Liberalism as a ‘World Religion’, and Neoliberalism as ‘Religious Extremism’[[1]](#endnote-1)

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**Introduction**

The 18th century Enlightenment was heavily influenced by, and productive of, the body of ideas that came to be called Liberalism in the 19th century. Modern theorizations of representative democracy, individual rights, and national sovereignty are all constitutive of Liberalism. Liberalism is also strongly associated - historically, and in contemporary discourse - with the secular science of economics and the doctrine of free markets. Typically today academics and media-politicians refer to modern representative democracy as Liberal democracy, and the free market capitalism of such societies as Liberal capitalism. Liberal democracy and liberal economics have been widely assumed to be a mark of western progress and superiority, of the modern over the traditional, of the secular over the religious, not least because Liberals respect the rights of Individuals, liberty and equality, the sovereignty of nation states, and free trade. Liberals have attributed this success story, in part at least, to the progressive marginalization of ‘religion’ and its dogmatic faith postulates from public life, and its replacement by the objective domains of secular reason.

The problem with this narrative is that Liberalism is itself based on faith postulates that are not essentially different from what are typically classified as religious beliefs. The key doctrines of Liberalism are based on myths – about human nature, about ownership rights, about self-regulating markets, about progress and development, about nations and national identity, about religion and religions - that have taken on the appearance of universal, common sense normality[[2]](#endnote-2). None of these Liberal abstractions have any empirically confirmable objectivity. They constitute imaginary goals and aspirations that appear in subjective consciousness as the limits of our ability to think.

Furthermore, in Neoliberal doctrine these myths have become invested with an intensity of faith that is not unlike the extremism frequently attributed to ‘religious fanatics’, and which today drives much of the violent disorder evident in the world. If the categories and principles of classical Liberalism are ‘religious’ beliefs, then Neoliberalism is a fundamentalist revival movement characterised by dogmatism and missionary zeal. That Liberalism, especially in its purist Neoliberal form, is not itself essentially different from a dogmatic religious faith undermines the very idea of the ‘secular’ as the reasonable ground from which the ‘religious other’ can be identified.

**The Meanings and Deployments of Liberal**

The term ‘Liberal’ has become associated rhetorically with ‘equality’ and even more with ‘liberty’. The fundamental sense of ‘liberty’ in Liberal ideology is the freedom of the Individual to pursue his or her private interests against the encroachments of arbitrary and unelected government. It has become associated with *liberation* from oppressive regimes; from the bigotry and irrational violence of religion; from the conservatism of traditional hierarchies; and from the oppressive and irrational past. The Liberal modern has been imaginatively constructed as secular tolerance, progress and development in opposition to the dark ages, the medieval and the exotic other. Liberalism is a soteriology of liberation of individuals from bondage, of enlightenment and self-fulfilment, the realization of our true entrepreneurial self in a world of spontaneously-combusting markets.

In order to avoid an infinite regress, I am assuming for argument’s sake that many of the foundational ideas of Liberalism were emerging in Christian Europe during the 17th century. John Locke has frequently been referred to as the Father of Liberalism, and there are good reasons for that. Though he rarely uses the term ‘liberal’ himself, a number of basic Liberal concepts and principles can be found in his work, a point I return to later in this chapter.

When the word ‘liberal’ appears in Locke, it typically has the meaning of tolerant, flexible and generous. There is good reason for this, for these are the older nuances of the word, and it continues to have this meaning today. However, such positive meanings have historically become combined and confused with a newer Enlightenment discourse on liberal political economy. Paradoxically, a central category of liberal political economy is the selfish Individual, who finds his (and more recently her) most rational activity in self-maximisation through free markets. The term ‘liberal’ took on an increasingly specific and theorised meaning in the works of Scottish Enlightenment authors such as William Robertson and Adam Smith.[[3]](#endnote-3) In and around 1769 such terms as “liberal policy,” “liberal plan,” “liberal system,” “liberal views,” “liberal ideas,” and “liberal principles” began to proliferate, and these liberal ideas - “the liberal system of free exportation and free importation” - were already embedded in a discourse on self-regulating markets, the division of labour, the progress of nations, and the entrepreneurial Individual.

After Smith’s death in 1790, fellow Scots such as Dugald Stewart and contributors to the Edinburgh Review “reinforced ‘liberal’ discourse and guaranteed that the term’s usage continued to spread”. Jeremy Bentham, who systematised the utilitarian calculus of Individual interests, approvingly adopted the term in these senses in his writing on political economy. In the 1820s the suffix “-ism” was attached to create “liberalism.” In Britain the founding of the Liberal Party in 1859[[4]](#endnote-4) at the height of British imperial power gave the term a prominence that suggests the increasing centrality and institutionalization of the term. William Gladstone (who was four times the Liberal Prime Minister of Britain) and fellow Liberals such as Richard Cobden and John Bright popularised the term “liberal” largely as Adam Smith and others had begun to use it. In Joseph Schumpeter’s words “Gladstonian finance was the finance of the system of 'natural liberty,' laissez-faire, and free trade.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Declaration of Independence (1776) and the US Constitution (1790), which is a prototype of modern written constitutions, are powerful proclamations of Liberal values, and figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison are surely among the most powerful voices expressing Liberal values and concepts of government.

The US Constitution proclaims and establishes the fundamentals of Liberal democracy based on the proclaimed natural rights of the Individual, of which arguably the most important is the right to freedom from government interference, the right to private accumulation of capital, and the right to representation. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – written by a small, educated elite of property-owning men, many with slaves - are couched in the language of universal progress and enlightenment, of liberation from traditional forms of tyranny. These sacred texts proclaim Liberal modernity at the same moment that they proclaim the manifest destiny of the US to liberate peoples from irrational and arbitrary tradition.

One of the nuances of Liberal here is that we[[6]](#endnote-6) are ‘freer’ than other people in the sense that we are ‘liberated from old forms of tyranny’. This meaning is also associated with progress, that the progressive peoples (typically the male dominant class) find freedom through higher attainments of rational understanding. It also inaugurates or at least proclaims a new world order.

