

# Religion & Liberty

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ACTON INSTITUTE'S INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RELIGION,  
ECONOMICS, AND CULTURE

## National Conservatism and Its Enemies

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FEATURING

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## THE ISSUE THIS TIME

ANTHONY SACRAMONE EXECUTIVE EDITOR

To the making of conservatisms there is no end, apparently. In 1953, Russell Kirk, the oft-regarded godfather of modern American conservatism, published *The Conservative Mind* in an effort to remind the serious that conservatism as an anti-ideological tradition of thought had deep roots, stretching back to the 18th century and the anti-Revolutionary “politics of prescription” of Edmund Burke, while reaching forward to Babbitt, More, and Santayana, not to mention the Southern agrarians, of the 20th.

A little more than a decade later, with the victory of John F. Kennedy and a heated-up Cold War, a collection of essays entitled *What Is Conservatism?* was published. Some of the most thoughtful conservatives, libertarians, and classical liberals—from F.A. Hayek and Frank Meyer to William F. Buckley Jr. and Garry Wills (yes, *that* Garry Wills)—tried to give timely answers to that question once again and so add a few bricks to the intellectual bulwark Kirk had begun building.

With the eventual victories of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton’s declaration that “the era of big government is over,” it would have seemed that all that foundation building had done its job and all would be well.

But that was then and this is the post-Obama and *Obergefell* era. There’s a New Right, composed of post-liberals, populists, and nationalists, that would like to have a word. The Age of Trump and “National Conservatism” has thrown a lot of the old right-leaning, Reagan-fusionist alliances into disarray. Can you still be a “conservative” and support unhindered immigration, the abatement of religious freedom in the face of “woke” identity politics, and the loss of U.S. industry to China? On the other hand, can you still call yourself a conservative and support tariffs, an eliding of the church-state divide, and interference in the doings of private businesses, even Big Tech?

Epithets are being coined and spewed even as I type. Accusations of traitorous betrayal are being hurled on social media, that bastion of quiet reflection and deep thought. Now throw in the Russian assault on Ukraine and the whole you’re-a-Putin-fanboy business. It’s a mess.

In November 2021, the National Conservatism Conference congregated in

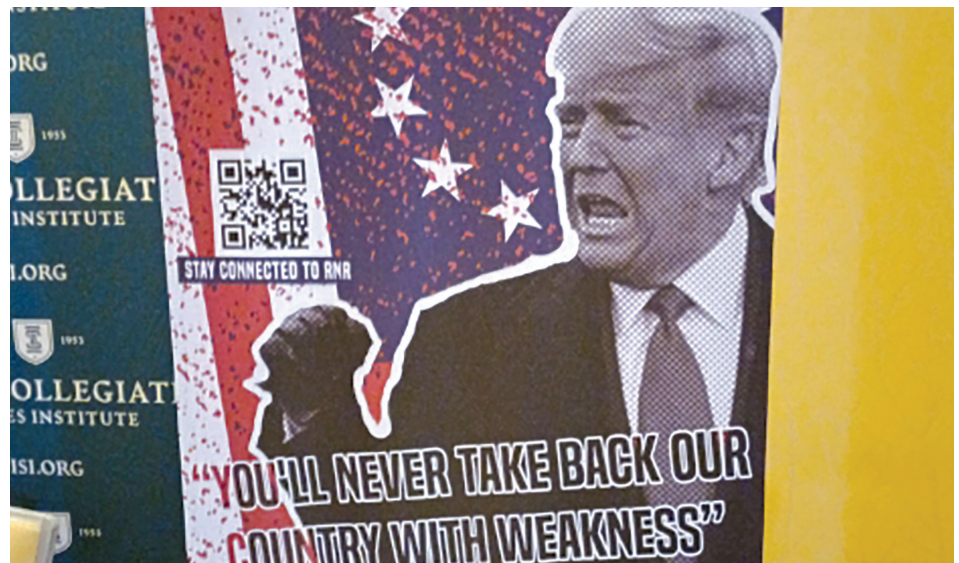
Orlando, Florida, pulling together some of the most noisome of the New Right folks, the ones most aggrieved by “Conservatism Inc.,” as the old-school folks are sometimes styled, those who, in the eyes of the NatCons, conserve little but kvetch much. Dan Hugger, Acton research associate and librarian, was there for the rhetorical pyrotechnics—and the swag. He was alternately surprised, entertained, and, yes, horrified.

One faction of this group of NatCons are the neo-integralists. James Patterson has their number, as well as their roots in failed former attempts to wed church and state as a hedge against moral chaos. Then Iain Murray takes a look at where libertarians

fit into this messy picture. Once vital members of the fusionist enterprise, anticommunist and pro-free-market cred accounted for, they’re looking at some of the more statist solutions being proffered by the post-libs with a jaundiced eye and a foot out the door.

And for those of you still waiting for an answer to that *What is conservatism?* question, George H. Nash, author of the magisterial *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, has a modest proposal—A hopeful, commonsensical look forward.

Plus so much more. I hope this special double issue tides you over till summer. Until then...



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# What I Saw at the National Conservatism Conference

Dan Hugger

*In November of 2021, scores of speakers, activists, politicians, and just plain fans descended on the Orlando Hilton to attain a vision of what the future of American conservatism was going to look like post-Trump and post-establishment conservatives. Did I mention there were totes?*

“So are you with that conference upstairs? Is it political? We’re both kind of into politics.”

I had finally made my escape after my first full, long day at the National Conservatism Conference and was sitting just outside the Orlando Hilton beside an open fire pit with a drink, trying to wrap my mind around just what “National Conservatism” meant.

My questioner was a slender young man in his early 20s who was accompanied by a woman of the same age holding a generously filled glass of wine. They had just come from the hotel bar above and I would later learn that the couple were from St. Louis; he had a job interview in the area tomorrow; and that, should he get an offer, they were exploring the possibility of moving to Orlando.

“Yes,” I said, “I’m attending the conference for work, and it is political.” *More political than I anticipated*, I thought to myself.

“Republicans or Democrats?” he asked.

A trap! Or perhaps an opportunity...an opportunity to begin putting into words what National Conservatism might mean to those curious.

“Mostly Republicans, but Republicans who are concerned about the Republican Party and want to take it in a different direction.” My articulation was undoubtedly shaggier and baggier than this at the time.

“Huh,” said the young man.

His companion now spoke: “We actually kind of liked Trump. He kind of told it like it is.”

I had clearly given them the wrong impression.

Prior to the opening conference session, I noticed a vendor table flanked by two 6-foot-tall banners. One featured Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, and the other former president Donald Trump. At the base of the former president’s banner was a quote—“You’ll never take back our country with weakness.” Always visit the vendor tables.

In a previous life, I worked as an audiovisual technician setting up rooms and running video and sound for conferences of all kinds. You can learn a lot about conferences from their vendor tables, schedule, audience, physical footprint, and even swag!

The aforementioned table was for an organization dedicated to political advocacy, but there were several right-wing media organizations that also had booths. Conservative magazines were well represented, and there was a children’s book publisher focusing on biographies of figures both political and cultural that could be broadly considered conservative, or at least marketed as such. And there were, of course, think tanks, of both American and Hungarian origin. These organizations were all more or less explicitly of the right, interested in disseminating ideas, and secular.

The schedule for the National Conservatism Conference was the most packed I’ve ever experienced. There were 24 plenary speakers, panels, and keynotes over three days, as well as 15 breakout sessions featuring 52 panelists. This represents a tremendous commitment by the Edmund Burke Foundation, the sponsor of the conference, of both time and resources. If anyone were to walk away from this conference unconvinced of the NatCon vision, it would not be because of a lack of talking and talking and talking.

Outside smaller-scale academic conferences, I had never seen a conference with a smaller speaker-to-participant ratio. There was also a generous amount of space in the main conference room dedicated to the press, as well as for the team of audiovisual technicians recording the conference’s plenary sessions. Seating on the main floor for attendees was ample, too ample. Often, perhaps due to the rigorous schedule or flight issues, which were plentiful, the main conference room appeared half empty. Most of the fellow attendees I met were either students or involved in conservative movement groups or think tanks like myself. Who exactly was this conference for?

How does one make sense of the unique structural realities of the conference itself? Is there a political economy of conferences? A critical conference theory?

Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the conference is in the swag. Upon registration, I received a National Conservatism tote bag filled with NatCon goodies. There was, of course, a pen, but also a magnet clip, coffee mug, and journal, all in variations of the conference color scheme of orange, blue, and white. When Chuck D of Public Enemy remarks: “Red, black, and green, you know what I mean?” we know him to mean Black Nationalism. In the distant future, when some National Conservative rapper similarly intones, “Orange, blue, and white, you know it’s tight right?”—will we understand?

This would be a mark of success in National Conservatism brand identity. National Conservatism is by no means merely a brand, but from many of the speakers at the conference I listened to, it seemed primarily to function that way. In this sense National Conservatism is,



at least in part, something like the Nat-Con coffee mug I received: an empty vessel labeling everything it contains as “National Conservatism.”

National Conservatism has often billed itself as “against the dead consensus,” rejecting the midcentury configuration of American conservatism arising from various conservative thinkers such as Frank Meyer and William F. Buckley Jr., both at the center of the early *National Review*. This “dead consensus” is typically referred to as fusionism, a synthesis of traditionalist and social conservatism and what is often called right-liberalism or right-libertarianism. The historical impetus for this fusionism was the threat of international communism.

It was surprising to see, then, just how many of those speaking at the conference seemed to be, if not in name, then in substance, fusionists. Marcell Felipe, Cuban American attorney and activist, gave an impassioned address the opening night of the conference titled, “Why Cuban Americans Get the Marxist Threat.” The fiery address was not only ferociously anticommunist but extolled the virtues of former president Ronald Reagan. Such principled anticommunism coupled with praise of perhaps America’s most fusionist president from the main stage of National Conservatism indicates that the consensus’s demise has been greatly exaggerated.

Glenn Loury, professor of economics at Brown University, gave a moving address on “The Case for Black Patriotism.” In it he argued for a transracial humanism grounded in the dignity of the human person and a shared commitment to and solidarity with fellow citizens of all races. While Loury rightfully called attention to how the pathologies of identity politics on the left often undermine such a vision, he also warns that the new nationalism on the right can “sometimes be insufficiently attentive to...an unhealthy version of patriotism, chauvinism, and jingoism,” which is particularly dangerous, “especially if tainted by racial identity mongering.” Loury’s speech, while well received, seemed more a sympathetic address to National Conservatives than a speech from a National Conservative.

No such surface-level ambiguities existed in the chairman of the National



Conservatism Conference Chris DeMuth’s speech, “Why I Am a National Conservative.” It was however curious that a former Reagan administration official and longtime president of the American Enterprise Institute would now style himself a National Conservative committed to replacing the “dead consensus” of fusionism.

In his address, DeMuth offered an explanation for this shift, alluding to the ideological realignment of Irving Kristol and his fellow neoconservatives, who moved from left to right throughout the 1960s and ’70s, arguing, in Kristol’s

words, that they were liberals who had been mugged by reality. So it was somewhat ironic to hear DeMuth play off this trope: “NatCons are conservatives who have been mugged by reality,” he declared. The reality that mugged both the neocons of the past and the DeMuths of today is the radicalism of the American left—then and now.

But does the National Conservative experience of the radicalism on the left today work analogously to what provoked neocons in the 1960s and ’70s, causing the NatCons to move from the right to the far right? For DeMuth the answer is



complicated: "There are a variety of views among intellectuals, among national conservatives, about our predecessors in 20th-century conservatism."

DeMuth feels that the most vocal critics of the so-called dead consensus go too far in attributing the social crises of our time to the failures of conservatism's past: "This exaggerates the potential of ideas to affect the course of society." He pointed to the successes of fusionism, from the economic boom of the 1980s and revival of New York City in the 1990s to the salutary influence of originalism in judicial interpretation resulting in the restraint of government power.

DeMuth went on to describe himself as a "free market man" and even a "libertarian," though one of an empirical rather than a doctrinaire bent. His model of political economy is Adam Smith, the champion of the system of natural liberty, and to young people interested in the relationship between freedom and virtue he commended the works of Catholic theologian Michael Novak. If this was National Conservatism, count me in! But if this was National Conservatism, what possible reason could there be to count fusionism out?

**I**s one a National Conservative by simple declaration? And is the substance of that declaration simply: "I'm not a regular conservative; I'm a cool conservative"?

At this point I was seized by a truly dizzying possibility—is it fusionism all the way down? Yoram Hazony, chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation and president of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem, in the most revealing lecture of the conference, "De-Fusionism," provided an answer. He began with an examination of the conference vibe: "I think it's going well. You know how I know it's going well? I know it's going well because I can feel—this is corny, all right, brace yourselves—I can feel the love in the room. I can. That feeling that you feel is the people making new friends, coming together, and building an alliance that can win."

For Hazony, National Conservatism is not merely a personal brand. National Conservatives are not some undefined liquid poured into National Conservatism mugs. National Conservatism is more

like the National Conservatism tote containing multitudes of branded National Conservatives and, as we shall see, even some anti-Marxist liberals (terms and conditions may apply). National Conservatives are friends united to win. To win what? *Elections*.

Hazony sees the social crisis of our time as a "neo-Marxist cultural revolution" that is corrupting liberal institutions worldwide. In a sense this threat is familiar, resembling the struggle against international communism throughout the years of the Cold War. This threat was, according to Hazony, met ably by fusionism, which he defined as a "public liberalism" joined to a "private conservatism." This synthesis advanced economic, social, and individual freedom in political institutions while promoting reverence for God, family, and country in the private lives of individuals.

Fusionism, while having successfully resisted international communism, is nevertheless ill-suited to combat today's "neo-Marxist cultural revolution," Hazony insisted. The reason? Since the 1960s, "private conservatism" had been eroded by "public liberalism." Hazony did not get into meddlesome details about exactly how that happened, but he assured the audience that this erosion was responsible for everything from corporate decisions to off-shore its manufacturing to China, the depopulation of the American heartland, censorship on social media platforms, pornography, and mass immigration.

This account of the role and function of liberty in public life is starkly different from Lord Acton's, which views "public liberalism" as enabling, not eroding, "private conservatism":

*Now liberty and good government do not exclude each other; and there are excellent reasons why they should go together. Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end. It is not for the sake of a good public administration that it is required, but for security in the pursuit of the highest objects of civil society, and of private life.*

Here liberty (public liberalism) is the necessary but not sufficient condition that enables the pursuit of public and

private virtue (private conservatism). This insight, that the good must be freely chosen, underlies the old fusionism that Hazony wishes to discard in the belief that liberty has, since America's triumph in the Cold War, poisoned and hollowed out "private conservatism," causing the social order to become septic.

Hazony made clear he is not wholly critical of liberalism: "I'm not here to knock individual liberty. Individual liberty is fantastic, [and I] wouldn't want to live in any other place than a country that cherishes individual liberty."

It is perhaps for this reason, although he never explicitly stated this, that he commended a new fusionism between conservatives and anti-Marxist liberals but with significantly different terms and conditions.

The new fusionism must explicitly reject all forms of egalitarianism except in the face of grave injustice. Hazony gave the example of the struggle against Jim Crow; he sees racial egalitarianism as a fundamental part of America's vocation as a nation since the end of the Second World War. Equality between the sexes, between citizens and foreigners, married and unmarried, homosexual and heterosexual, however, should be rejected.

A rejection of egalitarianism for minorities is grounded in what Hazony sees as an imperative to have a strong public culture shaped by the majorities in any nation.

Hazony is not entirely insensitive to the needs of minorities in society. As a Jew he believes that, in this country, American Jews need "a carve-out to be able to pursue their traditions, to send children to their schools, to not be persecuted ..., abused, or killed." He employed this language of "carve-out" again when discussing homosexuals, saying, "Give them their privacy. Nobody wants to be arresting people in their bedrooms."

This language is very different from the way Americans have historically talked about individual rights, and is in some ways more similar to the way modern progressives talk about the rights of groups or communities. Unlike modern progressive understandings of the rights of communities, however, these carve-outs would be essentially private

to the communities themselves and have no standing in the public square. This is an inversion of Hazony's understanding of the old fusionism. His new fusionism would be one of "public conservatism" joined to a "private liberalism."

Hazony believes such a new fusionism would result, in countries with a large Christian majority such as the United States, in a great Christian nation with a Christian public life.

The wide range of doctrinal, moral, and political convictions among American Christians was not addressed by Hazony. Nor were the possible motivations for anti-Marxist liberals to embrace these new terms and conditions. Neither was the electoral viability of such a new fusionism. It was more of a just-so story wrapped up with a "wouldn't it be nice" riding on a wave of good National Conservative vibes.

To paraphrase Emerson: Vibes, though a bad regulator, are a powerful spring. There was a palpable, if sometimes manic, energy at the National Conservatism Conference. While National Conservatism is a brand aspiring to be a political coalition, it is also clearly an attitude. While the metaphor of National Conservatism as a tote bag obscures powerful personalities, perhaps another piece of conference swag—the journal—can serve as a metaphor to shed light on the Nat-Con temperament.

The journal is an essentially private form of writing. It is the place where we write out the desires and dreams we're reluctant to share with others. It's the abode of the purpliest prose and our most outlandish ideas. Its very form gives us license and permission to express ourselves as we wouldn't elsewhere. The late, famously unconstrained vampire novelist Anne Rice attributed to Kafka her essential writing philosophy: "Don't bend. Don't water it down. Don't try to make it logical. Don't edit your own soul according to fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly." What happens when you wrap an id, that unconscious part of the human psyche of desires and dreams, in the cover of an orange, blue, and white journal titled "National Conservatism"? What happens when the rigid, undiluted, nonsensical, unfashionable, and obsessive parts of ourselves drive our political rhetoric and

practical politics like Mr. Toad on a wild ride through our obsessions?

Perhaps the most intense obsession of the conference, from speakers, on panels, and among the participants, was critical race theory (CRT). Christopher Rufo, senior fellow and director of the Initiative on Critical Race Theory at the Manhattan Institute, is both its greatest popularizer and critic. He was also the most well-received speaker at the National Conservatism Conference. He began by introducing himself as a writer and documentary filmmaker but told the crowd that he is best known to the audiences of MSNBC and *The New York Times* as "a liar, a racist, and a propagandist." The crowd loved it. He views his own work as a sort of counterrevolutionary activism against an ongoing neo-Marxist revolt that has captured our institutions.

For Rufo, the nature of this conflict is fundamentally cultural: "The fight today is no longer along the axis of economics but primarily along the multiple axes of culture, race, gender identity, etc." He sees his role as primarily making this fight public through reporting on and releasing documents from corporations, government, and schools that demonstrate how deeply immersed in identity politics they are. This information-gathering and dissemination has led, according to Rufo, at least in part to an "unexpected and totally organic grassroots uprising of parents at local school districts saying, 'Enough is enough.'"

He thinks this sort of activism should not be channeled toward reforming and reclaiming institutions but rather in "laying siege to the institutions, exposing them for their corruption, exposing them for their waste, exposing them for their hostility to the values of the vast majority of the American people." And this because "politics is downstream from state institutions....It's the dominant ideology in the federal agencies, it's the dominant ideology in the public universities, it's the dominant ideology in public K-12 education."

As Rufo outlined a strategy to mobilize and utilize populist outrage against American institutions, the crowd was enraptured. This was not a simple call to reform but one to something far more

radical. It was not an acknowledgement of deep-seated problems within institutions but a charge that those institutions are fundamentally enemies of the people. He suggested to the crowd that by harassing, frustrating, and finally dismantling those institutions, they have nothing to lose but their chains.

