

**The Republic of Humanity:
John R. Seeley
and the Religious Sources of British Imperial Universalism***

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I desire first of all to express my most sincere gratitude to Professors Caroline Douki, Emmanuelle Siebeud and Ann Thomson for their invitation to address their seminars and the opportunity they have provided to me of submitting to your attention, comment and criticism some interim conclusions I've reached at the present stage of my research and reflection on the ideology of the late British Empire.

The title I've suggested for my seminar, «The Republic of Humanity», hints to the definition of the nature and ultimate ends of the Empire inherent to a recurrent pattern of imperial discourse that may be discerned among the immense and intricate variety of imperial representations produced and radiated by the metropolitan culture in the period spanning from the last third of the nineteenth century to World War Two and its aftermath, and that may be conveniently described as the rhetoric of liberal imperialism.

This particular way of speaking about the Empire, about Britain's global power, about their world-historical meaning, took on a distinct shape in the 1880s, with the decisive contribution of the Cambridge historian, political scientist and religious thinker John Robert Seeley. It underwent fundamental changes from the Edwardian age onwards, but proved able to adapt itself to the intellectual climate and political environment of the new century retaining, under this much altered form, well recognizable links of continuity with its late Victorian matrix.

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The first and most basic element that the different images of the Empire employed by the subsequent generations of liberal imperialists shared in common (and that distinguished liberal imperialism from the conservative interpretations of the British imperial vocation, such as that expounded by Disraeli, which focused on India) was the central significance they assigned to the so-called *Greater Britain* and her 20th-century heir and counterpart, the *British Commonwealth of Nations*. Both expressions indicated the *political* macro-entity composed by the European Mother Country and the group of «self-governed communities» of white settlement which were mainly referred to as the “Colonial Empire” (as opposed to the autocratic Indian Empire) or, from the beginning of 20th century onwards, as the Dominions of the British Crown (which in the early 1920s came to include the Irish Free State).

Colonial self-government was the result of a long devolutionary process started in the 1830s on the basis of what could be summarily described as a monarchical compromise, by which the colonies gained full control over internal affairs in the form of responsible government but remained, owing to their allegiance to the Crown, formally subordinated to the London Parliament and substantially dependent from the metropolitan Government as far as foreign affairs and defense policy were concerned.

Prior to the emergence of liberal imperialism, however, British liberals were wont to describe the reformed Colonial Empire as the Grecian part of the Empire (as opposed to the “Roman” part, represented by autocratic India), or England’s *Magna Graecia*, in the intention to anachronistically stress an assumed analogy between the “settlement empire” and the prestigious precedent of the Hellenic *apoikia*, which had been self-governing and politically independent from the Metropolis. Some of them, like Goldwin Smith at the beginning of the 1860s, had advocated a policy of deliberate «colonial emancipation» on the part of the Mother Country, which should have prevented that what they saw as the inevitable final separation took on the character of violent secession (after the precedent of the American revolution), leaving behind a legacy of animosities. It was among their ranks that, in the late 1860s, had emerged the notion of a *Greater Britain*, coined by the liberal politician Charles Dilke. It is important to underline, in order to grasp the novelty of the later liberal imperialist rhetoric, that in its original acceptation *Greater Britain*, while excluding the

Mother Country, had included, besides the Colonial Empire, both the US and India: the expression referred, in other words, to the informal, non-political area of global irradiation of the English *civilization*.

The single most important contribution made by Seeley to the liberal imperialist thought consisted in a radical redefinition of the meaning of *Greater Britain*. Seeley's *Greater Britain* both comprises the Mother Country and includes only the self-governing colonies, thus emphasizing the residual links of political solidarity which hold together this peculiar group of communities in a single transoceanic State (or «world-State»).

According to Seeley, *Greater Britain* was a global polity endowed, at the same time, with a substantial linguistic, cultural and religious homogeneity, that could have preserved it from dissolution, acting as a centripetal factor, but only on a double condition: first, the underlying homogeneity had to develop into an actual pan-Anglican nationality (that Seeley defined in term of subjective consciousness of a common identity); second, the transoceanic State had gradually to transform itself into a federal commonwealth. The North American Union, having survived the trial of the Civil War, demonstrated, in the eyes of Seeley, both the actual viability of the project of a United States of Greater Britain and the absolute necessity to strengthen the weak political bond of unity provided by the monarchical compromise through the establishment of a center of authority endowed with the essential attributes of modern sovereignty (such as an Imperial Parliament for purposes of common defense and coordination of migration policies with a view to solving the social problem in the congested earth of Empire), if Greater Britain had to be preserved from dissolution.

For Seeley, who at Cambridge coupled the teaching of history with the teaching of political science in a positivistic vein, the importance to preserve the Colonial Empire and consolidate its link with the Mother Country laid in no small part in the evolutionary continuity he perceived between the normative stages of constitutional progress represented by British parliamentary government and American federalism. There may be no doubt, however, that Seeley saw in the US of *Greater Britain* the key-response to the sea changes in the geopolitical scenario, threatening British national security and world power status, foreshadowed by the American Civil War, Italian and German Unification, renewed Anglo-Russian and Anglo-French rivalry in Asia, which he was among the firsts to

interpretate (since the early 1870s) as the possible symptoms of a permanent crisis of the balance of power in continental Europe, the globalization of the struggle for hegemony, the entry into the international competition of new actors far superior to the traditional Great Powers in territorial and demographic dimensions, the beginning of an age of terribly destructive wars, waged by popular States actuated and propelled by mass nationalism.

