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Tory traditionalism and Christian heritage. Maurice Cowling's polemics with Friedrich Hayek, John Keynes, and Roger Scruton

Abstract: The Tory traditionalism of the British historian Maurice Cowling appears to be, at its core, a polemic against conservative defeatism. On the other hand, its positive message serves as encouragement to define a conservative option as being in firm opposition to liberalism and in firm support for orthodox and traditional Christianity. These reflections do not seek to address the views that Maurice Cowling criticises. Instead, they primarily aim to try to delineate the specificity of Cowling's position. Hence, Hayek's ideological portrait explains why Cowling does not share a sympathy for the term 'liberal-conservative option' that is common among conservatives. A sample of Keynes's views explains Cowling's lack of illusions about the liberals' intransigence in relation to the Christian tradition. Cowling's portrayal of Scruton's views – Scruton is renowned for his traditionalist stance and staunch opposition to liberalism – is an expression of Cowling's dislike of the post-romantic quest for a spiritual alternative to allegedly irrevocably defunct Christianity.

Keywords: Tory traditionalism, spiritual and civilisational heritage of Christianity, liberalism, liberal-conservative option

Introduction

Maurice Cowling (1926–2005) was an English historian. He studied and then taught at the University of Cambridge, at a time when the university had become a stronghold of Toryism. Peterhouse College led the way in this respect, having been transformed into a veritable bastion of traditionalism under the leadership of Herbert Butterfield from 1955 to 1968. Cowling joined this endeavour, further enhancing its conservative and anti-liberal profile [Annan 1990: 270–271, 392–393, 441; Parry 2010: 14-15].

It was this conservative Peterhouse College which gave one of the names to the milieu of Tory traditionalists (known as the 'Peterhouse School' or the 'Salisbury Group') – scholars, journalists, and politicians – that made its mark on British political debate from the 1970s onwards. Alongside Cowling, notable figures include Michael Oakeshott, Roger Scruton, Elie Kedourie, Kenneth Minogue, Angus Maude, Shirley Letwin, Jonathan C. D. Clark and John Casey [Annan 1990: 270–271, 392–393, 441–443; Covell 1986; Garnett and Hickson 2009: 105; Greenleaf 1983; O'Sullivan 1986: 21–22].

Cowling's conservatism is plebeian and populist, not aristocratic. This is because he does not address the revolt of greedy, anarchic and self-satisfied masses, but rather the intellectual corruption of the elites [Aughey, Jones and Riches 1992: 45–52; Ortega y Gasset 2002]. It is about scholars who, uncritically and with large-scale group conformity, identify their professionalism with a secular and liberal position. However, it is not only about clerks, but also about politicians; not only about bad faith, but also about the careless faith of both groups; and particularly about those who, without identifying with liberal anti-conservatism or animosity towards Christianity, naively assume that expressing their often genuinely conservative or Christian views in liberal terms does not undermine their doctrinal identity [Cowling 1963b: 9–10; Cowling 1980: xii].

Maurice Cowling made some interesting observations about the effects of the late 20th-century process of detraditionalisation and de-Christianisation of British society. In his view, the average Briton does not identify with projects aimed at eradicating Christianity. Therefore, they are not susceptible to Enlightenment, Romanticism or other forms of post-Christianity, as these presuppose an active rejection of religion. On the contrary, the average Briton is characterised by the usual conservative conformity to a system of beliefs that has existed since time immemorial and is likely to endure for a very long time [Crowcroft, Green and Whiting 2010: 279–280; Harris 1997: 42–44].

To those concerned about the survival of Christianity's spiritual and civilisational heritage in contemporary Europe, these remarks may not sound particularly encouraging. However, the belief that the process of the secularisation of British society is far more complicated and less clear-cut than is often suggested is notable testimony to the Conservative faith, despite the expressed doubts.

Commentators on Cowling's thought point out that the essential achievement of his major three-volume work, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (RPD) [Cowling 1980; Cowling 1985; Cowling 2001], lies in the fact that he asks the crucial question of 'how it really was', credibly telling the story not of how liberalism won the battle of ideas, but of how conservative and Christian circles too hastily accepted the inevitability of their own defeat [Green 2010: 208; Harris 1997: 42–44; Harris 2010: 44, 58–59; Piotrowski 2017: 496–497; Piotrowski 2019].

The ideological portraits of Friedrich Hayek, John Keynes and Roger Scruton, as discussed here, are taken from Cowling's aforementioned *RPD* volumes. To a lesser extent than the work as a whole, they outline the author's ideological profile through polemical points of reference.

