirit that inspired the French Revolution. But once obtained, the independence in question has to be held on to, it must be defended and justified, that is it must be conserved. Again, the liberal is forced to become conservative.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt considers the give-and-take between conservatism and liberalism in the context of education and politics. She observes that ‘conservatism, in the sense of conservation, is of the essence of the educational activity, whose task is always to cherish and protect something—the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new’ (Arendt 2006: 192). However ‘this holds good only for the realm of education, or rather for the relations between grown-ups and children, and not for the realm of politics, where we act among and with adults and equals. In politics this conservative attitude which accepts the world as it is, striving only to preserve the status quo can only lead to destruction, because the world, in gross and in detail, is irrevocably delivered up to the ruin of time unless human beings are determined to intervene, to alter, to create what is new’ (Arendt 2006: 192).

Arendt explains that whereas liberalism faces down a perceived ‘receding freedom’ with a view to avoiding totalitarianism, conservatism does the same thing for the same end in view of a perceived ‘receding authority’. ‘While both liberalism and conservatism fail us the moment we try to apply their theories to factually existing political forms and institutions, it can hardly be doubted that their over-all assertions carry a high amount of plausibility. Liberalism, we saw, measures a process of receding freedom, and conservatism measures a process of receding authority; both call the expected end-result totalitarianism and see totalitarian trends wherever either one or the other is present’ (Arendt 2006: 100). One and the other is interested in restoration, whether of freedom or of authority (Arendt 2006: 101).

4. Are Christians meant to be conservative or liberal?

It is usually taken for granted that religion acts within society as a stabilising factor, providing support, continuity, consolation, security, a firm connection between past, present and future. The Indian politician Kapil Sibal did say that ‘the DNA of a true Hindu is liberal. We are, by essence, liberal.’ Whether this is tenable or not, religions are generally considered as ‘conservative’ elements within society: they assist people in holding on to things.

The fact is that the general principle of the conservative character of religion may not be applied to religions in each and every case. But here we are considering the following question: is true Christianity conservative or liberal? Or perhaps the correct question should be: are Christians meant to be conservative or liberal? After all, Christianity refers to every single aspect of the human being and society (O’Callaghan 2016, 1–7). In other words, Christian anthropology is essentially integrative, as is Christian life and spirituality for that matter. The only thing Christians reject and exclude out of hand in humans is sin, which separates them from God, from others and from themselves, destroying their lives in the widest sense of the word. They do
not deny the effect of sin but do not see it as a defining element of the human com-posite. Besides, Christians believe sin has been revealed and overcome through the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who in reconciling us with the Father by faith, has brought us back into communion not only with God but also with our fellow men and women and with ourselves. This is not an instantaneous or magical process of course, for the power of salvation is applied to humanity in a gradual, progressive way, that respects the natural cadence of time, culture and human life. In the meantime, we may not always be in a position to distinguish between what is truly human and what is actually sinful.

Still, since Christianity excludes nothing substantial from the human composite – neither body nor spirit, neither freedom nor determination, neither sociality nor individuality, neither the temporal nor the eternal, neither female nor male – it would seem that both ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ aspects of individual humans and of society as a whole should be held on to simultaneously, if possible in an affirmative synthesis. That is to say, a Christian may be temperamentally conservative or liberal, but their true Christian identity should be both conservative and liberal. As the (liberal) Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton recently said: ‘When people ask me “Are you conservative or liberal?” My response is always the same, ‘Yes.’ ‘But which?’ ‘Both!’ Without a liberal spirit we become graceless and stuck. Without a conserving spirit, we are unanchored and drift’ (andrewhamilton.com 19.2.2019). Of course, what makes that integration difficult, as we shall see in the last part of this study, is precisely the divisive presence of sin.

But how can such an integration be made? Perhaps the following may be said.