To be sure, the late Victorian dream of a United States of *Greater Britain*, conceived by Seeley and other imperial federalists as a homogeneous transoceanic nation-State, and the reality of the Commonwealth, enthusiastically celebrated at its birth by the liberal imperialists of the Twenties and the Thirties as the panacea for any type of international and inter-civilizational conflict, are far from being the same thing, if only because the Commonwealth was a multinational free association, whose States members were held together exclusively, from the constitutional point of view, by their common allegiance to the Crown.

Liberal imperialists of all shades of opinion, however, agreed in that they attached the same ethical values to the political unity they saw realized, or desired to see realized, in the *Greater Britain* or the Commonwealth. Federal unity or monarchical unity – they argued – was essential to the preservation of Britain's world power status; it was based on the common cultural heritage of the peoples involved, which made it consistent with the principle of nationality; it coincided with the highest stage of the political progress of humanity; it embodied an institutional model which secured a condition of permanent peace among the communities which benefited from it and safeguarded at the same time their autonomy and cultural individuality, and which was susceptible of universal application.

The kind of constitutional relation uniting the self-governing colonies or dominions with the Mother Country, as well as their internal self-government regime, provided therefore the main argument put forward by the liberal imperialist tradition for the continuation of the «dependent Empire»: the ultimate justification for the British rule lay in the mission of leading the non-self-governing colonies to self-government within the Empire or the Commonwealth through the Westernization of the non-European subject peoples and their transformation in modern nations on the European model. Furthermore, the rhetoric of liberal imperialism represented Britain's world power and influence as the main instrument for the advent of a condition of *pax oecumenica* which was prefigured by the British

imperial system as a whole, intertwining with and becoming at times indistinguishable from the rhetoric of British liberal internationalism.

This last aspect of the liberal imperialist discourse introduces us to another and more fundamental set of assumptions underlying it and communicated by it – a set of assumptions which properly pertains to the interpretation of the overall meaning of British imperial experience advanced by the liberal imperialist rhetorician and which may be summarized under five headings: its universalism, its cosmopolitan internationalism, its providentialism, its millenarism, its religious implications. It is on these assumptions that I will mainly concentrate in the remaining part of my exposition. But before continuing, I feel compelled to give you some more explicit explanations about the exact historiographical relevance I attach to the rhetoric of liberal imperialism.

I am very far from claiming for it any privileged scientific status in comparison with other paradigms of imperial and colonial discourse which have mostly and deservedly attracted scholarly attention in recent years. I don't believe, in particular, that liberal imperialist rhetoric should be regarded as more representative or more influential than derogatory attitudes towards colonial subjects which were only too well represented in the metropolitan culture (not to mention colonial agents on the spot) – such as racialism, orientalism, differentialism and ornamentalism¹.

¹ In the last decades, as we all know, important attempts have been made at formulating generalizations about «how the British saw their Empire» (David Cannadine). Their authors are to be given credit for having drawn attention to a too neglected field of research and having cast light, in particular, on derogatory attitudes towards colonial subjects which actually only too well represented in the metropolitan culture (not to mention their use by colonial agents on the spot) – such as racialism, orientalism, differentialism, ornamentalism. What leaves me unsatisfied in such approaches is not only that they, as generalizations, simply don't tell all the truth, failing to take into account, in particular, the peculiarities of the liberal imperialist tradition and grossly misrepresenting sometimes, as a result, the point of view of their expounders. I personally believe in the possibility to arrive at more convincing generalizations, stressing the elements that all the various strands of imperial rhetoric seems to have undoubtedly in common, such as, for example, the reluctance to recognize any endogenous dynamism and the capacity for historical agency to non-Western societies, which were invariably portrayed as only reacting to the external stimuli of some European initiative even by the most advanced liberal imperialists and internationalists. But beyond this I reflect on the fact that I am, after all, a historian; and what is incumbent upon me, when studying the meaning of ideas and representations, is do not to forget to ask some simple preliminary questions: who produced or employed them – which person, what institution? whom he or it was addressing to? and for what pragmatical purpose they were produced and employed?

I rather believe that the specific significance of liberal imperialist rhetoric lays in the fact that it *uniquely* provided the later British Empire with a pattern of discourse which was *suitable also for legitimation purposes*.

For the sole purpose to recall briefly, in an impressionistic way, which were the legitimation needs of the Empire that the metropolitan culture was called to meet on the ideological plan in the period under consideration, I'll adopt a very simple operational notion of political legitimacy and legitimation, articulated in three main propositions. (1) Every political authority requires, besides other things, that the members of the human group over which its jurisdiction extends shall be intimately persuaded of its *right* to make decisions binding upon all of them, so as to obtain and maintain their obedience, mobilize their support, exercise the power of command without provoking too disruptive conflicts. (2) It avails itself, therefore, of systems of myths, beliefs, sentiments, specifically aimed at legitimizing the ruler in the eyes of the varied mass of the subjects. (3) The character of the representations and discourses apt to perform the legitimizing function will depend, in its turn, on the general orientation of the cultures and mentalities prevailing at a certain epoch among the different sections of that group.

Now, in my belief, if we apply this notion to the British imperial system as a whole, it becomes apparent very soon how complex and how difficult was the legitimation problem which it had to cope with; and if we survey the culture of imperialism keeping well in our mind this conclusion, we cannot fail to perceive that not all the "representations" and the "discourses" related to the Empire were always available to its official or semiofficial spokesmen. I will limit myself to mention only the two more obvious aspects of the problem.