Daniel B. Klein points out that in the USA in the 20th century the term Liberal has sometimes had negative connotations:

“In the first half of the 20th century, “Liberal” enjoyed a certain prestige. When Franklin Roosevelt began using it to describe the ideology of the New Deal, small-government types accused him of linguistic theft, claiming that since the expansion of state power threatened liberty, they—and not the New Dealers—were the true Liberals.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

This accusation against Roosevelt’s use or misuse seems to reflect the ‘classical Liberal’ understanding of ‘liberty’, such as free markets, small government, low taxation, and the right of individuals to accumulation of private property free from outside encroachments[[8]](#endnote-8). However

“…by the 1960s, the American right had stopped claiming “Liberal” and begun demonizing it. Over the next two decades, being a Liberal came to mean letting criminals terrorize America’s cities, hippies undermine traditional morality, and communists menace the world. It meant, in other words, too much liberty for the wrong kind of people. Fearful of its negative connotations, Democratic politicians began disassociating themselves from the term…”

The adoption of the language of American conservatism or neoconservativism should not hide from us the continuation of foundational Liberal and Neoliberal narratives about individual liberty and rights, about progress, or about the destiny of nations. The notion that the term ‘Liberal’ might become associated with hippie communes, cooperatives, workers’ rights or communism indicates an ambiguity about the meaning of the term. Peter Beinart, concludes that “although most Americans prefer the term “conservative,” those same Americans are “remarkably consistent” in telling researchers that they prefer liberal policies.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

This confusion of terms suggests that many of those who prefer to call themselves Conservative or Neoconservative are, at heart, classical Liberals in the sense of their opposition to the interference of the state in the ownership, production or redistribution of wealth. Redistributive Liberalism, that seeks to address matters of equality and social justice as well as matters of personal liberty, is a step too far in the direction of ‘socialism’. The Liberalism of the New Deal, or the Liberalism of the economist Maynard Keynes, threatens the rights of private ownership by raising taxes and creating employment in large publicly-funded building projects. Most Conservatives or Neoconservatives today believe in free markets, small government, low taxation, and the right of individuals to the unimpeded accumulation of private property. This point seems strengthened by considering the powerful influence on conservatives such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher of the New Liberalism, or Neoliberalism, deriving from the Austrian school of economics and such economists as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Both Hayek and Friedman claimed - with some justification - to be unpacking the principles of classical Liberalism to their fullest and purest extent. Both explicitly identified this pure form of Liberalism with specific theorists of political economy in the 18th century, especially Richard Cantillon and Adam Smith[[10]](#endnote-10), and the Liberal or classical economic theories of the earlier part of the 19th century (Ricardo, Bentham, James Mill, Richard Whately, Nassau Senior and others) before ‘Socialism’ and unionised labour destroyed the supposed earlier purity of Liberal vision[[11]](#endnote-11). The liberty that derives from the pursuit of Individual self-interest is represented as ‘natural’, a vision of ‘man in the state of nature’ shared by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, combined with a dualistic epistemology of fictional mental substances looking out onto an external, material world. This imaginary has had an elective affinity to the opportunities for global plunder of a class of Christian men in a world of colonial expansion. Historically such a subjectivity has been embellished by various rhetorical techniques, observances, disciplines, inculcated dispositions, ethical concepts, educational priorities, constitutional and legal enforcements, media propaganda, and the urgent responsibility of governments. Today the self-maximizing Individual of Neoliberalism finding his profit and salvation in free markets is offered both as a fact about human nature, as well as a moral exhortation about what kind of people we ought to be. The liberation of the Individual through competition over private property is also the universal condition for the progress of nations, and determines foreign policy and massive and regular military interventions and conflicts.

Liberalism, its fundamentalist offspring Neoliberalism, and the value of ‘liberty’ can be considered the dominant, globalising discourse of capitalist modernity, despite the tendency to obscure this fact by the use of terminology such as Conservative or Neoconservative.

Liberalism in the sense of the fundamental faith postulates of classical Liberalism and Neoliberalism has been energetically promoted through colonial and neo-colonial power both as a theory of government and also as an economic doctrine of markets. The relentless policies of privatization and energetic defence of the rights of private property and accumulation of capital are driven not only by elected governments but also by powerful institutions such as the Federal Reserve, the IMF, the World Bank, and the European Central Bank (ECB). Though Liberalism has been resisted in many ways in a multitude of sites, the USA today uses its unmatched power to force its key Liberal tenets on people in its mission to civilize and discipline. The power of propaganda has been effective in normalizing Liberal faith postulates, such that to deny them seems counter-intuitive, eccentric and a danger to democracy. Any policy that seeks to promote state involvement in the production and redistribution of wealth or in the protection of peoples and their environments is opposed as a form of socialism or collective totalitarianism. This would help to explain why people who believed in the classic Liberal principle of ‘liberty’ would have criticised the use of the term ‘Liberal’ to describe Roosevelt and his New Deal, because it involved the state in using taxation to redistribute the wealth of the nation to its poorer citizens.

**Being liberal, and being a Liberal**

The term ‘Liberal’ may have been shunned by US Conservatives and Neoconservatives for its association with Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 30’s, and again with the association in the 60’s with hippy communes and a tendency towards questioning the morality of selfish capitalism. Yet it could also be argued that the confusion of classical Liberal postulates with the ordinary language descriptor ‘liberal’ has advanced its *positive* image in the public mind. Enlightenment theorists would probably not have adapted a term for their theoretical purposes if it had negative connotations in ordinary language. Some of the ordinary positive uses of ‘liberal’ found in Locke, before the term got picked up and deployed for the more specific purposes by subsequent Enlightenment writers, are still continuous with common usage today. If I describe someone as liberal with her money, I mean she is generous. If I say that someone is liberal in her morals, I mean she is flexible and tolerant. Presumably it has always been possible for people to be liberal in such senses, that is, generous, tolerant and flexible. But to be liberal in these looser senses does not logically imply a commitment to Liberalism as a doctrine of political economy. It does not, for example, commit one to a belief in ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty’ except in the senses suggested by ordinary language. If someone is free with his or her money they are generous, or if someone is free with their time or in their morals they are flexible, tolerant or possibly ‘loose’.

The reverse is also true. Being a Liberal in the classical sense does not mean one is generous, tolerant or flexible. Despite the association of Locke with ‘tolerance’ in matters of worship, to be ‘a Liberal’ arguably has little to do with tolerance or generosity. It has far more to do with protecting one’s own private property and the right to private accumulation. ‘A Liberal’ is someone who believes in Liberalism, which – like any successful hegemonic discourse - is a system of beliefs based on fictions that have become normalized into common sense. And at the heart of Liberalism in this sense is the possessive Individual whose rationality lies in the pursuit of self-interest, and who is by nature radically independent and owes nothing to society[[12]](#endnote-12). This does not prevent liberal Liberals from being altruistic as a further, personal commitment. But it does not require them to be so.

The confusion of Liberalism with ‘liberal’ in the ordinary language sense of an easy-going generosity and tolerance, serves a powerful stream of ideological propaganda. But Liberalism as a doctrine is not necessarily tolerant or generous.

Contemporary Liberalism in its fundamentalist form Neoliberalism is intolerant and inflexible towards counter-values of social solidarity, expressed for instance by the unionization of labour and the demand for a basic wage and state subsidized social security. Both Hayek and Friedman have described the concept of Liberal socialism as an oxymoron and as a fatal confusion[[13]](#endnote-13). Any kind of State intervention in the re-distribution of wealth, or any unionised interventions of collective action, are irrational attempts to do what only free markets can do. The liberty of the Individual to pursue his or her own interests without the interference of government is supposedly guaranteed by the natural and spontaneous self-regulating market, ‘laissez-faire’. Yet nobody has ever seen a free market. Such a concept as self-regulating markets is a faith postulate, mystified as the scientific discovery of a natural phenomenon of a similar order as the discovery of gravity[[14]](#endnote-14).