On the one hand Christians are and should be conservative, insofar as they receive as God’s gift the created world, the grace of salvation through Christ, present in the Church and the sacraments, the word of God received in faith, the assistance of Church teaching (through the Magisterium), the example and help of the saints and of many other people. And their gratitude to God for all these gifts – one of the principle reasons why the Eucharist is celebrated – is the natural outcome of this awareness. Their thanksgiving is expressed not only (1) in receiving and accepting God’s gifts which ‘come’ to them as it were from the past and from others, but also (2) in assimilating those gifts deeply, identifying themselves with them, and then, besides, (3) in handing them on to others, insofar as it depends on them. Thus, Christianity is clearly centred on tradition, for it involves a receiving and a handing on from one generation to the next of God’s gifts, as the Latin word tradere precisely means. Conservatism thus has Christian roots. The eighteenth-century founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, was a Christian thinker whose conservatism has been traced to his theological presuppositions (Harris 2013; Cobban 1960: 94); in fact, he saw atheistic Jacobinism as a threat to Western cultural tradition (Hamilton 2016. 2.3).

We may say therefore that Christians are by definition conservative and traditional, in that they receive God’s gifts from Christ through the Church, make those gifts their own, and hand them on generously and creatively to those who come after them. This spiritual, intellectual and practical process – of acceptance, assimilation and communicating – goes to the very heart of Christian life. Christian life and action are based on an ‘obedience of faith’, of identification with what God has revealed to us, and the
consequent communication of God’s word and power to the rest of humanity. And this involves a spirit of faithfulness to what has been given and must be passed on. Psychologically, the conservative finds this part easier: he or she is convinced that the Church, in its members and institutions, is bound to hold on to the message received from the Lord. Writing to the Galatians Paul says so in unmistakable terms: ‘As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed’ (Gal 1:9).

But of course, this is only part of the story. Christian revelation affirms the reality and value of time as a space in which God acts and humans respond freely and personally to his grace and word. Indeed, Christian anthropology insists on the value of time as a space for real change and growth, on freedom as the path or mode by which God has wanted us to respond to his gifts, and on the untouchable or irreplaceable quality of each human person who lives with and for other persons. Time, freedom, personal individuality… These are values which in principle are particularly central for a liberal temper, and yet are passionately upheld by Christians. Besides, Christianity gives particular weight to a category that is not as clearly present in other religions, which is conversion, in Greek metanoia, which literally involves ‘going beyond the mind’, and evokes the need to surpass one’s present conviction and situation. And since conversion involves the overcoming of sin and alienation which comes to us ‘from the past’, Christianity cannot be conservative tout court without denying its essentially saving purpose. It may sound strange, but the Christian doctrine of sin – in particular, of original sin – serves as a confirmation of the liberal Christian approach to life and society, for liberalism looks on the past as a source of a series of profound alienations that have to be overcome.

Right from the earliest books of the New Testament we may see that Christians have broken not only with their personal failures and sins, but also with the Judaism of the time they lived in (often called second-temple Judaism), with the general lifestyle common in society, with idolatry, establishing a deeply renewed vision of the dignity of women and children, of the value of marriage and sexuality, a new liturgy, a new lifestyle. Sociologically, Christianity constituted an enormous novelty when it began (Stark 1997). And in the personal lives of millions of men and women, it constituted an extraordinary novelty as well. A new beginning, a change, a liberation, growth, progress, reaching out into the future. God’s power injected into the lives of sinful humans brought about an amazing transformation and liberation; it released energies unknown beforehand to humans; it launched them out into the deep (cf. Lc 5:1ff.), into a life of meaningful and passionate work and evangelisation. It did so before; it does so now.

We already mentioned that a liberal mindset gives particular weight to time, to freedom and to the human individual. And Christians love time as the space in which God acts through them; they love the time they live in, the future they hope for, and waste as little energy as possible on useless nostalgia (O’Callaghan 2016, 472–494). They love freedom, the freedom God gave them to receive his gifts, the freedom without which they cannot do good in the fullest sense, the freedom that will eventually open heaven for them, because without it, it would be impossible to receive and accept God’s gifts in all their variety (O’Callaghan 2016, 442–471). Besides, in all probability believers out of real charity will defend the rights and freedoms of their fellow men and women
more assiduously than those who belong to any other religion. They love people not as a whole, as a mass, as anonymous ‘humanity’, but as people, as persons, as individuals, one by one, each and every life projected by God in the world towards happiness and eternity (O’Callaghan 2016, 552–567). Kierkegaard (1988) (O’Callaghan 2016, 456–457, 2017) made it quite clear that the great contribution Christianity made to philosophical discourse lay in the value it gave to the individual, the person, the unrepeatable contribution made by each one. In that sense the Christian is not only a true conservative, but is, besides, a true liberal, fully intent on improving the world as God has given it to us, in time, through freedom, of persons.

