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INVENTING THE INDIVIDUAL

By Larry Siedentop

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A leading international historian of ideas – not, seemingly, a professing Christian – argues that the 'Revolution' initiated by Jesus and Paul is central to understanding present day democracy. Any Christian with an interest in society, history and politics will find this book exciting and challenging.

Drawing especially on Paul's letters, Larry Siedentop shows how Christianity 'turned the world upside down' by abolishing the classical understanding of the universe as shaped by natural hierarchy. Paul's insistence on each human being as equally free to be morally accountable reverberates through history ever since. In early monasteries, new communities dignified manual labour. Urban bishops provided orderly space for dialogue between rival cultures after Rome collapsed. The empires of the Visigoths and Charlemagne strove to accommodate the equality of subjects before God. When knightly violence threatened anarchy, the eleventh-century Papacy developed a framework of sovereignty and civil law, so laid the foundation for human rights. For Siedentop, the Renaissance and Reformation are less significant than Modernist history claims, and Catholic Christendom is more subtle and diverse than evangelicals often allow. European history is a series of adaptations to Christian claims on society and thought. Today's secular liberalism is simply the latest version. He closes with a plea to Christians to 'understand the moral depth of our tradition', reclaim the 'moral content of liberal secularism' and rescue society from the 'heresies' which reduce liberalism to crude economics and individualism.

The book is relentlessly Eurocentric. If Siedentop had extended his scope to account for the different histories of early Christian impact south into Africa and east into Asia then this could have been a masterpiece. As it is, 'Inventing the Individual' is just brilliant. It deserves our attention.

Paul Lusk