These are things that conservatives simply don't say! Respect for the nation, its institutions, and fellow citizens was simply not in evidence. Disdain from political opponents was both welcomed and flung back at them with abandon. Lord Acton's belief that "liberty is the delicate fruit of a mature civilization" and Burke's admonition that "our patience will achieve more than our force" were simply ignored.

Rufo's unconstrained and confrontational rhetoric was at least presented within a theory of institutions and politics. Josh Hammer, opinion editor of *Newsweek* and research fellow with the Edmund Burke Foundation, on the other hand, gave an address that was simply untethered and unhinged.

If there were a game whose object was simply to be as right wing as possible, Josh Hammer would be undisputed champion. Hammer's speech, "National Conservatism: The Only Path," contrasted the promise of a "muscular National Conservatism" with the failures of what he called "Conservatism, Inc."—fusionists and libertarians. Where they have failed, National Conservatives will (1) triumph through force of will, (2) wield power, and (3) "affirmatively reward our friends and punish our enemies within the confines of the rule of law." The "rule of law" caveat is important, as it places the National Conservatives firmly on the opposite side of the *Conan the Cimmerian* barbarism line.

The notion that "the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" comes from the German jurist, political theorist, and National Socialist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt also wrote the article "*Der Führer schützt das Recht*," which argued that the murders ordered by Adolf Hitler on the Night of the Long Knives were the highest form of administrative justice. I sat in my chair dumbfounded at the conclusion of Hammer's speech. I was still dazed when the

stately and dignified Mary Eberstadt took the stage remarking that the energy in the room reminded her of the early days of the Reagan revolution.

My brain was officially broken.

It is impossible to give a comprehensive account of the entire National Conservatism Conference in a magazine feature. It was large and contained multitudes. Some identify with National Conservatism on a purely superficial level, as a brand. Others see it as a political movement, a nascent coalition, and the wave of the future. Others take it as a sort of license to shed constraints and “tell it like it is,” whether it is or not.

The couple whom I first tried to explain National Conservatism to that night by the fire outside the Orlando Hilton took my description of the National Conservatives as “Republicans who are concerned about the Republican Party and want to take it in a different direction” to mean that those Republicans were hostile to Donald Trump. The curious absence of Trump in this discussion of National Conservatism is no accident. He was rarely mentioned. Ted Cruz did mention the former president in his address to the conference, saying, “Look, Donald Trump is a unique individual...”—a knowing pause—“so many Americans love this man...because after all the weakness and surrender and imbecility, thank God the man stands up and fights.”

This was very similar to the language of the former president that was quoted on the banner outside the hall: “You’ll never take back our country with weakness.” I took a picture of the banner on the last day of the conference; it seemed like a real point of resonance between the former president and the National Conservatives. It was only later that I realized the quote in question was from his address on January 6, 2021, the day of the riot at the United States Capitol.

In considering National Conservatism as brand, coalition, or invitation to stop being polite and start being real, my judgments are varied. National Conservatism as a sort of empty vessel is largely harmless if uninteresting. National Conservatism as a political coalition, a tote containing the old fusionist coalition under new terms, seemed both

under-theorized and untested. National Conservatism as a blanket permission to indulge our desires, to reward friends and punish enemies through rhetorical as well as practical politics, was positively immoral. It is plainly contrary to Christ’s admonition to “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

For our politics to change for the better, we don’t need a new brand, a new coalition, or a new license to dispense with our obligations to each other. We need a new heart: “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

OK, hold the eye rolling, please. Like Yoram Hazony, I too want to see America as a great Christian nation with a Christian public life. This is the most surprising and startling common ground I share with my National Conservative hosts. How it can be accomplished by branding, political coalitions, and unleashing our ids is something I do not understand, for the kingdom of God does not come with signs to be observed: “Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Lord Acton warned us long ago of the dangerous temptation to view the nation as coextensive with the state—of equating the national interest with the common good. A Christian nation and public life is already in our midst, but only accessible through the service we render in all our vocations to God and neighbor.

*Dan Hugger is librarian and research associate at the Acton Institute.* [READ](#)

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# An Awkward Alliance: Neo-Integralism and National Conservatism

James Patterson

*What do the New Catholic Right and the Trumpian National Conservatives have in common? Less than you may think. Will this marriage of convenience last?*

Conservative Christian Americans currently face a challenge from an insurgent group of scholars and activists calling themselves “post-liberals” or “neo-integralists.” They are largely scholars. Some are theologians, like Chad Pecknold (Catholic University of America) and Fr. Edmund Waldstein, O. Cist. (Stift Heiligenkreuz, a Cistercian abbey in Austria). Others are political scientists, such as Gladden Pap-pin (University of Dallas) and Patrick Deneen (University of Notre Dame), or law professors like Adrian Vermeule (Harvard Law School). Others are popular authors like Sohrab Ahmari, who currently holds a visiting position at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Post-liberals take their name from the 2017 book *Why Liberalism Failed*, which Deneen wrote at a time when the conservative movement was in flux. In retrospect, the book retains a strong sense of Rod Dreher’s “Benedict Option,” perhaps because the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, seemed destined to win the 2016 election; her loss was a surprise opportunity for post-liberals to emerge from a defensive crouch and advance their vision of a future in which conservatives could discard liberal nostrums of a bygone age in favor of a nation with a government that uses its power to advance the common good. In short, they longed for an America after liberalism.

Post-liberal conservatism is very different from mainstream American conservatism. Mainstream conservatism has its roots in Anglo-American colonial

customs, the Scottish Enlightenment, the Founding, and the 20th-century Judeo-Christian consensus. Post-liberal ideas have their origin in the Catholic reactionary thought of continental Europeans like Joseph de Maistre, Juan Donoso Cortés, and Carl Schmitt, itself a response to the French Revolution and the subsequent iterations of liberal parliamentarism. Unlike the Anglo-American liberals, continental liberals were much more radical, seeking to secularize all public life. Reactionaries opposed secularization by attempting to reimpose a centralized, top-down political order of a conjoined church and state. Reactionaries had always remained marginal in America. Our history is simply not that of the European continent. Moreover, the United States did not have even the historical memory of an aristocratic class and church hierarchy as sources of social order. Their imposition would be something entirely new, not “a return to tradition.” Finally, these European thinkers have rather unfortunate histories: Maistre and Cortés advocated for absolute monarchy; Schmitt was a Nazi.

Despite its historical remoteness and problematic origins, post-liberal thought has begun to influence largely younger conservatives. As the left has increasingly captured elite institutions to impose “woke” ideological constraints on them, many on the right want a national counterrevolution. Mainstream conservatives resist this approach, preferring local government, entrepreneurship, and the formation of civil society. These priorities do not resonate the way they once did. Opportunities to enter public life depend on carefully navigating rules and regulations designed by progressives to catch

conservatives and relegate them to the margins. What if local government is composed of a self-appointed vanguard of the left? What if entrepreneurship depends on starting a business in which clients require towing an ideological line? What if civil society is unequally policed, wherein progressive protesters receive elite endorsement and conservative ones federal investigations? These questions might sound over the top, but I have been asked them from conservative students and recent graduates. This kind of uncertainty makes the promised authoritarian response of post-liberalism more seductive.

Post-liberalism is part of a broader group of ideological outcasts that have begun to coalesce into a kind of conservative countermovement to the older, more traditional conservatism—a countermovement called “National Conservatism” and usually associated with the Donald Trump presidential victory. In this essay, I will discuss how post-liberal thought has precursors in figures like Fr. Charles Coughlin and *Triumph* magazine. Next, I will explain how this form of thought fits within the broader National Conservative countermovement. I will conclude with some words of warning.

Originally from Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, Charles Coughlin (1891–1979) came to America at the behest of the bishop of Detroit, Michael Gallagher. Coughlin was ordained to the priesthood in 1918 as a member of the Order of St. Basil (he left in 1923 after it was reorganized in a way he did not like), a French-Canadian brotherhood dedicated to restoring and updating medieval Catholic thought for the industrial age, and he brought this



experience to his call for social justice to a working-class Irish-Catholic audience. In 1926, Fr. Coughlin began broadcasting catechism classes for children over Detroit radio. From his newly founded Shrine of the Little Flower, Coughlin enjoyed initial success in teaching the basic dogmas of the Catholic faith and soon branched out to political topics appropriate for adults. Soon Coughlin had millions of listeners to his radio program *The Hour of Power*, and in 1930 CBS aired his program. When the Great Depression hit, he rallied to the Democratic candidacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and, after FDR's victory, became a cheerleader for the New Deal. He expected some degree of influence in the new administration, but FDR froze him out. Coughlin was not happy.

Coughlin, however, had only himself to blame. He had spent much of the months following the onset of the Great Depression accusing Jews of orchestrating economic collapse. His anti-Semitic attacks became frequent enough that CBS dropped him in 1931. He had alternative

broadcast options, and in 1936 he began publishing his own magazine, *Social Justice*. Coughlin's politics were isolationist, strongly in favor of a welfare state, and defended authoritarian government. Coughlin formed the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ) to rival the Democratic Party, but the campaign failed. Unphased, he launched the Christian Front in 1938, which was anticommunist, anti-Semitic, and clearly sympathetic with fascist causes. As Charles R. Gallagher recently published in his book *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front*, one of Coughlin's chief lieutenants, Francis P. Moran, was an unregistered foreign agent for the Nazi government. Despite Coughlin's full-throated fascist rhetoric, he retained a large following. Bishop Gallagher protected him from American episcopal and Vatican efforts to shut Coughlin down. It was not until 1942, after America had already entered the Second World War, that Coughlin finally broadcast a message demanding America not enter the war, as the Japanese attacks on Pearl

Harbor on December 7, 1941, were the result of a Jewish plot. That message violated the 1917 Espionage Act, giving the federal government cause to shut his media operation down for good.

Coughlin is part of an American Catholic history many contemporary Americans either do not know or would like to forget, yet he represents a strain of thought that has remained influential if underground. L. Brent Bozell, William H. Marshner, and other writers formed *Triumph* magazine in 1965 after the fusionism of *National Review* proved insufficiently Catholic for them. As Max Bodach has published in a study for the American Enterprise Institute, the Bozells moved their family to Spain, then suffering under the elderly Francisco Franco's rusting iron fist. Inspired by the integralist parties of the 1930s, the Bozells and their authors offered a reactionary critique of America. Perhaps too effete for Coughlin's rough populism and open anti-Semitism, the *Triumph* crowd at least shared his worldview of a church embattled and in need of a strong

authoritarian turn. Perhaps the best example of this was Marshner's November 1972 article "Politique d'Abord", in which he directly appealed to the ideas of Charles Maurras, a notorious anti-Semite involved in the Dreyfus Affair and later founder of Action Française (AF), a French proto-fascist party. Marshner regarded America with contempt, saying in his article, "We have been accustomed to think that the Land of the Free represents an alternative to that sort of totalitarianism, but once again we have been deceived."

The echoes of authoritarian Catholicism have resurfaced in the rise of neo-integralist thought among a cohort of conservative Catholics disaffected by the 2015 Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which stripped states of traditional marriage laws, and constitutional amendments to affirm a right for same-sex couples to marry. Their rise coincided with blogging and social media sites that gave them access to new audiences, often composed of young conservative Catholics and other Christians unhappy with the perceived indifference among mainstream conservatives in response to the decision, as well as other social conservative issues like abortion and pornography.

Fr. Edmund Waldstein began writing for his personal blog, *Sancrucensis*, and a group blog, *The Josias*, about a decade or so ago. At both he seeks to resuscitate pre-Vatican II church-state relations of the 19th century and revive the politics of Catholic Action groups from the 1930s. Over time, likeminded scholars like Vermeule began to contribute to *The Josias* as others founded new publications of their own. Gladden Pappin helped found *American Affairs* in 2017, an elite policy journal aligned with National Conservatism, while Patrick Deneen, Adrian Vermeule, and Chad Pecknold started a Substack newsletter, *The Postliberal Order*, late in 2021. All of them hold official positions or publish in important conservative journals like *First Things* and *The American Conservative* and also occasionally publish in *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*. In other words, the post-liberals hope to shape conservatism and gain a greater public profile in their national outreach.

The starting point for post-liberals is that all politics is fundamentally theological and that the conflict in our culture is one between liberal and Christian orthodoxies. To win the conflict requires total victory, which in turn means seizing the institutions of the federal government and imposing a post-liberal order onto the American people the way they believe progressives have in the past 20 or so years. The term "liberalism" as they use it conflates progressive thought with mainstream conservatism—the latter they call "right-liberalism," since right-liberals do nothing, in their view, but slow down progressive social change until conservative leaders ultimately cave on issues they once fought against.

The reason "right-liberals" cave, to their mind, is because their own liberalism demands it. Liberalism, according to post-liberals, defines the good at the level of the individual rather than according to church dogma or the common good. When "right-liberals" concede this approach in their opposition to progressives, they are in fact already giving the game away. Progressives understand the conflict as one of orthodoxies in a way that "right-liberals" do not; hence, "right-liberals" keep losing because they are unaware or unwilling to admit that liberalism itself is a dogma. When demanding that individuals make judgments on their own, liberals are in fact excluding Christian religious authority and substituting their own liberal authority on these matters. Hence, the language of "human rights" and "liberation" become the prevailing values that right-liberals cannot resist on liberal terms.

Some readers may be nodding their heads at some of these arguments, and that is because there is some truth to this critique. Progressives really do advance their own dogmas, whether it be "wokeness" or politically charged notions of "following the science." Moreover, progressives have worked hard to seize elite institutions to shape political discourse and, perhaps more importantly, control the supply of elite university graduates and their placement in government, media, corporations, and nonprofits. Hence, in the past few years, one has noticed an increasingly hostile

environment within these organizations and high-profile "cancellations" of leaders within them.

If the post-liberals have some good points of diagnosis, what then is the problem? There are two problems. The first is with the facts and the second is their solution.

The post-liberal story of mainstream conservative failure is highly selective. Conservatives have had many wins as well as defeats. The Cold War comes to mind; however, the same-sex marriage example is not entirely the fault of mainstream conservatism. The Supreme Court overturned successful conservative efforts to define marriage as one man and one woman at the state level. It is hard to blame the swing vote of former associate justice Anthony Kennedy on an entire movement. In addition, conservatives have made great strides in the efforts to overturn *Roe v. Wade* at the state level and are posed to strike a fatal blow in the *Planned Parenthood v. Hodges* case currently before a 6-3 conservative Supreme Court. Even if this case fails, there is every indication that conservatives have momentum. For example, in K-12 education, conservatives have advanced school choice, charter school, and homeschooling options for parents seeking alternatives to public schools.

Much worse and more important is the post-liberal solution. Here is where echoes of the NUSJ, Christian Front, and *Triumph* era flirtations with fascism can be heard. Post-liberals wish not only to "defeat" liberalism but also supplant it with what they say must come "after" it, hence the name "post-liberal." The post-liberal regime has a centralized political authority and devalues ideas of natural rights and human dignity, the latter of which Pecknold is especially critical. Like the integralist parties of 1930s Latin America and Catholic Europe, they aim to impose Catholic orthodoxy on the laws and subsidize family formation but with a modern twist they draw from examples in Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party in Hungary and Xi Jinping's rule over the People's Republic of China. Orbán offers generous subsidies for families who have multiple children to boost the number of Hungarians



born above the replacement rate. While the program has not had much effect, Pappin has sung its praises widely and encouraged Republicans to add it as a kind of middle-class entitlement to lure suburban voters back to the GOP. Vermeule and Ahmari have publicly celebrated communist China in its embrace of state-run capitalist enterprises and a “superior” natural virtue in a restored Confucian culture over America’s “liberal” one.

One might think that Xi’s totalitarian handling of religious and ethnic minorities might be cause for concern, but one should recall that post-liberals are not attached to ideas of natural rights or human dignity. Rather, they subjugate concerns for rights and dignity to the common good as they understand it, which is in a more collectivist sense of what a centralized government, duly informed by Catholic teaching, ordains for the people. Post-liberals stress the obligation for subjects to obey political authorities and leave ruling to elites. If the government deems a religious or ethnic minority, especially a Muslim one like the Chinese Uyghurs, a threat to the regime, then it has the sovereign authority to suppress it. After all, post-liberals strongly emphasize the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction, which they argue is the basis for all politics, although in terms of friends and enemies of the church and the state. While Xi is no Catholic, for post-liberals he at least has the right view of politics; if Xi were to enter the Catholic Church, he would, for them, be the best ruler in the best regime this side of God’s Kingdom. Vermeule makes no effort to hide his enthusiasm, using his significant social media presence on Twitter to share stories from official Chinese press sources and to recommend the works of Wang Huning, a member of the CCP’s Politburo Standing Committee and the first-ranked secretary of the CCP’s Secretariat. In a recent jointly written op-ed for *The New York Times*, Ahmari, Deneen, and Pappin referred to China as a civilizational equal despite its handling of religious minorities, and advocated a “hands-off” foreign-policy position. Another echo of the past.

Such a position becomes downright chilling when examining the work

of neo-integralist theorists Fr. Thomas Crean, O.P., and Alan Fimister in their book *Integralism: A Manual of Political Philosophy*. According to the widely shared “Three Sentences” definition of integralism shared on *The Josias*:

*Catholic Integralism is a tradition of thought that, rejecting the liberal separation of politics from concern with the end of human life, holds that political rule must order man to his final goal. Since, however, man has both a temporal and an eternal end, integralism holds that there are two powers that rule him: a temporal power and a spiritual power. And since man’s temporal end is subordinated to his eternal end, the temporal power must be subordinated to the spiritual power.*

Crean and Fimister provide the theoretical foundations and political implications for neo-integralism. Perhaps most concerning is their limited justification for slavery, the denial of women the right to vote, and the exclusion of the “unbaptized,” meaning especially Jews and Muslims, from citizenship. For neo-integralists, unbaptized populations would live at the pleasure of the regime, meaning they could not hold political office, serve in the military, or practice their faith in a way that might draw converts. Historically, to ensure that religious minorities do not convert the faithful, integralist states have segregated them into ghettos, which Crean and Fimister say nothing to oppose. One can see the parallel in the way China has handled the Uyghurs.

Surely, a reader may insist, all this is impossible to achieve. How would a majority of Americans ever agree to this? The post-liberal answer is to reject the premise; a majority is not necessary. After all, when progressives pushed for their policy proposals, few if anyone agreed with them. Same-sex marriage was unthinkable in 1990, marginal in 2000, a progressive plank in 2010, and the law of the land in 2020. The method for achieving this policy change was the organization of a small, well-situated minority who could use political and cultural power to move elites to their own position. The broader American people were indifferent, and progressive cultural

elites simply led them to a majority support for same-sex marriage with a combination of popular entertainment like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace* and political activism by organizations like the Human Rights Campaign. Vermeule argues that post-liberals will do the same but with neo-integralist ideas. In an article at *The Josias* (revised and recently published in the book *Integralism and the Common Good: Selected Essays from The Josias*), he calls for “integration from within” in which conservative elites work their way into the federal government and use their access to state power to impose conservative policies. Vermeule has criticized conservative pushback on this view, in the *Postliberal Order*, as the “futility trope” that right-liberals have held on to as consolation for their own failures to conserve anything.