5. The theological and spiritual integration of conservatism and liberalism

How do the conservative and the liberal aspects of life hold together on a theological, spiritual and anthropological plane? Three approaches may be suggested that express three distinct theological polarities: nature and freedom, Christ and the Spirit, faith and hope.

First, let us consider the polarity of nature and freedom. The former evokes conservatism, the latter liberalism. The Stoics affirmed nature was fundamentally unchangeable. All humans could do was to know and understand it and adjust their lives to it rigidly... stoically, we might say. They did what they had to do. Only in that way could they obtain fulfilment. As Seneca put it, Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt, ‘destiny leads whoever is willing, and drags along whoever is not’ (Seneca, Epist. 107:10). In other words, reality does not fundamentally change and neither should we attempt to make it change (O’Callaghan 2016, 445–447). At a philosophical level, the Stoics are the original arch-conservatives. But Christians, while gratefully accepting the created world God gave them, with its laws and cycles and apparent anonymity, with its ‘natural law’, understood that things had changed radically, because freedom was no longer to be considered a mere political aspiration (to live an unrestricted life) but a true power that can actually change things (under God) (Gaus, 2018 1.2; 1.3). They felt sure that the world, the future, humanity itself, was to an important degree in their hands. In fact, God had handed dominion over his created works into their hands (Gn 1:28–29). They were not attached to the past for past’s sake, but looked to the future, convinced as Paul says to the Romans, that they were spe salvi, ‘saved in hope’ (Rom 8:24).

Hence the rationalist claim that everything can, or should, be shaped to our aims and requirements violates the intrinsic value of reality and contradicts our own spiritual requirements (Cohen 2007: 9). The essence of human freedom for Christians is that, liberated from the slavery of sin, they gratefully receive God’s gifts and use them intelligently and with others to achieve excellence to bring about the fulness of the world (O’Callaghan 2019). ‘Liberals and socialists stress the malleability of human nature under the influence of changeable historical conditions. The anti-conservative Rousseau had an optimistic conception of human nature, blaming government and society for failings that – according to conservatives – belong to individuals.
Conservatives, in contrast, regard human nature as weak and fallible, unalterably selfish rather than altruistic (Kekes 1997: 368) (Hamilton 2016. 3).

In the second place, we may consider the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christians and of the Church. The words and actions of Jesus Christ are present to 21st-century believers, are mediated to them, from the past, through the sacraments which he instituted and the Church administers, and through the divine Word he himself gave us. The elements that go to make up the believer’s union with Christ which have been handed on to us from the past express to a degree the conservative aspect of Christian life. But the power of God also comes to us actively, in the present moment, tending towards the future, towards change, towards intensification, towards eschatological fulness (O’Callaghan 1998, 2011). This is represented in the Christian economy in terms of the action of the Holy Spirit. In effect, the Paraclete is the principle of freedom and liberty in Christian lives, the one who cries out in our minds and hearts reminding us that we live in the glory and freedom of the children of God (Rm 8:21), the one who inspires us to live, to contemplate and to act. The Holy Spirit is the true protagonist of the life of Christians and of the Church, and regales believers unceasingly with ‘the surprises of God’ that Pope Francis talks of. Perhaps we might say that the action of the Spirit represents the liberal aspect of Christian life. Not infrequently, conservatives follow a classical Christology and ecclesiology in their theology and life, whereas liberals consider themselves pneumatological, moved by the infinite Spirit (O’Callaghan 1998).

But an important theological point must be made here. To separate the role and work of Christ and of the Spirit in Christian life is simply untenable (Bordoni 1995). The fact is that the very word ‘Christ’ means ‘the anointed one’, and theological reflection has always held that the Christ, the Word made flesh, was filled with the Spirit from the very moment of the Incarnation (Lc 4:18–19). Besides, the work of the Spirit is identified tout court with the work of Christ, for he is the ‘Spirit of Christ’. The Spirit does nothing other than making Christ present in the mind and heart of Christian believers and in the Church itself. In real terms, the work of Christ and of the Spirit are one and the same (O’Callaghan 2016, 273–277).

