Martin Schlag
Giulio Maspero *Editors*

After Liberalism?

A Christian Confrontation on Politics and Economics

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Introduction

The idea of this book originated at a 2017 panel discussion in the House of Lords on a volume by John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future.*[1] The panel included John Milbank, Lord Brian Griffiths as well as the two editors, and was hosted by Lord and Lady Alexander Leitch. The evening united Red Tories and Blue Whigs and concluded with a memorable dinner at the Caledonian Club in London. The debate was so animated and aroused such passion that we decided to expand it into the book before you.

The question mark in the title of this volume—*After Liberalism?*—expresses the heart of what emerged from the discussion. Should liberalism be overcome or just reformed? What awaits us after the concrete form liberalism has taken in the age in which we live? The answer to these questions is the subject of joint research by economists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and theologians, who share the Christian faith and seek light from it to think about reality. The result is a Christian confrontation of politics and economics.

This volume is structured into two parts: each designed to show its own vista or perspective. The first part focuses on the discussion of liberalism and its future. The second part suggests a way to overcome this tension through the relational approach, which is articulated on a sociological, anthropological and theological level.

The first two chapters of the volume present the thoughts of John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, co-authors of *The Politics of Virtue*, containing their intense criticism of liberalism. According to these authors, liberalism is in a meta-crisis that embraces all its dimensions, from economics to politics and anthropology. It is precisely to the latter that the introductory essay by Milbank refers. He analyses the position of Samuel Moyn, Professor of history and law at Yale University, on human rights and their relationship with Christianity, as presented in *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).[2] The extraordinary interest of the first chapter lies in its sketch of the historical relationship between Christianity and the different political–economic positions originating in modernity. In

[1] John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

[2] S. Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

the critical dialogue with Samuel Moyn, the value of the theological dimension and the autonomous or relational (or ontological–social) conception of human nature emerges. The question about the future of liberalism is also essential in the confrontation with Islam in Western democracies. The question is thus framed not only in the context of the latest academic debate, but also in the most urgent contemporary issues. The historical reconstruction by Milbank is followed by a thoughtful analysis of the present political situation by Adrian Pabst. Together these two contributions communicate the core of the criticism of liberalism presented in the book *The Politics of Virtue*. Pabst shows the convergence towards a position that is anti-human from opposing political sides, which unconsciously support and give rise to one another. The *pars contruens* of the proposal is the return to the virtuous dimension of politics, understood from an Aristotelian perspective in its reference to the purpose, which is human happiness. But this requires overcoming the anthropological reductionism of both individualism and collectivism. The relational dimension is thus invoked as the only possible path for an after-liberal future.

Brian Griffiths' chapter presents a careful analysis of the book *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* by Milbank and Pabst together with a serious response to their criticism of liberalism. In a nutshell, the author discusses the claim that liberalism is in a meta-crisis by presenting both the complexity of the different versions of this doctrine and the inescapable relationship with surrounding culture. Many of the negative observations of Milbank and Pabst, according to Griffiths, can be traced back to this very background. There is, therefore, convergence on the existence of the crisis of liberalism, but at the same time, disagreement on the causes of this crisis, as they are traced back to the cultural dimension external to liberalism itself. This is the essential point of divergence with Milbank and Pabst's proposal, who consider intrinsic to liberalism itself those cultural elements, such as the libertarian drifts, which Griffiths considers external to it. Through a critique of the civil economy approach, to which the authors of *The Politics of Virtue* refer as *pars construens*, Griffiths highlights the need for an authentically religious dimension, in order to avoid the negative drifts of liberalism itself. In this sense, the discussion on post-liberalism raises an authentically theological question, linked to the assumptions of the cultural context in which liberalism was developed and applied. This refers to what Pierpaolo Donati calls the theological matrix.

