



Staying Human

#02 Statecraft for the Common Good

From Crisis to Meaning – Renewal and the Spirit of Justice

Jon Cruddas

Thanks, Jenny for inviting me to say a few words in this *Staying Human* series. I want to congratulate you on the title. The *Staying Human* framework is I think exactly right – it allows us to focus on the challenges that will threaten humanity in the years ahead.

Maurice has talked about statecraft, industrial policy, rearmament, the dignity of labour, vocation, devolution, subsidiarity etc, so I'm not going to simply echo his arguments because I share a lot of them. In my comments this evening I'm going to come at it from a slightly different approach, which really asks, 'is it possible to have a modern statecraft that deals with and challenges the scale of the issues we face today without a belief system situated behind it?'

I want to talk about the question of spiritual renewal and how that must inform any renewed statecraft. A statecraft based upon the dignity of the person, driven by a vision of what is just.

I will also bring out some historical references regarding different forms of spiritual renewal and religious contribution over the last couple of hundred years that in practice pioneered new forms of statecraft to deal with profound challenges of the time. I will address the need for a commensurate vision today. Let's call it a spiritual renaissance.

I will also make some political points - because it's impossible to ignore the inability of mainstream politics and its statecraft to speak to the moment, grave limitations which will likely usher in forces of reaction and populist upheaval in the years ahead. We saw a glimpse of that over the weekend with over 100,000 marching a few miles from here. At the front of the march on Saturday was a man with a huge wooden cross. There was talk of impending civil war and the defence of a Christian heritage. I will address this revived political interest in religion.

And finally in terms of political economy I want to focus in on the question of human labour – not least because next year marks 135 years since the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, the first of the Catholic Social Teaching encyclicals of the modern era – and because the new Pope, consciously taking the name Leo, signals major possibilities to rethink the role and status of work at a time of epochal technological change.

To begin with I think it is worth making a few obvious points.

The first relates to the unknown quality of our political leadership.

The historian Robert Blake once used Asquith's description of Andrew Bonar Law as 'The Unknown Prime Minister', for the title of his biography of the same man. Another historian Ken Morgan described Attlee as 'our really unknown prime minister.'

This idea of the unknown leader is one regularly deployed by historians. But today we have a leader who is more genuinely unknown than either Bonar Law or Attlee. Keir Starmer is a deeply elusive figure – it is almost impossible to identify his political philosophy. That isn't a criticism, rather an objective description.

Indeed, many would take this with a sense of relief – stressing how we need less philosophy and more pragmatic policy delivery. 'Ideas are indulgent – we need to get things done' - I have regularly heard this in Westminster. Keir Starmer himself appears to embrace his lack of a defining public philosophy.

Historically he certainly stands in stark contrast to many Labour leaders who derived their political worldview from a certain belief system – often a religious one. Yet Starmer celebrates that he does not have one. Indeed he has declared there is 'no such thing as Starmerism and never will be'.

On the day when he first addressed the country as Prime Minister, on the steps at Downing Street, he said his administration will be 'unburdened by doctrine'. An extraordinary phrase to use. If you do not have a doctrine, a body of ideas, a belief system, how can you forge a statecraft that can deal with the challenges that are ricocheting around us today. I will just leave that there. Clearly he wanted to emphasise the case for pragmatism over ideology. Yet such an approach can suggest a rootlessness - a lack of intellectual moorings - and might imply a lack of coherence or purpose in terms of public policy.

It suggests a government that lacks a belief system to underscore and guide its actions, its statecraft. It begs the obvious question - without a belief system how will you navigate this moment in history – and resist the forces that are literally upending western liberal democracy?

Unfortunately, this has been cruelly exposed over the last year or so. When we think of the big issues of our time: transhumanism, the dark enlightenment, a workless future, the potency of modern technologies that can challenge the integrity of the human being itself, how can you forge a statecraft to meet those challenges without a body of ideas underpinning it and your sense of what the human condition is?

My second point is that this vacuum informs an almost tragic quality to modern politics.