The Spirit does not teach new or different things from what Christ taught already; rather he ‘reminds’ us now of what Jesus once taught us (Jn 14:26), he places the divine word deep within our heart, he ‘convinces’ us of what Jesus taught us (Jn 16:8–12), he transforms theory and institution into practice and life… without eliminating either theory or institution. The Spirit ‘will take what is mine’, Jesus proclaims, ‘and declare it to you’ (Jn 16:14). But the Spirit adds nothing ‘new’ to the work and word of Christ… rather he applies it to believers, one by one, bit by bit, gently overcoming their sinful reluctance.

Thus the Spirit is the one who enlivens time and freedom and personhood from within, the very elements of human makeup – we suggested earlier on – that express a ‘liberal’ worldview. But because of the Christological root of the action of the Holy Spirit, the affirmation of the latter does not involve a rejection of what has been given, of what has been handed on, elements that would express what would normally be considered as a conservative attitude. A proper integration in personal Christian life between Christ and the Spirit will ensure believers’ conservatism (in the power of the
Spirit they sincerely do not want to let go of the gifts of God in Christ) and liberalism (following the example of Christ, they are moved by the Spirit to make those gifts their own and pass them on generously to others). Thus the Christian believer is sensitive and receptive to the power and light of God that derives from and was consolidated in the past, and also to the same power in the present moment, in their own lives, in the lives of others and of society at large, leading humanity into the future, though not in opposition to what is given.

T.S. Eliot argued that true originality is possible only in a tradition, a living presence in the modern world, not a museum relic (Eliot 1919; see Hamilton 2009). So we can see that the conflict between conservatism and liberalism takes place first of all in the heart of humans. Only secondarily may it be found in political, social and religious externals. According to O’Hear (1998), ‘those who see society riddled with defects are impatient with conservative resistance to change; for them, the conservative emphasis on human ignorance and traditional wisdom is an evasion at best’ (Hamilton 2016. 1.5). ‘It is often said that liberals prioritise rights over duties, while conservatives prioritise duties over rights 2016. whereas Christian believers strive to retain one and the other, the former for others, the latter for self’ (Hamilton 2016. 1).

And in the third place, the polarity between faith and hope reflects to some degree in Christian life the dynamic interaction of the conservative and the liberal spirit. In effect, faith points to the past, to what took place, for one and all. Fidelity in that sense is usually considered as a conservative virtue; it involves holding on to you have, the faith of your fathers. Hope however points to the future and belongs primarily to the individual (O’Callaghan 2011, 3–36). Of course, faith is also an individual virtue that must be personally lived, and hope a collective one insofar as it points to the common future of all humans, the Parusia. But hope does refer to what can, and must, be changed, whereas faith is a solid rock (Mt 16:18). The hearty liberal will say that ‘hope is the last thing to be lost’; the solid conservative will say we should believe unwaveringly, come what may. ‘In the libertarian free-for-all what is worst in human nature enjoys an equal chance with what is best, and discipline is repudiated as a meddlesome intrusion. Conservatism is the attempt to affirm that discipline, and to build, in the space of free association, a lasting realm of virtue’ (Scruton 2014, 166).

Of course from the theological point of view, faith and hope are very closely related to one another, as the letter to the Hebrews says: ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’ (Heb 11:1). And Benedict XVI in the 2007 encyclical Spe salvi says that ‘in several passages [of the Bible] the words “faith” and “hope” seem interchangeable … “Hope” is equivalent to “faith”’ (Benedict XVI 2007: n. 2). Faith is a living reality that unites the Christian with God and finds its fullest expression as hope, which is based on the faith in a God who promises salvation and does not deceive. And hope for the future is what gives ultimate meaning to faith. In Spe salvi we read that ‘Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well’. So now we can say: Christianity was not only “good news” … the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known. It is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown wide open’ (Benedict XVI 2007, n. 2).
The life of the Christian is built on faith which links him with the past, to charity in the present, and as a result to hope, which leads him confidently into the future. True Christians living in faith, hope and charity can and should establish a personal synthesis between the conservative and liberal in the deepest and best sense of the terms. They are aware of the greatness of the gift received, yet feel the need to assume it, in their own lives and in that of others, freely. But this is based on an idea of freedom that is clearly different from the one that marks modern secularist liberalism, that is both disconnected from the divine and attempts to be horizontally constructive of the future (O’Callaghan 2019). Such an idea of freedom does not fit in well either with a traditional or conservative view of society that limits the range of human freedoms for the sake of the good of society, or a progressive or liberal understanding of things that sees human free will as the only resource we have as humans to enrich our lives and realise our existence.