Martin Schlag, too, analyses the book *The Politics of Virtue*. Like Griffiths, Schlag asserts that liberalism is not in a meta-crisis, but in a deep crisis. For this reason, unlike Milbank and Pabst, Schlag denies that the only possible future is post-liberalism, because he believes that a purification from within the American tradition of liberal constitutionalism is possible, together with a smooth transition to 'trans-liberalism'. The question is, therefore, whether liberalism has the strength to cure itself. The analysis in *The Politics of Virtue* is considered excessively negative, since it does not highlight the real progress that capitalism made possible, historically, compared to an exclusively agricultural economy. In a propositional key, Schlag points to the inherent limits of the Old Whig liberalism of the enlightenment, particularly the lack of heroic charity and the exclusion of the poor. As way forward, Schlag stresses the role of the laity and the possibility that laypeople must bring out the dimension of gift, which

founds our society even now, from within the political–economic life. Unfortunately, secularism has overshadowed this element, but the negativity highlighted by Milbank and Pabst is not intrinsic to the American founding tradition of liberalism itself. In this, Schlag's analysis agrees with that of Griffiths and thus opens the way to the question to which the second part is dedicated.

Pierpaolo Donati's chapter opens the second part of the volume, as he tries to overcome the dialectical opposition highlighted by the first contributions and explores the possibility of working at the cultural matrix level to explore the possibilities of future development of liberalism. Donati, in his careful analysis of the welfare state, shows how not only liberalism is in a meta-crisis, as Milbank and Pabst claim, but also highlights the meta-crisis involving socialism too. This is a consequence of the crisis of modernity from which the *lib-lab* model, i.e. the management of the welfare state based on the correction of market excess (*lib*) with the introduction of more control (*lab*) and vice versa, would have developed. The limit of this approach would be the closure on itself of the interaction between the market and the state regardless of the relationship with society and the family. Correction of this situation with the introduction of ethical elements at the cultural level, as suggested by Griffiths and Schlag, would be impossible, because the modern conception of society treats each subsystem as autonomous, immunizing the whole to a higher reference. Donati's proposes the replacement of the dialectical opposition between state and market with a relational one that in its openness allows for genuine collaboration of the market and the state with the family and civil society. From this would arise a relational state and a relational economy, where the 'well' of the 'welfare' state would not be defined autonomously, but would be founded in the very relationality of the person. The implementation of relational policies capable of recognizing the economic value of the family and associations would not oppose the economic performance, but would recover the *lib-lab* mechanism as a particular case. Money would no longer be the end of the economic process, but only a means for the production of relational goods. The transition desired and pointed out by Donati would be neither smooth nor dialectical. It would be the transition from modern to postmodern, cause of the current crisis of liberalism, complemented by the transition from postmodern to trans-modern (or after-modern), thus granting hope for a future that makes possible a true trans-liberalism.

Fabrice Hadjadj's phenomenological approach shows the relevance of the relational proposal from the anthropological perspective. His chapter discusses in a masterful way the economic role of the relationship between man and woman, highlighting the role that this relationship has for an ecological conception that is not merely romantic, but authentically realistic and effective. Without a home (*oikos*), the relationship between man and woman cannot develop. For this reason, the future of the world depends on caring for a space that allows the times and spaces of love, which, being generative, can change the world. With great acumen, Hadjadj observes

that a mother never gives birth to an iPhone, but that Steve Jobs' mother gave birth to the founder of the company that produces it. The argument is based simultaneously on the analysis of our present time as mirrored in contemporary literature and classical thought. Without romantic and utopian nostalgia, the author shows a connection that today is absolutely absent from the common narrative, highlighting the value for the real economy of the relationship between man and woman.

In continuity with the first two chapters of the second part, Giulio Maspero's thesis is that the cultural dimensions to which one must turn to in order to find the reasons for the meta-crisis of both liberalism and socialism, highlighted by Donati, are metaphysics and anthropology, specifically the relationship between modernity and fatherhood. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first offers a philosophical–theological narrative that links three main metaphysical systems to different understandings of the role of the father in the societies characterized by those ontological frames. A sketch of the differences implied for the socio-economic perspectives by these relationships in the cases of Ancient Greek, Jewish and Christian cultures follows. In the second part, three phenomenological analyses in very different research fields are presented: René Girard's work on myths and sacrifice, Michael Tommasello's cognitive approach to the relational specificity of the human being and Pierpaolo Donati's relational sociology. These different approaches seem to converge towards an acknowledgement of the value of relation. This may explain the real difference between two kinds of markets: one characterized by pure competition and imitation, as in consumerism, another marked by the possibility of a true ontological novelty thanks to the relational element. Christian humanism has produced great progress through the latter approach, made possible by Trinitarian revelation. But this means that there is no freedom without relations and no fraternity without a father, who takes care of these relations. Thus, the future of liberalism depends on the concrete ability to develop a culture that makes fathers grow. In this sense, it seems urgent to become aware of the importance of Christian humanism, with the Trinitarian ontology and anthropology that characterize it. Secularization is corroding the foundations of this possibility, thus exposing us to the real danger of an economic apocalypse.