Post-liberals are an awkward fit in the broader National Conservative movement, but there is sufficient overlap to make it easier for the coalition to come together. The first thing to note is that the term “post-liberal” is of later vintage than “integralist” or “neo-integralist.” Originally, the group staked its future on neo-integralism quite explicitly, but the significant historical baggage made progress difficult. The move to “post-liberal” is more an affirmation of what they oppose rather than affirm, which is perhaps an easier way to gain greater traction and make inroads among National Conservatives. The same is also the likely rationale of rebranding neo-integralist politics as “common-good conservatism” or “common-good constitutionalism.”

National Conservatives are deeply skeptical of free markets and favor a return to working-class politics of the “Old Left,” namely of labor protections, aggressive tariffs against American enemies/competitors, reshoring of industries to make American production more self-sufficient, antitrust actions on Big Tech corporations, and tight restrictions on immigration. Post-liberals generally agree on labor protections, tariffs, reshoring, and antitrust action. All of these entail the use of centralized political authority for what they regard as the common good for ordinary

Americans instead of progressive elites. If post-liberals really do “integrate from within,” they will be the ones coordinating these policies, meaning they will not be subject to progressive capture because post-liberals will have captured them already. Antitrust is especially important because of how it would break up the progressive dominance of cultural production in social media, leading to opportunities for post-liberals to create and oversee new firms that suppress progressive ideas instead. However, post-liberals are less enthusiastic about immigration restrictions. Vermeule publicly called for more immigration but targeted to nations with large Catholic populations. While Pappin and Ahmari have sided more with the National Conservative approach—Pappin in *American Affairs* and Ahmari as an invited speaker at the 2021 National Conservatism conference—Vermeule seems less enthused with the Trumpian vision. Another point of friction is over the federal COVID-19 vaccine mandate. As an advocate for centralized authority, Vermeule favored it, but Pecknold did not.

Perhaps the most obvious problem for post-liberals is that the National Conservative movement began with the Edmund Burke Society, led by Yoram Hazony, an Orthodox Jew, and has in addition many Jewish members. Hazony’s inspiration for nationalism is the combined influence of modern Israeli solidarity and the sense of national purpose of 19th century Great Britain. Both were tolerant yet confessional states with a strong sense of national identity necessary for pursuing great projects. The common identity served as a foundation for constructive politics, despite intense partisan disputes within it, in a way that liberal politics simply prohibits. Does the neo-integralist position on Jews bother Hazony? He does not seem to take notice, but it is worth pointing out that Vermeule and other post-liberals are not really nationalists at all. Vermeule has stated that he is not nationalist, “except in the very qualified, non-ideal and second-best sense that nationalism may be a temporary expedient born of necessity, in opposition to an overbearing transnational

liberal order.” Indeed, he has endorsed a kind of “world government” under a Vatican-approved state. As with most coalitions, what holds the constituents together seems to be a common opposition both to mainstream conservatives and to progressives. Without these, they would necessarily oppose each other.

Post-liberalism is still very new and may prove to be quite short-lived, but there is no guarantee of this. As already mentioned, many young conservatives are unsettled by the status quo and want a definitive answer to the many setbacks they experience in public life. Moreover, the post-liberals may need years to see dividends in their strong social media and prestige media presence, one in which younger post-liberal adherents eventually make their way through graduate programs, law schools, and the federal bureaucracy. Integration from within takes time.

However, the most significant gamble for post-liberals is that there will be a constituency for their ideas. Vermeule insists that the broader American people will simply acquiesce to the ideas once the post-liberals have gained a foothold in the culture, but this view seems to underestimate American independence and overestimate the ability of post-liberals to reach positions of power. After all, it is one thing to favor banning pornography; it is quite another to do so while endorsing Orbán and Xi. National Conservatives arose to meet the demand for a conservatism more amenable to the presidency of Donald J. Trump and the perceived need to move beyond the “dead consensus” of the Reagan years. Given Trump’s vehement opposition to China, an opposition that has become a consensus view in Washington, it is hard to see how a pro-China post-liberalism could make any friends even with the Trump wing of the party—to say nothing of rank-and-file Republicans opposed to China in principle and in politics.

The most likely outcome for post-liberalism is that it will fall victim to the same fate as Coughlin and *Triumph*, wherein the movement loses support as more people learn of its true ambitions.

That said, to get Coughlin off the air was quite difficult, and *Triumph* had some strong interest in the early days until ultimately the Bozells mismanaged the magazine to such an extent that it came to ruin. Even so, it is important for those who stand for ordered liberty and constitutional government to stay vigilant against dangerous ideologies on the right as well as on the left and not assume that they will simply burn themselves out.

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ESSAY

## Do Libertarians Have a Political Home Anymore?

Iain Murray

*With the rise of an illiberal New Right and the identity-politics-obsessed left, libertarians are having a hard time of it. Can they find a party to go to or must they stay home until a new era of liberty emerges?*

For many years, libertarians and economic conservatives lived in harmony. The philosophy of fusionism said that the conservative party, when it governed, would seek to promote social

traditions and economic liberties—each reinforcing the other. In recent years, however, this fusion has started to dissolve. Today many conservatives, especially those termed the New Right or the post-liberals, accuse libertarians of having no answer when economic entities use their freedom against social traditions. Libertarians, in turn, are concerned that conservatives want to impose their vision of morality on everyone. Is any continuing

alliance between the two factions possible? If not, what does that mean for the future of politics?

I should start by defining what I mean by “libertarian.” A libertarian is basically someone for whom liberty must be the highest political principle. However, there are various types of libertarians.

Some, generally known as civil libertarians, believe that equality and liberty are inextricably linked and therefore support the use of the law to promote equality. They have long been at odds with conservatives, believing that traditional societies coerce some people on grounds of race, gender, or sexual orientation, and therefore have long been associated with egalitarians of other political stripes. For that reason, I’ll call them “left liberals” when I come back to them.

Others, who for want of a better phrase I shall call antiwar libertarians, regard the military component of what



President Dwight Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex as offensive to liberty. Most associated with abolishing the draft (which Milton Friedman campaigned for in the 1960s), they are also strong opponents of nation-building and foreign intervention. They favor free trade and oppose sanctions but made common cause with anticommunists during the Cold War. Many of them grew disillusioned with the conservative movement over the Iraq War, but so did many social conservatives. In any event, the collapse of neoconservatism after that war meant they had little to be concerned about going forward. All told, this probably is not a significant part of the libertarian movement at the moment, but many libertarians still identify with it.

A third group, and in recent years the largest part of the libertarian movement, consists of economic libertarians. Their views have generally been accepted by conservatives when it comes to the economy, but the reason why speaks in large part to why that alliance has been so close.

As I intimated earlier, libertarianism is a political belief. It is not a system of ethics. At heart, it is a neo-Aristotelian philosophy that seeks to build a bridge between what is good for individuals, for the communities of which they are part, and for the society where those individuals and communities operate.

Aristotle's central question was, What is a good life? The answer for Aristotle and libertarians is "human flourishing" or, as Thomas Jefferson put it, the pursuit of happiness. Yet what makes one person flourish or achieve happiness may not necessarily have the same effect for another. One woman will find peace in a garden, while another will tear down that garden to create a magnificent building. Legislating for everyone to keep their property in a state of nature or for everyone to work their land to create new things would both be equally pointless from the viewpoint of human flourishing. In fact, the only thing that connects these different human approaches to flourishing is that they are self-directed. Indeed, as legal scholar Randy Barnett and philosopher Doug Rasmussen put it, "Self-direction is the central necessary constituent or ingredient of human flourishing without which no other feature

could be a constituent." But, turning back to Aristotle, man is by nature a political animal. Which means that a political system aimed at the good life must have self-direction at its core.

This is what Rasmussen and his collaborators call "liberalism's problem"—how do we establish a political order that does not give preference to any one person's or community's perceived well-being over any other's? The way to do that is to give preference to natural rights, which taken together form the principles of liberty. Rights such as the right to property, freedom of association and contract, and self-defense come together to allow self-direction and thereby form the institutions of liberty. Cementing these in a political order creates other institutions, such as the rule of law, that allow us to address grievances created when rights conflict. Does the man who delights in building edifices have a right to cut off access to sunlight to his neighbor's garden, for instance? The right of first possession says yes if he was there first, no if he was there second, and the rule of law enforces this right, providing restitution to his gardening neighbor whose plants have died.

Many of these rights come together to create the economic system we call free enterprise, which has vastly increased the capacity for human flourishing. Indeed, the egalitarian aspects of liberalism I alluded to above helped create the conditions for what economic historian Deirdre McCloskey calls "bourgeois dignity," whereby the merchant is viewed not as a parasite but as a wealth creator to be celebrated. This shift in attitudes toward entrepreneurial activity, which occurred first in the nations around the North Sea in the 17th and 18th centuries and spread to their subsequent colonies, is responsible for the vast explosion in wealth in those societies and their descendants, most notably the United States of America. McCloskey calls this phenomenon "The Great Enrichment." One way in which free enterprise evolved was by extending these natural rights to the associations of individuals and investors we call corporations.

What is interesting is that until recently such a description of the basis of society and the importance of its institutions would have been viewed as firmly

conservative beliefs. Indeed, I suspect many readers of this journal would agree that they still are, yet we see a growing number of conservative political and thought leaders rejecting the implications of some natural rights in the economic sphere and proposing policies that conflict with them.

One area where this is most apparent is what we call Big Tech. Conservatives rightly value, as do libertarians, the natural right of free speech. In the view of many conservatives, however, large technology companies have deprived them of this right by banning the use of certain terms that until recently were considered acceptable, adding "fact checks" to their expressions of opinion, and in being heavy-handed in banning speech related to medical opinions during the pandemic. They have a point. Technology companies have been heavy-handed, all right, and have jumped the gun too often, especially on medical issues (such as the "lab leak" hypothesis about the origins of the COVID-19 virus).

However, other natural rights are in play here. The companies own their property, despite allowing people to use them for free—though we actually do pay, in terms of our attention and exposure to advertising. They also have a right to free expression, so they are within their rights to add "fact checks," however wrongheaded some of them may be (the "fact checking" of satirical articles published by, say, The Babylon Bee is a case in point). They have a right to free association, so they can ban people they believe are abusing their property. All these are natural rights that conservatives have supported for a very long time.

Moreover, the legal system has not been terribly sympathetic to conservatives' grievances over their perceived loss of rights. For instance, some conservatives now propose using antitrust law to discipline Big Tech companies by breaking them up into smaller entities that presumably will be friendlier to their customers' speech rights. Yet antitrust courts take consumer welfare seriously and are unlikely to view the complaints of an outspoken minority as necessitating such an abnegation of property rights. So, many of those same conservatives have joined with progressives in Congress, who have



their own gripes against Silicon Valley, to move to change antitrust law, giving bureaucrats the power to override property rights and other corporate rights. It's illiberal and, until very recently, would have been regarded as unconservative.

Libertarians, of course, have objected. For the most part, conservatives have reacted with anger or disdain. Libertarians are derided as “not getting it” or, worse, complicit in a progressive assault on free speech. Writers on conservative websites and from such places as the Claremont Institute have attacked libertarianism as a cancer in the conservative body, demanding it be expunged. Increasingly common is the view that conservatives must advance a “post-liberal” society. The most extreme of the New Right, the self-styled “integralists,” regard libertarians as just a form of progressive and suggest a reordering of society along one particular conception of the good life, which they term “common good conservatism.”

The speech and technology issue is just one of many that are causing friction between libertarians of various stripes and their erstwhile conservative allies. Conservative politicians are now urging new laws to force workers to sit on company boards, a clear violation of the rights to property and of free association. We are in a new era of protectionism, where free trade is sacrificed

to prop up favored American industries. Immigration has become a dirty word. Proposals to ban certain activities that have long been viewed as constitutionally protected free expression are rife. Everywhere you look, the fusionist alliance is under severe strain.

What happened to turn so many conservatives against these natural rights? Some libertarians blame President Trump and his MAGA movement. That is a tempting explanation, but mistaken. If you look around the world, similar things are happening to conservatives all over. Boris Johnson's Conservative Party is now the U.K.'s party of higher taxes, more government spending, intervention in the economy, and COVID restrictions. The old conservative parties in France and other European countries are in the process of being wiped out and replaced by something else (the same has happened to social democrats). The conservative Liberal Party government in Australia has been the most heavy-handed in any major developed country when it comes to COVID restrictions, even placing asymptomatic carriers in camps.

This is because politics around the world has undergone a significant realignment. For the past 80 or so years, political parties aligned around economics as the primary issue. You were either for free enterprise or for state direction. A secondary axis was social politics, which, when

combined with the economic axis, led to the famous four-quadrant Nolan chart that segmented the politically aware into liberal (or progressive), libertarian, conservative, and authoritarian blocks.

Such neat categorizations no longer apply. What appears to have replaced economics as the primary aligning issue is *identity*. Conservatives around the world no longer center themselves in the economics of free enterprise, as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, John Howard, and so many others did, but on their national identity. Boris Johnson championed Brexit, while President Trump proclaimed loudly that he stood for the American worker. This, noticeably, attracted large numbers of former supporters of opposing parties. The historian Éric Zemmour has come from nowhere to be a leading contender for the presidency of France by championing a robust French national identity. Leaders in Eastern Europe like Viktor Orbán are proudly nationalist.

This has affected the left, too. The Danish Social Democrats and other Nordic leftist parties have become very tough on immigration and trade. In America, however, the left has organized around identity—race, gender, sexual orientation, and a multitude of minority identitarian groupings (e.g., Black Hispanic transwoman) that derive from intersectional theory, which asserts that individuals are often put at a disadvantage by more than one source of oppression. As the primary political issue, it is driving things like education policy, which is why school board meetings, which progressives often control, have gone from being forums to decide where to spend money to contentious affairs concerning a host of such issues.

**T**he ramifications of this realignment are both profound and far-reaching. Most notably for our current consideration is that it leaves both old-style liberals and libertarians without a political home. Both varieties of liberal are generally pluralistic and cosmopolitan, meaning that they oppose both nationalism and identitarianism.

Another, perhaps underappreciated, aspect of the realignment is the self-consciously Christian identity of many American nationalists. A lot of

attention has been paid to the Catholic “integralism” of scholars like Adrian Vermeule, but Catholicism remains a minority denomination among American Christians. The *Dispatch* writer David French, a former conservative darling before the realignment, has drawn attention to the—literally—apocalyptic nature of the new American Christian right, particularly among Pentecostals. He writes: “MAGA Christian nationalism is emotional and spiritual, not intellectual or ideological...is concentrated in the churches most removed from elite American culture, including from elite Evangelicalism...[and is] often rooted in purported prophecies.”

Libertarians are strongly in favor of the separation of church and state, although they may worry that the free exercise clause of the Constitution has been devalued by the courts. The idea that American politics might be driven to some degree by a prophetic movement flat out scares them.

All of which suggests that libertarians have been driven out of a MAGA-focused right. Yet that may be a step too far, at least for now. They clearly have no home in an identitarian-dominated left, either. Free traders who expressed support for President Biden have been ignored as the administration has doubled down on protectionist trade policies. As much as the attacks on Big Tech have increased on the right, progressives are even more enthusiastic about antitrust as a solution to every economic ill you can think of. Senator Elizabeth Warren has even suggested using it to fight inflation, on the crackpot conspiracy theory that American grocery stores have formed a de facto cartel aimed at squeezing more money out of American households.

Moreover, the identitarian left routinely decries capitalism as the product and continuing enforcer of structural racism. This accounts for the modern form of socialism being less focused on economics than previous versions. Socialism is needed not because of class conflict but because capitalism supports racism—as exemplified by *The New York Times*’ ahistorical 1619 Project, which contends that capitalism and slavery are inextricably linked, and unfounded attacks on free market economists like Nobel Prize winner James Buchanan for

supporting color-blind policies that leftists deride as racist.

America has a two-party system. For libertarians to have any political influence, they have to ally with the dominant faction of one of the parties. That suggests that libertarians will have to settle for a diminished role on the right. It is important to remember that the Trump administration did adopt some libertarian-influenced policies, though not consistently and certainly not in all areas. It adopted a pro-energy stance and withdrew from the ruinously costly Paris Climate Treaty. It was mostly opposed to big labor and employment regulations. It was especially free market in its transportation policies. Appointments to nonexecutive agencies like Ajit Pai at the Federal Communications Commission and “cryptomom” Hester Peirce at the Securities and Exchange Commission drew predominantly from a base of scholars steeped in free enterprise economics. So reports of libertarianism’s demise may be exaggerated.

However, as identity issues come to bear in more and more areas—progressives, for instance, are looking to manipulate financial regulation to impose restrictions on industries like fossil fuels—the New Right will probably be inclined to use the power of government over the objections of libertarians concerned about natural rights.

In which case another opportunity might present itself. Remember those left-liberals and anti-war libertarians I mentioned earlier? They are increasingly out of place on the left. These old liberals are concerned about the rate and extent of woke politics coming to drive out all other considerations. This may have manifested itself in the recent recall of three “woke” members of the San Francisco School Board. Conservatives played no role in this. Moreover, capitalism has been very good to the political left’s donor class, which must surely view its rapid slide toward identity-focused socialism as a cause for concern.

With that in mind, it’s worth asking: Is it possible that left-liberals and economic libertarians might recombine in a new political block? For that to happen would require a decisive defeat of either woke socialism or nationalist conservatism. Either looks unlikely at present, but shifts within parties have happened

before. The chances are small but cannot be completely discounted.

However, what is more likely is that libertarians will continue their alliance with conservatives. As economic ills caused by interventionist policies start to appear, libertarians will be well situated to point to free market policies to right the ship. The influence of the liberty-centered law and economics school on the judiciary will also continue, particularly on the Supreme Court. For instance, for the first time since the 1930s, the constitutionality of unaccountable non-executive agencies is in question.

Far from retreating to the offices of *Reason*, Cato, or the Competitive Enterprise Institute until the whole thing is over, libertarians are likely to continue to fight for the system of natural liberty and make their case to their conservative colleagues. In some areas, like trade, this will be difficult. However, libertarians have gone through periods of far less political influence in the past. I often think of Leonard Read, founder of the Foundation for Economic Education, or Pierre Goodrich, founder of Liberty Fund, and how lonely they must have felt in the post-New Deal era. Libertarians are not as lonely now and have a history of having been proved right that dates back all the way to Aristotle. That’s something conservatives should appreciate.

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# Conservatism and Its Current Discontents: A Survey and a Modest Proposal

George H. Nash

*American conservatism appears to be coming apart at the seams. What, if anything, can bring the various factions together to fight the much greater threat of an illiberal, intolerant left? Perhaps plain common sense.*

In 2022 many American conservatives are in a state of acute anxiety, convinced that they are under siege as never before *and* that they are losing. Across the nation, the commanding heights of the federal bureaucracy, the news media, the entertainment industry, Big Tech, and the educational system from preschool to graduate school are dominated by people who seem increasingly hostile to conservative beliefs. In social media and elsewhere, identity politics and the ideology of “wokeism” appear to reign supreme, and a censorious left-wing “cancel culture” operates with virtual impunity.

Adding to the sense of conservative vulnerability is the declining influence of what scholars call America’s civil religion. For many years nearly all American conservatives have believed that our national experience has been on the whole a success story, and that at its heart has been a commitment to individual liberty, limited government, and the political philosophy embodied in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Today, for millions of Americans, this story no longer appeals. Instead, large numbers of our fellow citizens are being told that the essence of the American experience has *not* been freedom but slavery and that even now our nation is mired in systemic racism. This raises a troubling question: Will a rising generation of young people

who have been taught to criticize and even despise their political heritage be reachable by conservatives who defend it? Is the once-powerful Reaganite rhetoric of American Exceptionalism still persuasive?