As far as the peripheries were concerned, in which we should never forget to include also the settlement colonies, during the period under consideration British authority came increasingly to depend on a plurality of forms of compromise and collaboration with the non-Europeans and the white colonial populations, which made the government of Empire a multi-cultural affair. The acute awareness of the precariousness of their power induced even the late Victorians to adopt a wide range of attitudes towards the "Others", their

religions, their civilizations, among which the crudest forms of racialist, orientalist, differentialist or ornamentalist derogatory stereotypization could never predominate.

But let's not forget that the Empire had to confront a thorny legitimation problem on the domestic front too. During the first years of the transition to democracy and mass politics, the definition of Britain's identity as an imperial nation-State and a global power was at the center of harsh party controversies, whose main contenders – liberals, radicals, conservatives, unionists, socialists – often put forward antithetical proposals and employed the imperial discourse in order to delegitimize their adversaries (as in the case of the epic battles between Gladstone and Disraeli, or during the Anglo-Boer war). In order that references to the Empire in public debate could become less controversial, more attuned to the consensual logic of British constitutional system of parliamentary government, it was necessary that a minimal consensus emerged among the parties about the value, the meaning, the conditions of possibility of the Empire. The process took several decades, and went on very unevenly, but insofar it was successful, and successful it was indeed, so as to involve the Labour Party in the national consensus, it was the liberal imperialist tradition, in the long run, to provide the ground of convergence.

The strong hegemonic potential and appeal of the liberal interpretation of the imperial idea may be inferred from the crucial circumstance that it was gradually appropriated by the post-Victorian monarchy. In a commentary written in 1902 for the coronation of Edward VII «by His Majesty's Gracious Command», for example, we find *Greater Britain* described as a political association of the most progressive communities never seen on the face of the Earth and the main prop of England's «planetary hegemony». Later in the century, in George V's *Jubilee Speech*, which was written by the great Whig historian George Macaulay Trevelyan and read in 1935 before both Houses of the Parliament and representatives of the Dominions and the Indian Empire, we find the imperial system as a whole described by the King himself as «a Commonwealth of peace» uniting in the same «family» a variety of nations, races, cultures and forms of government unheard of in the history of the world.

After the loss of their vestigial political powers in the first decades of the 19th century, the British Royals had learned quite soon that their legitimacy, prestige and influence depended on their capacity to transform themselves in living symbols of the values shared by all the

national community. Therefore, when we come across monarchic propaganda echoing well-established *tòpoi* of liberal imperialist discourse, as in the two cases I've just quoted, we may guess that they had become acceptable to large parts of public opinion, at least in the sense that their content lent itself to be construed by each part according to its favourite version of the imperial idea².

Part of the strength of the liberal imperialist tradition was that it put at the service of the Empire a kind of legitimating rhetoric which was the product of a more or less conscious effort to translate an older Christian interpretation of Britain's imperial vocation into a language more congenial to a cultural atmosphere of increasing secularization, scientificization and professionalization of public discourse³.

A major common characteristic of the liberal imperialist narratives is the exalted pretension they put forward on behalf of the Empire. The British imperial system and its constituent parts were portrayed as actual embodiments, or stages in a process of gradual implementation, of a set of values which were synthetically referred to as universal brotherhood, and therefore normative forms and modalities for the political and cultural unification of mankind in a single community or family both inside and outside the Empire.

It was not only, in fact, that the Empire was putting into effect the ideal of universal fraternity *within* its formal boundaries (or its more direct sphere of informal influence). Liberal imperialists regarded it as a crucial agency, a laboratory, an exemplar model for still

² The last observation brings me to mention a further reason for paying more attention to liberal imperialist rhetoric than usually is made – a further reason which is suggested, first of all, by the comparative study of the imperial systems. Opponents of imperial authority in the peripheries of the system do not limit themselves to refute legitimizing discourses radiating from the centre. They are influenced by it, actively take possession of it, remould it for their own exigencies, if only to turn it as a weapon against the authority by pointing out the discrepancy between the words and the reality.

³ One further aspect of the liberal imperialist rhetoric which may have concurred to make it appealing to significant strata of colonial subjects too (see note 3) is that it spoke the language of a Christianity interpreted as a religion of humanity. Recent studies in the global history of ideas have shown the strong influence exerted by Western secularized religions of humanity incorporating Christian values and modes of thought (such as Idealism, Positivism, Mazzinianism) on liberal trends within non-Western religious traditions who, particularly in India and the Muslim world, were dealing with the problem of adapting their evolving systems of values and beliefs to a historical environment undergoing the changes accelerated by European domination. It seems to me a not implausible hypothesis that British liberal imperialism might have acted, both directly and through the legitimating rhetoric he contributed to shape, as a similarly globalizing factor.

larger aggregations of peoples, and, ultimately, for the final instauration of the Republic of Man at planetary level.

It is important to recall that as long as Britain was, or could nurture the illusion of being a global power, her elites maintained the attitude towards world affairs that Ronald Hyam has aptly termed «cosmo-plastic». They believed, in other words, that Britain had both the duty and the resources (soft power resource, if no longer material and strategic resources) to play the role of architect and demiurge of a well-ordered world society.