The chapter by Ilaria Vigorelli is a follow-up to the previous one and revisits the theme of fatherhood, economics and metaphysics from the perspective of postmodernity. Freedom is the main focus of the chapter, highlighted by the contributions of Byung-Chul Han and Nietzsche's heritage. The main question is how freedom is linked to the different forms of fatherhood, to different economic systems and to different metaphysical frames. Is freedom always positive or can it become destructive? What is the relationship between limitations and ends from this perspective? The Nietzschean notion of patricide is critically examined on the basis of its effect on human and social freedom. The theological and philosophical concept of the analysis is the relationship and how it is read in the postmodern context.

The health crisis that began in 2019 makes our discussion even more topical, because the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the crisis of liberalism already evident in previous years. At the same time, the limits of the various alternatives to liberalism itself have become clearer, bringing to the forefront both the role of

culture on a social level and the conscience of each human person, an inseparable (relational) pair proposed by Christian revelation.

April 2020

Martin Schlag
Giulio Maspero

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Liberalism and Its Future

The Last Christian Settlement: A Defence and Critique, in Debate with Samuel Moyn

John Milbank

Abstract In the introductory essay, Milbank analyses the position of Samuel Moyn, professor of history and law at Yale University, on human rights and their relationship with Christianity, as presented in *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). The extraordinary interest of the first chapter lies in its sketch of the historical relationship between Christianity and the different political–economic positions originating in modernity. In the critical dialogue with Samuel Moyn, the value of the theological dimension and the autonomous or relational (or ontological-social) conception of human nature emerges. The question is also essential in the confrontation with Islam in Western democracies. The question about the future of liberalism is thus framed not only in the context of the latest academic debate, but also in the most urgent contemporary issues.

1 Right and Christian Politics

Samuel Moyn's *Christian Human Rights* stands at the intersection of two debates: one concerning the history of rights-talk, the other concerning the political character of what is increasingly recognised by historians as the last European Christian revival during the nineteen-thirties, culminating in the last political–cultural Christian settlement right across the West and even the globe, after 1945 [29].

At the further margin of both these concerns, only hinted at in the aforementioned book and yet considerably orienting its perspectives, lies the question as to why this settlement so suddenly collapsed, eventually ushering in an era of undiluted liberalism which includes, as Moyn suggests, a new and more purely secular, yet also novel apolitical dominance of human rights.

Essentially out of sight, or only invoked in the last chapter in a too complacent manner, remains the contemporary fact that the reiteration of liberalism in our own day, as after World War I and with Weimar, has started to come unstuck, once more

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challenged by populist, quasi-fascistic and renewed state socialist advocacy. It was just such a situation, one could argue, that the Christian revival of the nineteen-thirties tried to address in a 'nonconformist', creative and coherent way that once more looks highly relevant today [3].

Therefore, one could also read Moyn's book as a clever attempt to suppress this relevancy and instead treat nonconformist communitarianism as but a reactionary hangover from the deep European past, and even as too close to fascism for comfort.

In what follows I will try to make this case, by addressing simultaneously both of Moyn's main concerns: the modern history of human rights and the exact character of modern Christian political advocacy.

2 The Integrity of Christian Resistance

In either case, one must unreservedly welcome Moyn's commitment to historical rigour and desire to deny false continuities and lazy anachronisms. The nineteen-sixties were indeed such a watershed that we find it very difficult to believe that the existential stances, religiosity and *mores* of the twentieth century prior to that point were so very different. Thus, most of the TV dramas set before that decade manage to get the clothes (if not always the make-up) more or less right, but scarcely the conversation, accents and behaviour, bar the occasional negative registration that these decades fell well short of current standards of political correctness and were supposedly complacent as to the needs for state protection of adults and minors from all sorts of menaces.