The philosopher John Gray wrote a few years ago that 'The heart of tragedy is fate, that human beings face inescapable choices in which whatever is done incurs irreparable loss'. That seems to me to be a fairly good description of the current state of affairs in terms of the body politic.

All three main parties lack a credible diagnosis of the condition of Britain and the challenges facing it. The capacity of our politicians appears inversely related to the scale of the challenges they face.

I would suggest this is where history kicks in. Politicians need to excavate their histories – to rediscover a sense of ethical purpose or else they will be washed away by what's coming.

Given this sense of tragedy how do we diagnose where we are? Well we might suggest that liberal democracy rested on a notion of progress that promised inclusive economic growth and social mobility. It used to guarantee cultural and social reconciliation alongside political stability. It delivers none of this today.

We see an enduring cost of living and housing crisis, social mobility is rewinding, the public realm is in decay. Wages and productivity are essentially flat since the financial crisis. Moreover economically, liberal democracy appears to have ushered in oligarchy.

Socially we are caught in escalating culture wars that threaten post war advances in civil rights – and we have canyons of age, education, class and geography that demarcate the country.

Politically we are being upended – our political parties are ill equipped to deal with an era of upheaval that found expression in Brexit and populism – an upheaval powered by modern technologies that atrophy our culture – a culture that's reduced to little more than technologically powered forms of data exchange.

Now that is pretty challenging.

The silver bullet isn't a utilitarian approach to growth. It's something much more powerful. It demands a rethink of what we understand politics and justice to be.

So my third point is to ask what is powering this upheaval.

For years I was the MP for Dagenham. We were the canary down the coal mine, upstream of Brexit. We had big battles with the BNP. In my experience, for many of our fellow citizens there is a sense of escalating crisis – and it is a crisis of meaning.

It can translate into feelings of rage and anger – often born of feelings of frustration, dispossession, modern humiliation, given the indignities intrinsic to modern capitalism. It seems to me that we can understand the upheaval by the growing distance between the lives people were promised by liberal democracy and the lives they were actually living.

These emotions are driving populism, upending the same liberal democracies that promised so much. Alongside this we see various religions being bent through ethno-nationalist prisms, becoming carriers of these visceral forces.

And here is the big question: a modern statecraft to challenge this is vitally required. But I would suggest that a form of spiritual renewal is required before this question of statecraft.

I want to refer you to two political interventions that recently caught my eye regarding this question of spiritual renewal.

The first one was by Mette Frederiksen the Danish Prime Minister and head of the Social Democrats. She said in the spring of 2025 that 'we will need a form of rearmament that is just as important (as the military one). That is the spiritual one'.

Her comments were a product of concern that much of the Danish youth appear unwilling to actively support the military given the ongoing war in Ukraine and increased conscription and military spending. In May 2023 her government committed to triple Danish military spending.

Frederiksen has been the Prime Minister since 2019 and party leader for over a decade. In 2019 she headed a coalition of left and centre left political parties and since 2022 a more centrist coalition of *Venstre* - the major party of the Danish centre-right and the Moderates.

Now interestingly Frederiksen has no religion – although she sometimes attends church to acknowledge the central role it performs in Danish society. And her comments regarding spiritual renewal were not an isolated intervention.

In another interview with a Christian newspaper, she had remarked 'I believe that people will increasingly seek the Church' and argued that it offers 'natural fellowship and national grounding' and said that 'If I were the Church, I would be thinking right now: how can we be both a spiritual and physical framework for what Danes are going through.'

The suggestion is that new forms of social solidarity must be established to help peoples and nations navigate the complexities of the modern world. But her question is deeper than that. Countries such as Denmark must re-establish a sense of the common good and religion will be vital in this sense of national renewal.

Her comments beg some deeper questions.

Is a period of secularised government over? Is modern social democracy too under-powered to mobilise around a sense of the commons? Does a vision of secularised liberalism offer diminishing returns in the modern world? How do such societies build a sense of shared sacrifice and contribution commensurate with the challenges of today, that will define statecraft in the modern era of technological upheaval, populism, authoritarianism and climate emergency?