6. Purifying and integrating the conservative and the liberal thrust of human life

The synthesis the Christian believer makes between nature and freedom, between Christ and the Spirit, between faith and hope … between the conservative and liberal spirit, is and must be a deeply personal one for a Christian believer. It is a synthesis that fully involves the temporality of human existence. In that sense, the Christian may at times react and decide in a more ‘conservative’ way, and at other times, in a rather more ‘liberal’ way, as the pilot of a yacht must tack the wind. Jerome Kohn observes in his introduction to the work of Hannah Arendt that she ‘was neither a liberal nor a conservative; she knew that human affairs never stay the same, but she believed no more in progress than in the status quo’ (Arendt 2006). The synthesis involves overcoming the ambivalences present in both conservatism and liberalism referred to at the beginning of this study, which in turn are a reflection of the sinful condition of believers, a sinfulness that influences their thought-forms and actions, of living a ‘one-dimensional’ life that Herbert Marcuse spoke of (O’Callaghan 2016, 2), a sinfulness that blocks them from integrating the different aspects of their lives. To finish this reflection we may ask: how might sin leave its mark on a conservative? Or on a liberal, for that matter? What would one or the other position need to overcome? Where would saving grace need to illuminate and purify?

Conservatives hold on to good things, and do so out of gratitude. They are right to do so, and as Christians they should do so more and more. But just as easily they may hold on to mistaken or evil things. Or they may hold on to superfluous good things, not sharing them with the needy. The conservative believes in truth, but may be mistaken in identifying what is true and what is false. He believes in tradition, but what tradition should be conserved? (Hamilton 2016. 3.1). Besides, the conservative spirit needs to exorcize a certain dose of fear of the future, the fruit of laziness, an easy-going but often egoistic contentedness, a pessimistic excess of realism and a lack of optimistic idealism. For the conservative, ‘the ideal and the practical are inseparable’ (Hamilton 2016. 1). He or she prefers not to be tested and tried by the passage of time, by a sense of personal responsibility, by the pressing needs of others, by the
disconcerting challenges of life. Yet Christian faith and hope challenge these elements in the power of the Spirit who makes the renewing and subversive power of Christ present anew and afresh.

Liberals may be motivated to change or reform by a sincere and generous desire to improve things and overcome evil and wrong in society. They may however insufficiently appreciative of what they have received from the past or from others, from what has been given, and this may well denote immaturity and unrealism. The liberal may be too sure of his or her ideas or projects, more idealistic than realistic, less prepared to listen and learn, indisposed to adjust or correct ideas or vision as needs be, at loggerheads with their own identity, sometimes impatient, restless and agitated. The liberal often rejects the inner logic and intractable character of nature, yet in doing so many a so-called ‘liberal’ ends up being irrationally conservative. Again, faith in Christ, through whom and for whom all things were made (Jn 1:1–2; Col 1:15–16), will help them recognise the goodness and value of what they have received, to improve and enrich it without attempting to change its nature, to recognise human freedom not only as choice and absence of restriction, but primarily as a living openness and acceptance of God’s gifts, and to pay heed to each and every human person, called by God to share his glory with him forever (O’Callaghan 2011).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

Rev. Prof. Paul O’Callaghan has taught at the School of Theology of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross since 1990. He was Academic Vice-Rector from 1998–2000, Dean of the School of Theology from 2000–2008, and Director of the Department of Dogmatic Theology since 2012. He was born in Dublin, Ireland, and was ordained a priest on 1982 by St. John Paul II. He received his Licence and Doctorate in Theology from the University of Navarre. He is a member of the Council of the Pontifical Academy of Theology. His academic interests include Christian anthropology, eschatology, creation theology, Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogue, and the relationship between philosophy and theology, and faith and culture. He has published widely in these areas.