Deepening the unease on the right is the growing recognition that the conservative movement itself is in disarray. There have always been moments of ferment in modern conservative history, of course, along with sharp internal disagreements about strategy, tactics, and first principles. Yet never has there been as much dissension and acerbic feuding among conservative factions as there is now.

Why has the movement come to this point, and what might be the path forward?

In evaluating conservatism’s discontents and prospects, we must first remember one of the most important facts about modern American conservatism: It is not, and has never been, monolithic.

It is a coalition that developed after World War II in response to diverse challenges from the left. The coalition eventually grew to comprise five distinct groupings: (1) libertarians and classical liberals who extolled individual liberty, believed in free-market capitalism, and opposed overweening, bureaucratic government and the ever-expanding welfare state; (2) “traditionalist” conservatives, appalled by the weakening of the traditional religious and ethical foundations of Western civilization at the hands (they believed) of secular, relativistic liberalism; (3) zealous anticommunists focused on the titanic Cold War struggle against the “evil empire” of Soviet Communism; (4) neoconservatives, disillusioned former liberals and socialists who had been

“mugged by reality” (as Irving Kristol put it) and who gravitated into the conservative camp in the 1970s and 1980s; and (5) the so-called Religious Right or (as we say now) social conservatives, incensed by what they regarded as the moral wreckage unleashed upon America by the courts and the culture wars during the 1960s and beyond.

Each of these components of the conservative revival had something in common: a deep antipathy to 20th-century liberalism. The alliance was led and personified by two extraordinary leaders: the founder of *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., and, a little later, Ronald Reagan, both of whom performed an ecumenical function, giving each branch of the coalition a seat at the table and a sense of having arrived. Under the leadership of an ex-communist editor at *National Review*, Frank Meyer, the movement developed a theoretical construct and modus vivendi known as fusionism—that is, an attempt to fuse or at least balance the competing concerns and paradigms of the libertarians and traditionalists: the libertarians with their exaltation of individual freedom, and the traditionalists with their stress upon *ordered* freedom resting upon the cultivation of virtue in the individual soul.

As a purely theoretical construct, fusionism did not convince all Meyer’s critics, then or later. Not everyone approved of his celebration of individual freedom as the summum bonum of politics. As his arch-traditionalist critic, L. Brent Bozell, mordantly put it in 1962: “The story of how the free society has come to take priority over the good society is the story of the decline of the West.” Nevertheless, as a formula for political action, fusionism proved to be a considerable success. It taught libertarians and traditionalists that they needed each other and that American conservatism must not become utopian and doctrinaire.

The multifaceted conservative coalition that arose after 1945 was a Cold War phenomenon. The presence in the world of a dangerous external enemy—the Soviet Union, the mortal foe of liberty *and* tradition, of freedom *and* religious faith—was a crucial, unifying cement for the emerging conservative movement. The life-and-death stakes of the



Cold War helped to curb the temptation of right-wing ideologues to become sectarian and schismatic.

Needless to say, the stunning end of the Cold War in the early 1990s had immense repercussions for American conservatism and conservative thought. No longer united by unyielding opposition to a now defunct external foe on the left (Soviet Communism), a number of activists on the right felt less need to stick together, and hitherto suppressed cleavages in the grand alliance began to surface.

The most conspicuous example of this was the emergence in the late 1980s and early 1990s of an outspoken group of conservative traditionalists who became known as “paleoconservatives,” in fierce opposition to the neoconservatives who had risen to prominence in conservative ranks in the Reagan years. To militantly nationalist/“America First” paleocons like Patrick Buchanan, the neocons were not true conservatives at all but liberal, Wilsonian, internationalist, and welfare statist “interlopers.” The witty conservative author M. Stanton Evans quipped: “A

paleoconservative is a conservative who has been mugged by a neoconservative.” The ensuing tension between the two groups became severe, and it has persisted to this day.

Another sign of the times in the aftermath of the Cold War was a growing search by conservative intellectuals for fresh sources of unity in a different and more perplexing era. It became commonplace to advocate new formulations of conservatism with a prefix or adjective attached and to categorize conservatives in seemingly ever smaller groupings. Thus the Clintonian 1990s saw the rise of “leave us alone” conservatism, “national greatness” conservatism, and the “compassionate conservatism” of George W. Bush. More recently, appeals for “constitutional conservatism,” “reform conservatism,” and “Tea Party conservatism” have arisen in the land. Now and then one hears of “conservatarians” and “paleolibertarians”; of “West Coast” Straussians and “East Coast” Straussians, and of “crunchy cons” (traditionalists with countercultural sensibilities). The labeling impulse has gen-

erally been well intentioned, no doubt, but it does suggest the sectarian tendencies at work.

Still, the conservative intellectual and political community did not fall apart in the 1990s. Fusionist conservatism of the Buckley-Reagan variety continued to be the prevailing expression of conservative thought in America—the language, if you will, of the conservative mainstream—for some years after the Cold War ended.

**B**ut no era lasts forever. This brings us to the extraordinary upheaval that Americans have been experiencing in the past decade or so: insurgent populism on both the left and the right, and the political and intellectual fragmentation that it has engendered. Traditionally, populism in America has come in two forms: a left-wing, anti-corporate version (think William Jennings Bryan, Huey Long, and Elizabeth Warren), and, more recently, a right-wing, anti-statist version (think Ronald Reagan and the Tea Party movement). Both variants are vocally anti-elitist, but they target different elites. For the populist left, the enemy is Big Money: the overlords of capitalist, private-sector America. For the populist libertarian right, the enemy is Big Government and the public-sector bureaucrats who administer it.

Both of these familiar forms of populism became prominent again after the Great Recession of 2008. Then, in 2016, something truly remarkable occurred: the fiery eruption of a new and even angrier form of populism containing both left-wing and right-wing elements—a hybrid we now call Trumpism.

It is not possible in this brief essay to examine at length the origins of the Trumpist rebellion. But a few observations about it are required. Ideologically, it bore a striking resemblance to the vehemently anti-interventionist, anti-globalist, immigration-restrictionist, and “America First” worldview propounded by various paleoconservatives like Buchanan during the 1990s and ever since: an ideological pattern that antedated the Cold War.

But instead of concentrating its fire solely on left-wing elites, as Reaganite, conservative populism had done, the Trumpist brand of populism did something more: It simultaneously assailed



right-wing elites, including the Buckley-Reagan, fusionist conservative movement described earlier. In particular, nationalist and protectionist Trumpism broke dramatically with the Reaganite internationalism of the Cold War era and with the pro-free trade, supply-side economics ideology that Reagan embraced and that had dominated Republican Party policymaking since 1980. It thus posed not just a political challenge to the liberal establishment, and a factional challenge to the Republican establishment, but also an ideological challenge to the separate and distinct conservative establishment, long headquartered at Buckley's *National Review*. The distinctiveness of Trumpism in 2016 was that it assailed three establishments simultaneously.

In short, as a body of populist sentiments, Trumpism boldly objected to the fundamental tenets of nearly every component of mainstream conservative thought described in this essay. At the heart of Ronald Reagan's political philosophy was a single value: *freedom*, especially *individual freedom*—the “right,” in Reagan's words, of “each individual...to control his own destiny” and “work out” his own happiness without subjection to “the whims of the state.” “America is freedom,” he declared in his Farewell Address. At the heart of Trumpist populism, however, is a rather different yearning: for *solidarity* and *security*, especially for those who feel forgotten, disrespected, or left behind. If Reaganite conservatism, at least in theory, has been skeptical of the power of government to manage the economy and create prosperity, at the core of Trumpist populism is a willingness to use governmental power to improve the lot of people whose plight has been overlooked by arrogant elites.

It would be difficult to overstate the shattering impact of the Trumpist upheaval on conservative activists and networks during the past six years. The once ascendant conservative community in America—a community built on ideas—has increasingly become a house divided over ideas, with contentious factions engaged in an often rancorous tug of war. At such hubs of dissident conservative discourse as *The American Conservative* magazine, the *Claremont Review of*

*Books*, and the website *American Greatness*, demands for a fundamental reconfiguration of the right are frequent: a right in which two of its former pillars—free-market libertarians and neo-conservatives—would be marginalized if not entirely absent. The once dominant and implicitly ecumenical philosophy of fusionism has been denounced by a chorus of right-wing critics as a “dead consensus,” afflicted with “Zombie Reaganism” and what they bluntly deride as “free market fundamentalism.” In some right-wing circles, free-market capitalism has even been portrayed as an enemy of the “common good.”

Meanwhile, the institutional custodians of fusionism—particularly those inside the Beltway—have been openly mocked by some on the right as “Conservatism, Inc.,” as if the conservative establishment were just another business trying to make money. Fusionism, some critics assert, was perhaps a necessary contrivance during the Cold War but is now irrelevant.

And so a determined quest for yet another formulation of conservatism has begun: for what one might call “Trumpism without Trump.” Not so long ago, leading conservative thinkers of the Reagan era and its afterglow routinely associated their philosophy with the principles of limited government, low taxation, free trade, and entrepreneurial enterprise. In 2022, however, growing numbers of populist/nationalist insurgents on the right are criticizing these principles as outdated and even unconservative dogmas. Ditching the anti-statist rhetoric of Reaganite populism, they are calling instead for the unabashed and energetic wielding of government power in pursuit of their agenda. In their hostility to globalism and transnational progressive elites, and their dismay about economic and social disintegration at home, some of them are looking to Old World nationalists and social conservatives for inspiration and intellectual support.

Indeed, one of the most striking intellectual currents in America in the past decade has been the growing Europeanization—more precisely, *continental* Europeanization—of American conservatism. Interest in Europe, of course, is nothing new on the American intellectual right. One thinks at once of Russell

Kirk's magisterial volumes *The Conservative Mind* (1953) and *The Roots of American Order* (1974) and his extolling of Edmund Burke as the father of Anglo-American conservatism. One thinks also of the contributions of Friedrich Hayek, Wilhelm Röpke, and Ludwig von Mises to the classical liberal and libertarian strands of the conservative alliance that evolved after 1945. In the realm of political philosophy, the émigré scholars Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin and their students have done much to remind conservatives of their European heritage all the way back to Plato and Aristotle.

Until recently, the American right has tended to identify most with what Kirk in one of his last books called “America's British culture,” and with such British luminaries as Burke, Adam Smith, and (in our time) Margaret Thatcher. It has steadfastly preferred the American Revolution to the French Revolution, and the relatively moderate Scottish Enlightenment to the more radical and anti-Christian manifestations of the Enlightenment across the English Channel. While often critical of classical liberal purism, it has tended over the years to align itself with the liberty-oriented conservatism of the Anglosphere instead of the more statist brands of the right found in the past two centuries on much of the European continent.

It is all the more striking, then, that in the past half dozen years since the Trumpist explosion, a number of conservative intellectuals and celebrity figures in the United States have sought out right-wing political leaders and anti-liberal thinkers on the continent like Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary for guidance in fashioning an alternative political path. This fascination for non-American models is a measure not only of the seekers' intellectual curiosity but of their estrangement from what some of them perceive as an enfeebled American right—and *American regime*—riddled with “Lockean liberal” error and its allegedly inevitable, soul-corrupting consequences.

Intellectuals are not the only ones on the right who are now thinking outside the battered box of Reaganite fusionism. In the political arena, right-of-center members of Congress like Senators Marco Rubio and Josh Hawley are openly lam-



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basting big business, especially Big Tech, and are advocating forms of governmental regulation to rein in offending corporations in the name of what they call the “common good.” As Rachel Bovard, a rising star in conservative public policy circles, declared at the National Conservative gathering a few months ago: “Businesses like Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Apple exert state-like monopoly power over America’s minds and markets, and they simply cannot be allowed to endure. The scale at which they exist is incompatible with a free society.”

The mounting intellectual tumult on the right is motivated by more than economic concerns. At the heart of National Conservatism, “integralism,” “post-liberalism,” and the emerging self-styled New Right is the conviction that America is engulfed in nothing less than a “cold civil war” over the future of our republic: an irrepressible conflict pitting conservatives against an enemy determined (they believe) to destroy them. The rapid rise of left-wing identity politics and progressive “wokeism”; the spread of social media censorship and cancel culture; the tolerance of massive, illegal immigration along the southern border; the toppling of historic monuments and the wide dissemination in the schools of left-wing critiques of American history: These, to many conservatives, are manifestations of an all-out cultural revolution being waged against them by an increasingly authoritarian foe. In parts of the American right—and parts of the American left, as well—the rhetoric of conventional politics is giving way to the apocalyptic rhetoric of war.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the American right is now totally preoccupied with sound and fury. In the wake of the upheavals of the past few years, efforts by serious, intellectual conservatives are underway in many places to restore the nation’s civic literacy and a more balanced and affirmative understanding of Western civilization and the American experience. The National Association of Scholars, for example, has organized the 1620 Project to refute what it sees as the deeply flawed and divisive narrative of American history propounded by the 1619 Project of *The New York Times*. In 2021 a group of black conservative intellectuals

created an alliance called *1776 Unites* in defense of America’s “spiritual, moral, and political foundations” and in opposition to what they call “false history and grievance politics.” Several months ago, the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal launched a conference program specifically for American high school teachers, using *The Roots of American Order* as a text, providing resources for teachers to draw upon when explaining to students the fundamental principles animating America’s regime of ordered liberty. Many more such examples could be given. Thus intellectual activity, quiet institution-building, and endeavors for cultural renewal continue on the right even amid its internal turmoil and the deepening polarization of American public life.

So, where does American conservatism go from here?

Can confident, liberty-loving, Reaganite fusionism, and Fourth of July patriotism be reconciled with the martial rhetoric and heterodox policy proposals now emanating from “post-liberal” sectors of the right? Can Americans who consider the values of “historic liberalism” (as Herbert Hoover termed it) to be an integral part of America’s political fabric find common ground with those who claim that America was indeed liberal from the outset—and that this is its fatal flaw? Is anything more than an alliance of convenience against the left possible?

As a historian, I cannot predict precisely how the current intellectual drama on the right will unfold in the years just ahead. But I think I *can* predict that there will be no clearcut restoration of the Reaganite paradigm or the fusionist status quo that existed before 2016. History does not work that way. What is more likely to happen will be an attempt by mainstream conservative figures to refurbish the house of conservatism with a certain amount of Trumpian furniture but without Trump himself as the proprietor of the house. Many conservatives in the public arena will probably become somewhat less libertarian and anti-statist on economic and social policy, and more anti-elitist in their posture, as they try to nail down the working class vote at home and confront the military and economic threat from China. Whether

Trump himself comes again to the political arena or goes away, Trumpian populism, with its counterrevolutionary overtones, is likely to remain part of the right-wing landscape for a while, for it is being fueled by an apprehension that millions of grassroots conservatives now share: that traditional America as a free, well-ordered, and basically decent society is in peril, and that a despotism of the illiberal left is arising in its place.

But it is also likely that under relentless pressure from the cultural left at home, and from emboldened and aggressive authoritarian regimes abroad, many conservatives will again find inspiring the philosophy and rhetoric of individual freedom so deeply imbedded in the American political tradition—and not just economic freedom but religious freedom, freedom of speech, and the freedom to live and let live, without harassment. It is also conceivable that under the impetus of the appalling tragedy in Ukraine and its geopolitical ramifications, a more assertively internationalist and freedom-centered foreign policy posture will once again appeal to American conservatives.

Faced with these multiple challenges, can conservatives in 2022 regain their moorings and lose their sense of losing? As this essay is being written, there are some reasons for hope. First, conservatives should take heart from one of their most impressive achievements of the past 50 years: the creation of a vibrant counterculture of alternative media, foundations, law firms, think tanks, homeschooling networks, classical Christian academies, and more. From the perspective of a historian, this flowering of applied conservatism, this institutionalization of conservative discourse and advocacy, is a remarkable and laudable development. Since the 1960s, what has been called a conservative parallel universe has arisen in America, and it continues to expand. It should not be cavalierly disparaged.

Conservatives should also take consolation, if not exactly comfort, from the acts of aggression being committed by fanatics on the left. These excesses are opening up new opportunities for conservatives to cultivate alliances with dissident liberals and others in defense of free speech, civility, and a balanced

interpretation of American history. One noteworthy sign on this front is the Academic Freedom Alliance, headquartered in Princeton, which was launched in 2021. Another is the burgeoning revolt of countless parents outraged by the egregious indoctrination of their children on racial and other matters by left-leaning ideologues in the nation's public schools.

Still, conservatives must do more than celebrate past achievements and react defensively to provocations from the left. To lose their fear of losing, they must redouble their efforts to expand their influence beyond the ranks of those already committed to the cause. Too often it seems that the conservative parallel universe does not interact sufficiently with those who live outside its boundaries. And that population includes millions of Americans—Asian, Hispanic, and black Americans—who in the past two years have been repelled by the fanaticism and illiberalism of the “woke” left. More than at any other moment in recent times, these Americans are open to conservative persuasion.

In pursuit of these and other opportunities, conservatives should not forsake their traditional language of liberty and persuasion for the assaultive language of war. Reckless and militarized rhetoric can repel as well as attract. And successful politics, as Reagan taught, is about addition, not subtraction. The new governor of Virginia, Glenn Youngkin, has provided an instructive lesson in how this can be done.

At this perilous juncture, it might be useful for conservatives of all persuasions to step back from their intramural polemics for a moment and ask themselves a simple question: *What do conservatives want?* To put it in elementary terms, I believe they want what nearly all conservatives since 1945 have wanted: They want to be free; they want to live meaningful and virtuous lives; and they want to be secure from threats both beyond and within our borders. They want to live in a society whose government respects and encourages these aspirations while otherwise leaving people alone. Freedom, virtue, safety: goals reflected in the libertarian, traditionalist, and national security dimensions of the conservative movement as it has developed over the past 75 years. In other

words, there is at least a little fusionism in nearly all of us. Conservatives should remember that.

Finally, if conservatives are to reclaim the culture and prosper again in the public square, they must retain a fusionist sensibility. That is to say: an ecumenical disposition, recognizing that the wisdom of conservatism comes from many sources and that sound-bite sloganeering will never suffice. They must beware of the sectarian temptation—the impulse to go it alone—and be cautious about attaching prefixes or reductive adjectives to the dignified name they have accepted for their movement.

But if the temptation to qualify conservatism with an adjective is irresistible, I submit this modest candidate: *commonsense conservatism*. This formulation has many advantages. It takes the word down from the thunderclouds of bitter disputation and associates it with the wisdom of the ages and the virtue of prudence in public life. It permits its advocates to engage with people without zealotry and in a manner that is welcoming, not threatening. It conveys the salutary lesson that conservatism is not an “armed doctrine” but the negation of dogmatic ideology, as Russell Kirk tirelessly taught.

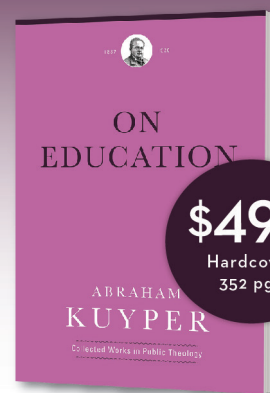
If conservatives in 2022 remember that theirs is above all a philosophy of common sense, and if they act that way, they may again lead their fellow Americans to better days.