Above all, as Moyn stresses, in the wake of other fine historians, we find it hard to imagine that up till so very recently religious assumptions remained normative and were even boosted in the face of rival totalitarianisms, both during peace and later at war, despite much deliberate (and by no means inevitable) organised secular opposition [6]. This includes, as Moyn so well details in this book, a myopia as to the nature of the human rights first advocated after 1945 and a false assumption as to the smooth gradient of rights recognition from then until now.

As he argues here and elsewhere, two new phases of rights-talk have intervened since this initial one [30, 31]. A second one tending to yoke rights to movements for national liberation, thereby reviving the French revolutionary notion of rights which saw them as protecting the smaller person and smaller property from the greater equivalents, and as only valid and enforceable if regarded as the rights of the 'citizen' as well as of the human being as such.

Then, a third one, which alone articulates fully a doctrine of exclusively 'human' rights, focused both on all sorts of emancipations of individual types and choices, as well as on the limitations of torture and other forms of legal abuse, cruelty and withholding of defensive succour. This most recent phase of post-war rights which now holds sway, is more individualised and internationalised and so depoliticised. Without any serious linking to international governance, but only to international tribunals that on their own lack the teeth of enforcement, the 'rights of man', or now

of the human being as such, have become unyoked from the 'rights of the citizen'. This latter right was closely linked to the rights of the majority of citizens to rule, even if these two perspectives—of liberalism and democracy, respectively—are obviously in an aporetic tension with each other.

The consequence of this unyoking, as Moyn indicates, is that rights can now mean anything and everything and are not necessarily linked with democracy at all—indeed they may tend to inhibit any collective action and encourage a purely formal mediation between rival claims by the law and the market, constitutionally embedded and immune to any serious popular challenge. He tends further to imply that this unyoking leaves rights once more prey to theological capture, as may be instanced by the return of 'dignity' talk in our own day, even if this now takes predominantly Kantian forms, which it did not in the early twentieth century, as Moyn rightly says [22].

On the other hand, if his remedy for either axiological anarchy or a new religious embrace is a re-politicisation of rights discourse, then it is perhaps not clear just how this can be possible in a globalised era without a difficult move to international governance, whose liberal character as presumably desired by Moyn would risk further popular democratic disaffection which is allied to a concern for place and ineffable local identity [35]. The non-validity of such concerns appears implied rather than discussed by him.

Moyn does not consider the way in which the stronger linking of the rights of the human being to the rights of the citizen always risks the cancelling of those rights outside of the sway of polity, or their suspension in an emergency—exactly the reason why the Christian thinkers he discusses tended to diagnose dialectically a totalitarian drift of Rousseauist liberalism itself and considered that human rights required an extra-human foundation that was transcendent rather than political. At times Moyn seems to assume that these diagnoses were just grounded in religious bias, rather than emergent from a serious and still relevant analysis. Is it not the case that the contemporary tendency to try to reinforce 'right' with 'dignity' is related to our valid reactions of shock and horror to the easy suspension of supposedly universal rights in conditions of supposed emergency and with respect to persons who have become or are deemed to be stateless?

All the same, these philosophical *lacunae* in no way detract from the importance of Moyn's insistence that right and dignity are unnatural bedfellows, in both philosophical and historical terms. As he contends, a discourse of foundational subjective right—assuming freedom as naturally given 'self-possession' (Hobbes and Locke) or else as a spiritual 'dignity' of free choice lying prior even to any kind of ownership (Rousseau and Kant)—was historically developed as an *alternative* to the discourse of 'natural law', even though there is a story to be told about how the latter, through the work of Francisco Suarez and others, gradually drifted in a natural rights direction [5]. Classically, natural law was not founded upon given freedom, nor even any uninterpreted natural 'facts' whatsoever, but upon the assumption of a divine government of the cosmos, which guided also human beings explicitly through their free conscience in terms of an intuited sense of equity [11]. This discourse therefore assumed the inherent justice of certain modes of action, goals and ways of relating. It

was, one might say, a discourse of the common good, taken to include objective standards of individual flourishing, variegated according to proper social roles, besides holistic goods that can only be shared and striven for collectively, since they amount to more than the sum of their parts.