The specific objects envisaged by the 19th- and 20th-centuries liberal imperialism as the ultimate goal of Britain's cosmoplastic exertions was the abolition of war and interstate anarchy, and the prevention of the potential conflicts with non-European civilizations engendered by Western expansion. As a means to this end, they advocated the reorganization of the ecumenical space in a world federation or a world society providing the institutional framework for the juridification of international relations and open to the participation of new self-governing national communities emerging from the modernization of societies rooted in the tradition of non-Western world-religions (like islamism and hinduism). The links between British liberal imperialism and internationalism, to which I've already alluded before, were to become quite apparent in the interwar years when a peculiarly British variant of internationalism emerged for a time as a now forgotten third alternative to both Wilsonian and Leninist anti-imperialist internationalism. The liberal imperialists of this period all agreed in rejecting the equation between the right of national self-determination and the right of absolute national sovereignty. Most of them, like Alfred Zimmern and Arnold J. Toynbee, expounded the cause of the League of Nations, imagining the League as a global counterpart to the newly-born *British Commonwealth of Nations* and regarding them as indispensable to each other. An influential minority, in face of the failures of the League, advocated an International Commonwealth and a World Government patterned on the United States, like in the case of Lionel Curtis and a handful of visionary constructive federalists.

The general connection between liberal imperialism and internationalism, however, dated back to the nineteenth century. And Seeley had had a prominent part in forging it, pioneering in the early Seventies the idea of a federation of the United States of Europe

aimed at the «abolition of the war» in the Old Continent and the application of the Christian principles to the international relations. In subsequent years Seeley continued to conceive the *Greater Britain* as only instrumental to the future advent of a world-wide federal State, favoured by a predictable reaction against the destructivity and exclusivism of contemporary nationalism and premised on the substitution of the modern European States-system with a *Pax Anglosaxonica* imposed on planetary scale by the combined strength of the two branches of the «English race», the British Empire and the United States.

Seeley's «universal State», however, was in a sense a nation State. He believed that it would be the political expression of a «universal nationality», of a sense of group identity finally embracing all the branches of human family and made possible by their conscious sharing of a «universal religion», whose essential creed was already professed by the cultured elite of an actually existing «universal civilization», the «Western civilization». The future world federation, the federation of humanity, would be foreshadowed and complemented, therefore, by a new «universal church», built on the ruin of Roman Catholicism and centered around the spiritual hegemony of a reformed, latitudinarian Anglo-American Protestantism.

To Seeley's fertile historical imagination the universal federation presented itself as a post-modern or ultra-modern dialectical *Aufhebung* (sublation) of the trend towards fragmentation of the originary «unity of Europe» which had prevailed during the last four centuries, conserving and transcending at the same time both the *thesis* – the medieval cosmopolitanism of Church and Empire – and its *antithesis* – the political and ecclesiastical particularism that had taken its place. The «universal state», then, would fully recognize the rights of «local nationalities» and «national religions», but only as hierarchically subordinate «provinces of humanity».

Seeley seems to have been ready to admit also a confederated and self-governing pan-Indian national State among the larger local units of the Cosmopolis (like Canada or the United States of Europe), as the final outcome of the Westernizing and homogenizing influence exerted upon the Subcontinent by the British rule. The grand world-historical mission committed to Britain's Asiatic Empire was that of overseeing the civilizational «marriage» between East and West and leading India into the «modern city of God», by

which Seeley meant the «universal civilization» binding together all the European peoples in a «brotherhood of great nations». Britain had to help the mosaic of Indian peoples and cultures to accomplish their momentous metamorphosis in yet another political, religious and ecclesiastical «province of humanity». These, at any rate, were to be the inevitable conclusions which successive generations of prominent British sympathizers of the Indian national movement felt themselves authorized to draw from Seeley's teaching, acting as intermediaries between liberal imperialism and internationalism and Indian nationalists.

Liberal imperialists never regarded the Empire as the only instrument of Britain's cosmoplastic mission. Through the entire period under consideration, for example, they stressed the significance for «the whole future of the planet» – Seeley's words – of an assumed «unique relation» between Great Britain and the United States. But it is only too obvious that, when they emphasized the instrumentality of Empire and British world power in furthering the unity of mankind, they aimed at legitimizing Britain's imperial institutions and policies as a means to a higher purpose than sheer national greatness, power, prestige.

An integral feature of their argumentative strategy consisted in the attempt to put at the service of the imperial ideology a teleological vision of universal history «from a cosmopolitan point of view» (reminiscent of Kant's philosophy of history). It focused on an evolutionary taxonomy of the forms of free government (formally analogous to Hegel's philosophy of history), which started from the family or the clan society, passed through the intermediary stages of the city-state, the nation-state, the continental or transoceanic State, and culminated in the international federation or the League of Nations. Liberal imperialist philosophies of history also stressed, complementarily, the world-historical significance of the progressive growth in scale from the local to the global level of the human groups, their various forms of association, interaction, and geographical expansion (on the model, even in this case, of a still more ancient "ecumenical" approach to world history resuscitated by the early modern historiography of mission).

By representing their country as the foremost agent and her multiple cosmo-plastic activities as essential aspects and moments of the unification of mankind, liberal imperialist rhetoricians refashioned in the idiom of historical and political science the myth of

providential empire, which had been central to the religious consciousness and public discourse of nineteenth-century Britain.

Many among its most prominent intellectual adherents did not eschew, well into the 20th century, from explicitly identifying the *tèlos* of the secular progress, the republic of humanity, with the historical realization of the kingdom of God announced in the New Testament. They represented indeed the irenic planetary utopia, whose building was entrusted to Britain and her Empire by the logic of world history, as a historicized equivalent of the ultimate goal pursued by the man Jesus.