Historically, a word with one set of positive connotations – liberal - has been appropriated by generations of theoreticians and rhetoricians and attached to a doctrine that, at its base and centre, rejects them.

**The Invention of religion and politics**

The invention of the religion-politics binary is difficult to separate from the articulation of the Liberal doctrine of liberty. The political domain is an imaginary modern construct of formal equality of opportunity that disguises the actual relations of power. In previous publications I have drawn attention to the ideological division between ‘religion’ and ‘political society’ made by men such as William Penn and John Locke in the late 17th century[[15]](#endnote-15). Penn, Locke and others argued that religion is *essentially* different from governance[[16]](#endnote-16). Though reason has a place on both sides of the duality[[17]](#endnote-17), there is a fundamental difference between reasonable faith in God’s Providence and empirical knowledge of material reality. In this new formula, religion has nothing in its true nature to do with ‘power’. The only legitimate holder of power is the governor or ruler who has a contractual obligation to protect the interests of (male) private property owners. This is what Locke meant by ‘politics’ or ‘political society’. However, this emergent narrative required a radically different understanding of ‘religion’ from the dominant understanding of their day. A key aspect of this reconfiguration of ‘religion’ was that it took a different meaning within a differently imagined world, as did so many other categories, including ‘secular’, ‘science’ and ‘nature’. In the new Liberal imaginary religion was conceived as a private ‘faith’ in the inner conscience of the individual and as having nothing legitimately to do with power and government, thus radically distinguishing it from the public domain of ‘politics’, rational governance and scientific knowledge. In effect these men authorised not only a new discourse on *religion* but also a new understanding of governance and the political state as *non-religious*. Fundamental to these new imaginaries was (and is) the fiction of the autonomous and radically independent Individual.

This breakthrough in the imagination, which required a radically new and persuasive account of the meaning of ‘religion’[[18]](#endnote-18), simultaneously introduced the idea of ‘politics’, of non-religious governance, which in turn provided the basis for the emergence of what we today call representative democracy and the secular nation state. ‘Secular politics’, like ‘religion’, is a modern imaginary with a specific historical genesis that has become normalized and universalised. ‘Politics’ is represented rhetorically as essentially different from ‘religion’, even though the imagined boundary between them is arbitrary, flexible and shifting.

Liberalism as a body of ideas with doctrinal formulations thus depends on a number of contested and problematic distinctions, including the distinction between ‘religion’ (as ‘faith’) and ‘politics’ (as rational science of government). This flexible modern binary operates discursively to construct politics and the state as the normal and benign domain of rational liberal government and legitimate power, and religions as private acts based on faith postulates and essentially different from politics. It is the Liberal secular state that authorises what is and is not a genuine and tolerable religion in the first place. ‘Good religions’[[19]](#endnote-19) consist of those relatively harmless private beliefs and practices that make no claim to power, do not get involved in politics, and do not challenge the authority of the Liberal secular state. They keep their morality to themselves, for morality is subjective and private, mere opinion, whereas the science of political economy and government is objective and factual. They may offer moral exhortations, provided these conform to, and perhaps reinforce, Liberal and Neoliberal beliefs. Bad religions (what Tony Blair and other propagandists refer to as ‘perversions of faith’) are those beliefs and practices that overstep their properly contained sphere, involve themselves in ‘politics’, and constitute a potential threat to the Liberal order. These bad ones are the barbarous superstitions that threaten to destroy Liberal reason, science and civility.

**US Constitution and the problem of identifying the essence of religion**

It was in North America that the invention of politics and the modern state as distinct from religion was first effectively proclaimed in state Bills of Rights and ultimately the US Constitution.

Despite Locke’s and Penn’s imaginative breakthrough, and despite Jefferson writing in 1802 of “the wall of separation”[[20]](#endnote-20), the separation has never been clear-cut. The terms ‘God’ and ‘natural reason’ in all their Deistic vagueness and ambiguity hover over both sides of the invented binary. This is a continuing legacy from Locke. It is true that Locke constructed religion and politics as essentially different from each other. Religion is private, voluntary and has nothing to do with power. Politics is the public domain of rational action and the legitimate use of power to represent and defend private property and other rights of the individual. And yet at the same time ‘God’ is required in his system to guarantee the natural reason of man in the state of nature and in political society[[21]](#endnote-21).

The US Constitution announces *some kind of separation* between religion and governance. The simple act of classifying the private practice of religion as a Constitutional right to be protected by the State, and of providing private religious faith as a basis for certain exemptions, inscribes the state and the political society as non-religious. Some have pointed out that the nation state is itself a sacralised object of devotion– for example in the arguments that America has a civil religion[[22]](#endnote-22) - and that the constitutional principles upon which it is founded are themselves considered as sacred. As a result, academics in secular universities, searching for neutral descriptive and analytical concepts, have had to invent contradictory expressions such as ‘civil religion’ or ‘political religion’ in a futile ad hoc attempt to bridge the descriptive gap between imaginary domains that are already ideologically separated. Yet the history of contestations and contradictory rulings by the Supreme Court since 1790 suggest that what-is-being-separated-from-what has always been unclear and problematic, and has become increasingly so.

At the time of the framing of the US Constitution ‘religion’ mainly referred to some variation on the theme of Christian faith and practice. The Framers were mostly Protestant Christian or, at the very least, deist [[23]](#endnote-23), and though the term ‘religion’ was becoming quite enlarged at the time in the mind of Jefferson and others[[24]](#endnote-24), we can see clearly the link between the older meaning of religion as Christian truth and the emergent essentialized category of modernity.

The meaning of ‘Christian’ was hugely contested, and the term ‘deist’ was and is also vague, though along with ‘natural religion’ the discourses on deism have played a significant part in the transition from the theocratic myths of the encompassing Christian Commonwealths, sacred monarchs and ancien regime to the myths of Individualism in the political society. The formulation of privatised generic religion and the multiplication of religions was quite far advanced by the late 18th century. North American and British texts from that period (and still today) reveal an ambigous oscillation between the meaning of ‘religion’ as Protestant Christian truth and civility, and religion as a universal genus with global species. This was around the time when so-called ‘world religions’ such as ‘Hindooism’ were starting to be fomulated for example by Orientalists. It reflected the liberal denial of collective or social realities and the supposition that the Individual is the fundamental unit of reality. Just as the autonomous individual is the only relevant unit of economic calculation, so the individual is (or ambiguously ought to be) the only relevant unit of ‘religious faith’. While it seems fair to claim that ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ in the modern generic sense had, by the time of its invention, become mainly associated with ‘belief in God’, this expression has little meaning outside competing theological positions. There were strong traditions of theocracy[[25]](#endnote-25) in North America that denied any ‘politics’ imagined as a domain separated from ‘religion’. Despite Jefferson’s affirmation, the “wall of separation” was a Liberal aspiration rather than a description of fact.