Despair of the reality of such an order or of human participation within it (a despair that to begin with was itself perversely theological) led to novel and rival proposals for the grounding of human politics upon natural rights. Although Samuel Moyn is correct to say that seventeenth century notions of self-grounding subjective right were intended to protect an existing order of property and contract, one must still see continuity as well as inversion (as he tends exclusively to stress) between this legacy and that of the late eighteenth century revolutionary epoch. For the emancipatory irruption of more dispersed freedoms linked to smaller properties still assumed the new subjective foundation, displacing older natural law. For this reason, a more conservative understanding of this foundation remained latent and liable to re-erupt (as so often in the Unites States) as well as less national–political construals, both individualist and internationalist, with roots going back to Grotius. And one can note here the still continuing debates as to whether after all Hobbes really favoured King or Parliament, and whether Locke was really a defender of the estate owner or of the smallholder.

For these reasons, Moyn is somewhat in danger of suppressing genealogical continuities with respect to modern rights, even if we can altogether agree with him that these had no real precedents before the late Medieval (and largely Franciscan) proto-construction of something like the Hobbesian outlook [21]. This is not to deny his insistence on the ruptures that result in different archaeological levels (The Seventeenth Century/The Revolutionary Epoch/Christian/Liberationist/Globalised Rights), but it is to suggest an inherited and uncertain epigenetic potential within rights that belies his implicit attempt to see the revolutionary model as both normative and normatively radical. In doing so, he ignores the fact that this normativity has often been subject to critique from the socialist left as well as from what he wants to deem the 'reactionary' right.

None of this, however, in any way qualifies the truth of his insight that the Catholic assertion of 'dignity' in the nineteenth century arose in opposition to revolutionary rights and was made in the name of natural law and communitarian values. Nevertheless, a too easy and historically vague usage of labels like 'conservative' and 'reactionary' by Moyn causes him at times to underplay the degree to which, already in the nineteenth century, Catholics were trying to unharness their tradition from association with *ancien regime* absolutism and dynasticism, whose assumptions and practices were after all not primordial, but rather themselves a specific mode of *modern* polity, often making just the same pessimistic anthropological assumptions as to natural human anarchy, or putting forward equivalent 'enlightened' technocratic remedies, as their liberal opponents.

In this context, for Catholics to refuse the 'modern' in either mode was not necessarily to be 'conservative'. To view things in this way, as Moyn does, is itself to take the terms of reference of modernity for granted and to fail to see that 'liberal' or 'reactionary' may be equally and specifically *modern* options. By begging the

most vital questions at issue in this fashion, Moyn seems to just assume that the orthogonality of Catholic thinkers is a species of self-deluded vaunting, rather than a genuinely prescient perception of our modern political condition.

In support of a claim for this prescience, one can point out that recent historiography has concluded that most nineteenth century socialism *shared* this orthogonality. Left versus Right was a specifically revolutionary legacy, variously corresponding to *ancien regime* versus revolution, or to more conservative and more radical construals of revolutionary rights to freedom, property and happiness. Thus, as Jean-Claude Michéa has shown, right up till 1900 'the left' was more or less exclusively defined by *liberalism* [20]. To be 'socialist', at least before Marx and to a degree even after him, meant to refuse the normal terms of reference for political debate altogether. For one thing, socialists accused revolutionary republicans of wrongly seeing the solutions to economic and other problems as primarily *political,* whereas socialists—it was the whole point of their name—claimed them to be *social*, which meant voluntary, mutualist, fraternal, cultural and therefore often—in whatever way—also religious [24].

In this respect, socialism, just like the more radical and innovative modes of political Catholicism, essentially offered itself as a 'third way'—neither defending the excessive hierarchy and static property regime of the immediate past, nor embracing the voluntaristic individualism of the new present. Much of the vocabulary of socialism (e.g. the term 'solidarity') eventually migrated from socialism to Catholicism and—given the inherent argument *within* socialism as to the degrees of allowable private property, share-ownership, returns on interest and state intervention—the political split between the two was often more to do with espoused religion than anything else, especially when socialism tended in a more atheist direction (and particularly in Germany) after the influence of Marx and Engels [26].