And basically if, as a country we are consumed by a sense of crisis of meaning and purpose, how can you confront this without a belief system to guide you? We return to the basic question: what is the political philosophy that is informing your approach to this modern world?

The second intervention was by Senator Chris Murphy. He has been a Democratic Senator for Connecticut for a dozen years – who knew? I didn't. Yet he is beginning to make quite a stir in the Democratic Party, and is talked of as a likely presidential candidate.

In the middle of 2023, Murphy wrote a piece entitled 'The Left Needs a Spiritual Renaissance. So Does America.' In it he identified what he calls the 'emptiness – a soullessness – to our shared political life' where a neoliberal consensus 'instructs us that consumerism, wealth accumulation, and individual achievement are the main paths to happiness'.

He references the spiritually inspired leadership of Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Bobby Kennedy and Dr King, the latter rooted in his Baptist upbringing, Kennedy and Chavez in Catholicism and the Hindu Gandhi. And he urges a 'new vision of this kind will be key to our success.'

He goes further when saying Democratic orthodoxy has preferred 'separating religion from public life, and reinforcing ostensibly secular, humanist notions of fairness and justice' – let's call it a statecraft – 'which will prove insufficient' and that success will only be possible through a 'spiritual questioning that has animated so many of our tradition's greatest achievements'.

Both these social democratic politicians are stressing spiritual renewal to build a new statecraft, to navigate the complexities of the modern world – technology, worklessness, anomie, rootlessness, rethinking the relationship between social democracy and religion.

But Frederiksen and Murphy are just two isolated figures. If you really look at where religion is being mobilised today, it is around identity - through various ethno-nationalist movements that divide the landscape and upend any sense of the commons.

We can see it in the 'far right' adopting Christian nationalist language and imagery, flags, crosses and the like. You can see it in the muscular Catholicism deployed by the likes of Peter Thiel, JD Vance and Viktor Orban.

But this is not just about Christian nationalism. Following the carnage and inhumanity in Gaza you saw it spill into last year's General Election, foreshadowing the likely emergence of a discreet UK Muslim political movement. You see it in a more animated Hindu nationalist politics in places like Harrow, or in battles with Muslim communities in cities like Leicester.

These shifting allegiances prefigure something much more significant going on.

Kemi Badenoch has talked about the exile of religious sentiment from the public conversation. She describes herself as 'an agnostic who is culturally Christian' noting that her grandfather was a Nigerian Methodist minister.

She identifies the growing potency of religious identity and links it to an evangelical hostility to the progressive left, and how it has become embedded in what she describes as the bureaucratic state. Her fear is that this 'new progressive ideology' is on the rise, fuelling identity politics and an assault on both democracy and the nation state. She wrote that 'culture and economics are entwined ... the new progressive ideology sees the nation state, and related migration controls, as a purveyor of historical injustice'.

She argues that it is the moral imperative of Conservatism to defeat this ideology. She suggests Conservatism must become a national force equipped with moral certainty in defence of the sacred.

Various politicians and religious denominations are mobilising in defence of a notion of the sacred. But the energy is on the political right. For me what is significant is the vacuum on the Left that both Frederiksen and Murphy acknowledge.

We have certainly retreated from that era of muscular, even evangelical secularism, the 'New Atheism' of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens who asserted a new age of reason, of disinterested scientism, after 9/11. Today Christian convictions appear to be in the ascendant, exemplified in public conversions by figures such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, one of the original new atheists.

So why this renewed interest in spiritual concerns? Certainly, migration and cultural tensions play a part. So too the effects of pandemic, in confronting death, meaning and purpose. And the threat of technological change as well as the effects of war.

But it is not occurring on the Left.

For many, religion offers a sense of certainty in a world unravelling. Overall there appears to be a distinctly religious turn as a response to a secular progressive ideology deemed responsible for a sense of national decline.