Constitutional expert Micah Schwartzman of the University of Virginia School of Law, in a dense and well-researched article “What if Religion Isn’t Special”[[26]](#endnote-26), has searched court decisions since 1790 for consistent criteria that can clarify how religious beliefs and practices differ from secular ones. One continuous assumption that runs through all the contestations examined is that, whether or not we can know exactly what religion is, it pertains to the private conscience and opinions of individuals and not to the public realm of governance. This reproduces the basic thoughts of Penn and Locke on the topic. This binary between private and public encapsulates the difficulty by introducing a problematic distinction between private conscience and public duty. The separation logically has to include the presumption that the US Government and organs such as the Supreme Court are not themselves religious organizations, even though individual members of the government or the judiciary may privately belong to a religious organization and might privately hold religious beliefs or opinions. This further implies an assumption that there is a real distinction between private beliefs and practices and public ones. Although some kind of distinction between religion and government is deeply embedded in the history of US legislation, Schwartzman sees no clear agreement or method for knowing what the distinction is or where the lines should be drawn.

‘Religion’ is treated as a special case in both the Establishment Clause and the Exercise Clause of the Constitution. The Establishment Clause says that Congress cannot pass any law respecting an establishment of religion, but it does not prohibit the establishment of non-religious (secular) ethical or moral views. In this respect “Religion is special in the sense that it suffers from a legal disability that does not apply to secular beliefs and practices.” (2). In the Free Exercise Clause, religion is identified as special in the sense that it is identified as the subject of special protection: “Congress is prohibited from passing laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion.” (p2) Schwartzman has studied a large number of court rulings, showing how problematic it is to find any clear and consistent distinction between the wide range of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ beliefs and practices. Constitutionally, religion must be special, and yet it isn’t: “religion cannot be distinguished from many other beliefs and practices as warranting special constitutional treatment. As a normative matter, religion is not special” (p2).

Where no essential, or non-arbitrary distinction between religious and non-religious domains can be identified, the distinction operates today as a binary within an ideological paradigm that remains largely unquestioned outside of some legal and academic analysis. It is logical to conclude that the idea of secularity and secularism (non-religion) is as empty of content as the idea of religion, and that the two imaginary domains are parasitic on each other, each understood strategically as what the other is not.

Whether classified by Liberals as good or bad religion, ‘religion’ has become a vast residual category of ‘faith-based’ alternative discourses that challenge dominant Liberal concepts of the realistic and the rational. Yet the separation between religion and politics is imaginary and contingent, and both categories have been invented in tandem and operate in binary formation to normalize Liberal beliefs. The invention of religions has served to promote the illusion that the modern Liberal secular state is normal and benign, and that the urgent global pursuit of self-regulating markets and endless extraction for personal profit is natural, reasonable and inevitable.

**Liberalism as a ‘political’ doctrine**

Liberalism is frequently referred to as a political doctrine because of the implications for government of a doctrine of individual freedom.[[27]](#endnote-27) It seems obvious that Liberalism, like all World Religions, is a bundle of contested positions. One of the central disagreements among Liberals is the degree to which the state should intervene to regulate markets or to protect the poor from exploitation. However, all Liberals take the ‘liberty’ of the Individual as the fundamental value, as against equality in collectivist and socialist theories, or as against belief in ‘tradition’ and the inherited status quo among the landed classes that have historically opposed Liberal progress.

However,It is difficult to see how one can separate Liberalism as a political doctrine from Liberalism as an economic doctrine. The idea that the liberty that grounds Liberalism is fundamentally a ‘political’ value is problematized by a number of considerations. One is the rhetorical duality of meanings. ‘Politics’ is widely deployed both to refer to a historically specific concept of Liberal representative government, and also and simultaneously as a response – something like ‘government’ - to the supposedly universal condition of conflict and competition characteristic of all human power formations. The elisions of this dual meaning in public discourse, the universal and the historically specific - has the effect of normalizing ‘politics’ by creating the illusion that ‘it’ is ‘in the nature of things’.

This confusion of the historically specific with the universal is linked to another problem with the idea of Liberalism as a political doctrine. This is the obvious extent to which ‘political’ values are inseparable from ‘economic’ ones, which may explain the continued popularity of the term ‘political economy’. Is taxation a political or an economic issue? Or is it not both simultaneously? Is not legislative, military and foreign policy in the pursuit of the market economy a political goal as well as an economic one? How can a domain of ‘pure’ economics be distinguished from political judgements?

The invention of the religion-politics binary in the 17th century was an imaginative breakthrough that provided a powerful rationale for the subsequent development of a market society based on private property. It subverted the existing myths of the hierarchical Christian Commonwealth of inherited degree and status, and in its place legitimated the rising power of private property, markets and government based on contract. Politics as an imagined domain of natural reason acted as the mother of economics through the concept of political economy. Locke’s interests in political society as defined by the rights of male property owners was incipiently a theory of political economy[[28]](#endnote-28), a term that was explicitly deployed by the French Physiocrats such as Boisguilbert, by Richard Cantillon, and by Adam Smith.

Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations[[29]](#endnote-29) (1776) raised for sustained attention the concept of self-regulating markets and the division of labour in the supposed progress of nations. However, Smith’s work arguably did not fully separate an economic domain from the wider moral economy of human relations. It was not until the early 19th century that Liberal economics, in English at least, was explicitly proclaimed to be a secular science in its own right. For example, the Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford in 1831, Richard Whately[[30]](#endnote-30), who was also an Anglican ordained minister, assured his Christian audience that faith in God, the domain of religion, remains unaffected by the discovery of the scientific laws of market economics because they have nothing essentially to do with each other. Unlike religious faith, which is solely concerned with morality, God and life after death, economics deals with empirical facts about the world. He drew an analogy between the Newtonian science of gravity and the economic science of markets.

More recently, 20th century Neoliberals such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman have argued that, unlike politics, which is characterised by value judgements, the science of markets is objective and concerned with measurable facts. Markets are quantifiable and spontaneously generated aspects of nature. As such markets are fundamental to our understanding of human nature, are the only guarantee of our freedom, and ought to determine the rational form of governance. Neoliberal practitioners explicitly retrieve what they consider the pure Liberalism of the early 19th century, before the interfering state, unionised labour and collective ideologies of socialism had emerged to counter and spoil it. They both argue that, in a free market society the state and politics will become (or, again ambiguously ought to become) greatly attenuated, if not completely redundant. Economics conceived as a distinct domain of rational action based on faith in free markets challenges the state’s role, and reduces the state to its minimal essential function of representing the interests of private property without interfering in those interests. Thus, while theory of government is fundamental to Liberalism, Liberalism is also at its heart is a doctrine of free markets, Individualism and private property.