This contribution is not intended to do full justice to the views of the thinkers that Cowling describes; rather, it aims to illustrate and analyse Cowling's own position. Hayek's, Keynes's and Scruton's views, which he presents, serve largely as mirrors in which he views himself.

The selection of Hayek, Keynes and Scruton as the personalities to be analysed from among the plethora of figures in Cowling's *RPD* is not accidental, as their views shed interesting light on his standpoint. This is particularly true given that one would have to define Cowling's standpoint in terms of traditionalist Toryism – that is, in firm opposition to liberalism and in terms of Christian conservatism – that is, an affirmation of Christianity in the orthodox sense, rather than the diluted or heretical sense [Cowling 1980: 453; Crowcroft, Green and Whiting 2010: 279].

Given Cowling's critical and cutting style of analysis, one could compare his *RPD* with Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* [Johnson 1988; Johnson 1994], Roger Scruton's *Thinkers of the New Left* [Scruton 1985; Scruton 1999], or Noel Annan's *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation* [Annan 1990]. This style of portraying ideological positions is inevitably exposed to accusations of a lack of due impartiality, detachment, or objectivity. Nevertheless, despite such controversies, Cowling's intellectual biographies, like those of the aforementioned authors, reveal valuable insights into their subjects that would otherwise remain elusive. In other words, the author of this text follows the lead of other authoritative opinions on the matter in believing that identifying theoretical paradigms with ideologies does not necessarily result in ideological obstinacy or a narrowing of analysis of views and

opinions. The author sees a greater problem in the failure to realise such a relationship than in bias or partiality. In other words, the author agrees with the idea that 'it is impossible not to have prejudices, but it is possible to criticise them' [Beyme 2005: 86; Grobler 2006: 238–239; Heywood 2006: 21–22, 25–26; Iggers 2010: 97].

Ideological Portraits of Cowling's Opponents

Friedrich Hayek

According to Cowling, conservatives notorious tendency to seek ideological affinities with liberalism stems from a confusion between conservatism and liberal anti-totalitarianism. He argues that this is particularly the case with Thatcherism, especially among the New Right. However, he also acknowledges that, after the Second World War, Toryism in all its forms was 'blunted by alliance with antitotalitarian liberalism'. It was then that the mistaken impression emerged that the anti-totalitarianism of Friedrich Hayek, Karl Popper, Jakob Talmon and Isaiah Berlin was right-wing or conservative in nature. Nevertheless, he notes that this was not primarily the fault of these authors, but rather of their readers and conservative propagandists [Cowling 1978: 7, 21].

Regardless of the ingenuity of Hayek's overzealous interpreters, he did indeed propagate the idea of an alliance between liberalism and conservatism. He believed that liberal civilisation was at a crossroads and therefore, 'English Liberalism and English Conservatism, while differing about privilege, should come together to restrict the damage which Socialism was doing to the character of the [English] people' [Cowling 2001: 496].

As Cowling points out, this call for an ideological alliance between conservatism and liberalism is worth considering in the context of an idea that was fundamental to Hayek's thinking. He emphasised this idea in his highly acclaimed book *The Road to Serfdom*, published in 1944. The book's key message is the general warning that socialism could lead to the replacement of a commercial and competitive society with a militarised and totalitarian one. More specifically, it advises British wartime propaganda to portray the war against Nazism as a war against state tyranny by embracing liberalism as the staunchest defender of freedom [Ibid.: 495–496]. In other words, Hayek argued that the fight against the Third Reich should take the form of a liberal crusade.

Cowling is sympathetic to the nostalgia expressed by Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom* for the way of life of pre-First World War Britain that was lost forever

(i.e. the catastrophic consequences of the total mobilisation of society, the economy and the state during the war). However, he is sarcastic about describing this old world as 'liberal', just as he is sceptical of Hayek's belief that the success of this old society was due to the fact that 'the growth of commerce had joined the tradition of Periclean individualism to liberate citizens from custom and satisfy an ever-widening range of desires'. He also treats Hayek's assertion that the core of the British tradition and the source of British prosperity at that time was freedom, tailor-made to liberal standards, with irony. He argues that *The Road to Serfdom* is a testament to 'the resentments of a dispossessed Liberal. So far from being conservative, it was designed to achieve Socialism's ethical objectives without resorting to Socialist methods' [ibid. 496].

