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JAVERT IS “RIGHT”: The Demonization of Conservatism in *Les Misérables*

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Victor Hugo’s 1862 novel *Les Misérables* has provided theologians and cultural apologists with rich material for reflection for years. Many fans first fell in love with the story through its highly popular Broadway musical/opera adaptation, which premiered in London in 1985 and was made into a movie in 2012. In this article I focus primarily on the film version of the musical.

Cultural apologists will be attracted to *Les Mis* because of the story’s overt Christian content. It is the story of Jean Valjean, a hardened criminal whose life is transformed by an act of mercy. After serving nineteen years in prison for stealing bread to feed his starving nephew, Valjean has learned to hate society. Branded as an ex-con and unable to find honest work, Valjean returns to a life of crime. But when the police arrest him for stealing silver from a Catholic bishop who had given him shelter, Valjean is shocked to find that the bishop forgives him. The bishop claims he had given the silver to Valjean and gives him even more than he had stolen. Through this radical act of turning the other cheek, the bishop’s act of grace transforms Valjean’s life. Valjean decides to become a new person and eventually becomes a successful businessman and the mayor of a small town. But while the bishop has granted Valjean a new life, society has not, and Valjean is forced to break his parole to take on his new identity. Consequently he is pursued by a strict policeman named Javert for the next seventeen years, until at last Valjean has the opportunity to forgive Javert just as the bishop had forgiven Valjean.

The typical reading of this story is as a choice between legalism and grace, between pharisaism and authentic Christianity. Javert is taken as the symbol of an overly strict adherence to the law, while Valjean is taken as a symbol of Christian love and forgiveness. I think this is too simplistic. A better reading is to take the story as posing a choice between conservative Christianity and the liberal Romanticism of eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

HUGO’S AGENDA

On the surface at least, *Les Mis* is as Christian as any story could be. Yet Victor Hugo himself was not a Christian. Hugo wanted to use his novel to “found a new religion which will swallow up Christianity just as Christianity swallowed up paganism.”¹ One clue to Hugo’s agenda can be found in the novel’s title. The French term *les misérables* literally translates as “the miserable ones,” but has the sense of something like “the wretched poor” and carries a connotation of moral condemnation. Hugo discusses the term in this passage from the novel: “Undoubtedly they seemed very depraved, very corrupt, very vile, very hateful even, but people rarely fall without becoming degraded. Besides, there is a point when the unfortunate and the infamous are associated and confused in a word, a mortal word, *les misérables*; whose fault is it? And then, when the fall is furthest, is that not when charity should be greatest?” (p. 744).²

Compassion for Criminals

The point about “fault” is very important here. Following Rousseau, Hugo believes that the poor become criminals out of necessity. They “fall” (i.e., become poor) and then become morally “degraded.” Therefore, our response to crime should be “charity,” not punishment. This is a classic Romantic view that became the basis for modern liberalism. According to Rousseau, people are basically good and are corrupted by society, committing crime only out of ignorance and desperation; the solution to crime, then, is education and welfare. Christians obviously worry that this view has no place for the doctrine of original sin, and conservatives object to this view because it leaves out personal responsibility for crime.

LIBERTÉ AS POLITICAL LIBERALISM

If I am right about the Rousseau subtext, then Javert is not necessarily a villain; he’s just a conservative, albeit a liberal caricature of a conservative. There are two good examples of a liberal bias in *Les Mis*. First, notice that Valjean’s position in his society is roughly analogous to an illegal immigrant in our society. When he leaves the prison, Valjean can’t get work because he doesn’t have the right papers. He’s an undocumented worker. In a scene from the musical cut from the film, a farmer allows Valjean to work for him, but then only pays him half as much as the other laborers. The farmer reasons, “You broke the law....Why should you get the same as honest men?” This reasoning is not far off from today’s conservative wondering why illegal immigrants should get the same benefits as law-abiding citizens. Then Valjean breaks parole and tries to start a new life, just as many people enter our country illegally to start a new life. Valjean succeeds and becomes a successful member of society, and yet Javert says none of this matters; he has broken the law and must be punished. From the conservative point of view, Javert is right: giving amnesty to illegal immigrants seems to condone their crime and encourages others to break the law, too.

Personal Responsibility

As a good conservative, Javert believes in personal responsibility. His worldview emphasizes the “order and light” of God’s law, symbolized in one song by the

unchanging courses of the “stars.” Javert says he follows “the way of the Lord” and “the path of righteousness,” which leads either to God’s “reward” or the fiery “sword” of punishment. “There is nothing on earth that we share,” he concludes, “it is either Valjean or Javert!” But the contrast is not only law and grace: it is conservatism and liberalism, submission to divine authority or self-will. From Javert’s point of view, Valjean is beyond hope of redemption because he has shown himself incapable of submitting his own will to God’s law, which is the only basis of salvation. “Men like you can never change,” he tells Valjean. But Javert is not simply being prejudiced here. He knows from his own experience that it is possible for the poor to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Javert, too, was born in poverty. He is “from the gutter,” as he puts it, but he embraced law and made something of himself. His point is not just that Valjean might return to stealing; he’s saying that Valjean will never be able to submit himself to the rule of law. And he’s right: Valjean is fundamentally opposed to the conservative concept of justice that requires individuals to be held accountable for their crimes regardless of excuses.