One further aspect is that property ownership and, therefore suffrage, was from the beginning a male right. As far as suffrage is concerned, there has been a historical struggle to extend it to its contemporary levels. What needs to be stressed is that a great deal of contemporary reality has been constructed from a configuration of largely privileged male fictions that continue to constitute Liberal and Neoliberal subjectivity.

**Religion, political economy and the Individual**

It seems a dubious proposition to maintain that political science and economic science have distinct subject matters, a difficulty that may explain the continued deployment of the term ‘political economy’. If theories of liberty are the grounding value of Liberalism, then inevitably the Individual subject who claims such liberties is also the grounding value of Liberalism. Arguably it is the fiction of the independent and radically free Individual with natural rights, especially the right to unlimited capital accumulation as private property, who is presupposed in Liberal theories of political economy, and which connects today’s Neoliberalism all the way back to John Locke. To call Liberalism a political doctrine is correct in the sense that the idea of a distinct domain of governance called politics was represented as the outcome of a mythical contract with individual (male) property-owners. Therefore the right to representation (suffrage) and ownership of property (which implies the right to buy and sell in markets for one’s own gain) have been inseparably connected from the start. In this way the domain of politics acted as the midwife for the later emergence of Liberal economic science.

Liberal categories presuppose the primacy of the Individual as basic in a number of ways. In particular, the Individual is the carrier of natural rights, such as the right to freedom of religion and – arguably most important – the right to accumulate private property, free from outside interference. This conception of the Individual – the self-maximiser or possessive Individual – which, as earlier mentioned, arguably derives from the myth of ‘man in the state of nature’ of John Locke and other 17th and 18th century theorists, has maintained its centrality throughout Liberal history right up to the contemporary globalising doctrines of Neoliberalism deriving from Hayek, Friedman and others.

Implicated in these developments has been the epistemological question whether and how objective knowledge is possible. In Descartes and more problematically in Locke, epistemology was formulated in terms of a fundamental dualism between two metaphysical fictions, mind and matter. In the dualistic narrative, minds or mental substances are confronted in experience with an objectively existing material reality. But how are these distinct substances related and how as individual minds do we know what we claim to know about the real, ‘external’ world? Cartesian dualism constructed minds and bodies as essentially distinct kinds of substances, which raised the problem of solipsism in theory of knowledge, and had the effect of inscribing into consciousness the fundamental distinctiveness of individuals as knowing agents acting in an objective and empirically knowable material universe. Once the basic terms of this duality of mind and matter were established, then further philosophical moves became possible, including the reduction of both to its opposite term – viz. either matter to mind as in some forms of idealism or mind to matter as in some forms of empiricism and positivism. Yet looked at differently, it can be argued that both mind and matter are themselves unknowable metaphysical postulates or fictions, and not themselves the result of induction from empirical observation. The assumption that our subjective consciousness is essentially separated from an external world of matter, and either looking out on to it, or receiving impressions of it from outside, is a fiction deeply lodged in our modern Liberal conditioning.

This dualism of mental subjects and objective material reality did not only characterise the philosophical thinking of the enlightenment and the question of scientific knowledge. It passed into the wider consciousness of European representations. The notion of the knowing, active and rational mind as an individual subjectivity radically distinct from other minds and confronted by an objective world of material processes and entities was the metaphysical basis of modern Individualism. Though rational governance and scientific knowledge are conceived as part of the public domain, it is the individual knowing agent who is the subject of both and who becomes a key category of modernity. It is the individual who gains true knowledge of the ‘external world’, albeit through ‘personal experience’ or through the publicly verifiable methods of science. It is the Individual who is the agent of his own career, happiness and possessions. It is the Individual’ that can plunder the ‘external world’ for private surplus extraction, and transform other subjects into objectified human labour. And it is the Individual who is the subject of natural rights that require rational government for their protection. It is in a specific concept of the property owning individual as he or she has been conceived in Liberalism that the modern discourse on rights, Liberal democracy and market economics has become dominant.

The invention of politics as a domain distinct from ‘religion’ was intended to secure the supposed natural rights and representation of male property owners; and the fiction of the rational individual as essentially characterised by self-interest and freedom from the dependency on others provided the fictive basis for the later emergence of political economy as a secular science.

**Possessive Individualism, Secular Politics and the Emergence of Political Economy**

In his book The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke (1962) the historian and philosopher C. B. Macpherson argued that the basic concepts of modern market economy are already present in the 17th century. Hobbes, Locke, Harrington, and the Puritan Levellers were all in their different ways confronting the de facto emergence of capitalism. Hobbes, and Locke in particular, most fully articulated the fundamentals of Liberal market values by defining the Individual as naturally possessive and acquisitive, and by justifying unlimited capital accumulation. The proper role of rational governance is to protect the rights of private property ownership.

It may be an exaggeration to claim that a fully developed concept of the market economy was already available in the 17th century[[31]](#endnote-31). The best way to read Macpherson is to take his compelling and philosophically coherent deduction of key Liberal categories as a summary of a doctrine that was emergent in the 17th century but was to be further worked out subsequently.

Macpherson’s identification of the key features of the idea of Possessive Individualism and market relations is invaluable for bringing out their implications for modern Liberal capitalism more generally. Today we are still caught in much the same paradigm in the Liberal representative state and its duty to protect individual property rights. The crucial point is to see the doctrine of possessive individualism, the right to private property and capital accumulation, and the theory of representative government, as emergent since the 17th century and as fundamental to Adam Smith’s liberal political economy, to 19th century Liberalism and to contemporary Neoliberalism.

Macpherson (1962:263) summarises the assumptions that comprise possessive individualism, for which I offer a paraphrase here[[32]](#endnote-32):

1. What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the will of others.
2. Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest.
3. The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.
4. Although the individual cannot alienate the whole of his property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labour.
5. Human society consists of a series of market relations.
6. Since freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual’s freedom can rightfully be limited only by such obligations and rules as are necessary to secure the same freedom for others.
7. Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual’s property in his person and goods, and (therefore) for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange between individuals regarded as proprietors of themselves.

In these principles one can see a very specific reification of Individual human nature as free from dependency, as concerned with one’s own possessions and one’s own well-being, and living in a society that recognises the primary value of market relations between such construed individuals. To some extent Macpherson may have retrospectively derived a set of assumptions that were incipient in the complex debates of the 17th century, and not quite as explicit as he suggests. This is a moot point. However, this list of assumptions has the ring of truth for the emergent form of liberal political economy and the science of economics.

Given that the discourse on Liberal or classical economics as a secular science did not fully emerge until the early nineteenth century, there must be a danger of the retrospective projection of modern categories that developed later. However, Macpherson’s unpacking of these seven propositions provides us with a useful anatomy of the fundamental assumptions of Liberalism as they have come down to us.