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## ESSAY

# Are We Reliving the 1970s?

Anne Rathbone Bradley

*While today there are similarities to conditions and political responses of the 1970s, we are actually much better off than you might think, despite COVID and statist/nationalist overreach. The takeaway? Yes, there are real concerns, including yet another Russian invasion of a neighboring country, but do not be afraid.*

There is real concern that we are reliving the 1970s, a vexing time for the American economy. Despite the tumultuous economy we have been living through the past two years, which, in part, was imposed upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also is due to a long tradition of increasing the size and scope of government, we are materially far better off. That is not to downplay the real concerns about a return to the 1970s: an era marked by stagflation, gas queues, unemployment lines, and the peak of the Misery Index. But are we really on the same path the American economy took during the 1970s? And if so, can we stop it?

It is an amazing time to be alive. The past 250 years have witnessed a remarkable and unprecedented level of economic growth. Most countries today are richer than they were 50 years ago, and in the U.S. we are far richer. Economic growth is not the only relevant factor for human flourishing, but we cannot experience flourishing

without it. Economic growth is sustained by open markets that provide ordinary people with the incentives they need to discover better ways of doing things. This learning and discovery are rooted in the constant refining of the division of labor and ensuing specialization. Adam Smith knew this was possible and witnessed it as early as the mid-18th century. The optimism he had for the extension of opulence to the most destitute has come to fruition. Yet we seem afraid to embrace it. Pundits on both the right and the left decry the opulence they rely upon daily. Adam Smith, too, worried about the spiritual and ethical effects of opulence. Money can't save our souls, after all. But what is lost on both sides of the political aisle is a recognition that unfettered markets have brought universally increased standards of living.

What's more curious is how these pundits suggest we fix the wealthy society we enjoy. On the left you hear arguments for extreme progressive taxation and indictments of corporate greed as the source of inflation. This leads some, including Elizabeth Warren and Janet Yellen, to demand a global corporate tax.



There are also calls for price controls as a mechanism for mitigating inflation and more universal government programs in healthcare, daycare, and higher education. On the right we hear rants against globalism and among some a call to return to an economic nationalism that is just modern mercantilism, another idea as old as the sun.

Markets are not simply stylized supply-and-demand abstractions. They are neither robotic nor removed from human action—they reflect individual choices. Thus, the sociological context of an economy matters greatly. The 1970s were a time of great change in family dynamics. The divorce rate began to increase rapidly starting in 1964, a trend that increased after 1974 but at a decreasing rate. Approximately 1,077,000 divorces were granted in 1976, bringing the divorce rate to 5.0 per 1,000. The divorce rate per 1,000 married women increased 94% between 1962 and 1973 (from 9.4 to 18.2).

Today, however, divorce rates are far lower. Both marriage and divorce rates declined from 2009 to 2019. In 2019 there were 16.3 new marriages for every 1,000 women aged 15 and over, down from 17.6 in 2009. Simultaneously, the U.S. divorce rates fell from 9.7 new divorces per 1,000 women aged 15 and over in 2009 to 7.6 in 2019.

Divorce rates are declining but, alas, so are marriage and birth rates. Wealthy countries whose birth rates fall too low risk falling short of the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply, and so put their economic growth at risk. People are good for the planet. Human flourishing requires humans, and we need an economic and political environment that supports work.

Workers had a much tougher time in the 1970s. Unemployment reached a high of 9% in 1975. Any occasion in an economy when there are large numbers of employees who cannot find work brings social and political pressure for solutions. Looking to the 1970s and today, we often see that these policy solutions often harm the very people they intend to support and grow the size of the government at all levels, which is a promise for a less dynamic economy both now and in the future. In February 2020, prior to COVID-19 lockdowns, U.S. unemployment was the lowest it had been, particularly

for African Americans and Latinos, in 40 years. The pandemic erased that success, with a 14.7% unemployment level in April of 2020 during the worst part of the lockdowns. But U.S. unemployment has rebounded as the economy has reopened. The 1970s represented persistent levels of higher unemployment, something to keep in mind.

Julian Simon explained human capital the best—people are not just mouths to feed but hands to work. Human capital is the most essential type of capital because it's the source of ideas and innovation. When we see an economy with people willing to work but who cannot find jobs, there is cause for concern. But that is not what we are seeing now.

The Misery Index, aptly named, combines levels of unemployment with inflation that gives us some sense of the quality of life for ordinary people. Inflation represents the decline in the dollar's purchasing power, and growing levels of inflation hurt those toward the bottom of the income distribution the most. The Misery Index experienced a large increase over the 1970s, reaching its all-time peak of 21.9% in 1980, an significant jump from 11.67% in 1970.

The index was turbulent during the 1970s, rising to 19.90 percent in 1975 then dropping and rising again around 1978. Even the Great Recession did not have the impact on the Misery Index that the decade of the 1970s did. In 2006 it sat at 5.71%, and by 2011 was 12.73%. From 2015 to 2019, it hovered near 5%, and then the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying policy responses were unleashed on the economy. In April 2020, the Misery Index reached 15% and now sits around 11.48%—half its 1970s peak. Even a global pandemic that induced politicians on both the right and left to usher in unprecedented levels of tyranny, including lockdowns of businesses, churches, and schools, did not raise unemployment and inflation to 1970s levels.

What the COVID-19 pandemic, the Great Recession, 9/11, or any other crisis, whether natural or manmade, reveals is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Tyranny waits for a crisis; it always has. Economic freedom and economic growth insulate us from the unmitigated growth of power. That is

the largest difference between today and the 1970s—we are all richer.

Yet there are still real comparisons to be made between what the U.S. economy is now facing and what it faced in the 1970s, including inflation concerns, rising oil and natural gas prices, and of course the dreaded policy responses that are predictable and usually economically incoherent. The policies being touted today do, in fact, echo the 1970s.

In the winter of 1977, President Jimmy Carter implored Americans to keep their thermostats at 65 degrees or cooler. His administration asked for voluntary sharing among natural gas markets in the United States to help solve the energy crisis. It should be noted that the Nixon administration also called for lowering home thermostats, reducing driving speeds, and reducing unnecessary lighting amid calls for energy independence. The mantra of “energy independence” is nothing new and it's repeated today. If the supply of something is reduced, *ceteris paribus*, prices will increase. Richard Nixon ushered in price controls to deal with the upward pressure on prices that occurred amid shortages. Yet the sound economic answer to shortages is to ascertain the supply constraints rather than to impose price controls, which will only serve to exacerbate the shortages and can create black markets.

The consequence of Nixonian price controls were gas queues and rationing that continued under the Carter administration. Economic realities are ubiquitous, and policy cannot change them. Policy at best can alleviate supply-and-demand problems by getting out of the way, but distorting market prices by subsidizing one thing over another or outlawing certain products always yields unintended consequences. This was as true in 1970 as it is today. Government price controls are arbitrary, and they don't solve the underlying problem of scarcity; they worsen it.

Today gasoline is not being rationed according to our license plate numbers, but we do see a time of growing inflation and concerns over its duration. In 2021 we were told by the experts that this inflation was “transitory” and we shouldn't worry too much about it. After all, the pandemic wreaked havoc on the

economy. Gross domestic product, a measure of output, declined by almost 33% in the second quarter of 2020. That's what happens when you shut the doors, literally in this case, on commerce. This precipitous drop in GDP is the worst we have seen in two centuries—far worse than in the Great Depression or the Great Recession. Simultaneously, the federal government responded with massive stimulus spending programs. To date, \$3.9 trillion has been spent on COVID-19 relief while the Federal Reserve pursued an unorthodox monetary policy. Moreover, the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine prompts fears as did the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, bringing grim reminders of how war and oil are ugly bedfellows generating severe economic consequences. We do not yet know how current events will develop, but we can predict some troubling economic times ahead as a result.

Among the problems already on display before the war in Ukraine was unanticipated inflation, which is particularly pernicious because, when you don't see it coming, it can't be accounted for in purchases and contracts. As economist Alexander Salter pointed out throughout the pandemic, we have witnessed changes in the practices of the Federal Reserve that go beyond its dual mandate to maintain maximum employment and stable prices. The Fed typically works to achieve this by buying and selling assets and sometimes making loans, but it has reached beyond those typical and expected measures and engaged in unexpected and overreaching activities, including giving loans to small and medium-sized businesses and municipal and state governments. Salter rightly shows that this allows the Fed to participate in fiscal, not just monetary, policy. The precedent for the Fed to engage in discretion over stable rules dates to the Nixon administration, which removed the U.S. dollar from the gold standard.

It should be noted that there will always be episodes of inflation and the purchasing power of currency is relative to what it could be and what it has been. And there will always be a crisis. In the 1970s we faced infighting and angst over the Vietnam War, which finally came to an end in 1975. Carter inherited the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries

(OPEC), a cartel, which controlled 56% of the oil supply in 1973. The Yom Kippur War (1973) and the Iranian Revolution of 1979 exacerbated the world oil crisis. Put your economic thinking cap on and it's not difficult to see why. OPEC is a cartel whose creation was oddly celebrated. It represented a trend toward the nationalization of natural resources and a complete politicization of oil as a commodity. Cartels raise prices, and the nationalization of resources creates disincentives for innovation and the growing of supply.

Today we face global supply chain issues, inflation, and volatility in output and employment due to the pandemic. Gasoline prices are up 60% over past year, and natural gas prices are up 30%. From 2020 to 2021, inflation increased at its fastest pace in 30 years. The Consumer Price Index rose 7.5% over the past year, reminiscent of the fears Americans had in the 1970s. It is true that the Biden administration faces problems today that bear striking similarities to what the Carter administration faced in the early 1970s: inflation, unemployment, the less-than-satisfactory end of long wars (Vietnam and Afghanistan), and worries about international economic foes. In the 1970s, Americans worried that Japan would take over as the industrial leader of the world, a worry many have of China today. The 1970s boasted a "collapse of U.S. manufacturing," a siren's call for the demise of the middle class.

But should this be a cause for panic? Political overreach is more accepted when people are worried about their standard of living. A crisis always exacerbates both our fear and our willingness to cede power to centralized authority. And the fearmongers take their role seriously. If we are afraid, terrified even, we are more likely to surrender more power so they can "fix it." But with all the similarities to the bad old '70s, we must look at *all* the facts.

In the 1970s, unemployment was a serious economic issue and people could not find jobs. Today "Help Wanted" signs are everywhere we look—a different kind of problem. We continue, even after shuttering businesses and schools, to add jobs to the economy. So much so that Amazon is offering \$3,000 sign-on bonuses, and businesses like Dollywood and Walmart

are offering to pay full college tuition for their employees. The picture of the labor market today is quite different from that of the 1970s.

U.S. manufacturing has not collapsed, despite repeated claims to the contrary. U.S. manufacturing has tripled over the past three decades and accounts for almost 11% of overall output and 82% of U.S. exports, and boasts an average annual worker compensation of more than \$83,000 per year. The number of workers employed in manufacturing has greatly declined, however, a significant change. But as productivity increases, workers naturally move into the service sector. Manufacturing employs fewer people because machines have effectively replaced human labor, and so people move on to more specialized jobs—all due to economic growth and improved living standards.

More inspiring news: U.S. per capita GDP in 1975 was \$7,800 annually, and the U.S. GDP in that year was \$1.7 trillion. In 2019, before the pandemic, U.S. per capita GDP was just over \$65,000 annually and the U.S. GDP in that year was \$21.4 trillion. Moreover, in 1975 the U.S. population was almost 216 million; in 2019 it was over 328 million. Life expectancy in 1975 was just over 72 years, while in 2019 it was 79 years. Growth is everywhere.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter spoke to the American people in what is referred to as the "Malaise Speech," and while he didn't use that specific word, it was dour, just like the economy. Carter critiqued materialism as an effort to get people to see the problems as much deeper than queues for gasoline. He suggested, as all American presidents do, that the United States was the leader of the world, and as such we had to get our internal house in order to protect that position. He warned about war and deplored energy dependence. His was a mercantilist response of increasing domestic oil production and import quotas. These were not economically literate responses but were certainly predictable. Carter's favorability increased by 11% in the polls after this speech—proving that politics makes us feel good even when it harms us.

Vice President Kamala Harris in a January 2022 interview recognized what

she deemed “a level of malaise” reached by Americans in the context of how life had changed during the pandemic. She talked about the desire to return to normal and how the government was what made the recovery possible. She suggested that the government was the fixer and claimed it created 6 million jobs. She failed to say that by closing the economy, the government destroyed jobs and livelihoods. Economist Frédéric Bastiat warned of the broken window fallacy, which argued that destruction is good for the economy because rebuilding ultimately boosts it. Such thinking about the lockdown and its ultimate effect on the economy is a clear example of this fallacy. Politics and politicians remain the same due to the incentives they face. Crises are great opportunities for the seizure of power—we saw this in the 1970s and see it today. We can also see that markets and commerce are resilient in the face of the sometimes-extreme beatings they suffer.

The economy will always go through periods of recession, relatively higher inflation, and unemployment. COVID-19 is not the last crisis we will endure. The best solution to a crisis is a robust and growing economy powered by dynamic entrepreneurship. This is enabled by economic and civil freedoms, which can always be improved. Things today are better than we often admit. Yes, there are real problems and there will continue to be—we live in a fallen world. Yet the quest for growing human flourishing remains achievable.

Let's end with some good news. The middle class isn't shrinking because people's incomes are regressing, but because they are growing. Economist Mark Perry has highlighted this remarkable trend: From 1971 to 2016, middle-class households, which earn between \$35,000 and \$100,000 per year, were 53% of U.S. households, while today they are only 42%. Again, this is not because the middle class is shrinking but because middle-class earners are moving into high-income brackets, earning more than \$100,000 per year. In 2016, 27.7% of households earned more than \$100,000 per year compared to only 8.1% in 1967. Middle-income Americans are becoming high-income Americans.

American incomes are growing but, just as importantly, the labor hours needed to purchase many goods and services are decreasing. We don't simply want income to grow; we want income growth and the progressive cheapening of goods and services. Perry has also done his homework on trends before the pandemic-induced inflation we're seeing now.

During the most recent 21-year period, from January 2000 to December 2020, the consumer price index (CPI) for all items increased by 54.6%, and we can look at the relative price increases over that period for selected goods and services based on hourly wages. Seven of the 14 have increased far more than inflation, including: hospital services (+203%), college tuition (+170%) and college textbooks (+151%), medical care services (+117%), childcare (+106%), housing (+65%), and food and beverages (62%). Average wages have also increased more than average inflation since January 2000, by 82.5%, suggesting that hourly wages have increased 28% more over the past two decades than the average increase in consumer prices. Prices that have declined over the same period are TVs (-97%), toys (-73%), computer software (-70%), and cellphone service (-40%).

The areas where the costs of goods and services have increased above standard levels of inflation since 2000 are the sectors of the economy that face a much greater regulatory burden and more government intervention. The goods and services that are becoming far more affordable are areas where there is less government intervention.

We are living in a time of exponentially increasing consumption equality. As economist Deirdre McCloskey has pointed out, the biggest difficulty in measuring GDP per capita over time is the availability of new goods and services spurred by innovations and advancements in technology. The richest American in 1975 could not even conceptualize walking around with a smartphone in his pocket. Such a product was inconceivable, and it was certainly unimaginable that every American could have one.

The labor hours required to get things is decreasing at an increasing rate.

Average Americans consume double today what they did in 1980 and triple what they did in 1960. The scarcest resource we have is our time, and time is money. Americans must work fewer labor hours today to get things that are better than they were in 1970! Consider a television set from the 1970s versus one bought today. Our productivity is far greater, which means we need to work fewer hours to afford the television, and it's a far better product.

Politicians tend to fearmonger, especially during a crisis because they want the power to save us. What the past 50 years demonstrate is that even constrained markets are robust and provide life-extending and life-enhancing change and innovation. Policy can't ward off a crisis. What we can learn from the 1970s is to dispense with the political response that calls for us to be afraid, trust those with power, give them more power, and let them solve the problems. In this regard, politics has changed little since the 1970s. But what *has* changed the most is what provides us with the most economic hope for today and the future: the explosion of market exchange and the wealth it affords us.

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ESSAY

# The U.S. Bishops and the Tweet Heard 'Round the World

Samuel Gregg

*A recent tweet from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is a reminder of a time when many Catholic bishops strayed outside their area of expertise.*

**L**ike many other Catholics living in the United States, I was alternately bemused by and dismayed at a particular tweet issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on January 10, 2022.

For a moment, I thought we were reliving the 1970s.

In the context of encouraging ordinary Catholics to involve themselves in the synodal process launched by Pope Francis to engage in reflection on the challenges facing the Catholic Church today, someone with access to the USCCB Twitter feed tweeted: "Here are seven attitudes we can all adopt as we continue our synodal journey together. Which one inspires you the most? Let us know in the comments below." The attitudes listed were: innovative outlook, inclusivity, open-mindedness, listening, accompaniment, co-responsibility and dialogue.

To say that Catholic Twitter-World was unhappy at this strange mixture of managerial-corporate speak and sentimental-humanitarian babble was an understatement. It erupted with replies like "Who wrote this spiritual guidance, Nabisco Corp?" and "We're not a Fortune 500 company, we are literally the body of Christ." "Is this entire synod," one tweeter wrote, "being run by human resources interns?"

Why, others pointed out, did the attitudes say nothing about faithfulness to and proclamation of the Christian faith, or commitment to the teachings

of the Church? Actress Patricia Heaton tweeted the following: "How about you adopt this attitude: 'Christ shed his blood on the cross to save you, so attend with an attitude of repentance, humility, gratitude, joy and worship. Let your lips be full of praise for your savior Jesus.' Or 'innovative outlook' I guess..." In a similar manner, the former atheist, Christian convert, and now Catholic author Leah Libresco, tweeted: "If you need 7... The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations."

Truth be told, I wasn't especially surprised that the USCCB would tweet such a statement, but then I have never had high expectations of bishops' conferences.

Certainly, bishops' conferences have their significance in the Church's life. I would add that many of those who work for them are truly selfless individuals who live holy lives and have given themselves to the Church. Many could be working in very different jobs and earning much more money. They also put up with a great deal, including from those bishops

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who, judging from their Twitter feeds, seem indistinguishable from your average NGO activist.

It's also true, however, that some people who work for bishops' conferences are susceptible—especially in hyper-political cities like Washington, D.C.—to whatever happens to be the latest secular trend in language, culture, or politics. They simply don't grasp that the more “with-the-moment” they try to be, the more feeble and occasionally ridiculous they make the Church look.

If there is a place where we should be able to find some respite from the woke discourse and endless “diversity-equity-inclusion” rhetoric that now permeates so much of America, one would like to think that the Church, with its deep theological and philosophical resources, 2,000 years of reflection on the human condition, and understanding that there are truths about God and humanity that never change, would be such a place. To put it in economic terms: This is Catholicism's comparative advantage. Why pretend that it is not?

The truth, however, is that some Catholics who work directly for the Church are like many other Catholics: extremely subservient to the secular zeitgeist. Many Catholic bishops in Germany, for example, and some of the thousands of people who work for church-tax-funded German Catholic organizations, have shown (especially since 2013) that their lodestones are (bad) psychology, (bad) sociology, and (heretical) theologians who long ago gave up any pretense of believing in many of Christianity's central dogmas and doctrines.

