BOOK REVIEWS

HERBERT BUTTERFIELD: HISTORY, PROVIDENCE, AND SKEPTICAL POLITICS By K.B. MacIntyre, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011, 247 pp., $18.00.

Herbert Butterfield is a name better known to historians and political theorists than sociologists. For those sociologists who see the revelation of God in Christ as the central event of history—as well as the cornerstone for social critique—Kenneth McIntyre's short and readable critique of Butterfield is a must read. From the moment MacIntyre introduces the reader to Butterfield's critique of *secularized eschatological history* and his assertion that this represents abandonment of authentic historicity he has us wanting to read more. As MacIntyre's book proceeds to unpack this critique the reader is provided with an alternative Augustinian view of history in which providence, guided by God's will is presented as the moving force of history.

This providential Augustinian view is contrasted with what Butterfield called the Whig interpretation of history which he defines as: "[A] . . . retrograde effort of Whig historians to subordinate history to contemporary practical concerns" (p. 7). Butterfield argues that the historian's true art is to provide an authentic view of the past, not an apologetic foundation for the contemporary. Social theorists will hear echoes of Weber's assertion that sociological analysis ought to be value neutral and to avoid prescription. This is not surprising since each was schooled by Leopold von Ranke and the German historical tradition. While Butterfield promotes the autonomy of history he also provides an alternate way to view the past that he calls Christian or providential history. MacIntyre describes this view as "a skeptical religious anthropology informed by [Butterfield's] Augustinian Christianity" where God constantly produces the novel and beneficent via providential activity above the level of conscious intention.

The reader of MacIntyre's book will find plenty of provocative reflections on modern history provided by "Augustinian humility" such as Butterfield's criticism of American Cold War attitudes. The reader will also find an extensive apologetic for the employment of a *skeptical liberalism* that follows from Augustinian anthropology. Butterfield argues that there are two primary sources of skeptical liberalism, one religious, more specifically Christian [Augustine, Luther, Niebuhr, Kennan, Barth] that follows from ". . . the specific and intrinsic value that Christianity places on the individual human soul." The other is epistemological and proceeds from an understanding that the " . . . inherent weaknesses of human nature limit the possibilities of human achievement. . . . [This] epistemological version [is] . . . skeptical of the most characteristic form of modern political discourse, namely ideological politics . . . or 'armed doctrines'" (p. 101-102).

MacIntyre provides an extended discussion of the implications of skeptical liberalism, or more to the point the demise of skeptical liberalism, and its impact on modern political theory and political events. For all this the sociological theorist will probably find MacIntyre's critique of Butterfield's description of modernity most fruitful. Like Robert Nisbet, Butterfield views the emergence of the idea of progress associated with the scientific revolution as definitive of " . . . the modern Western *Weltanschauung"* (p. 67).

Butterfield is more deliberate in emphasizing that it was not so much science as scientism that defines the modern world view. "[T]he scientific revolution was not characterized by the secularization so often attributed to it. Indeed, there was a common and striking religiosity among the early scientists.

However, the popularization of the achievements of the scientific revolution took place at the hands of a literary generation composed primarily of religious skeptics . . . ." (p. 75). The emergence of the scientific revolution, says Butterfield: ". . . outshines everything since the rise of Christianity . . ." (p. 77). If the plaint of Christian social theorists is, as for this reviewer, that the rejection of an Augustinian anthropology in exchange for Lockeian *tabula rasa* has crippled social theory Butterfield's critique of modernity is food for the soul. Just as Locke's *evidentialism*, originally conceived as a defense of faith from enthusiasts and Inner Light irrationality, was appropriated as argument against all religion, so was science misappropriated in favor of scientism, defined by Butterfield as "[A] Gnostic way of immanentizing the eschaton" (p. 86).

Where modern science was fundamentally rooted in mathematics and its application to the natural world: "Its proponents were, for the most part, very religious men. . . . They believed that in discovering the rationality of the natural world, they were expressing the genius of a creative God. . . . The irony of this situation lies in the fact that the very completeness of the mechanistic conception of the universe seemed to render the personal God of orthodox Christianity superfluous . . ." (p. 82-83). The result has human confidence to the point of hubris. What is necessary, Butterfield argues, is the restoration of a proper and provisional attitude appropriate to legitimate science, and for him a historiography that is descriptive rather than prescriptive. "[S]cience, like history is best understood as a conditional way of conceiving the world which is satisfactory in a provisional way but ultimately inadequate in explaining the meaning of human existence" (p. 87).

Butterfield"s rejection of temprocentric historical analysis echoes Weber's rejection of a prescriptive social science in favor of a value-neutral social science. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of MacIntyre's critique of Butterfield is the provision of direction for social theorists to reset the narrative. The prevailing premise for social theory is that sociology arose most directly from the ashes of the French Revolution. It's hard to argue with this but Butterfield (and MacIntyre) take us back to the 18th century and place the narrative in a broader context. The French Revolution and aftermath weren't the only game afoot. "[T]he irony of the French Revolution is that, despite its professed aims and its approbation of the English vocabulary of liberty, its central achievement was the creation of the modern revolutionary politics which defined much of the 20th century" (p. 130). A reset providing greater attention to English tradition, arguably more central to political theory than social theory, may be instructive in promoting a more Augustinian anthropology. According to MacIntyre ". . . the English tradition is intimately connected with . . . an inherited Augustinian conception of human beings as intrinsically precious but inherently imperfect" (p. 132). As MacIntyre puts it: "The rejection of the doctrine of universal sin and its replacement by an optimistic conception of human nature . . . is much more violent and chaotic than Butterfield's Augustinian alternative" (p. 136).

In his indispensable *Original Sin: A Cultural History* Alan Jacobs observes that "[O]f all the religious teachings I know, none—not even the belief that some people are eternally damned—generates as much hostility as the Christian doctrine we call 'original sin'" (Jacobs, 2001, p. ix). Those of us who would recommend a reset of social theory predicated on an Augustinian anthropology grounded in the idea of original sin should hold no illusions as to its embrace. We would do well to consult Kenneth MacIntyre's critique of Herbert Butterfield in the process. "Butterfield's skeptical liberalism is informed by his Augustinian Christianity and his reading of the English political tradition. He understands human beings to be the unique and invaluable creations of a loving God, who, having fallen from their original state, are inherently imperfect and imperfectable . . ." (p. 163).

Works Cited

Jacobs, A. (2001). *Original sin: A cultural history*. New York: HarperCollins.

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