The Individual is conceived in the first place as defined by his (sic) independence, understood as freedom from dependence on the will of others. No doubt the intention behind this construal of the individual and the right to representation was to protect and extend private property and other natural rights from the arbitrary power of the sacred monarch, as well as from the predations of other self-maximizers. The urgency for finding a basis for property rights can be understood in terms of the interests of a growing class in English society, and European societies more widely, from the new opportunities for land ownership offered by enclosures, and capital gains deriving from investments in colonial projects. The right to enclose common land and hold it privately, and to extract profit from slavery or cheap wage labour, reflects not only radical changes in social relations in England and more widely in Europe, but the availability of the ‘Indies’ (both East and West) and the vast ‘empty’ lands of North America for private ownership[[33]](#endnote-33).

This myth of the independent Individual and his liberty defined in terms of the accumulation of capital is in turn inseparable from the concept of society as a series of market relations. By implication at least, this myth of the possessive individual, which constitutes in turn the basis for the further myth of a rational society characterised by market relations, led to the theory of self-regulating markets that was articulated by Adam Smith (or perhaps Richard Cantillon some decades earlier) and further elaborated by the early 19th century Liberal economists.

However, this idea of the individual as independent in his nature, and with a natural propensity to accumulate private capital, is arguably as much of a myth as the then dominant myth of the Great Chain of Being or the divine origins of the hierarchical Christian Commonwealth that it was intended to replace. This new emergent narrative was a claim about the rational and the real, as distinct from the earlier superstitions, and provides a basis for much of the globalising ideology of modern capitalism. For three centuries this myth, which has had an elective affinity with the interests of a capital-owning class, has become progressively dominant and in the process has been transformed into a factual science of economics.

The neo-Liberal form of Liberalism that derives especially from key texts by such powerful theorists as Friedrich Hayek (1944)[[34]](#endnote-34) and Milton Friedman[[35]](#endnote-35) (1962) can be read as a doctrinal fundamentalism of self-regulating markets that has been propagated globally through the powerful mission work of various agencies. These have been thoroughly charted by many writers including David Harvey[[36]](#endnote-36), Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky[[37]](#endnote-37), and others[[38]](#endnote-38). The activities of the Chicago School of Economics under the influence of Milton Friedman since the time of President Reagan in the USA and Prime Minister Thatcher in the UK are by now notorious. Their work represents a powerful liturgical reproduction of pure Liberalism and a sustained attack on all forms of collective democracy. The result has been the enthusiastic promotion of policies of privatization. The policies followed by powerful people under the influence of Hayek and Friedman (and other propagandists such as Ayn Rand) have made the rich even more wealthy and the poor even more poor. The valorisation of unlimited accumulation of private gains as the realization of our rational human nature; the belief that privatization will spontaneously generate free markets; and the ‘trickle-down’ effect of wealth generation; does not seem to be substantiated by today’s concentration of wealth in the ownership of a relatively tiny class.

Where faith is more important than evidence, then each setback and unintended outcome can be explained by secondary elaboration. In his seminal ethnography of witchcraft beliefs of the Azande people of the Nile, the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard argued that Zande witchcraft beliefs constituted a logically coherent system of explanation that he himself lived by while living in their villages. For Evans-Pritchard, there was no doubt that Azande people were fully as rational as the western ethnographer. The crucial difference between Zande witchcraft beliefs and modern science was that, unlike genuinely scientific explanations, witchcraft beliefs could not be falsified, and that when the explanations seemed wrong they were saved by secondary elaborations. There seems to me to be a close analogy with the beliefs of Liberal economists here. Liberal economics appears as an empirical science of the real world. Like Zande witchcraft beliefs, it has internal logic. But its internal logic is based on mythical premises that are not falsifiable. They are not falsifiable for the same reasons that any other metaphysical faith object is un-falsifiable. Markets, and especially self-regulating markets, are as mythical as witch-substance. So are the radically independent self-maximisers that Liberals believe we are in our real nature, and therefore ought to be. They are ‘religious’ aspirations not essentially different from any other superstition.

**Women and subaltern classes**

The degree to which Liberal principles such as equality and liberty were intended to empower women as well as men is a moot point. Whatever Locke’s intentions may have been in this regard – and there is disagreement on this point among feminist experts on Locke[[39]](#endnote-39) – there seems little doubt that, historically, Liberalism has generated various rights, human and civil, that have made it possible for women and subaltern classes to achieve a degree of empowerment that had not existed previously. This point is probably true of many non-Christian or non-European orders of power that have been challenged by the imposition of Liberal principles. In contrast, Liberal capitalism has made possible a near universal franchise and a greater degree of equality and liberty, at least in the wealthier countries and to some degree globally.

However, such a generalization, while possibly true, does not necessarily accord with the experience of women without capital. Martha E. Gimenez[[40]](#endnote-40), for instance, points to the specific forms of patriarchal oppression of women under Liberal capitalist regimes:

Any consideration of the oppression of women brings to mind a variety of psychological, economic, social and political phenomena affecting women’s lives, ranging from rape, incest, domestic violence and sexual harassment, to social stereotyping, low-paid and gender- segregated employment, discrimination in educational and occupational institutions, the sexual division of labor, domestic labor and the contradiction between domestic and work demands, reproductive issues and the struggle for reproductive self-determination, the under-representation of women in political offices and public leadership roles and, unavoidably, patriarchy.

Gimenez argues for the continued relevance of Marx for identifying the historically specific forms of inequality and patriarchy under capitalist modes of production and reproduction:

The oppression of women is the visible, observable effect (e.g., in the labor market, in socioeconomic stratification, the domestic division of labor, bureaucratic authority structures, etc.) of underlying relations between men and women determined by the articulation between the capitalist mode of production, and the organization of physical and social reproduction among those who must sell their labor power to survive. Feminism, to remain relevant to the majority of women, must, therefore, acknowledge that most women are working women whose fate, and that of their families, are shaped both by gender oppression and class exploitation.

If it is true that all or most historically known orders of power have oppressed women (as well as other classes of subordinated people), then today this continuing oppression is disguised in Liberal capitalist nation states by the appearance of democratic government and formal values of liberty and equality. This appearance is (arguably) precisely what ‘politics’ is: an imaginary forum of universal empowerment opportunities, on the face of it neutral and open, free and fair, but masking the actual relations of power. Liberal political society was after all invented as a contract for the protection of male private property, and the extension of the franchise to those without property has constituted a historical struggle that has been bitterly and punitively resisted. Though the extension of the franchise is no longer seen as the central issue in modern Liberal democracies, the degree to which the modern state is still beholden to capital interests seems obvious in the on-going determination of governments to privatise public assets, to externalize costs, and to destroy any collective organizations that might protect those without capital. One of the ways it achieves this masking is through the rhetorical association of Liberalism, individualism, and private property with ‘freedom’, natural reason and common sense, in distinction from those supposedly Utopian beliefs in Socialism, or those exotic ideas and values that can be classified as ‘religious’. The latter can be tolerated so long as they do not challenge the established and sacralised discourse of Liberal values and secular reason.