**ORCID**

Paul O’Callaghan  [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5218-2756](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5218-2756)

**References**

Arendt, H. 2006. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books.

Arendt, H. 2007. *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books.

Benedict, XVI. 2007. Encyclical Spe salvi (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano).

Berkowitz, P. 2019. *Conservatism and the People*. New York: City Journal Magazine.

Bordoni, M. 1995. *La Cristologia Nell’orizzonte Dello Spirito*. Brescia: Queriniana.

Broad, C. D. 1913. "Lord Hugh Cecil’s ‘Conservatism.’" *Ethics* 23 (4): 396–418. doi:10.1086/206766.
Cobban, A. 1960. *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century: A Study of the Political and Social Thinking of Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey*. 2nd ed. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Cohen, G.A. 2007. “A Truth in conservatism: Rescuing conservatism from the Conservatives”. Unpublished paper downloaded from https://sites.google.com/site/politicaltheoryworkshop/GACohenConservatism.pdf?attredirects=0

Cranston, M. 1967. “Liberalism”. In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by P. Edwards, 458–461. New York: Macmillan and the Free Press.

Deneen, P. J. 2018. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.

Eliot, T. S. 1919. “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. In *Selected Essays*. London: Faber.

Frost, R. 1964. *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*. New York; Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gaus, G. F. 1996. *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gaus, G., S. D. Courtland, and D. Schmidtz. 2018. “Liberalism”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Spring 2018 Edition), edited by E. N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/liberalism/.

Gray, J. 2010. *Selected Writings*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

Hamilton, A. 2009. “Scruton’s Philosophy of Culture: Elitism, Populism, and Classic Art.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (4): 389–404. doi:10.1093/aej/ayp035.

Hamiton, A. 2016. “Conservatism”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2016 Edition), edited by E.N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/conservatism/.

Harris, J. 2013. “Spare a Thought for the Late Unlamented One-Nation Tory.” *The Guardian*, April 14 2013.

Kalb, J. 2008. *The Tyranny of Liberalism*. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books.

Kekes, J. 1997. “What Is Conservatism?” *Philosophy* 72 (281): 351–374. doi:10.1017/S0031819100057053.

Kekes, J. 1998. *A Case for Conservatism*. London: Cornell University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. 1988. “The Point of View, Supplement.” In *Kierkegaard’s Writings* 22. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Marx, K. 1852. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. New York: International.

Milbank, J., and A. Pabst. 2016. *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

O’Callaghan, P. 1998. “L’agire Dello Spirito Santo, Chiave Dell’escatologia Cristiana.” *Annales Theologici* 12: 327–373.

O’Callaghan, P. 2011. *Christ Our Hope. An Introduction to Eschatology*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America.

O’Callaghan, P. 2016. *Children of God in the World. An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.

O’Callaghan, P. 2017. “Cultural Challenges to Faith. A Reflection on the Dynamics of Modernity.” *Church, Communication and Culture* 2/1: 25–40.

O’Callaghan, P. 2019. “Getting Freedom Right”. In *Sufficit Gratia Mea. Miscellanea di Studi Offerti a Sua Em. il Card*, edited by Angelo Amato, 253–265. M. Sodi. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

O’Hear, A. 1998. “Conservatism.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. Craig, 1762–1769. London: Routledge.

Quinton, A. 1978. *The Politics of Imperfection. The Religious and Secular Traditions of Conservative Thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott*. London: Faber and Faber.

Rosenblatt, H. 2018. *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Scruton, R. 1980. *The Meaning of Conservatism*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

Scruton, R. 2014. *How to Be a Conservative*. London: Bloomsbury; Continuum.
Stark, R. 1997. *The Rise of Christianity. How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.

Zabel, K. L., and A. N. Christopher. 2011. “Conservative Ideology”. *Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*, vol. 1, 242–246. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.