Seeley, as we've seen, referred to the «universal civilization» destined to give birth to the future world-state and world-church as the «modern city of God». His most direct twentieth-century heir, Lionel Curtis, published in the Thirties an ambitious work of philosophy of history, bearing the double title *Civitas Dei-The Commonwealth of God*, tellingly changed in *World Order* in the first American edition. As the various titles clearly indicate, one intent of the book was to emphasize the evangelical roots of the International Commonwealth advocated by Curtis, who once described its constitution (in a very anti-Weberian manner, by the way) as the Sermon of the mount translated in political terms. Curtis had no doubts, in other words, that the kingdom of Heavens of which Jesus spoke in that occasion was a social system to be implemented on Earth and aiming at the union of all men in a single community. But Arnold Toynbee too, a liberal imperialist and internationalist who dissented from Curtis's constructive federalism, conceived the ecumenical society, that he hoped could emerge from the experiment of the League of Nations, as the final outcome of the transformation of the *civitas terrena* in a «province of the kingdom of God», showing himself in agreement with Seeley's and Curtis's rejection of a dualistic interpretation of Saint Augustine theory of the two cities.

This insistent recourse to religious language and imagery should not be dismissed as mere phraseology or sanctimonious irrelevance, because it reflected the deepest convictions of the liberal imperialists and may provide an important clue to the understanding of the exact role played by their rhetoric in the metropolitan culture of empire.

The thesis that the ethics of universal brotherhood embodied in the British Empire and in the future world State was coincident (in terms of both historical continuity and moral and

emotional content) with the ethics of universal love taught and exemplarily incarnated by Jesus in his life and work and with its application to politics on its largest scale, implied a distinctly post-millenarian interpretation of Biblical eschatology. Christian liberal imperialists, in other terms, regarded the millennium, the apocalyptic «kingdom of the Saints» on earth, as the culmination of a natural plan of education of mankind unfolding in history and to be brought to completion by men's own efforts. They rejected the pre-millenarian readings of the apocalyptic prophecies, so influential with the nineteenth-century British missionary movement and its attitude towards the Empire, which saw the millennium as only possible *after* Christ's second coming, because of the irredeemable corruption of human nature and human world.

This is to say that Christian liberal imperialist visions of the future world order were grounded upon an extreme form of anthropological optimism, emphasizing man's capacity for perfection, salvation, heroic holiness and beatitude *in present life*. The essential lesson they felt authorized to draw from Jesus' teaching and example was that every human being had to seek and could have attained complete personal self-fulfillment through an existence spent in the «service» of the others. This perfectionism brought the liberal imperialists and internationalists to distance themselves from any interpretations of the relation between Christianity and politics leading to quietism and indifferentism. They reacted with particular force against the denigration of the State, the *civitas terrena*, as the mere sphere of the *libido dominandi*, the sinful desire of ruling over others.

It was not only that man's capacity for goodness made all his activities virtually susceptible of sanctification. Politics, according to Seeley, was «the greatest and the most important of the human pursuits». It offered to the individual, all the more so if he was the citizen of a great Empire responsible for the future welfare of entire mankind, the opportunity to discharge his highest moral obligations, those that bound him to all other men as such, becoming not only an *imitator Christi*, but a co-worker with Jesus, a veritable *coadiutor Dei* in the building of the Kingdom of God.

In a letter written in 1918, Lionel Curtis, who was a prominent imperial statesman too, being involved, among other things, in the drafting of the *Government of India Act* of 1919 and in the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the Irish Free State in 1922,

confessed that he had the strong *personal* feeling that, in helping to bring to completion the project of the British Commonwealth, he was accomplishing the task of building the Kingdom of God upon Earth, that Jesus had initiated and committed to his followers.

The millenarism and optimism of the liberal imperialists depended in its turn on very definite opinions on the nature of God and his relations with man. Their common position on these matters may be defined as Incarnationalist and testifies to the close links connecting imperial rhetoric to powerful currents of religious sensibility, which, since the mid-nineteenth century, had been remodeling the Christian identity of the British middle class, propelling a profound reorientation of British Protestant theology, and finding expression in other areas of public discourse, such as the debate on the social problem, and which the liberal imperialists managed to harness in the service of the legitimation of the Empire.

The term "Incarnationalism", taken in its narrower technical sense, refers to the dominant current of Anglican theology from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War. The beginning of its rise to ascendancy is conventionally dated to the publication of a collective volume, entitled *Lux Mundi. A Series of Studies in the Religion of Incarnation*, edited in 1889 by one of the most prominent Anglican theologians of his generation, Charles Gore. Gore and his friends belonged to the so-called High Church Party, which emphasized the sacramental role of the Church. But *Lux Mundi* was an attempt to synthesize the legacy of Anglo-Catholicism with various strands of "liberal" Protestantism. Gore himself had been a pupil of Thomas Hill Green (the Idealist philosopher) and later in life, in 1927, in a series of lectures on *Christ and Society*, he described Seeley's most influential religious work, *Ecce Homo*, an essay on the life of Jesus published anonymously in 1865, as an unsurpassed account of Jesus' moral teaching. By "Incarnationalism", therefore, scholars also mean a set of ideas held in common by a broader spectrum of theological schools, some of which dating back to previous decades of the 19th century, like the Christian Socialism of F. D. Maurice, the Broad Church (or latitudinarian) Anglicanism of Seeley himself, and the immanentist philosophy of religion of the Oxford neo-Hegelians.

These schools shared, first of all, a common enemy – the theology of Atonement that had come to dominate the Protestant, and especially Evangelical thinking on social and political

affairs in the period from the French Revolution to the publication of Seeley's *Ecce Homo*, whose editorial success in the Sixties has been sometimes given a symbolic periodizing value as a symptom of the turning of the tide in favour of the Incarnationalist theology (in the broadest acceptance).