I admit I have some self interest here, because I'm from the Left. There is real trouble here for the government. Their utilitarian focus on growth often involves a suspension of the ethical. Within the government and a wider secularised polity there is limited space for engagement around faith and the public realm.

Moreover, Starmer is arguably the first openly atheist Prime Minister in British history. A secular counter position to all the energy and vitality around religion and politics on the right.

I note that at the last General Election, Britain elected the most consciously secular parliament in history, with some 40% of MPs opting to non-religiously affirm their oath – in contrast to just 24% five years earlier.

This is where history is instructive; revive our historical traditions to re-enter modern political debates and help push back against the ethno-nationalist framing of identity and religion.

Let's revisit a bit of history to see how movements for social justice introduced new forms of statecraft to deal with the moral imperatives of the time.

We can consider Abolitionism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to end slavery. Primarily driven by Quakers who dominated the Committee on the Abolition of the Slave Trade and who first petitioned the government in 1793. Yet they accepted the parliamentary campaign had to be driven by Anglicans and consequently it fell to Evangelical reformers, such as John Newton, Henry Thornton and William Wilberforce to drive through abolition, culminating in 1807 and 1833.

Or the movement behind the Factory Acts beginning in 1802, which engaged with a form of statecraft to improve working conditions. Again, led by a combination of Evangelicals such as the 7th Earl of Shaftsbury and Michael Thomas Sadler, alongside Methodists and Quakers and even utopian socialist spiritualists such as Robert Owen.

Or, in terms of the late 19th century pre-history of the Labour Party, the era of the so-called 'religion of socialism' of the 1880s and 1890s – the origins of ethical socialism driven by dissident non conformity – Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Unitarians, assorted free churches

including the 'Labour Church', the 'Ethical Church', the Fellowship of the New Life and spiritual movements, visions of socialist fellowship and the 'moral economy' associated with figures such as John Ruskin and William Morris.

All were engaged with forging a new statecraft in the face of the intense late industrial revolution of the 1880s and 1890s. Activists were often termed 'apostles' intent in reclaiming the integrity of the human being from the indignities intrinsic to capitalist exploitation.

A tradition that was clearly visible in the leadership of Keir Hardie, Ramsey MacDonald and George Lansbury, the prophets of the old religion, their political character formed through Christian socialism. Or the three times Labour leader Arthur Henderson – a lifelong Wesleyan lay preacher. Later in the Congregationalist background of Harold Wilson and the Baptist origins of Jim Callaghan – and even dare I say it the early ethical and spiritual concerns of one Tony Blair.

Or think of the statecraft of Edwardian liberalism which when combined with early twentieth century idealism challenged laissez-faire liberal assumptions and drove a 'new' liberalism' that rethought the role of the state in delivering social welfare.

It embraced progressive taxation, early pension reform and social security, regulation on working hours, health and safety at work. A movement within liberalism built on a cooperative commonwealth erected on explicitly moral foundations.

Or we could trace the history of human rights back to the religious concerns of the Levellers or Diggers, or the trade union movement, back to the nonconformity of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Post war concerns for human rights were as much inspired by ethical concerns to preserve the integrity of the human being following tyranny and genocide in the Second World War, as they were by notions of natural or inalienable rights.

The problem with Human Rights today is the way it has contracted toward legalistic concerns and has lost that ethical, economic and social agenda of the post war reformers to preserve the integrity of the human condition.

My point is a simple one – at historic turning points, spiritual and religious movements have been at the vanguard of any movement for social justice.

Let's actually consider the term "social justice". If you look at its history. It can be traced back to Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio. Born in 1793, a Thomist Catholic philosopher concerned with the nature of the social order under industrial capitalism whose teachings were highly influential in terms of the thinking of Pope Pius XIII. Moreover, one of the original drafters of *Rerum Novarum* was Matteo Liberatore, another student of Taparelli.

You can also make the case that the origins of *Rerum Novarum* lie closer to home. Cardinal Manning, the leading British Catholic of his day, became a very high-profile figure in public life after his intervention in the East End of London in the 1889 national dock strike – just two years before *Rerum Novarum* was issued. In that struggle he worked alongside social reformers such as Annie Besant, trade unionists such as Tom Mann and Ben Tillett, and politicians such as John Benn, the grandfather of one Tony Benn.