Consider a second example of liberal bias. The character of Fantine is designed to elicit the viewer’s sympathy for “welfare mothers.” Fantine, a young, unwed mother in Valjean’s factory, faces persecution from her coworkers. The factory foreman expresses a conservative attitude toward charity: “At the end of the day, you get nothing for nothing.” Fantine shouldn’t expect special treatment, but rather should take responsibility for the consequences of her own sexual license. Likewise, when Fantine turns to prostitution to feed her child, Javert is unmoved by excuses. Valjean’s family was starving, and Fantine’s daughter was sick, but these facts don’t excuse them for breaking the law. Theft and prostitution are wrong, and it is Javert’s duty as police officer to arrest them. Like a good liberal, Valjean blames society and offers a therapeutic solution: “She needs a doctor, not a jail.” Javert again expresses the conservative position: “I have heard such protestations every day for twenty years. Let’s have no more explanations. Save your breath and save your tears. Honest work, just reward: that’s the way to please the Lord.”

Thus *Les Mis* is designed to get us to see Javert’s conservatism as cruel and to elicit sympathy for Hugo’s liberal social policies. It should be noted, however, that *Les Mis* is a caricature of the conservative position. Conservatives agree that we ought to treat the poor with dignity and compassion. They think that compassion programs, however, should be administered by the church instead of the state, and they think true dignity requires personal responsibility and submission to the law.

JAVERT AS THEOLOGICAL CONSERVATIVE

Les Mis is also theologically liberal. In the opening scene of the film, Javert says Valjean must “learn the meaning of the law.” Valjean replies that he has been “a slave of the law” for nineteen years and longs to finally be “free.” Yet Javert claims we can never be free from law. In this debate, many evangelicals will instinctively side with Valjean, citing Galatians 3:23–26 to say that in Christ we are made free from the law. But, theologically, Javert is closer to the conservative position.

In Christ the law is fulfilled, not annulled (Matt. 5:17–18). According to the doctrine of penal substitution, God never simply ignores the law, even when He forgives our sin. Rather, it is through Christ's obedience to the law that we are set free (2 Cor. 5:21). If Christ had not obeyed the law on our behalf, then we would have to obey it. Someone has to, or we would have to be punished according to God's standard of righteousness (Rom. 3:25). Conservative theologians should agree with Javert: the law cannot be broken or set aside. From this perspective, Valjean looks like a liberal. He thinks we can simply do without law. He wants grace without sacrifice. He wants, as his factory foreman puts it, something for nothing. And so in Hugo's eyes, the cross becomes merely a symbol to inspire us, not a genuinely legal transaction with God.

Love As True Communion

Even when there is redemption language in *Les Mis*, it has a liberal twinge. The bishop offers to share his bread and wine with Valjean, not as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, but only to "revive" him and offer "rest from pain and rest from wrong." This is a liberal view of communion. Conservatives agree that Christ's yoke is easy and gives us rest (Matt. 11:28–30), but this is because the Spirit we encounter in communion helps us obey the law, not because Christ abolishes it (Rom. 8). It is highly significant that the music from the bishop's scene is reprised toward the end of the film when the lone surviving revolutionary Marius reflects on the "empty chairs" of his lost friends, remembering the socialist revolution song they sang ("Do You Hear the People Sing"), which he says "became their last communion." It is clear that for Marius the spirit of love between people is the only true communion. But the film subtly reminds us that this is true for the bishop, too, because the two songs have the exact same melody. Thus when the bishop forgives Valjean, saying, "By the Passion and the Blood, God has raised you out of darkness; I have bought your soul for God," it is not an accident that the subject of the last clause is "I." The bishop's act of grace, not God's action on the cross, has bought Valjean's soul. For *Les Mis*, it is up to us to transform the world through love, and Hugo argues that this is best accomplished through political revolution.

Valjean's last words are, "To love another person is to see the face of God." And the whole film ends with a vision of heaven on earth, brought about through human effort—a liberal eschatology, complete with swords beaten into plough-shares in "the future that they bring when tomorrow comes." But this utopia is not brought about by the second coming of Christ. It comes when "the people sing" together and we all join in the "crusade" of revolution with the example of Jean Valjean as the new messiah.

SUBVERTING THE STORY

The fact that *Les Mis* contradicts evangelical theology does not mean apologists shouldn't use it—on the contrary. We can help non-Christian fans of the musical see how the vision that draws them toward the story can only be fulfilled in Christ. What does it say that fans (and Hugo himself) can accept the image of Christ symbolically embodied in the forgiveness of Jean Valjean while rejecting Christianity itself? Javert

would say that non-Christians are unable to give up their addiction to self-will, which they define as “freedom” but which is really slavery to sin. To follow Christ is not to be absolutely free, but to be a slave to a new law (1 Cor. 7:22). Many apologists would agree. In this way, *Les Mis* opens up conversations about the nature of freedom and its relation to law and allows Christian theologians an opportunity to share the doctrine of penal substitution as a more satisfying truth than Victor Hugo’s antinomianism.

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NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Algis Valiunas, “The Sacred Heart of Victor Hugo,” *First Things* (August/September 2007); <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/07/003-the-sacred-heart-of-victor-hugo-44>.
- 2 Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman McAfee (Signet Classics, 1987).