

On Agreeing – But Not Quite – with Adam Gopnik's Liberal Credo
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Whenever English people open their mouths in England they are likely to be at a disadvantage. If they talk posh, they will most probably be immediately hated by large numbers of people. If they do not talk posh, equally large numbers of people will at once dismiss them as persons of no importance, hardly worth listening to. So whatever you do, you can't win.

I realise that as soon as I open my own mouth, people will say, 'Oh, he's obviously from north-east Cheshire,' and I shall be well and truly dismissed. It's absurd, I know, but you must just get used to it. I do not repine.

Still, I like to flatter myself that personally I am not so prejudiced as many. When I listen to people like A.N. Wilson, the novelist, or the late dear old Lady Warnock, the philosopher and former Mistress of Girton, who speak with witheringly posh accents, I am charmed, because they seem to be taking me back to some vanished Edwardian world. My three sons, on the other hand, tell me that when they see or hear Mr Wilson on TV they feel like putting their boots through the television screen. How prejudiced can you get!

At the same time I am able to appreciate local accents. One of my favourite preachers was my late colleague, Frank Bullock, Unitarian minister in Bradford and father of Alan, Lord Bullock the historian, the founding Master of St Catherine's College, Oxford, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Frank Bullock was not at all Northern. He was from Somerset and spoke with a lovely West of England burr. I could listen to Frank Bullock for ever, and I felt the same about J.B. Priestley, the novelist. I could listen to his beautiful warm Bradford voice for ever.

There is one voice, though, that does not arouse instinctive prejudice in England. When Americans open their mouths in England, they are usually immediately loved. We are aware that there are different kinds of American accent, and we can recognise the Southern voice - but that usually means that we love it all the more. We think 'Gone With the Wind', Oh how lovely!

American voices intrigue us because we can't immediately place the speaker in the social hierarchy. Is he a billionaire, or just some assistant professor from a New England college? Is he a farmer or a financier? Is she a philosopher or a shop-assistant? We can't easily tell. Our instinctive English prejudices are happily baffled and overcome.

One such delightful American voice is that of Mr Adam Gopnik, a writer on the staff of the celebrated New Yorker magazine, who I am glad to say is sometimes invited to give

the weekly Point of View talk on BBC Radio 4. Adam Gopnik has a very warm, friendly, relaxed way of speaking. He is obviously very intelligent, highly educated, and a man of wide intellectual interests and sympathies. (He comes from a secular Jewish academic family). But his friendly voice puts us on an equal footing with himself. He never gives the impression that he is talking down to us from a great height. His is a very democratic voice.

Last November he gave a talk entitled A Liberal Credo. The root meaning of 'liberal' is 'generous', and in Britain we usually feel comfortable with this word. It can be used quite happily in a wide variety of political and religious contexts. You can be a liberal conservative as well as a liberal democrat or a liberal Catholic, a liberal Anglican in religion. We don't feel that the word 'liberal' is at all threatening.

But in America it's very different. You could say the West coast of the US from Seattle through San Francisco to Los Angeles, and the East coast from Boston through New York to Washington DC, are enclaves of liberalism. But the vast mass of middle America, and even more the vast mass of the South, are far from liberal. There the word seems as dangerous and frightening as the word 'communist'. People there are terrified that liberals are trying to take their guns away from them, so leaving them unable to defend themselves. Liberals want to allow such things as same-sex marriage, which is against the Bible (or so they think).

So liberals threaten the usual order of things, the way things have been for centuries, and they are feared and hated. People in Middle and Southern America will not vote for liberals.

So it's brave of Mr Gopnik to declare himself a liberal (though you don't need to be brave to do this in New York, which is full of liberals). He doesn't mean this in a party-political sense, but as indicating a general attitude to life that can be found in people as varied as Benjamin Disraeli and Denis Healey, from constitutional conservatives to social democrats. Very interestingly he says, 'I would call myself a liberal humanist or a semi-secular Unitarian-style liberal humanist.' He confesses that this is going to shock most people in middle America.

Let me tease out the meaning of Mr Gopnik's credo, as far as I understand it. 'Liberal', as I have already explained, really means generous, warm-hearted. 'Humanist' – what's that? Well, in my book it means someone who wishes to bless and prosper the human enterprise, something that I hope all of us here would wish to do.

'Secular' is an even more tricky word. It comes from the Latin word saeculum meaning 'this age'. So if you're living at this time, in this age, you are secular. Even the Pope, in this sense, is secular. But that's not very informative, is it, just to say we're all secular now, if we're alive, whether we like it or not. I know very well that 'secular' has another meaning.