Years before Manning had delivered a famous lecture in Leeds, 'The Dignity and Rights of Labour', given in 1874, which began boldly: 'I claim for labour all the rights of property'. Among them was the right to organize - through unions to improve conditions. This was 17 years before *Rerum Novarum*. At the time striking and picketing were literally criminal offences. It was an extraordinary intervention.

In May 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, meaning 'Of New Things' was published in English. Manning was the official translator from the Latin. Labelled "On the Condition of Labor," it was the first comprehensive Catholic encyclical concerning social justice - although the term social justice does not actually appear in the actual text. Its purpose was the rescue of human dignity in the modern industrial world, to forge a route between a liberal individualism and a doctrinal socialism, a genuine 'third way'. This was nine years before the creation of the Labour Party.

It argued for a new spirit of justice. In it, Pope Leo XIII begins by noting 'the enormous fortunes of individuals and the poverty of the masses.' He quickly asserts 'There can be no question whatever that some remedy must be found, and quickly found, for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor.'

He argues people must reject an over reliance on self-interest and return to questions of virtue to overcome the immiseration of the masses and bring forth a spirit of justice through enhancing the dignity of labour.

This 'spirit of justice' seems to take us full circle to link to the question of modern spiritual renewal posed by Frederikson and Murphy I quoted earlier. It seems to me that at regular moments throughout the last 200 years that spiritual and faith based movements have sought to reestablish this same 'spirit of justice'.

But where is this today? All the energy is on the ethno-nationalist right, focusing on division, racial absolutism and reaction. This energy is colonising religions in an attempt to shape the world.

In all of this – just like in 1891 - given the potency of the new technologies, the question of human labour is central. These challenges must be confronted and we must discuss the idea of a moral economy. I very much echo the points that Maurice has made in terms of industrial policy, subsidiarity and the dignity of labour.

Literally today there was an Employment Relations Bill that was brought back into Parliament, seen as the signature radical intervention of the current Labour government. It does offer some significant improvements, such as regulating zero hours contracts.

But it is all framed around individual rights.

Despite commitments to repeal all anti-union legislation and to reassert the dignity of Labour, the basic architecture of Margaret Thatcher's reforms remains intact. The two really radical ideas that were first proposed have been cut back: the extension of collective bargaining through Fair Pay Agreements has been significantly curtailed, and the promise of "single status" for all workers linked to "day one rights for all" has not been delivered.

There are also serious omissions:

- There is little about the extension of collective bargaining
- There is little about the notion of good work: what is good work in the modern world and how the state nurtures and provides it as an act of public policy
- Industrial democracy (works councils, worker directors etc) remains the path not travelled in British labour law
- Nothing about a review of company law and the supremacy of shareholder interests and directors' duties
- Nor economic democracy and worker ownership
- And very little on automation and the future of work – in a government that appears captivated by the tech billionaires. Technology is not destiny. There is very little state activity to try and mould this in the interests of a new model of social justice.

I use this as an example where historic spiritual and religious concerns regarding the defence of human dignity have a contemporary significance in helping us forge a new statecraft fit for the modern world.

But I repeat good statecraft requires a belief system to drive it.

Without such spiritual renewal, I fear policy will become somewhat randomised.

On the specifics of employment law, I think we have missed a real opportunity – but we can keep the pressure next year in the 135th year since *Rerum Novarum*.

All of this must be part of a wider spiritual renaissance – which seems to me to be vital before you can really provide consequentially a new form of statecraft for the modern world, given especially the direction of travel of modern politics today.

So the stakes are pretty high. I think we are duty bound to do this work – in order that literally we stay human.

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The second in the Staying Human series of public talks, this lecture was one of a pair given on 15 September 2025. A companion lecture was given by Maurice Glasman. A recording of both lectures and the Q & A can be found at t4cq.substack.com.