Atonement theology placed an unbridgeable gulf between God and man, extolled the vicarious sacrifice of the Cross as the *unique*, superhuman act of love by which Christ gratuitously offered salvation to a damned race, which original sin had made utterly incapable of contributing to her own redemption. Incarnationalists, on the contrary, saw in Jesus the prototype of redeemed humanity, the supreme revelation of the possibilities of the humankind, of the divinity of man. This is what Seeley alluded to by entitling his book *Ecce Homo*, that in the *King James version* of the *Vulgata* reads *Behold the Man*. Pilate's words might be construed as an intimation (unintentional indeed) to recognize in Jesus the Ideal Man, man's higher self: «See what a man is, see what a man can become». To be more precise, Incarnationalists believed that, with Jesus, «what was godlike in man» had expressed itself to the full in a really and purely human life. Jesus had set a standard of perfection which was attainable for each man who followed his example. According to Maurice's doctrine of «universal salvation», the true meaning of the Incarnation, of God becoming human, was that man's nature had not become corrupt to the point of rendering him unable to triumph over sin in present life. The world-historical function of Jesus, as interpreted by Seeley in *Ecce Homo*, was to help humanity to reach this goal by her own means.

We have already considered which political consequences the liberal imperialists drew from their theological premises. I would only add that, at this level of discourse, intermediate between theology and political prescriptions, the rhetoric of Christian imperialism and internationalism exactly coincided with the rhetoric of late 19th-century Christian socialism, which was also strongly indebted towards Incarnationalism in the larger acceptance and had to become the hegemonic school of social teaching within British Protestantism in the first half of the 20th century. Both rhetorics focused on the idea of the Kingdom as a system of right relationships progressively taking shape in history and to be realized, in the intentions of Jesus himself, in the present world. Both rhetorics refuted any interpretations of Christianity leading to exclude any part of human behaviour from the field of morality or

confining religious experience to the exclusive dimension of individual interiority. And both rhetorics described the international commonwealth, or the national community recovering its lost solidarity – broken from the industrial revolution – through economic reforms, as the result of the reorganization of the respective spheres of conduct by free acts of will on the part of men capable to conform themselves to the will of God as revealed in and through Jesus.

The contribution given by British Protestant social thought to the ideology of the welfare state is only too well known⁴. Historians have also investigated the role played by Incarnationist social Christianity in shaping and giving expression to a new middle class Incarnationist ethos and religiosity and in recruiting her support for liberal social reform policies. But Incarnationalism helped to provide the rising welfare state with a much-needed legitimation resource also more indirectly, by contributing to the formation of a kind of non-denominational and immanentist Christianity which seems to have been the main beneficiary of the so-called process of secularization in Britain as far as the public sphere and public discourse are concerned. This consensual Christianity celebrated the sacred value of "service", was ritualized in the liturgies of the monarchy, and aspired to the rank of semi-official civic religion of the nation and of the Empire.

Nothing analogous has been attempted to clarify the role that Incarnationist imperial Christianity might have played in reflecting and canalizing the middle-class changing sense of the sacred for the benefit of the imperial State and in attracting imperialism into the orbit of the emerging national religious consensus. But the whole topic of the impact of Christian liberal imperialism on the metropolitan culture of Empire has been surprisingly little studied, and what is known about it finds it hard to penetrate into the general historiographical awareness. Suffice it to say that in a recent, valuable work of synthesis on religion, politics and society in Britain in the long 19th century (*Providence and Empire*, by Stewart Brown) Seeley is treated as a very significant mid-century writer on Christological and ecclesiological matters from a Broad Church point of view, but Seeley the imperialist, Seeley the prophetic historian, is not mentioned ever once! There are important exceptions indeed, like the

⁴ The very phrase "welfare state" having been coined or at least popularized during the Second World War by the archbishop of Canterbury William Temple, who was an heir to the *Lux Mundi* tradition.

studies of Gerald Studdert-Kennedy on the complex interconnection and interaction between British Christianity and British India in the interwar period, where the significance of the Incarnationalist tradition is rightly stressed. Studdert-Kennedy does full justice to Seeley the providential historian and political scientist, but what almost disappears, in this case, is Seeley the religious thinker!

I'm concentrating my attention upon Seeley because he obviously forms, so to speak, a class apart among the Christian liberal imperialists, having been a chief contributor on his own account to the process of remaking of middle-class religious identity both signaled, reflected and propelled by the turning of mainstream Protestant Christology «from atonement to incarnation». His strictly religious writings, which were constantly intertwined with the historical and political ones, provide the key source for sounding the relation between liberal Christianity and liberal imperialist rhetoric at its profoundest level.

Seeley, to be sure, was in no sense a theologian. When he hastily wrote *Ecce Homo*, in the summer of 1865, he had been the Professor of Latin at London University College for a couple of years and was engaged in a critical edition of Livy's history of Rome. He wanted *Ecce Homo* to be read as a truly historical account of the «plan» or «design» of moral regeneration of mankind pursued by Jesus in founding the Christian Church. The book enjoyed immediate success, was reviewed by such Victorian eminences as John Henry Newman or William Gladstone, and seems to have been universally read and discussed. In 1909, fifteen years after Seeley's death, *Ecce Homo* status as a popular "world classic" received a kind of semi-official recognition by its inclusion in the Everyman's library.