It can seem indeed confusing that, in the twentieth century, the explicitly named 'third way' has been a mid-path between socialism and capitalism. Yet this disguises a continuity with an older, unnamed 'third way', that I have just described as being common to both socialism and Catholicism. For in either case what is sought is a medium between market individualism and top-down state control, such that construals of the third way in the twentieth century sense have been variously more or less capitalist, more or less socialist, in a mutualist and co-operativist sense of the term.

In this context, when it comes to the question of nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, Catholic concern with 'dignity', then it does not seem sufficient merely to say that it is used in order to re-insist upon a natural law vision of the dignity of the human status within a created cosmic order and of various hierarchically ordered roles within human society. For even if one wishes to view this cynically, it is clear that a decisive part of Catholic strategy within this period was somewhat to substitute for the guaranteed support of elite patrons of the inherited fealty of the European folk. Whether for mere interests of survival, or as the result of a resurrected inherited sense of the Christian centrality of the poor and humble (or both), nineteenth century thinkers and popes newly spoke of the 'dignity of labour', of the dignity also of the lowest rung of the social hierarchy.

One cannot just see this as 'conservative' nomenclature, asking the poor to be resigned to their lot, because it was specifically linked to the encouragement of Catholic workers' action and organisation and sometimes (as with Cardinal Manning and the London dock strike of 1889) as support for workers in their struggle for justice. Even if this be regarded as an opportunistic move in the face of declining elite and educated support, it still marks already a historical rupture.

Nor can one disconnect here (as Moyn tends to imply) the affirmation of social dignity from human dignity as such. The entire *point* of 'the dignity of labour' is that workers are also fully human beings. Thus, even if they are not supposed to rebel against their working status as such, or even perhaps to take strike action in most circumstances, this remains inherently an egalitarian rather than hierarchical affirmation, whose import is unlikely to be contained at a merely 'spiritual' level, and, in fact, was never intended to be, even by the Catholic hierarchy.

What is more, Moyn's statement that 'dignity' at first referred only to groups, and only later to individuals, is incoherent and inaccurate. From the outset, the 'dignity of labour' necessarily meant that the individual worker is fully a human being and must be accorded the full respect due to all humans as such. It is easy to find quotations which confirm this [13]. In this respect, the nineteenth century Thomistic revival did not have to wait upon twentieth century personalism, because Aquinas's texts themselves strongly link dignity with personhood and the complexity of his usage of 'person' (grounded in Trinitarian and Christological dogma as well as Latin etymology for which *persona* means 'mask') allows for a highly complex interplay between player and performance, the inherent and the assumed, human nature and human social role, necessary to a creature understood to be an *animal sociale* [22]. This inherent theological fluidity of the notion of person already forbids the contrast of 'group' and 'person' that Moyn wishes to impose upon it.

A shift in the application of 'dignity' from group to individual is crucial to Moyn's argument as to what happened with Christian thought in the nineteen-thirties. He is surely not completely incorrect about this shift, nor wrong as to its main cause: a growing worry about the totalitarian import of any political collectivism. All the same, it would be more accurate to speak of a shift of emphasis and not a change from one perspective to another with which it is incompatible—precisely because the dignity of role already assumed the dignity of the individual 'performer' of that role in the way that I have just described, just as the dignity of the human essence assumes the dignity of the individual, personal 'performer' of that essence (the Roman, Trinitarian and Christological echoes here being crucial).

Indeed, Moyn effectively concedes that this is, after all, merely a shift in emphasis—though maybe that concession strengthens his argument as to 'conservative' continuity—by allowing that the group-focussed 'corporatist' Catholics of Vichy often fully embraced Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier's new personalist language, while inversely the new Irish Republic, though refusing Iberian-style fascism (or its near-equivalent) still encouraged a mode of corporatism under the name of 'vocationalism'.

It could also be added that, although the German and Austrian exponents of Christian Democracy after the war put a strengthened emphasis on individual rights