Many people are aware that religions have made a huge amount of trouble by trying to impose their particular religious rules on everybody, and that this has done great harm to society. So they have declared themselves to be the enemies of all religions and determined to keep religion out of public life as much as possible. We now know there many religions, and

that they cannot possibly all impose their rules on everybody, because their rules are not all the same, they contradict one another, so a modern state has in some sense to be secular. It says to the adherents of the different religions, 'By all means keep your own rules, but we can't allow you to impose your particular rules on everybody else.' In that sense we are a secular state.

But Mr Gopnik says 'semi-secular', and I'm very glad he does. Because to be unremittingly, ruthlessly, harshly, vindictively, exclusively 'secular' would be a terrible mistake. Contained within the religions of the world are the most tremendous and powerful humanitarian, life-helping and life-ennobling impulses. To dismiss them, to forbid them, exclude or ignore them would be an appalling loss. Think about it: do we really want to blot out the work of the great Roman Catholic Orders of Charity all over the world? Or the work of the Salvation Army among the poorest, most deprived, most abandoned? Think of all the friendly devoted work done week in, week out, by the ordinary members and ministers of all kinds of congregations of all manner of denominations and religions that provide human warmth, fellowship, sympathy, support, through all the chances and changes, tragedies and sufferings, as well as joyful celebrations of human life. If all that were to be wiped out, the world would be an infinitely worse place to live in than it is now.

So Mr Gopnik's phrase, 'semi-secular' seems to me to be very wise. No, I do not want churches and religious authorities dominating me and ruling the roost. For God's sake, no! But at the same time, I'm well aware that to wipe them out entirely, as some so-called secularists want to do, would be the most lamentable and ghastly mistake, an incalculable loss. Intriguingly, Mr Gopnik said, 'Unitarian-style'. Now what is Unitarian-style in New York City? Well, there are several Unitarian congregations in New York. The biggest, of a thousand or so people, is All Souls Church on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. It expresses a traditional liberal Christian Unitarian faith.

Interestingly, a fact which few people know, it was the church of one of the greatest of American novelists of the nineteenth century, Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*. Even more importantly, another fact of which few are aware: it was the church that initiated and organised the care of the sick and wounded nationally during the American Civil War. Its then minister, Dr Henry Bellows, gathered together a group of ministers and medical men and went to Abraham Lincoln. 'Mr President,' he said, 'what are we doing to care for the sick and wounded in this war? We must do something.' 'I entirely agree,' said Lincoln. 'Will you organise it for us?' This Bellows proceeded to do, something for which Unitarians have good reason to be very proud. It was a living out of the Unitarian Law of Public Service.

Then there is the Community Church of New York, which emphasises inter-faith activities, bringing together people of different religious backgrounds, and also the First Unitarian Church of Brooklyn, which is a strongly humanist congregation. So what is the Unitarian style here? It says difference is no threat, find unity in variety; we need not think alike to love alike.

Mr Gopnik's central affirmation is to declare that as a liberal he believes in Reason

and Reform. Of course, I strongly agree. As he says, the world has many ills, tradition is a very mixed bag of nice things and nasty things, and we can work together to fix the nasty ones while making the nice ones available to more people. Liberals believe in reform. Yes, it has to go on all the time. Society gets torn and frayed constantly, full of holes, and so we have to go on with our mending and repairing and patching up all the time too. Actually this works better than revolution. It's dramatic and romantic to think that one great revolution could once and for all make everything right: destroy the past with all its terrible mistakes and start again afresh.

But as liberals we don't like violence, we distrust violence, and we have good reason to do so – it doesn't work. If you burn everything down, you lose too much. Revolutions devour their own. Experience teaches us that in the long run our way of mending and repairing works better.

It's our human imagination that enables us both to reason and to look intelligently at the evidence and then choose what to do that will make life better for us and people around us. This is a highly moral and responsible way of doing things, and we do have a human capacity to do this. The upholders of traditional religion have often been critical of what they see as the errors of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the so-called Age of Reason. No doubt some of these criticisms are justified: we are after all imperfect creatures in an imperfect world, and we cannot suddenly make ourselves perfect. Progress is not inevitable.

That's true. But it doesn't do to sneer at the ideals of reason and improvement.