The reasons of such an impact, however, are not to be found in any original contribution on the part of Seeley to the so-called «quest for the historical Jesus». Seeley's attitude towards the Biblical sources was extremely conservative. He claimed that the evidence he could draw from the Gospel enabled him to penetrate into the very mind of Jesus, so that, from the purely scholarly point of view, *Ecce Homo* came very soon to be regarded in academic circles as «one of the least "scientific" books never written on a historical topic», more of the nature of a historical novel.

Now, in my belief, if the publication and the reception of *Ecce Homo* has title to be regarded as a significant event in the religious history of Victorian England, it is just because

Seeley managed to translate the basic Incarnationist assumptions of the Broad Church and Christian Socialist theology (under whose sway he had fallen during the 1850s in the process of reacting against an orthodox Evangelical family upbringing) into a powerful historical myth about the true human «character» and teaching of Jesus. That myth proved so convincingly realistic and appealing to the British general educated public because it exactly reflected their changing social values, aspirations, and intellectual needs.

Ecce Homo, in other words, offered a suitable definition of the meaning of being a Christian to a generation which was experiencing both a crisis of belief, being called to adapt its faith to the scientific world view and the new German currents of Biblical criticism, and an increasing gap between her moral sensibility and the ethical implications of the more traditional religious teaching. And to provide such an answer through a historicist and positivist approach to the religious problems was exactly the task that Seeley had set to himself in composing *Ecce Homo*.

According to the image of the historical Jesus depicted in *Ecce Homo*, to be a Christian did not imply the faith in any dogmatic creed. The essential feature of a Christian existence (such as that exemplarily incarnated by Jesus) was a practical conduct of life entirely and ascetically devoted to the satisfaction of the virtually innate desire of each man to benefit all others even at the cost of the greatest personal sacrifices. This unconditioned and unlimited altruistic attitude and behaviour follows altogether spontaneously from a correspondent natural sentiment of universal love, the «enthusiasm of humanity», which has its ultimate root in the distinctively human faculty of sympathy – «the power to feel by reflection what other men feel» – and which Seeley identified with «the godlike in man».

Every individual entirely possessed of such an enthusiastic passion is made by it not merely a virtuous, but a holy man partaking of the divine, because it silences his lower animal, self-centered passions, preserving him from the very temptation of doing harm to others. Christian morality, that could not consist in anything else than the specific principles of conduct inwardly inspired by universal love, was an active morality, dictating a whole new table of positive duties.

The most obvious duty dictated by the Christian feeling of unlimited altruism was the law of philanthropy, by which Seeley meant the enthusiastic desire to improve the physical well-

being of others. As applied to modern conditions, Christian philanthropy implied a commitment to scientifically oriented social reform aimed at removing structural causes of poverty and suffering (including war) and at making available the best opportunities of satisfying bodily wants (in the largest acceptation) to the greatest number.

But in order to grasp the full political implications of Seeley's Incarnationalism we have to concentrate our attention on what he regarded as the supreme duty of positive morality, the duty of each man of edifying others. The highest norm of life for a Christian eager to benefit his fellow men was obviously that which prescribed to him of helping them to reach and conserve in their turn the same enthusiastic condition of feeling. Seeley named it «the law of edification», because every human being in which the «enthusiasm of humanity» is fully operative becomes an element of the fabric of a *societas perfecta*, whose members seek personal self-fulfillment in devoting themselves to the self-fulfillment of each other. To establish such a society was the purpose Jesus had had in mind in founding the Church, which was conceived by him, however, only as a means, although an indispensable one, for the final unification of mankind in the same community.

Seeley defined therefore a life of active citizenship in the secular Kingdom of God as the *summum bonum* of human existence. Salvation cannot be achieved by the individual in isolation and without any aid from his fellow-creatures, not only because the altruistic impulses need to be satisfied through the actual service of others, but also because the enthusiastic passion only can be kindled and fueled by stable personal contacts and intimate affective connections with other individuals actuated by the same feeling.

Christian charity corresponded only to the highest form of development of the natural love for all men inherent in the divine faculty of sympathy, which grows in proportion to the moral worth of the individuals one encounters in ordinary social interactions and the ethical standard prevailing in a given community. In its earlier stages of historical development, natural love incarnates itself, at its best, first, in the paternal, or the filial, or the brotherly love, then, in the civic hero who immolates itself for the *pòlis* or the country. It inspires two inferior forms of morality, such as family morality and national or «ethnic morality», which resemble each other in three respects: they are exclusive, not recognizing any obligations towards individuals external to the community; they mostly prescribe negative duties (like in

the case of the Mosaic law) under threat of various kind of punishments and sanctions; they require indeed from the individual the unconditioned, disinterested devotion to the common good, but only in exceptional cases.

Family and national morality, however, have another and more fundamental characteristic in common in that they are *religious* systems of morality (as distinguished, for example, from philosophical systems of morality) and depend on a religion of Man. In such cases, moral behaviour draws inspiration from a condition of feeling, which Seeley calls «worship» and which consists in an attitude of permanent admiration mixed with gratitude towards individuals (both real and mythical) who embody in a paradigmatic way the axiological values of the community. This crucially implies that in primitive family-based societies, ancient republics and nation-States, patterns and incentives of ethical behaviour are inculcated in the individual through the personal ascendancy of charismatic heroes, backed by social pressure to conform to their example.

