Larry Siedentop. *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. London: Penguin Books, 2014. Pp. 434.

After attending Hope College in Michigan and Harvard University, Larry Siedentop made a distinguished academic career at Keble College, Oxford. He wrote on the French liberal thinkers Tocqueville and Guizot and published a noted *Democracy in Europe* (2001). A recurring theme of interest in his work has been the fact that the roots of modern liberalism, and particularly the values of equality and individual freedom, are to be traced primarily to the influence of Christianity on Western culture.

The central thesis of *Inventing the Individual* is therefore highly unfashionable and certainly not something propagated in secular universities—that Christianity contributed positively to the growth of Western freedoms: "Secularism is Christianity's gift to the world, ideas and practices which have often been turned against 'excesses' of the Christian church itself" (p. 360). Siedentop also daringly contrasts Christianity and Islam at their inception: "Enforced belief was, for Paul and many early Christians, a contradiction in terms. Strikingly, in its first centuries Christianity spread by persuasion, not by force of arms—a contrast to the early spread of Islam" (p. 361). So this book invites us *sotto voce* not to be browbeaten by slanted secularization theories and to affirm how positive the message of Christianity was for the development of human flourishing.

The title of the present work is a little deceptive, perhaps because of no fault of the author—who knows? We might expect the book to run through the Reformation to the French Revolution and beyond. However, its center of interest is much further back, and the main body of the book deals with the development of the notion of the individual up to the time of the Reformation. There is a final chapter on "Dispensing with the Renaissance" and an epilogue on "Christianity and Secularism." In these two chapters Siedentop goes against the current flow of present interpretation of the meaning of Renaissance and secularism.

The twenty-five chapters of the book are divided into sections that deal successively with the world of antiquity, the moral revolution of Christianity, the idea of fundamental laws, Europe acquiring its identity, a new model of government, and the birth pangs of modern liberalism. The author finds the roots of modern liberalism in the canon lawyers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, not yet in coherent theory, but in the seeds that bore fruit two centuries later. He identifies several important elements, such as equality as the basis for the legal system, the belief that enforcing moral conduct is a contradiction in terms, the defense of individual liberty through fundamental

natural rights, and representative government as appropriate for a society resting on moral equality. These ideas were not yet combined to create a program for the sovereign state and secularism. That development came later, "when the fragmentation of Christianity led to religious wars, civil and international. In an attempt to restore a broken unity, Catholic and Protestant churches resorted to force, (which) led sensitive minds gradually to put together the credo of secularism, drawing on the insights of so-called 'medieval' thinkers" (p. 332). So liberalism was not born naturally from Christianity, but indirectly, as a result of conflict when "liberal" or "modern intuitions generated by Christianity were turned against attempts to 'enforce' belief" (p. 333). Henceforth the epithet "barbarous," which had hitherto been applied to pagan hordes, was attached to the churches.

From our point of view, the main interest of Siedentop's cultural narrative lies in its capable debunking of two modern shibboleths, the myths we have been conditioned by modernism to accept as self-evident, firstly, that classical antiquity was a haven of freedom and the aspirations of human nobleness, which Christianity overlaid with darkness, violence and oppression, and secondly, that the Renaissance was the breaking forth of a new humanity, a harbinger of the liberating Enlightenment, which put paid to the barbarities of the dark ages when religion dominated in the medieval period and the Reformation.

Chapters 4 to 6 of this challenging book are a tonic. They made me think that we have somewhere lost the power of the gospel and its social impact in theological niceties. Contrary to what we were told in school, the ancient family, the ancient city, and the ancient cosmos itself were characterized by forms of oppression that can only be described in terms of inequality, hierarchy, and fate. The core of ancient thinking was the assumption of natural inequality, which meant that rationality was not equally distributed among mankind. "Whether in the domestic sphere, in public life or when contemplating the cosmos, Greeks and Romans did not see anything like a level playing field. Rather, they instinctively saw a hierarchy or pyramid" (p. 51). Siedentop does not have much difficulty (although he is not always helped by some of his references, who are "Enlightenment agents") in showing that the much-maligned apostle Paul, following the teaching of Jesus, turned the world upside down. Christ, not Augustus, is king. Paul "invented Christianity" by reconstructing human identity (pp. 58–62). Christ reveals God acting through human agency and redeeming it. Rationality is reshaped by faith, and Paul overturns inequality for equality, bringing a new transparency into human relations and a God-given foundation for human action in the free action of love. Paul "attaches to the historical figure of

Jesus a crucial moment in the development of human self-consciousness" (p. 63). Later Christian apologists will give social order a foundation in law and conscience. Martyrs will demonstrate the power of the individual will founded on conscience, in stark contrast to the heroism of antiquity (p. 80). This demonstration is capital for today, at a time when the Christian church needs to discover anew the difference between Jerusalem and Athens, rather than kowtowing to Athens.

Siedentop's story is that "Christian egalitarianism (the 'care of souls') first shaped the distinction between spiritual and temporal authority, creating a sphere for individual conscience" (p. 321). Egalitarian moral institutions had gradual and transforming power. Slavery was undermined early on, and the permanent inequalities of social status came under increasing threat in the long haul, with accountable sovereignty replacing tyranny. This movement focalized not in the Renaissance but in the later Middle Ages; the challenge for early modern Europe was transforming moral claims into social status (pp. 338–39). Siedentop criticizes the accepted wisdom on the Renaissance: "We have inherited from historians such as Burckhardt the view that the individual re-emerged and burst into bloom in the Italian Renaissance (which) marked the end of a kind of religious tyranny, a tyranny of the mind—opening European eyes to the apparently far wider range of values and interests exhibited in classical antiquity." Any suggestion that egalitarian moral values might be traced to Christianity became outlandish. This, it is suggested, is far from the reality of things. Even though Siedentop has no wish to depreciate its attainments, he maintains that the Renaissance has been grossly inflated; the idea that it marked a decisive break separating ignorance and superstition from freedom and progress needs to be called into question (pp. 334–36). Uncoerced belief, the role of the individual conscience, legitimate authority, and freedom of choice and responsibility are products of Christianity in its developments prior to the Reformation.

As far as antiquity, the Renaissance, and the rise of modern egalitarian values are concerned, we have been led up the garden path by the virulent anticlericalism of modernism, which is still with us in its postmodern form as anti-Christianity. Siedentop invites us to review the accepted wisdom and take seriously the message of the gospel for moral egalitarianism. This might be essential when it comes to thinking about the *limits* of egalitarianism, and the way it is tipping over into new forms of tyranny today.

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