This isn't a uniquely Catholic problem. My Orthodox Jewish friends, for example, regularly lament to me that many progressive Jews have effectively reduced their religion to highly secularist conceptions of social justice. Likewise, evangelical Christian colleagues have stressed to me that liberal Protestantism went down that road a long time ago. I don't think it's any coincidence that liberal forms of religion seem to be collapsing everywhere. What do they have to offer that can't be provided by progressive politics and social movements?

This in turn points to a broader issue: When should the Catholic Church—and, more specifically, Catholic bishops'

conferences—speak publicly and about what subjects?

The issue of the Catholic Church's involvement in public policy debates has always been contentious. If Catholics focus exclusively on the hope of life after death, they are inevitably accused of abdicating responsibility for life here on earth. Yet if the Church becomes too focused upon temporal affairs, it risks forgetting that its fundamental mission is the salvation of souls. Where, some ask, do the boundaries lie? To what extent should the Church involve itself in public debates?

The Swiss Catholic intellectual Cardinal Charles Journet once noted that Catholics have always struggled to avoid two temptations in regard to public life. The first is the tendency to view the political world as something cut off from the claims of God's Kingdom—in short, to believe that a person's Catholic faith is irrelevant when it comes to public life. The second temptation, he said, is to allow the Church to mutate gradually into a type of ideological force that is primarily if not exclusively concerned with the here-and-now.

Then there are the issues surrounding the more specific details of that involvement. In short, who in the Church can say what about public policy issues? What degree of authoritativeness should be attached to the statements of bishops' conferences about such issues by the faithful?

These are very important questions, not least because failure to grasp the subtlety of the answers can lead to much confusion between, for example, what is binding for all Catholics and what is simply a prudential judgement with which individual Catholics are entitled to agree or disagree. Unfortunately, there have been occasions when statements issued by bishop conferences have contributed to such confusion. In many respects, the story of the American Catholic bishops and their statements on public policy issues in the 1970s through to the mid-1990s exemplifies how not to engage such matters.

**I**n 1986, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued one of their better-known pastoral letters, *Economic Justice for All*. Its release occurred after an extensive

consultation process. Although the bishops included a disclaimer in the document that it somehow constituted “a blueprint for the American economy,” the Princeton legal philosopher and Catholic intellectual Robert P. George pointed out that the bishops effectively compromised this claim by offering very specific prescriptions on just about every economic issue imaginable. By any standard, these recommendations essentially reflected a “left-liberal” economic agenda of more government regulation and intervention that was, at the time, indistinguishable from the Democratic Party's economic platform.

In itself, the precise political character of the bishops' prescriptions was not the issue. To my mind, the problem would not have been any different if the policy preferences of *Economic Justice for All* had closely resembled a Republican “right-liberal” economic program. The difficulty was that while the bishops insisted that “we do not claim to make these prudential judgments with the same kind of authority that marks our declarations of principle,” they also stated that they felt “obliged to teach by example how Christians can undertake concrete analysis and make specific judgments on moral issues.” Again, Robert George posed this vital question: “Why...if their prudential judgments are no more binding on the faithful than yours or mine, do the bishops ‘feel obliged’ to offer them?”

Throughout the '70s, '80s, and early '90s, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops persisted in offering prudential judgments on subjects about which, collectively speaking, neither they nor their advisers had any more expertise (let alone authority to speak) than many lay Catholics, other Christians, and those of all faiths and none. But by becoming so involved in offering detailed commentaries on subjects including “war in the Middle East,” “U.S. domestic food policy,” “Panama-U.S. relations,” “farm labour,” “Lebanon and the Peace Process,” “Acceptance through Citizenship,” and “Permanent Normal Trade Relations to China,” the USCCB facilitated confusion among lay Catholics concerning the difference between principles authoritatively enunciated by magisterial teaching (and, hence, binding on Catholics) and prudential judgements (which are not binding).



Even more seriously, there is little question that some Catholics were encouraged by such statements into thinking that they could legitimately regard certain issues on which the Church has authoritatively pronounced (like, for instance, euthanasia) as requiring only the same—or even less—commitment to achieving very specific policy outcomes as they do on issues such as the appropriate degree of government intervention in the economy. In 1996, Bishop James McHugh of Camden warned that future bishops' statements on public policy "must note the moral difference of the issues involved. Some positions are fundamental and non-negotiable."

On many economic issues, choice is between not only bad and good options but also several good options, some of which, to cite one Catholic natural law philosopher, the late Germain Grisez, are "incompatible with one another but compatible with the Church's teaching." Working out how a modern society attains an end like universal healthcare may depend upon empirical and prudential judgements reasonably in dispute among people equally well informed by principles of Catholic teaching.

Having surveyed the available evidence and informed themselves of the principles of Catholic teaching, one group of Catholics may conclude that it is best realized by a predominantly

state-funded system. Other Catholics, having examined the available evidence and informed themselves of the same principles, may conclude that private insurance, with a state-provided minimum safety net, is the most prudential approach. In any event, one would expect any Catholic examining such questions to acknowledge that there are many policies that people can advocate to realize such a goal while remaining in good standing with the Church. In these cases, Grisez is surely correct to say that people should not propose their *opinion* as the Church's teaching.

The point is that while there is normally a reasonably strict translation of Catholic teaching about an issue like euthanasia—the intentional ending of an innocent human life, which the Church has always regarded as a grave moral evil—into a particular policy position, it is hardly the case that, for example, the objective of universal healthcare (adequate medical care for the poorest) can be similarly translated into anything like so strict a policy.

What does this mean for bishops' statements on public policy matters? It depends on the subject. On a topic like euthanasia, where the Church has authoritatively pronounced and that translates reasonably strictly into a consistent "pro-life" position, a bishop—indeed, bishops' conferences—may (and should) pronounce that Catholics cannot

support policies that have a different object as their end.

In cases where the principles of the Church's teaching are not strictly translatable into detailed policies owing to differences in cultures, economies, resources, etc., it is conceivable that bishops as *citizens* may express a preference for one policy position over another—though I think this should be done rarely, with great caution, and with plenty of formal caveats. And even if a bishops' conference decides to address such an issue, it should always stress that any disparity between the bishops' policy view and that of a Catholic with a different opinion on the topic does not make such a Catholic "bad" or even wrong.

Generally speaking, I think that most bishops and many of those who work for bishops conferences these days (contra the 1970s and '80s) tend to be far more circumspect about inserting themselves into those public policy discussions where faithful Catholics are free to disagree. What's important, however, is that, when they do, they should be doing so in a way that reflects the distinct integration of reason and faith—or natural law and revelation—that gives Catholic and other Christian reflections on the public square a distinct and powerful character.

No tweet, however artfully worded, can substitute for that.

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# ETHELMAE HUMPHREYS

LAWRENCE W. REED

She knew what the most important things were in life and kept them in proper order from start to finish: God, family, freedom, country, community. She possessed the highest personal character because she understood that character was an indispensable foundation for everything else. She was a model American.

Such a woman was Ethelmae Humphreys of Joplin, Missouri, who passed away on December 27, 2021, two weeks shy of her 95th birthday. The many freedom-loving organizations she supported over the years, including the Acton Institute, will forever appreciate her faithful and generous support.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1927, she was the only child of Ernest Leroy Craig and Mary Ethel Crist.

In 1944, Ethelmae's parents founded a roofing company in Joplin and named it TAMKO. Each letter in the name derived from a state in which they hoped to sell the shingles they made—Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Nearly eight decades later, the company markets its products just about everywhere.

She was only 23 when her father suffered a stroke, necessitating a new direction in Ethelmae's remarkable career. She became executive vice president of TAMKO and assumed day-to-day control of its operations. Leading a major corporation in a male-dominated industry in her 20s, she famously joked that she was "the only foreign language major who came home to run a shingle company."

Over seven decades of service to TAMKO, she sacked nails, kept the books, and came to know every nook and cranny of how and where to sell



the best shingles. She led by wisdom and example, revered as "the matriarch of the roofing industry." She brought the best out of the men and women who worked for her.

On TAMKO's 75th anniversary, in 2019, she said:


*Over time, we've seen great business growth and we've built upon our character without sacrificing who we are. It's special for me to think about TAMKO—a company initiated by my father, named by my mother, and run by my husband and children. However, we never would have made it without our people. For 75 years, TAMKO expected hard work, honesty, and integrity from its employees, and just as my father did from day one, our employees have demonstrated a work ethic and level of dedication that no one ever had to ask for.*

Under Ethelmae's leadership, TAMKO became one of the largest privately owned roofing manufacturers in Amer-

ica and one of the top-four asphalt shingle producers in the nation. From a small operation with one plant, it grew to more than a dozen plants in nine states and a diversified array of building products.

The philosophy of freedom and free markets was one of Ethelmae's many passions. She not only supported that philosophy generously with her resources but also gave of her time and wisdom as a board member of groups such as the Foundation for Economic Education and the Cato Institute. But her generosity also extended to her community. After the devastating tornado that destroyed a large swath of Joplin in May 2011, she came forward with a substantial gift to rebuild a local hospital.

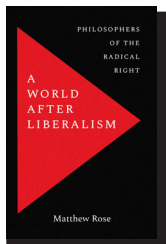
Ethelmae Humphreys embodied the best of the personal qualities that made this country exceptional—she was faithful, kind, generous, entrepreneurial, and more. She was a wealth creator who never lost sight of the freedoms that make wealth creation possible. She will be missed for a long time to come.

**Lawrence W. Reed** is president emeritus of the Foundation for Economic Education and its Humphreys Family Senior Fellow. He blogs at [lawrencereed.com](http://lawrencereed.com). 

# What's Old Is New: The Right Against God and Man

*A World After Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right*  
By Matthew Rose (Yale, 2021)

Reviewed by Richard M. Reinsch II



*A new survey of five radical-right thinkers aims at understanding what may be motivating post-liberal thinkers today. Both old and new right, however, suffer from a similar failing: the tendency to become everything they say they hate.*

In the introduction to *A World After Liberalism*, Matthew Rose observes that the most provocative thinkers on the right now contest liberalism, individualism, and autonomy. He argues: “We are living in a postliberal moment. After three decades of dominance, liberalism is losing its hold on Western minds. Its most serious challenge does not come from regimes in China, Russia, or Central Europe, whose leaders declare that the liberal epoch is ‘at an end.’ It comes from within Western democracies themselves.” Of course, the greatest challenge to liberalism in America does not currently emanate from the right, but from the identity politics of the left.

There are, however, unmistakable voices on the right who reject or critique America’s constitutional order and the principles that undergird it. In general terms, their economics are left leaning, their cultural objectives are right, and they favor an expansive use of state power for social and moral purposes. They dismiss conservatism’s usual concerns with the problems inherent in the use of state power for such reasons. Their rise seemingly presents the occasion for Rose’s book, which profiles five 20th-century post-liberal thinkers in Europe and America: Oswald Spengler, Julius Evola, Francis Yockey, Alain de Benoist, and Samuel Francis. The author presents their arguments and beliefs in all their shocking, cringe-inducing form. Rose’s book provides the full contents of a radical post-liberal imagination, a valuable service if we are to refute and prevent it from recruiting new adherents.

General trends in the profiled thinkers emerge despite their many differences. These thinkers decisively reject Christianity because they view it as a cultural dissolving force. Why? Christianity worships a transcendent God who loves each person equally. Indeed, Christianity’s claim that God incarnated himself as man in order to redeem man from his own sin through the God-man’s death and resurrection is the ultimate ground of human equality under law. We should

not, therefore, be surprised that Christianity is first on the chopping block for these right-wing, post-liberal thinkers. Liberalism in its best sense is built on this Christian embodiment of equality, and “radical right” thinkers argue that such equality is a lie.

The radical-right thinkers argue that “liberalism was evil.” Liberalism “destroys the foundation of social order. It obscures the central moral distinction, which is not between right and wrong, but between civilization and barbarism.” Therefore, liberalism’s politics and conception of law aim at neutrality and openness, deferring to answer the questions of how people should live according to religion or sacrificial duty. By denying people comprehensive answers to basic questions about virtue and excellence, liberalism leaves people with the inability to lead lives of greatness. It further denudes a civilization of its inheritance, its full scale of identity. For an understanding of the seduction of unchosen identity, we should explore Oswald Spengler.

The first volume of Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918) encapsulates many of the themes the other thinkers profiled in the book will exhibit. Spengler, Rose observes, sets forward that “the human world is the world of culture.” By this Spengler means something vastly more than that the human person cannot be understood by modern scientific analysis. Spengler argues that “languages, rituals, histories, myth, works of art and music” are not just things we do, but “they are that by which we know.” Our nature as a person is such that we cannot immediately understand reality with reason, observation, and logical argument. We can only do this through the culture we were born into.

Spengler radically separates human beings into culture and denies that our cultural identity could even be a matter of choice. In the attempt to locate the essential activity of the person in cultural artifacts, Spengler becomes the deterministic thinker par excellence. He is also an early prophet of multiculturalism. How could he not be? If human beings are incapable of rising above their culture and are locked in a self-contained world, then cultures are, of course, radically separate and inaccessible to outsiders. And, as Rose notes, “if cultures are incommensurably different, so too are human beings.” Spengler’s denial of universal categories that reason might understand and reflect upon becomes a gaping hole in how human beings might talk to one another across civilizations. And this radical disjunction extends even to the sciences. Spengler at one turn argues, “There is not one sculpture, one painting, one mathematics, one physics, but many, each in its deepest essence different from the others.”

One thing all cultures share under Spengler’s analysis is that they are fated to die over a life cycle. If each culture is animated by a central or prime symbol within a sealed atmosphere, then gradually its life-giving form will begin to wane. Nothing is eternal. Crucially, Spengler makes two interesting moves in distinguishing Western culture’s uniqueness amid the rather equivocal standing it should have given his cultural relativism. The West is “Faustian”; that is, it strives for “infinity.” The prime symbol of Faustian man is a constant seeking, a desire “to surpass and extend” one’s discoveries beyond each frontier. Secondly, Christianity did not shape Western civilization; rather, Christianity was shaped by the Faustian strength

of Western man. Spengler, no Christian, sought to incorporate Christian spirituality into the cultural symbol of the West while demoting its truth claims about God and man. This commentary on Christianity, Rose adds, fully emerges in the second volume of *The Decline of the West* (1922), where Spengler notes that Christianity also contributes to liberal political ideals and human equality. And more is the pity, because liberalism, according to Spengler, “detests every kind of greatness, everything that towers, rules, is superior.” Spengler called on what he thought was the pure witness of Christ who cared only for the eternal world, without thought for justice here below. Christianity was an achievement of the West and was its deepest weakness.

For a cure to this Christian ailment of making equality a fundamental touchstone of political order, Julius Evola evoked a utopian world of Tradition as a sempiternal fund of truth about the human person, society, and cult, which builds order on inequality, aristocracy, and sacred obligations. Tried in Rome in 1951 for promoting the restoration of the dissolved Fascist Party, Evola pled an academic detachment, with his involvement taking place on a “purely intellectual and doctrinal level.” He merely called for “fascist ideas, not inasmuch as they are ‘fascist’, but in the measure that they revive ideas superior and anterior to fascism.” Those ideas that Evola perversely thought could serve as a bridge were mythic, prehistorical notions of the true ways by which all human societies found order and harmony.

Evola’s testimony to Tradition evokes his spiritual disorientation in liberal society and his deep imaginative capacity to find an alternative order. His master was the so-called Descartes of esotericism, René Guénon, a convert to Islam, who decamped from Paris to Cairo in the 1930s for “a more traditional society.” Guénon sought the underlying principles shared by the great spiritual masters. He further argued that modernity marked the severing of the West from transcendence, thrusting it into a spiritual dark age. Evola took this insight and deepens it in his book *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934), where

he argues that modernity’s evident chaos follows its severed relationship with transcendent order. This collapse in modernity was caused by “desacralization” and the separation of daily life from true spiritual order.

Tradition is needed, but it can be accessed only through “myth, legend, and esoteric readings of premodern texts.” But the esotericism is no impediment, because Tradition’s truths are simple: “Every aspect of human life, every social activity, role, and caste, is dedicated to the service of a higher order.” They became the way prehistorical man reached “transcendence.” And, Evola thinks, these pathways to the eternal verities remain open to modern man, despite his desiccated condition. In the Traditional world, he intones, “nature was not thought about but lived as though it were a great, sacred, animated body, the visible expression of the invisible.”

Evola’s fantasies were intoxicating to many on the far right. His disdain for liberal society was manifest in his calling for a “Real Right” to take charge of society in a revolution from above and to rebuild a higher, elevated, aristocratic society. In this, Evola would remain disappointed. Christianity’s crimes were legion in his eyes. Evola’s Tradition called for political authority to be holy, sacral, absolute. But Christianity had made this nearly impossible by locating the highest truth for man in a transcendent God. This limited political power and encouraged skepticism, if not rebelliousness, toward authority, per Evola. There was also the egalitarianism of Christianity, which eroded hierarchies of the spirit needed for a traditional society to flourish.

In the end, Evola’s dreamlike politics left him deeply unsatisfied. He began to conjure violent notions in light of the New Left’s turn against bourgeois society. Perhaps the negation of the negation was something to be wished for if Tradition was going to reemerge. As Rose notes, he offers a comprehensive vision of an anti-liberal society to those who find themselves spiritually dispossessed. And all of it is scarcely believable, but it remains an outline of the form that the neopagan right could take in our age against the constant assertions of identity politics.

The chapter on the American thinker Francis Parker Yockey touches on an anti-Semitic, fascist, and anti-American ideologue who remains quietly influential on the far right. Yockey’s interpretation of postwar events in *Imperium*, his 1950 book that launched him on the far right as a touchstone thinker, was bizarre at the time. But Rose argues it is maybe not so extraordinary in our own period. Themes in the book include his clothing of political power in hierarchic and absolute terms, his analysis of cultural Marxism, his appeal to Russia as a new hope for civilizational order, and his belief that the purpose and cultural vitality of the West was in global domination. He further argued that contemporary Western leadership was impotent and complicit in emptying out the form and substance of Western culture. Its crime was that it protected the enemy within, whose critical ideas were undermining the West.

Yockey was, as notes Rose, a “virulent antisemite.” His analysis of “cultural Marxism” included Marx and Freud and other thinkers who argued that ideas, habits, and institutions in Western life were not built on truth or the stated reasons but on nefarious interests and irrational instincts. Cultural forms could not be trusted on appearance but should be the subject of suspicion—this was the danger the West faced from Jews.

Yockey’s truly demented anti-Jewish mind can be seen in his analysis of the Soviet Union’s hanging of 11 members of the Czechoslovakia Communist Party, including the general secretary, in 1952. For Yockey it signaled that the Soviets were expelling the Jewish intrusion from their leadership and that Russian nationalists had taken control of the Russian state. Consequently, the Soviet Union was no longer an ideological threat to the United States. Rose argues that this is the first instance of the radical right seeing Russia as a cultural ally that will reinforce its position in the West. In the end, Yockey was captured by the U.S. government in 1960 after having worked and conspired with enemy communist governments. Rather than face interrogation and imprisonment, he killed himself with cyanide capsules. Rose ends the chapter by noting that he lived in service to his ideas and sacrificed greatly for them. We may find those ideas horrible,



but Rose nevertheless notes that he lived his life in service to them. Many Communists and Nazis lived existences of sacrifice and death, too. And we should remember none of them.