Cowling concedes that there is no reason to deny Hayek's appreciation of Christian philosophy of man. After all, Hayek saw the doctrine of original sin, with its pessimism, as a strong and authoritative counterweight to modern rationalism and its optimistic belief in human agency. On the other hand, Hayek valued Christian humility as an essential part of civilisation's heritage. Nevertheless, Cowling describes his doctrine as 'as little Christian, or even religious, as it was conservative' [ibid. 498].

Cowling does not believe that Hayek was a materialist or a proponent of the prevalent modernist mindset. After all, Cowling confirms that Hayek derided 'Comte's scientism and St Simon's early authoritarianism' [ibid. 495]. He also acknowledges that, by condemning Nazism, Communism and British socialism, Hayek was seeking to follow in Edmund Burke's footsteps and his doctrine of the free world. However, Cowling notes that the difference is difficult to ignore, namely that Burke defended 'an alliance to unite European Christianity against Jacobinical atheism'. Meanwhile, Hayek's proposal amounted to 'a post-Christian politics' that would enable people in a secular, post-Christian world to find 'a sufficient arena for moral endeavour' [ibid. 499].

Hayek has a well-deserved reputation as an advocate of spontaneous order and a critic of statism. He clearly identified with a tradition of modernity critique that is sensitive to the fragility of spiritual order, which is threatened by a mentality that places too much hope in the culture-creating capacities of scientific reason. Cowling does not attempt to undermine Hayek's reputation. However, he does take the liberty of noting that Hayek himself rejected Christianity, placing greater value on vague hopes seeking confirmation in the authority of views such as Karl

Mannheim's assertion that 'politics required a new spiritual foundation based on the reorganization of . . . knowledge' [ibid. 495].

John Keynes

More respectful than Hayek for the religious dimension of human existence seems to have been another liberal, portrayed by Cowling, who also has the reputation of being an outspoken opponent of Bolshevism. John Maynard, the first Baron Keynes, for we refer to him here, grew up in an atmosphere of liberalism that strongly championed the principles of free trade. A proponent of economic freedom, he was openly dismissive of Marxist economics, regarding it as archaic. He also had no sympathy for the Labour Party, claiming that it was a 'class-party' leading a 'class-war', in which he was 'on the side of the educated bourgeoisie' with heart and mind. He considered the Liberal Party to be 'the best instrument of progress' [Cowling 2001: 483, 486].

Keynes 'combined' an enthusiasm for free trade with a 'desire for moral Liberation', which meant rejecting his family's religious traditions, both Anglican and non-conformist. Significantly, he succeeded in freeing himself not only from Christianity, but also from the form of contestation of Christianity that stems from crude, naturalistic scientism. Ultimately, he considered 'Puritan' anxiety about the salvation of the soul to be pointless. This was not due to crude materialist rationalism straight out of the Radical Enlightenment or Benthamite utilitarianism, but rather due to 'knowledge . . . aesthetic experience and . . . love preferably for another person' and enthusiasm for 'the spontaneity of human nature and (…) the life of action, including the pursuit of power, politics, success, and wealth' [ibid. 483].

Keynes had no sympathy for Soviet-style economics. He also stood in solidarity with the 'educated, decent intelligentsia of Western Europe' and, like them, condemned the political brutality of the Soviet regime. However, he had a soft spot for the religious sensibility of Marxism, a sentiment he expressed after visiting Bolshevik Russia in the mid-1920 [ibid. 483–484].

He detested Lenin for his ruthlessness but took him seriously. Firstly because, he argued, 'in an age which was without religion, many would feel a strong emotional curiosity towards any religion which was really new'. Secondly because Marxism-Leninism, in attempting to replace 'capitalism's loss of idealism', 'was giving a changed relative importance to pecuniary motives and the accumulation

of money'. In other words, Keynes acknowledged that Bolshevism was a hard-to-ignore source of the restoration of the spiritual foundations of the liberal order. He suggested that 'chemicals were being mixed', that the Soviet Union had more invention than the US and that Russian communism might indeed represent 'the first stirrings of a great religion' [ibid. 483–484].

While Keynes had much consideration for the fervour of elation emanating from the furnaces of the Bolshevik revolution, he seemed to value the revolution mainly for the impetus it would give to the liberal revolution. He believed that the arrival of a 'really new, (…) great religion' in the non-communist part of Europe would be achieved by the power of 'the liberal hope that opinion could be changed, the imagination instructed and hearts and minds enlarged as the true voice of the new generation made its impact on the world'. Driven by this hope, he was convinced that the western part of the old continent also had explosive potential capable of triggering a revolution that was 'no less inevitable' than the one inspired by the 'bloodthirsty philosophers of Russia and that was sufficiently hostile to established traditions to 'eventually loosen the bonds of custom' [ibid. 485].