I'm very grateful to Mr Gopnik for stressing that there is one great example that shows us that our liberal championing of the ideals of Reason and Reform has not been in vain and is still of the utmost value. He says: just look at the fruits of scientific reasoning in medicine. After all, what is this but the application of organised self-scrutinising reason to the problems of human bodies. The wonderful and marvellous fruit of our liberal ideals of reason and reform is modern medicine. It gives us vaccines, anti-biotics, anaesthetics, surgery and public-health measures everywhere. If you scoff at reason and reform and don't want them, then instead you can have bleeding by leeches, the theory of the five humours, and surgery performed by a barber with a saw who hasn't even washed his hands.

Modern medicine is a magnificent proof that improvement is possible. I owe it an enormous debt. Ten years ago it saved my life. Four times I have enjoyed the blessings of a general anaesthetic, the last only a few months ago. If death is like that, we have nothing to fear. We are beyond all pain. God is kind to the unthankful and the evil, claimed Jesus, and this kindness may be shown in the certain gift of death to every one, bringing relief from all pain.

It might sometimes seem that our liberal loyalties are just abstractions or slogans. That is not so. They are vital, flesh-and-blood, living and lived-out realities. Pluralism, for example. It sounds an abstraction, but it means resolutely facing the fact that the world is made up of many very different people, all with varied ideas and visions of life. We face that fact, live with it happily and curiously, not feeling threatened, not needing to kill everybody

who is different from us. That is creative living-out of the principle of toleration that sees no need for religious wars: that is faith in liberty, allowing curious people to enquire freely, and not curbing their questioning.

We are confident that if we give deprived people more material pleasures, that in itself is a thoroughly good thing to do. Giving more happiness to oppressed people is a good thing to do. This liberal generous impulse has struggled against thousands of years of cruelty and of despotic religious leaders who cursed any new insights or new experiments in human living. Mr Gopnik claims that it is one of the greatest spiritual journeys humankind has ever made after we embarked on the path of self-reliance.

I know 'self-reliance' is a great watch-word, and that Emerson wrote grandly about it, but it's a phrase I am not altogether comfortable with. I'm not suggesting that people are useless and that only supernatural aid is any good, but I am vividly aware that we are also dependent creatures, utterly dependent on all the natural forces and resources of the universe. I would rather put it this way: self-responsibility. Let us honour our acceptance of self-responsibility - it's this that has led us to great things. Some of these great things are the emancipation of women (still by no means complete, of course), the spread of democracy, the extension of human rights to homosexuals, the belief that torture and censorship are wrong

The mythological stories from the past about the universe and our human place in it can be colourful, grand, poetic. They can also be harmful and disabling. Now, by patiently confronting the evidence, we have much more accurate pictures of earth's place in the universe and the story of human life here on earth. This surely is a marvellous achievement that we should celebrate. We do not have to worry about punishment in hell after death. Hell is real, but it's what human beings, very sadly, can make of life here on earth. Death is life's great gift that brings peace and freedom from pain to everyone.

Mr Gopnik confesses that the liberal imagination does not pretend to give the final answers to our cosmic questions: why are we here and why do we suffer? He is not upset by this inability, nor am I. The Buddhist discourse on Questions Which Tend Not to Edification shows that the Buddha himself shared a similar point of view. We do not trust those who claim to have all the answers. The liberal claim is more modest than that. Let me turn to one of the great liberal saints of the twentieth century to give us his answer to this, to Albert Schweitzer:

'We cannot understand what happens in the universe. What is glorious in it is united with what is full of horror. What is full of meaning is united to what is senseless. The spirit of the universe is at once creative and destructive - it creates while it destroys and destroys while it creates and therefore it remains to us a riddle. And we must inevitably resign ourselves to this.'

We are limited beings and we can't know everything. Albert Schweitzer did not let this thought paralyse him or make him give up and stagnate. On the contrary he threw himself wholeheartedly into life, working every day until the very end of his long life as a healer, one of the great healers of the twentieth century. Through the vast ocean of what

seems icy and indifferent there flows the warm gulf stream of love. We let ourselves be seized and carried away by that vital stream. His great watchword was reverence - Reverence for Life, Respect for Life. We reverence life's awesome power and beauty wherever we can find it, in the infinitely vast and the infinitely small. We reverence the infinite vastness on which we depend - the life universal, the divine life, the fulness of being, and that reverence includes compassion and love.

We reverence the interconnected and interdependent web of life. We reverence the great saints of humanity and draw strength from them, from the Communion of the Saints. So, Mr Gopnik, Reason and Reform, yes, by all means, I agree. But that alone is not enough. We must add Reverence and Respect, and through Reverence and Respect let ourselves be seized and carried along by that vital stream of love.