**A**lain de Benoist is a contemporary French thinker whose ideas have resonance within Europe's roiling debates about immigration, national identity, cultural integrity, and the future of the continent amid ongoing challenges from liberal ideology in its worst sense. The liberalism of the European Union elite does not recognize the need for borders, nations, the Christian religion, and the family. Its highest values are the autonomous individual on the one hand and humanity at large on the other. From these two it derives a politics of cosmopolitanism oblivious to the deep culture and history of the European continent. Benoist seems to offer nothing new in the series of thinkers profiled by Rose, but he has cleverly pilloried modern liberalism for these follies. His critique of Christianity is that it elevates individuals above their culture, their family, and their group, making them unique individuals before God. And nothing could be more detrimental to culture than that. His conception of culture and nation as formative of identity seems regnant for a far-right thinker. Benoist defends democracy as a preeminent Western political form, but he decries liberal democracy as a perversion of the form because it is an oxymoron that places universal aspirations for human beings alongside what should be largely closed societies.

Benoist's most controversial idea sounds like that of Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt. Cultures depend on belonging, and they must have an "other" who is excluded from their primal form. This is not necessarily friend versus enemy, according to Benoist, but builds on the idea that "we are what we are, the way we are, depending on what we are not and the way we are not." Dialogue and exchange can happen provided the other remains fundamentally the other and the twain never meet. Benoist failed to notice that, in proposing fundamental and universal rules of self-enclosed culture as true for every human group, he contradicted his own

theory of the separateness of cultures. Benoist: cultural imperialist.

Samuel Francis is the last radical rightist that Rose illuminates, and he traffics in much of the thinking that the previous four men exhibited. However, Francis was an adviser to Patrick Buchanan in his two presidential campaigns. He articulated certain aspects of politics that conservatives in America in the post-Cold War period overlooked, like the interests and sentiments of middle Americans, working class in economic orientation and generally conservative in culture while not overly religious. This configuration obviously emerged in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Rose notes that Rush Limbaugh read an unsigned 5,000-word essay, written by Francis, to his audience, concluding that the essay was politically brilliant.

Francis built his political thought on a class-dominated understanding of politics garnered from James Burnham, although Burnham was not as mechanical in his own analysis. He concluded that American conservatism in its dominant form was deluded because it appealed to the constitutional order and an undergirding intellectual form for the vindication of the America it wanted to rebuild. Francis replied that it was in no one's economic interests to rebuild that America, and so it was a fool's errand. But can the human person and politics be reduced to class and race, even in service of a more "conservative" America? Francis thought so, and his appeal to culture was ultimately an appeal to white Americans to repel the cultural destruction project of liberalism. Why only whites? He responded that every culture depends on a dominant racial class for its leadership. America was no different. Francis explicitly set power against power with no real belief in an American citizenship that turned on freedom and equality. Francis would likely be the only "conservative" in America to deplore that Latino voters are increasingly becoming Republican and undoing the vaunted "Emerging Democratic Majority Thesis," which argued that a shrinking white America would lead to Democratic Party dominance.

Francis also turned his fire on Christians. They were the "religious wrong" who failed to understand that Christian

insights about the human person were a form of false consciousness, preventing these people from understanding how to recover American greatness. Such recovery did not depend on faith, natural law, constitutionalism, economic liberty, and rule of law, but on power and force from Middle American Radicals who would defend America as a unified political-cultural product requiring economic nationalism and traditional moral codes for its supports.

Samuel Francis, Rose notes, in a powerful rebuttal came to resemble his critics: "He deluded himself into believing that he was an enemy of leviathan and a friend to its culture, when he was in fact neither. Francis could not see how thoroughly he shared the philosophical assumptions of liberalism. Its denial of transcendence, its rejection of natural law, its anthropological materialism, its skepticism about reason, and its reductive psychology—Francis accepted every one of its doctrines." In the end, Francis let himself be led by class, economics, and race to come to political conclusions that seem conservative but ultimately reduce the constitutional order to something less than freedom and virtue. As this volume attests, he was not alone in these gravely mistaken judgments.

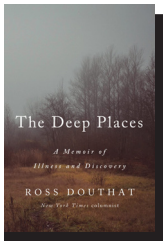
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# Ross Douthat and the Problem of Pain

*The Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery*

By Ross Douthat (Convergent, 2021)

Reviewed by Joseph Bottum



The New York Times columnist's account of his struggle for a diagnosis, then a treatment, for Lyme disease is instructive not only in negotiating the modern American healthcare system but also in what friends are for.

**Y**ou ever have a friend, a relative—someone you work with, maybe—who has been in a car wreck? What you discover is that, for some good while, they can't *not* talk about the accident. All the details are laid out, sorted and resorted. How it felt at each moment.

How it didn't feel at each moment, for that matter, with a common trope the report of not knowing about an injury till later, when the car-wrecked friend, standing at the side of the road in shock, looks down and sees blood.

You want to be sympathetic. You *are* sympathetic. This is a person, after all, who's been through a traumatic event and is still in pain: the twinges and aches, the click of misaligned bones and the stuttering steps of the battered, that linger long after discharge from medical care. And you learn from your friend about all the misadventures of that medical care. And all the pains, spasms, and wrenches that remain as well.

Last fall, Ross Douthat published *The Deep Places*, a brief account of his struggles with chronic Lyme disease. The book is lyrical in places, fascinating in its investigations of the self's sense of its own diseased state, and serious in its efforts to understand the moral theology implicated by illness. It's also annoying. Douthat is that friend who just won't stop talking about his car wreck, long after your attention has begun to bang on the back of your eyelids demanding a respite.

The truth is that Ross Douthat actually is a friend—not just to me, who know him slightly, but to nearly everyone in the publishing world who's met him, even in these over-politicized days that seem to resent the existence of people who aren't perfectly aligned with the proper ideologies. And friends let friends drone on about their troubles. That might even be the definition of friendship.

Douthat can be your friend, too, for he has the gift, shared by fewer authors than you might imagine, of making readers feel an affinity: a sense of closeness and shared feeling. To read *The Deep Places* is to know, yes, the author is running on a bit, but you put up with it because he's become a friend. Pain, he writes, makes your body “feel like a cage around your consciousness.” A chronic illness such as Lyme disease “dramatically clarifies just how much this world of surfaces and curated selves lies to its inhabitants, to both the healthy and the sick.”

A columnist at *The New York Times*, Douthat undertook *The Deep Places*, his sixth book, as a “memoir of illness and discovery.” And he means both the illness and the discovery, for he tells the story not just of his suffering but also of his maniacal search for treatment once the ordinary doctors he consulted more or less dismissed his symptoms (and often the disease itself) as something like a psychosomatic disorder in those too stressed by the demands of modern life to live at peace with themselves: a first-world disease, in the parlance of the day, suffered by those without any actual suffering.

The story begins in 2015, when Douthat and his wife, Abigail, came to realize how much they hated Washington, D.C. Abigail Douthat, with her baby in a stroller, had been robbed on Capitol Hill. A few days later, she was nearly run down as she leaned into her car to unbuckle a child's seat.

Enough was enough, and the boom in Washington real estate prices meant that sale of their Capitol Hill house would give them the money to act on a dream. The Connecticut

natives would go to the land—that idyllic land imagined in the idles of city folk—and buy a countryside place in Connecticut. They found a 1790s farmhouse, out in the tulies, with a barn, some pastures, and fruit trees. Bucolic heaven, in other words, for a successful young man with a growing family.

The bucolic hell soon descended. Just a few days after buying the farmstead, Douthat found a crackling in his spine and a boil on his neck—a result of a tick bite he had received while looking over the property. Seeing deer in the meadow, he thought to himself, “Yes, this is what I want.” What he got was not just the deer but also an infection from the insects they carry.

Perhaps the first doctor Douthat consulted was not to blame for waving away the early symptoms of Lyme disease. Readers of *The Deep Places* will get a crash course in the rigid conditions the Centers for Disease Control have laid out before it will accept a report of the tick-borne disease, with the result that many early cases are missed.

Even with clear evidence of Lyme disease—obtained from Connecticut doctors only after a dozen D.C. doctors refused the diagnosis—Douthat discovers that the medical establishment refuses to accept the existence of *chronic* Lyme disease: the lingering and even escalating symptoms that sufferers insist they have. He feels as though he and his wife (carrying their third child while she tries to write her own book) are wandering through a set of *The Shining*, haunted by ghosts and too exhausted from pain's theft of sleep to undertake the repairs that a 1790s house needs. Their charming country life has turned to squalor, and the medical world keeps trying to tell them it's all in his mind.

So Douthat takes to the internet to find others like himself and learn the

treatments they have tried—nearly all of which he tries himself. He purchases a Rife device, which uses an “oscillating beam ray” to kill bacteria in a patient’s body. He hooks himself to an antibiotic drip. He buys more antibiotics at pet stores, pouring as many as a dozen a day down his throat, along with “every non-prescription antimicrobial substance that any study, however obscure, suggested,” as he notes with conscious irony. Still, his self-treatment, he insists, was systematic: “the most empirical work...I have ever attempted.”

In the end—but there isn’t really an end for chronic disease. It lessens, sometimes, and life goes on. Douthat’s subsequent bout of COVID confirmed what his chronic disease had taught him: a pronounced suspicion of blithely offered public-health declarations and the too-quick, too-programmatic pronouncements of doctors.

And his sufferings confirmed his faith as well. God is a luxury good for the healthy. God is a basic necessity for the ill. The intellect will not abolish pain and exhaustion. “The mind is always carapaced by suffering flesh,” Douthat writes, “like a balloon bobbing against a hard ceiling, free to move but not to soar away.” The will cannot save us, either. Only something above us can lift us out of ourselves.

The reviews received by *The Deep Places* last fall are instructive. Ross Douthat seems a friend even to those who’ve only read him, and many reviewers had actually met him. *The New York Times*, reviewing its own columnist (as some journals do, while others do not), went out of its way to be nicer to the book than the reviewer clearly felt—although, in the monovision of the day, she repeatedly mentions that it would have been a different book, and probably a better book, if it were written by a sensitive woman rather than a man who must, by nature, be a brute. *The Wall Street Journal* lauded the book, in a distant way, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books* snarked at it a little before admitting that, yes, it helped make clear, like one friend talking to another, the chronic drag of chronic disease and the spiritual teaching it can impart.

I’m less confident in the spirituality *The Deep Places* lays out. It’s earthy and bodily, which an illness by definition forces one to be, but it never reaches much beyond into the mystical, the way Simone Weil’s accounts do, or into the terrible gift of suffering, the way St. Therese shows.

“Affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it,” John Donne wrote in his *Devotions*. It’s one of those poetic lines that the healthy all nod sagely at, while the sick feebly reach up to throw a bedpan across the room at the poet’s head. Ross Douthat has suffered enough—he even had to sell the farmhouse, at a loss—that he’s earned the right to take a few potshots at sententious and fatuous efforts to make pain useful.

Our job is just to shake our heads in sorrow as we listen to the details. That’s what friends are for.

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BOOK

# There Is No Escaping Natural Law

*The Essential Natural Law*

By Samuel Gregg (Fraser Institute, 2021)

Reviewed by Ryan T. Anderson



*Reason tells us that there are things one cannot not know, among them: to do good and avoid evil. It is from this starting point that one can begin speaking of natural and civil rights.*

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In it, the protestant clergyman would cite two of the most influential saints of the Roman Catholic Church, Augustine and Aquinas, to justify civil disobedience in the face of unjust segregation laws:

*I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.” Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.*

As much as people today speak of moral relativism and legal positivism, the truth of the matter is that we can’t escape the natural law. Anytime we’re debating what the law *should* be, we’re appealing—at least implicitly—to some conception of justice, some conception of the common good, in order to justify why we think the law *ought* to be whatever our proposal entails. And the same is true whenever we’re deliberating about what we should do: The natural law governs our personal actions just as much as it does our common life as political communities. As Samuel Gregg, research director of the Acton Institute, explains in his new book, *The Essential Natural Law*, “natural law is primarily ethics insofar as it is concerned with practical reasoning about how individuals and communities do good and avoid evil when making choices and acting.”

Theories of the natural law are one thing—and theorists will debate them until the second coming. But the natural law is first and foremost a reality before it is theorized. There is a truth about human nature and the goods that perfect it, just as there is a truth about the moral norms that should govern our actions in pursuit of those goods. And the natural law tradition, as Gregg



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clearly lays out, holds that reason can know these truths, and that at some level we all make appeal to these basic truths even if we fail to follow reason *all the way* through: “Natural law maintains that for us to be rational in the fullest sense is to choose and act in accordance with what our reason tells us is the truth about the right course of action.”

Gregg opens this short book by tracing the tradition of natural law theorizing back to its classical roots in Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. Far from being merely a translation of Christian theology into secular language, Gregg argues that critical reflection on human nature and its perfection gets started in a systematic way in the ancient Greek and Roman thinkers who sought a standard of justice beyond mere convention, grounding justice in nature. From there Gregg turns to the Christian thinkers who develop this tradition of philosophy and incorporate it into Christian theology, particularly the medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas, whose foundational theory of natural law Gregg presents in some detail. Continuing his historical sweep, Gregg explores later medieval Catholic thinkers, such as Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suárez, particularly concerned with what the natural law entailed for the exploration and settlement of the so-called New World, international relations, and trade, along with Protestant natural law thinkers such as Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, and Emmerich de Vattel.

Of particular importance in Gregg’s presentation of natural law theory is that the goods that perfect human nature are the foundational starting points. Our grasps of certain ends that are good in themselves, not mere means to other ends, is what allows thinking about action to get off the ground. From there we can discern various moral norms that should guide our action, and then various *conclusions* about particulars such as the virtues that shape our character, the actions that should never be done because they always involve committing immorality (so-called moral absolutes), and rights understood as the entailments of justice. This last point is critically important: Natural rights for the natural law tradition are conclusions of a chain of moral reasoning, not starting points (as they are for certain social contract thinkers). Gregg explains: “Natural rights derived their moral, legal, and political force from giving effect to requirements of natural law. Absent that foundation, natural rights would be understood simply as assertions of will and thus having little to do with reason.” That is, it is only from a sound conception of human nature and human flourishing, of the demands of justice and the common good, that we can *then* reason to conclusions about natural rights—and, I would add, any justified political and civil rights.

From here, Gregg moves on to discuss what the natural law tradition means for political authority and the distinctively political common good. In a chapter titled “Limited Government and the Rule of Law,” Gregg explains that it is precisely a concern for human flourishing that both justifies and limits government, and that demands that people be governed by law. Here Gregg attends both to those things that government must do in order for people to flourish and the ways in which government could overreach and subvert that flourishing, with the principle of subsidiarity proving crucial. In the next chapter Gregg turns to the natural law foundations and limits to the ownership of private property, emphasizing the foundations of property rights in service to the common good, but not saying quite

enough about property duties. And in the final substantive chapter, Gregg explores the historic roots of the *jus gentium*—the law of nations—and its implications for international trade. In both these chapters on economic relations, Gregg examines the role that various late medieval and early modern Catholic and Protestant natural law thinkers played in the development of theorizing about markets, prices, trade, and commerce in general—showing how many of Adam Smith’s particular conclusions were already arrived at and with greater clarity and rational justification by these earlier thinkers.

The book concludes with Gregg’s discussion of the centrality of natural law for societies that want to maintain and protect ordered liberty, arguing that “it may well be natural law’s insistence that there are universal moral and philosophical truths knowable through right reason that represents one of its most important contributions to the maintenance of free societies.” Against skepticism about our ability to know the human good, or relativism and “neutrality” about the state’s promotion of the good, Gregg argues that it is precisely a sound—truthful—conception of human nature and human goods that will be the best bulwark for authentic freedom. Indeed, he closes the book with this clarion call: “Understanding natural law and the principles that it embodies surely has enormous potential to serve as a powerful ballast for the free society and to remind us of why liberty is important and why the protection of freedom merits eternal vigilance.”

Gregg’s book is an outstanding introduction—concise and accessible—to the broad natural law tradition. The choice to focus on economic and international relations leaves other topics less explored, and the Thomistic theory advanced is clearly influenced by Germain Grisez and John Finnis’s re-presentation of Aquinas’s works—which may rub some Thomists the wrong way. For the lay reader looking for a reliable guide, however, *The Essential Natural Law* is a fine place to start.

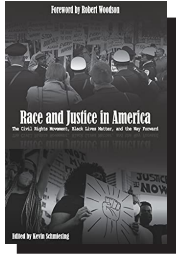
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# Thinking About Race Anew

*Race and Justice in America: The Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Way Forward*

Edited by Kevin Schmiesing (Freedom & Virtue Institute, 2021)

Reviewed by Rachel Ferguson



*State-based and tribal solutions to racial economic imbalances are being challenged from conservative quarters. It's about time.*

In *Race and Justice in America*, Kevin Schmiesing collects several essays dealing with American race relations from a perspective that affirms the American ideal, grounds it in Christian natural law, and celebrates markets and entrepreneurship. Robert Woodson, a former civil rights activist and conservative who champions black progress through ownership and entrepreneurship, wrote the foreword. It sets the tone for a collection that seems to have been put together to show that conservatives and free marketers can acknowledge America's racial sins and care about racial uplift without denigrating the American project or becoming socialistic. This is a worthy goal, one I wish more conservatives and classical liberals would attempt. Right-leaning people of goodwill can learn much from the collection. However, the Ismael Hernandez essays, which cover most of the philosophical content of the book, are perhaps too ambitious in their attempt to deal with all the relevant movements and thinkers in such a short space.

It's always a daunting task to simplify complex philosophical debates and historical movements for a popular audience. Schmiesing does an admirable job in the opening essay of providing a quick gloss of the black American struggle for freedom and its relationship with Christianity. The role of faith is undeniable as a matter of historic reality, both among black freedom fighters and their white colleagues. The role of the church in the story is too often obscured by an emphasis on mere politics. While Schmiesing draws on Douglass' famous condemnation of slave-holding Christianity, the essay would benefit from the addition of a short section on the betrayal of black Christians by white Christians during the civil rights movement itself. For instance, I'm not sure it's true that the civil rights movement grew into a "nationwide, broadly supported campaign." It's more accurate to say that once the legislative goals had been reached through the hard work of a majority black movement with a few brave white activists coming alongside, white America accepted it. Why do I say this? Because in 1968 when he was killed, 75% of Americans disapproved of Martin Luther King Jr., whose philosophy of nonviolence Schmiesing and Hernandez prefer. Billy Graham agreed with King's goals but argued he was moving too fast, though he later repented for taking this position. Books like *God's Long Summer* and *The Color of Compromise* do an admirable job of telling this theologically, historically, and culturally complex story. Researchers don't need to agree with these authors about everything to allow their historical insight to inspire some serious soul searching in the white American church. Such acknowledgement is doubly necessary in a work framed as a Christian perspective on race, particularly one also attempting to defend the U.S. Constitution and the American ideal against claims of inherent racist corruption.

Nevertheless, Schmiesing covers a lot of ground here quickly and informatively, demonstrating that the black American struggle has been deeply informed and inspired by the black church and its identification with the Judeo-Christian concept of the human person, the experiences of the Hebrew people in and out of bondage, and the person of Jesus Christ. He acknowledges the undeniable evidence of black oppression in American

history and notes well the massive violations of individual liberty.