According to the anti-Hobbesian principles of Seeley's political science, government authority ultimately depends on that unique peculiarity of human «sociability», the capacity for self-devotion⁵, which finds expression, in this case, in the willingness of the governed to sacrifice themselves to the common interest if and when necessity requires it. Every vital State, therefore, presupposes (and is at the same time) a Church, whether organized or not, a community worshipping and fostering the worship of the same human Gods. The political group, then, being so interested to promote the kind of virtues of which it vitally needs, plays an essential preparatory role in the process of moral education of mankind, which enters its final stage, the stage of universal morality, with the foundation of the Christian Church.

Christian morality differs from family and ethnic moralities because it is universally comprehensive rather than exclusive, prescribes new positive duties and infuses a new spirit in the old negative ones, making both of them independent from fear of punishment or hope of reward, regards altruistic self-devotion as the rule rather than the exception. But also Christianity is far from being a mere system of ethics: it is a moral religion of man (like Buddhism), centered on the loving worship and grateful admiration of an exemplar human

⁵ According to Seeley, the fact that the unions of men may count on man's capacity for self-devotion is the distinguishing feature between human and mere animal sociability.

hero embodying in a perfect way some socially valuable human quality. And Christianity too avails itself of social and institutional means to bring his *chàrisma* to bear upon the practical life of the votaries.

With the advent of Christianity the object worshipped by the religion of Man finally becomes the Ideal man as incarnated in Jesus. Universal love, a love finally extended to all mankind across its division in tribal and national groups, is not conceivable as a love for what each man actually is, taken in his concrete individuality, but only as a love for what every man could become, taken in his abstract universality. The world-historical role played by Jesus in the moral education of mankind consisted then in revealing a new standard of human perfection, which has rendered each human being worth of enthusiastic loving. But Jesus, according to Seeley, made much more than this. He employed his own human excellence in erecting that system of hero-worship which was indispensable if the new universal morality was to take roots in men's consciousness. Jesus deliberately nurtured his charismatic influence, owed to his human excellence and after the model of the hero-king of the Jewish tradition, in order to promote the cult of his own personality and to cement the «allegiance» of his followers, and founded the Church as a corporate agent for the perpetuation and expansion of his personal influence through the evocation, imitation, application to the changing circumstance of his example.

In *Ecce Homo*, in other words, Jesus is portrayed as a kind of political genius and Carlylean Hero, who makes use of the most ordinary and elementary religious agencies and mechanisms of cultural, social and political cohesion (individual *chàrisma* and its institutionalization) for giving birth to the universal church. The Church, on its turn, is the greatest and most perfect creation of human «sociability», of man's capacity for self-sacrifice, which finds its anterior expression, as said before, in the family and the political community. The States and the republics of the Antiquity were therefore, according to Seeley, «the germs and embryos» of Christian brotherhood⁶.

⁶ Seeley writes that the «union of politics and morals» is among the essential characteristics of Christianity.

Seeley repeatedly refers to the Church as a State, a commonwealth, a republic, and not in a metaphorical sense. What he wants to point out is the fact that also the Church «claims unlimited self-sacrifice on the part of his members», differing in this from other kinds of human associations and partaking of the essential characteristic of the State. The universal church, on the other part, is properly the specialized organization evolved by humanity for the cultivation of universal love, for developing in free consenting individuals the natural sense of what is right. To perform this task she doesn't need to wield any *direct* political authority, or identify herself with the State.

The fundamental reason why, on the other part, the spiritual city of God constantly strives throughout history for permeating the *civitas terrena* and transforming it in the republic of humanity, so that the universal Church portends the political unity of mankind, is that, as we have seen, the religion of Man is inseparably linked with the complex web of family relations, class relations and international relations in which each individual spent his life. Their ethical content determines the level of human worth which the individual has the chance to experience, to admire, to worship, and therefore the degree of intensity and the range of inclusivity of his natural sympathy and love. In this non-materialistic sense, society contributes to shape the character of the men that the Christian enthusiasts aim at edifying, on which the degree of success of their efforts depends. In the light of Seeley's Incarnationalist perspective, which is at the roots of all subsequent attempts to build a Christian sociology in Britain, all ordinary human relations acquire a properly sacramental value, and every person who is involved in them, and can have a voice in the historical process by which they are continuously transformed by human choices, virtually becomes a mediator, a channel of grace. Christianity, therefore, cannot avoid and will always irresistibly pushed to concern herself with "the world".

The application of Christian principles to the relations among the States, which for Seeley, as we know, can be achieved only on the basis of the substitution of international anarchy with a universal federation, is made imperative not merely by the philanthropic horror at the consequences of war. The lesson of contemporary history is that, under «a permanent condition of international hostility», the modern sentiment of national solidarity shows a tendency to pervert itself into a form of patriotism reminiscent of the exclusiveness of the

ancient, pre-Christian «ethnic morality», becoming an obstacle to the development of the «enthusiasm of humanity».

Every national Church, therefore, acting as an ecclesiastical «province» of the not yet self-conscious and organized modern universal Church, must assuredly teach the duties of patriotism incumbent upon the citizen of a particular State in connection with its peculiar «vocation» in world affairs. But, in discharging this task, the Church will never leave the faithful in doubt that patriotism may be only a «step», although a necessary one, «to the higher morality», the «universal morality», and that «the ultimate lesson of morality» is «the Christian unity of mankind».

Fifteen year after he wrote these last words quoted, Seeley the scientific historian discovered and communicated to his fellow-countrymen that, by a happy but at the same time challenging coincidence, the «national vocation» that England had received from history was to carry out to completion that task of giving «unity to mankind» which had been undertaken for the first time in late antiquity, under conditions much less favourable to its success, by the alliance between Christianity and the universal Empire of Rome.