However, for this liberal revolution to take effect, the courage of the revolutionaries is still needed. According to Keynes, the Liberal Party, 'the best instrument of progress', should risk stirring up the electorate's attitudes to undermine 'the prevailing medieval . . . orthodoxy about marriage, divorce, birth control, contraception, the family and sexual abnormality' [ibid. 486].

Roger Scruton

For Cowling, the polemical point of reference for Christian conservatism is generally Liberal thought. Occasionally, however, this role is also served by someone from the Tory traditionalist milieu. His critique of British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton's position stands as a testament to this.

From Scruton's disdain for the spiritual misery of the contemporary Anglican Church and the liturgical poverty typical of Protestantism, not to mention his view that Christianity had been reduced to a mere relationship between God and the soul, one might conclude that he was a firm supporter of Roman Catholicism. However, as Cowling argues, this is a misleading impression. First and foremost, Scruton regarded himself as the heir of Matthew Arnold, with his position as an apologist for higher culture. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Arnold contrasted this with the intellectual and aesthetic defects of the materialist and

commercial mentality of the Victorian 'philistine'. While this attitude possesses all the hallmarks of one of the successive varieties of critique of modernity, it has little to do with Christianity [Cowling 2001: 629].

Scruton wanted to avoid atheism and non-belief. However, he also argued that religion can no longer be what it used to be because the Enlightenment has irrevocably undermined the credibility of Christianity. He believed that Europe, having lost its gods, must avoid anarchist individualism, but could not pretend that Christianity was still vibrant. He also believed that an appropriate religiosity for our times should be based on accepting the lessons of the Enlightenment and the experience of the Romantic rebellion against it [ibid. 631].

In Scruton's view, an appropriate religious attitude for our post-Christian times is found in the affirmation of a higher culture whose role is to teach life, a task previously fulfilled by Christianity, 'as if [human] lives [still] mattered eternally'. Its mission would be to make 'the cynic as well as the salesman wither before the transcendental'. However, the identity of higher culture lies not in the fact that it contains the remnants of Christianity, but in the fact that it is Christianity's successor [ibid. 631–632].

In Scruton's view, higher culture must replace Christianity because it is dead, and this culture seems to hold sufficient potential for the task. This is partly because the decline of Christian faith has coincided with 'the rise of aesthetics, [which] has now replaced the religious as the central strand in humane education and experience' [ibid. 631]. Scruton believed that the aesthetic attitude has the power to restore the individual, community and transcendent dimensions of human dignity. It can also provide a credible antidote to scientism, instrumentalism, Marxism, existentialism, scepticism, deconstruction, and even Kierkegaardian despair [ibid. 628–629].

Not only is higher culture able to step in for Christianity, but it is also characterised by qualities unavailable to Christianity. By allocating the space vacated by the demise of Christianity to the aesthetic imagination, Scruton did not expect it to preach doctrine, establish practical prohibitions and precepts, or 'interrogate the world, as Christianity interrogated it, in order to sniff out heresy and error'. He only demands that it be capable of prompting 're-emergence of the old spiritual forces (…) [and] venture (…) into spiritual territory which has no place on the Christian map' [ibid. 632].

How valuable could Scruton's post-Christian religion be to a conservative? While one could make several arguments in its favour, this does not convince Cowling. The astringent conclusion of his reflections on the British philosopher's spiritual quest clearly indicates this. As with Matthew Arnold's stance, Cowling argues that we cannot be certain 'whether Scruton's religious rhetoric is more than fashion, what will be left of religion once it has abandoned belief and dogma and whether anything will be left once it has been absorbed (…) into culture or conduct' [ibid. 633].