**The ideological operation of the religion-secular binary**

The illusion that Liberal and Neoliberal doctrine and its implementation is rational, empirical, objective, and essentially different from any other ‘religious’ dogma has been partly achieved through the ideological operation of the religion-secular binary, and the invention of the secular science of economics. If economics is a science akin to the natural sciences, as decades of propaganda have assured us, then it follows that it must be rational and factual and cannot be a religious faith. But belief in self-regulating markets and the Individuals that purportedly make them is as much an act of mystified faith as belief in any other fiction such as Transubstantiation in the Catholic Mass, the magical efficacy of the priesthood, or Zande witchcraft substance. A powerful Church and its priesthood was required to ensure the necessity of belief in the free-flowing grace of the Holy Spirit and the Real Presence of Christ in the Mass; so powerful ‘Liberal’ governments and their priesthood of economic advisors and media propagandists have been necessary to oblige our society to welcome the spontaneous advent of free, self-regulating markets in the upward march to freedom and progress. Rather than being solemnly acknowledged as a dangerous contradiction by our leadership, we are subjected to an extreme soteriology of marketization and a Utopian fantasy of Individual self-realization. Only the blind, fanatical faith that is typically attributed to fundamentalist religion can explain this ideology of market devotion. The danger arises because the element of fanatical faith is invisible not only to the consumers of fetishized products, but also to those persons who willingly shoulder the responsibility of bringing a world of free markets into being.

Some readers will understandably, though incorrectly, detect a hyperbolic intent in my use of such language. Surely we all know what we mean by religious faith, and we all understand the difference between superstitions like belief in gods, goddesses and witch-substances, and intuitively held common sense entities such as free markets and self-maximizing Individuals. But I suggest that these are the result of centuries of propaganda. While Liberalism has given us a doctrine of human rights that we instinctively want to defend against the tyranny of arbitrary power, it has had from its genesis and at its heart a doctrine of private accumulation through the maximization of self-interest.

**Conclusion**

One implication I have drawn in previous work is that terms like ‘religion’, religious’ or ‘religiosity’ cannot be deployed as though they are neutral, unproblematic descriptive or analytical terms. ‘Religion’ is deeply embedded in modern Liberal illusions, acting at the discursive level to normalize secularism and its faith postulates as common sense reason. But it follows that ‘politics’ also cannot be deployed as though it is an unproblematic universal with an intuitively apprehended meaning. Politics is a key category in the invention of Liberal modernity, feeding parasitically off the supposed exclusion of religion. To continue to recycle ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ as though it is an innocent, neutral and disinterested term with an unproblematic, intuited universal essence is as problematic as the recycling of ‘religion’. It is part of the same discursive formation, though appearing as a stand-alone category.

If ‘politics’ is a historically-specific discursive construction given an appearance of normal reality, then so is ‘political economy’. This fiction of self-regulating markets is a faith aspiration, a confusion of our own story telling with what appears as objective reality. Markets, instead of being seen for what they are – a theoretical abstraction from the human propensity to exchange[[41]](#endnote-41) - are attributed with an independent agency that regulates, or ought to regulate, all exchanges. Belief in markets as real entities that do or ought to guide us in the conduct of our lives is not essentially different from belief in a kind of god. There is no independent reality of ‘free markets’, which is an abstract category - possibly useful for thinking with, but not in principle deducible from empirical observation. Such categories construct our subjective apprehensions of the world more than describe them. They are faith postulates. Specific markets, such as money markets, markets in land or labour, insurance markets, housing markets, energy markets are all merely conventional demarcations that have no clear ontological distinctions; they are accounting fictions that have a certain degree of utility for making provisional calculations. In short, there is no such thing as a free market outside the devotional aspirations of Liberalism. Liberalism says there *ought to be* free markets, and then Liberal governments, rhetoric, legislation, media propaganda, educational systems, policing and military intervention transform *ought* into an illusory *is*.

Liberal and Neoliberal economists, who are a kind of priesthood of capital accumulation, consult these invisible agents (markets) with reverence, and the media-politicians in turn listen carefully for their oracular pronouncements, and manage our lives according to what they think they hear the markets telling them through their expert interpreters. This central act of worship, or more properly *haruspicy* [[42]](#endnote-42), is the heart of Liberalism and provides the key for understanding what is meant by ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’. What began in interesting and important writers like Adam Smith as a useful way of talking about exchange and the division of labour has resulted in the elevation of artificially abstracted portions of our human totality - which is in turn the totality of life - to a position of mystified centrality.

The myth of land and labour as market commodities serving legitimate private interests has always been fundamental to Liberalism since the time of John Locke. At their inception in the 17th or early 18th century, the myth of the possessive individual was deeply resisted by different classes, to whom the then current myths of the hierarchical Christian Commonwealth still stubbornly appeared in consciousness as intuitive common sense. The need to refine the theology of possessive Individualism so that it came to look persuasively like common sense seems to have been at least partly achieved by wrapping the newly emergent fiction in the language of the natural sciences, and distinguishing its basic postulates from the faith of religion. This technique helped transform an ideology with an elective affinity to the interests of a male, capital owning class into an appearance of universal secular reason offering the meaning of life for all.