Conclusions

In his essay on Friedrich Hayek, Cowling's traditionalist stance (defining conservatism in firm opposition to liberalism) is particularly polemical, especially given the expectations of many conservatives regarding the liberal intellectual tradition, which are characteristic of the New Right orientation. Hayek had a reputation of an exceptionally scathing critic of the non-liberal and liberal left, and was often 'passed over in silence' by his opponents. This was partly because he was a staunch advocate of the idea that Nazism had socialist roots, and partly because he offered a critique of the democratic liberal orthodoxy of the Western political order from the perspective of classical liberalism, i.e. by criticising its democratic component while defending elements such as nomocracy and polyarchy. Hayek was thus indeed a 'liberal whip for the left'. He fully deserved the genuine resentment of left-wing intellectuals. Cowling does not question Hayek's merits as a vocal critic of anthropocentrism and vulgar modernism. However, in a manner similar to Michael Oakeshott [Oakeshott 1999: 42], he argues that Hayek is simultaneously seriously entangled in the very mode of thinking he is critiquing. In other words, Hayek is living proof that an exemplary right-wing liberal critic of socialism and totalitarianism can have little in common with conservatism and Christianity.

Perhaps the most widespread view of Hayek is that he embodies the neoliberal reaction against state interventionism, which was traditionally championed by Keynes for many decades. However, Cowling's delineation of their ideological profiles does not focus on this aspect of their competing views. Instead, these portrayals emphasise their doctrinal affinity, given their shared aversion to the Christian moral, intellectual, and religious tradition. However, from the perspective of potential conservative expectations, Keynes's anti-Bolshevism, as presented by Cowling, is even more disappointing than Hayek's. This does not seem surprising, given that Keynes's liberalism is not ascribed conservative tendencies, as is the case with Hayek, especially among New Right sympathisers.

Keynes rejects the Bolshevik creed, both economically and politically, but not religiously or spiritually. In fact, he views it as the harbinger of a new religion that will emerge fully as a result of the liberal revolution and eventually prevail over traditional Christian orthodoxy. His liberalism is therefore anti-Bolshevik, albeit with exceptions. However, Keynes is even more principled in his anti-conservatism and hostility to Christianity, although without similar exceptions.

Not only do the liberal thinkers Hayek and Keynes not meet the ideological tastes of Maurice Cowling, but neither does the anti-liberal conservative Roger Scruton. Indeed, Scruton was critical of technocratic modernity, which he believed suppresses the spirit. He also emphasised the doctrinal superiority of Catholicism over contemporary Protestantism, particularly in Europe. Ultimately, as Cowling laments, Scruton's stance had little in common with an appreciation of the *gravitas* of Christian spirituality. In fact, he shared a similar conviction to Hayek and Keynes that Christian spirituality would definitely be annihilated by Enlightenment rationalism. In Scruton's view, a religion tailored for modern humanity must take this fact into account. It should also not disregard the spiritual legacy of the Romantic rebellion against the ideas of the Age of Light. It is intended to be a religion of higher culture. Not only is it capable of replacing defunct Christianity, but it also clearly surpasses it spiritually.

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The confrontation of worldview options by the three British intellectuals described by Cowling does not challenge their belonging to different political and doctrinal traditions. However, it also demonstrates that, although they deplore the destructive effects of some of the more vulgar and dogmatic forms of modern ideology, they simultaneously exude a profound belief that these effects are irreversible. In their view, those decrees of fate consigning Christianity to the dustbin of history are particularly irreversible.

What of Roger Scruton distancing himself from the fervour of Thatcherite New Righters and Friedrich Hayek's concept of a doctrinal alliance between conservatism and liberalism? Hayek arguably damages his reputation as a serious thinker with his ideas for a new spiritual basis for a de-Christianised West. However, Scruton's conservatism seems to lose credibility through his enthusiasm for searching for a living religious alternative to Christianity, which is allegedly outdated. This puts him almost in line with John Maynard Keynes and his projects for a new, this time liberal, religion.

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The significance of Cowling's disagreement with Keynes, Hayek, and Scruton's views does not seem to be limited to the British debate. Indeed, important references to the polemics taking place in other modern Western countries cannot be denied. The dispute also appears to be of interest to the ideological discussion taking place in Poland's Third Republic (and probably in other post-communist countries too). This applies in particular to a significant part of Poland's right-wing current. Perhaps because liberalism could be regarded as a more distinctive – though not necessarily more profound – antithesis to communism than conservatism during the communist era, this current nourishes a stronger sentiment towards the liberal ideological tradition than is warranted, often resulting from simple misunderstandings.

Cowling's analyses can act as an effective antidote to such an affliction. They present significant reasons to be wary of the pernicious tendency, as described by Kenneth Minogue, 'to dress up conservative assumptions as form of liberalism' [Minogue 1978: 123]. In other words, they raise awareness of the irony involved in the situation where the 'theologically committed Christian conservative *bloc*' defines its identity in terms of liberal conservatism by resorting to 'Mill's slogans' [Cowling 1963a: xiv–xv].

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