1. This is an early draft of what later became my own contribution to an edited book, (eds.) T. Stack, Naomi Goldernberg and T. Fitzgerald, Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty, (Brill, 2016). Readers will hopefully understand the ironic intention of this title. My concern is not only with academic representations, but also with a much wider dissemination of Liberal presuppositions embedded in a range of different kinds of sites and texts. My work on critical deconstruction in this and many of my publications is partly designed to draw attention to the way academic discourse reflects, mirrors, and legitimates this wider discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I have pursued some of these issues in Religion and Politics in International Relations: the Modern Myth (Continuum, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Daniel B. Klein The Atlantic, 13 Feb 2014 [http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/the-origin-of-liberalism/283780/] [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See the Liberal Democrat History Group, [http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item\_single.php?item\_id=4&item=history] [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Klein, op cit [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The identity of the ‘we’ here is problematic, because for most of its history Liberalism and the Liberal concept of ‘liberty’ has been reserved for male property owners of ‘substance’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Klein op cit [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This dispute might be cast as a dispute between negative and positive concepts of freedom, a distinction explored by Isaiah Berlin that has generated much debate. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Beinart, “Liberal Is Good” in The Atlantic, (5 Feb 2014). [http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/liberal-is-good/283617/] [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Murray N. Rothbard, “Richard Cantillon: The Founding Father of Modern Economics”, Ludwig von Mises Institute December 16, 2010 [Excerpted from An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought, vol. 1, Economic Thought Before Adam Smith (1995)] [http://mises.org/daily/4810/] [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham derives from, and informs, calculative Liberal principles. Nassau Senior, a student of Richard Whately and Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, was a member of the Poor Law commission set up in 1832 that authorized the systematization of the workhouses. A reading of the Poor Law Commission Report of 1834 suggests that the values of Liberal economics are anything but ‘liberal’ in the ordinary senses of generous, tolerant and flexible. The language is not much different from Margaret Thatcher and her ‘Conservative’ party in the 1980’s and still today. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I think that, conceptually, they are right. I do not agree with their conclusions. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. One peculiarity of modern economic ideology is the self-serving illusion that liberal economics is as much of a science of the ‘natural’ world as Newtonian mechanics. Richard Whately in 1831 early made explicit the essential difference between religious faith and scientific knowledge. In what appears as an early characterization of economics as a ‘secular science’ in his Introductory Lectures of 1831 given as Drummond Professor of Political Economy, Whately claimed: ‘. . . political economy is a scientific enterprise that affords “secular” knowledge, or knowledge of Nature, whereas theology is a religious enterprise that affords “sacred” knowledge, or knowledge of God’ (A. M. C. Waterman, “The Changing Theological Context of Economic Analysis Since the Eighteenth Century”, History of Political Economy (40), 2008:132 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I have written about these issues in Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories (OUP, 2007); In Ch. 11 of Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations (Equinox, 2007); and in Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth (Continuum, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Both these men are explicit on this point. See my quotes and discussion in Discourse on Civility and Barbarity, pp.20/1 and 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The ambiguous attitude of some Liberals today, that though religion is generally suspect, there are nevertheless good religions (which conform with Liberal principles and keep themselves in their proper domain) and bad religions (which constitute a challenge to Liberal principles, what Tony Blair refers to as ‘perversions of faith’) arguably finds its inception in Locke. Liberal Protestantism unsurprisingly fits this model well. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I have argued in previous publications that in English (and presumably in Dutch, German and French) the dominant meaning of Religion was Christian Truth, a totalizing concept that encompassed every aspect of life, and in which their existed no conceptual space for anything like a non-religious domain of politics. The notion argued by Locke that religion had (or ambiguously ought to have) nothing to do with power or government went directly against the orthodoxy of his day. It is a trope endlessly repeated by academics across the Humanities and Social Sciences, and in the rhetoric of politicians and the media. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. For some Liberals there is no such thing as a ‘good religion’. See for example Christopher Hitchens, How Religion Poisons Everything. For others, such as Tony Blair, there are good and bad religions. See their debate on You Tube. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Thomas Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802 http://www.constitution.org/tj/sep\_church\_state.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Naomi Goldenberg (2016) has expressed in an interesting and productive way how a generalized reference to ‘God’ as a more exalted form of sovereignty is conjured to bolster and validate government (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, from the issue entitled, "Religion in America," Winter 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, pp. 1-21. See also Robert N. Bellah, Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. US Constitution Online http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop\_reli.html [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. “Where the preamble declares, that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed by inserting "Jesus Christ," so that it would read "A departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion;" the insertion was rejected by the great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohammedan, the Hindoo and Infidel of every denomination.”

    -Thomas Jefferson, Autobiography, in reference to the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom, quoted at [http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/jeffpol.htm] [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Murray N. Rothbard, “The Puritans "Purify": Theocracy in Massachusetts”,

    Conceived in Liberty, Volume 1 (Mises Institute, 1999 [1975], pp. 174-181. http://mises.org/page/1427 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. I am grateful to Naomi Goldenberg for this reference. Micah Schwartzman, “What if Religion Isn’t Special?” (2012), Virginia School of Law, Social Science Research Network Electronic Paper Collection http://ssrn.com/abstract=1992090. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See for example “Liberalism”, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/Liberalism/#DebAboLib [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. C. B. Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Kathryn Sutherland (ed) Adam Smith, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, (1776), OUP, 1998. Sutherland points out in her introduction that Adam Smith refers to ‘political economy’, not to ‘economics’ as a scientific theory. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. A.M.C. Waterman, “The Changing Theological Context of ‘Economic Analysis’ since the Eighteenth Century”, History of Political Economy 40 (2008): 121-42 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. According to Rothbard, Locke made clear in this early work his profound insight and thoroughgoing commitment to a free-market economy. Murray N. Rothbard, “John Locke vs. the Mercantilists and Inflationists”, available on Ludwig von Mises site November 04, 2010; [http://mises.org/daily/4702] [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. I note in passing that even at this recent date generic ‘man’ is still deployed. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Locke was deeply involved in attempts to justify taking land that had been used by Native Americans and treating it as private property. There was no such concept in Native American thinking. There was an attitude among Christian colonists that the land was ‘empty’ and that therefore the Native Americans were still ‘in a state of nature’ and had not progressed to a proper civil, political society defined by individual private ownership. For specific research on John Locke’s contributions to the justification for enclosing the supposed ‘empty lands’ of North America, see Morag Barbara Arneil, “All the World was America”: John Locke and the American Indian, PhD thesis, University College, London, 1992 discovery.ucl.ac.uk; Onur Ulas Ince, “John Locke and Colonial Capitalism”, PhD Candidate Department of Government Cornell University, [<http://government.arts.cornell.edu/assets/psac/fa12/Ince_PSAC_Sep28.pdf>]

    For a better view of the actions, policies and motives of Christian colonisers more from the point of view of Native Americans, see Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1975; published on behalf of Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Friedrich Hayek, The Road to Serfdom, London & New York: Routledge, 1944 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Milton Friedman, “Capitalism and Freedom”, 1961; The Online Library of Liberty, http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2492&Itemid=27 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Naomi Klein, The Shock Doctrine; David Harvey, A Short History of Neoliberalism, OUP; Noam Chomsky & Robert W. McChesney, Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and the Global Order, Seven Stories Press, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. “…proponents of Neoliberalism cannot and do not offer an empirical defence for the world they are making. To the contrary, they offer - no, demand - a religious faith in the infallibility of the unregulated market, drawing upon nineteenth century theories that have little connection to the actual world.” Robert W. McChesney, “Noam Chomsky and the Struggle Against Neoliberalism”, Monthly Review, April 1, 1999 http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/19990401.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See also Jason Hickel, “A Short History of Neoliberalism (And How We Can Fix It)”, New Left Project http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\_comments/a\_short\_history\_of\_Neoliberalism\_and\_how\_we\_can\_fix\_it [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Nancy J. Hirschmann and Kirstie M. McClure (eds.), Feminist Interpretations of John Locke, Penn State University Press, 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Martha E. Gimenez, “Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited”,Science & Society, Vol. 69, No. 1, January 2005, 11–32; available at http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/pesm/marx%20and%20feminism.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation (1944) for a powerful critique of the fictions of land, labour and money [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. “Haruspicy”, Encyclopaedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/256271/haruspicy [↑](#endnote-ref-42)