The core of the book is made up of three essays by black Puerto Rican immigrant and nonprofit leader Ismael Hernandez (one of which is co-authored with Schmiesing). Hernandez wants to present a Christian personalist account of the value of black lives, while critiquing those movements that claim to value them but lack the necessary philosophical grounding on which to do so. This point is clear by the end of the book, at least, though I wouldn't have minded a more explicit statement of the purposes of the collection up front. I don't envy him his task either, as leftist political theory is currently composed of a mishmash of academic obscurantism and often deeply conflicting ideas. It's difficult to engage with it at all without mapping out a maze of interconnected but disparate thinkers, from Hegel, Rousseau, and Marx to Beauvoir, Marcuse, Foucault, and Derrick Bell. In a work like this, it's not necessary to make every single scholarly distinction apparent, but it can also undermine credibility when too many names and ideas are rolled up into one grand narrative of what's wrong with our conversations around race. Anyone familiar enough with the content to know all these names and movements will know enough to be nitpicky about the way Hernandez lays them out.

For instance, Hernandez distinguishes broadly between the dialectical/separationist socio-political approach and the personalist/integrationist approach, filing various thinkers and movements under each. But Marxism is clearly dialectical and integrationist, since it's an international workers' movement that seeks to overcome all distinctions other than class. Defining these categories too broadly leads to some odd outcomes, like putting the Nation of Islam (NOI) under the dialectical/separationist label. While the Nation of Islam is certainly a separationist movement, it's also well-known for its embrace of the traditional family and other bourgeois sensibilities around business success. Socialists condemned NOI leader Louis Farrakhan's Million Man March because of its emphasis on personal responsibility and black self-help, and you can buy T-shirts online that say "My Conservatism Is Malcolm." I'm sure experts on other figures Hernandez discusses will bring up similar objections to such broad categorizations.

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Why do more precise distinctions matter? For two reasons. First, oversimplification of these categories has a nasty history. You might remember the old picture of a protester against school integration holding up a sign that says “Race Mixing is Communism.” It’s true that communists supported race mixing, but that doesn’t make race mixing a communist idea any more than the fact that Nazis condemned smoking means that anti-smoking campaigns are eugenicist. We need to be particularly sensitive to this today, as both ends of the political spectrum are equally slapdash in their language, with leftists calling every conservative point racist, and conservatives calling every left-leaning point Marxist. For instance, the Scandinavian system of a robust free market supplemented by a significant welfare state is most decidedly not Marxist. It’s welfare liberalism, and ought to be addressed as such. Oversimplification has led to real confusion. Secondly, we miss out on opportunities for unlikely alliances when we too quickly put other groups into the “wrong” camp. As Frederick Douglass said, “I would unite with anybody to do right, and with nobody to do wrong.” Some of the greatest accomplishments of the conservative movement over the past decade have been in areas with great appeal for black Americans: criminal justice reform and educational freedom. Unduly declaring black cultural heroes like Malcolm X to be the mortal enemies of the movement will undermine good possibilities for civic friendship.

Another point of concern is that readers who aren’t already familiar with these names and philosophical movements will almost certainly feel baffled in trying to follow the conversation, as Hernandez sometimes introduces terminology without immediately defining it and discusses various thinkers with the assumption of background knowledge. He is obviously writing for the educated nonprofessional. The question is, however, how educated? Terms like “personalist,” “realism,” “dialectical,” “collectivist,” and others, combined with a long list of philosophers and activists, can leave one’s head spinning. Ultimately, I found myself wishing that Hernandez would map the philosophical background of this debate with just a few more distinctions between strands of thought, but fewer philosophical figures mentioned to demonstrate them.

Substantively, though, Hernandez hones in on the right principles for thinking deeply about America’s racial tensions: the dignity and inherent value of every individual; our shared human nature regardless of race; and the importance of fighting for freedom and uplift in ways that are effective and not utopian. Hernandez is concerned about revolutionary movements whose utopian fantasies end up making matters worse for marginalized communities by undermining stable social structures and economic chances. He’s absolutely right on that score. For far too long, the academic scene has been populated by thinkers who neither appreciate the absolute Christian claims about the nature of human persons nor the wonders of the free market. It’s frustrating that the greatest source of enrichment for the poor across the world—participation in global markets—is almost universally condemned by the very same people who complain about the relatively impoverished economic position of black Americans. Of course, it might not have gone this way if thinkers more amenable to natural law and free market arguments had been active in defense of property rights, contract rights, and rights to equal protection of the law for black people in this country. That’s why it was heartening to see Schmiesing and Hernandez emphasize both the black church

tradition and the white Christian fellow travelers who fought for civil rights; they were among the few who fought for traditional values and black liberation at the same time. But it’s also an opportunity for conservatives and classical liberals to ask themselves why some of their predecessors in the defense of the American ideal weren’t more sensitive to the plight of black America. The simple answer is racism. The bigger question is how that racism was rationalized.

The final essay is perhaps the most inspiring. John Sibley Butler contrasts populations, including a whole class of successful black entrepreneurs, who “took their future to the market” with those who “took their future to the factories.” The main distinction is not whether any of them ever worked in factories, but whether their long-term goal was to stay in the factory system indefinitely or to get their children an education and to open up small businesses. Another major factor at play here is the idea of the group economy, discussed at length by W.E.B. Du Bois in sociological studies of black American life. Butler convincingly argues that those black Americans who perfected the concept of the group economy, started black colleges and universities, and encouraged their children to start small enterprises, created generational wealth. But for those who didn’t, racism plays a devastating role. Millions of people of all colors went to the industrial north for jobs, but the black population suffered worst under unyielding discrimination, far from the long-standing institutions of their southern homes. They simply could not generate the all-black colleges and businesses that those in the south enjoyed and thus stayed on the factory path. Butler discusses the work of William Julius Wilson at length, essentially agreeing with his analysis about the central role of unemployment in black social outcomes but disagreeing with Wilson’s policy recommendations. Parallel to some of Hernandez’s complaints, Butler expresses frustration that the civil rights movement put more emphasis on things like public accommodation law than on building those institutions that would sustain long-term economic growth. This essay is also full of enticing references to work on the tradition of black entrepreneurship in America. I found the historical analysis interesting and the implications for practical solutions compelling.

Finally, Hernandez wraps up *Race and Justice in America* by condemning the “false dualism” between a conservative movement that merely rolls its eyes at contemporary discussions of racism and a progressive movement that uses our racist past as an “alibi” for every social problem in which the black population is overrepresented. He hopes to carve out a more reasonable approach that does justice to our racist history, doesn’t give in to despair with regard to the American project, and thinks hard about solutions that are actually effective. This is exactly the kind of work that conservatives and classical liberals ought to be doing right now. If we have few if any such accounts of black history on offer, we can hardly complain when the left sucks all the air out of the room. I commend Schmiesing, Hernandez, and Butler for insisting on having this conversation and for refusing to play tribal politics in the process. May this work multiply!

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# Liberalisms and Their Critic

*Whatever Happened to Tradition?*

By Tim Stanley (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021)

Reviewed by Dylan Pahman



*Tradition is in bad shape, but journalist Tim Stanley's critique of liberalism doesn't help.*

In *Whatever Happened to Tradition?* British journalist Tim Stanley seeks to answer his titular question while simultaneously making an apology for the allegedly elusive “tradition” to which something has “happened.” Spoiler alert: It’s liberalism.

Stanley adds his own Christian Blue Labour brand of indictment against this much-maligned social and political philosophical tradition to the large chorus of voices that say, more or less, exactly the same thing. From Yoram Hazony to Patrick Deneen to Alistair McIntyre to Brad Gregory to Rod Dreher to Sohrab Ahmari—the list goes on—the postliberal religious traditionalist of today has a veritable library to choose from. What gives *Whatever Happened to Tradition?* any comparative advantage over its competitors in this oversaturated market? Or does it, perhaps, have none, given that part of this recent trend involves downplaying, dismissing, ignoring, or otherwise misunderstanding the importance of economic liberty and comparative advantage in the first place?

To be clear: I write this as a religious traditionalist myself, of sorts. I became Greek Orthodox some years ago and believe that everyone, on balance, would be better off with more incense and icons, the Nicene Creed, and sundry ascetic disciplines. But I know my tradition well enough not to confuse its spiritual treasures with earthly regimes or ideologies. The Church has survived through a diverse array of imperial, national, and tribal societies and economies with varying degrees of amicability and hostility toward it, while still preserving the tradition of “the faith...once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). This is not to say that the gospel of Jesus Christ stands utterly apart from our earthly and social life, but rather the way in which we relate to the world is through its spiritual life and principles, in the sacramental communion of fellow Christians, no matter the political context in which we find ourselves.

For anyone familiar with the many varieties of liberalism (it is not a monolith) and the principles of economic liberty, it quickly becomes clear that Stanley is not. In his defense, he admits, “Defining liberalism could be as tricky as nailing jelly to a wall” (38), yet he is no more successful at such Sisyphean carpentry than others, settling on the general observation that “running through the history of liberalism we find a disposition towards freedom, equality, the individual, the scientific method and that constant emphasis on growth through reason” (38). Put in such nonspecific terms, who would object? Not even Stanley, really, who in his many caveats and waffling affirms, at points, the potential good of each of these aspects of the liberal “disposition” so defined.

Yet, warns Stanley, “Russia’s experience of liberal capitalism was horrible—gangsterism and theft—and it quickly returned to authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin. China embraced capitalism without bothering with democracy” (39). The confusion here comes in presuming minor attempts at liberalization amount to genuine economic liberty. Neither nation has experienced anything that could be generally termed “liberal capitalism,” which, to clearly define it, is any economy characterized

by private property, free exchange, the division of labor, and the rule of law. (If Boris Yeltsin’s Russian Federation and Deng Xiaoping’s Communist China are the quintessence of liberalism, then I guess I’m a postliberal, too.) Even so, what liberal improvements have been made in both contexts have been leaps and bounds better than Bolshevism, the “Cultural Revolution,” Holodomor, or the Gulag. The question remains: In what ways would continued improvement in Russia and China not be in a more classically liberal direction—namely, toward the protection of basic human rights, religious liberty, a freer press, free elections, and the reduction of mercantile political privilege in their economies?

Nevertheless, Stanley insists on setting tradition and liberalism in opposition to one another: “If tradition is defined by three qualities—it connects the individual to their society, passes on social knowledge and transcends time and place—liberalism often does the complete opposite” (40). “Liberalism,” to Stanley, not only includes but is undifferentiated from cultural progressivism. At various points he complains about the sexual revolution, transgenderism, wokeness, cancel culture, looting and rioting, and the decline of marriage and religion, but the liberal thread that supposedly ties these together is not as apparent as he thinks. At least some of these are as much the product of cultural Marxism as liberalism. Moreover, the classical liberal tradition of John Locke, the U.S. Founding Fathers, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke consistently affirms some version of natural law, freedom of speech, the importance of religion and virtue, the family, and so on. If one were myopically to limit liberalism only to them, as Stanley and others myopically limit it to these grievances today, one might come to the opposite conclusion: that our modern malaise amounts to a departure from the liberal tradition. A more measured conclusion—the right one, in my opinion—would be that many have substituted a bad form of liberalism for a good one or none at all. That would require one to discern the difference between schools and trends within liberalism, rather than straw-manning and dismissing the entire tradition, a task at which too many balk today, Stanley included.

Therein lies the problem. Liberalism is a tradition in its own right. It is a broad intellectual tradition, not without problems, but certainly not devoid of merits either. There are schools of thought within liberalism. There are historical, even Christian, antecedents to liberalism, such as Cicero, the Edict of Milan, St. Augustine's *City of God*, and Magna Carta. There are Christian liberals alongside secular Enlightenment liberals, just as Stanley is right to point out the real tradition of Christian socialism that he favors, as exemplified by such figures as R. H. Tawney and John Ruskin, which is distinct from revolutionary Marxism. Like many other authors of this recent trend of postliberal religious traditionalists, Stanley's nontraditional use of "liberalism" simply amounts to whatever-he-doesn't-like-about-culture-today. I don't like many of those things, either. Where *Whatever Happened to Tradition?* comes up wanting is through its paucity of analytical nuance, substituting instead a surfeit of journalistic anecdotes that, though often well written, cumulatively have the effect of padding out the prose of otherwise shallow assertions disguised as serious arguments.

The worst offender in this regard is chapter 6, "Tradition and Identity," which could more accurately have been titled, "On Circumcision, Featuring a Gratuitous Glut of Anatomical Detail." Perhaps I'm just a prude, but modesty is a traditional virtue, not only of the modern, Victorian era but the millennia-old Christian and even Jewish tradition (despite the latter's continued religious use of circumcision). Or maybe I'm just a liberal: I can tolerate such detail for the sake of scientific investigation. But it seems to me that one can modestly talk about the significance of circumcision as a traditional marker of identity for various peoples and religions without a lengthy and explicit instruction manual for how to become a mohel.

In Stanley's defense, he tries to be fair to opposing views, and perhaps that effort constitutes *Whatever Happened to Tradition?*'s comparative advantage vis-à-vis its competitors. In chapter 9, "Tradition and Equality"—essentially his chapter on economics—Stanley goes out of his way to acknowledge how the British left too often unfairly demonizes Margaret Thatcher, offering extra context for

sometimes misinterpreted statements. But he still spends little time with key proponents, such as, well, any mainstream economist, of the economic liberty he criticizes. He repeats, via Daniel Bell, Max Weber's thesis that capitalism depends upon values it actively undermines. There may be merit to the claim, but if one wants to argue that point, one should be able to demonstrate this necessarily self-destructive contradiction in the works of major figures like Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall, neither of whom, nor any of their contemporaries, does Stanley bother to quote. He also resorts to annoying clichés such as the straw man of "untrammeled" or "unfettered" free markets, as if all proponents of economic liberty are as radical as Ayn Rand. (They're not.)

Furthermore, one would expect a proponent of Christian socialism to spend more time among the works of actual Christian socialists and their critics. In addition to Tawney and Ruskin, Stanley cites the Scottish satirist Thomas Carlyle, known for his proto-fascist "great man" theory of history and his deriding of classical political economy as the "dismal science" because of the success of economists like Richard Whately and Robert Malthus (both ordained ministers, incidentally) in fighting for the abolition of slavery in Britain. Are we to believe that a proponent of slavery like Carlyle should be considered a friend of Christian labor? Among Stanley's own Roman Catholic tradition, he cites only Pope Francis and G. K. Chesterton, the latter of whom preferred distributism—his and Hilaire Belloc's own ethical economic system—to capitalism or socialism and who, according to George Orwell at least, was troublingly enamored of Mussolini's Italy. Why not engage actual Roman Catholic socialists like Dorothy Day and Gustavo Gutiérrez? For that matter, why not wrestle with the pronouncements of various popes in favor of organized labor, though opposed to socialism, such as Leo XIII, Pius XI, and John Paul II? There are so many sources to interact with, even limited just to Roman Catholicism. Outside Stanley's tradition, I would be fascinated to read a sympathetic exploration of figures like Henri de Saint-Simon or Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel tradition, but no such luck. Of course, one need not

read and cite every classical economist, Christian socialist, and Christian critic of socialism in order to talk about historic Christian support for organized labor, but the sources Stanley does cite seem oddly selective. Strung together, they make for an entertaining narrative but fall short of a coherent argument.

That might serve as a fitting summary of the book, in fact: entertaining, but not an argument. Oddly, I think *Whatever Happened to Tradition?* would be better without a thesis at all. Stanley isn't wrong that many traditional values and practices have waned from our cultures and even have been attacked by (some) Enlightenment intellectuals. He's not wrong that there are many today actively seeking to undermine those same values and practices. He's not wrong that there's tragedy in the loss of tradition. Simply painting that picture in a vivid and sympathetic way, without any other agenda, might better highlight the value and beauty of tradition, and Stanley certainly has the needed talent in storytelling to do it. Unfortunately, that's not the book he wrote, and I cannot recommend the one he did.

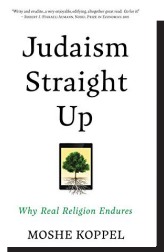
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# Tradition: A Guide to Social Survival in the 21st Century

*Judaism Straight Up: Why Real Religion Endures*

By Moshe Koppel (Maggid Books, 2020)

Reviewed by Benjamin Schvarcz



*In the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, it is vital that something does not get lost: faith.*

Heidi and Moshe—two young Princeton University scholars, one secular and cosmopolitan, the other religious and Zionist—are bickering. What’s the big surprise? They hold diametrically opposing worldviews. They argue whether Jews should adopt or reject their national identity. “How can you justify your narrow tribal loyalty?” asks Heidi, a student in the faculty of humanities. “Isn’t the lesson of the Holocaust that we Jews must never put our parochial interests ahead of others’ interests? We should know better than anyone what happens when that lesson isn’t learned.” Moshe, a young Ph.D. in mathematics, is rendered speechless. He was not prepared for that blow. He sat before her, as he later testifies, “slack-jawed, staring at her uncomprehendingly.” Forty years later, as a professor emeritus of computer science at Bar-Ilan University and chairman of the Kohelet Policy Forum, Moshe Koppel published his detailed response to Heidi in his book *Judaism Straight Up: Why Real Religion Endures*, also aptly translated to Hebrew by Alon Shalev with the participation of Tsur Erlich as *Living Like a Jew: Why Tradition Will Continue to Bury the Prophets of Its Demise*.

Koppel’s world is split between tradition and modernity, between Jewish ethnicity and Western cosmopolitanism, between religious faith and scientific research. He is at home in each of these realms, yet they seem to represent “different facets of [his] social, religious, and intellectual experience.” The book is intended—though not explicitly described as such—to serve as a guide to the perplexed of this generation. There are those who shut themselves up in a communal ghetto behind religious walls, rejecting modernity, and there are those who, due to this confusion, detach completely from tradition as outdated and meaningless. Koppel seeks a model for a balanced Judaism committed to Jewish law but not afraid of enlightenment.

With an eye-opening and highly entertaining methodical style, Koppel formulates his arguments by means of human figures not quite in dialogue. The book’s protagonist takes the form of an old and grouchy Jew, a Holocaust survivor named Shimen, with whom he prayed at the Gerer Hassidic *shtiebel* in Manhattan. Shimen and his friends, including Moshe’s grandfather, were “God-fearing Jews, but they felt sufficiently at home with God to take liberties as necessary.” The author does not provide the reader with a list of these liberties, but the picture reflected here is of wholly devout, pious Jews who admittedly abandoned the outward appearance of Gerer Hassidim but would not even pour boiling water over a tea bag on Shabbat.

Alongside Shimen is the character of Heidi, an attractive and graceful student, with a good sense of humor and an endearing character. Her parents were active in a Conservative synagogue on Long Island and kept kosher at home but not outside the house. At Princeton, she broadened her horizons, making friends from diverse backgrounds. Orthodox Jews seemed narrow-minded to her, especially in their treatment of Gentiles. She also criticized the inferior status of Jewish Orthodox women in public rituals, such as prayer, Torah study, and the marriage ceremony. Shimen’s and Heidi’s

views are juxtaposed throughout the book, even though they would not likely have interacted had they met in person. It is Princeton’s kosher dining room that provides an opportunity for an argument to develop.

What conditions are necessary for the prosperity of human societies? That is the fundamental question to which the entire book aims to respond. Koppel claims that Shimen’s community is sustainable but that Heidi’s “is doomed.” Why? Because societies “need rich systems of social norms...in order to cohere and survive.” According to Koppel, Shimen lives in a rich system of halakhic social norms, “including public rituals, food taboos, kinship rules, and commercial-exchange regulations;” and special obligations toward other Jews. Heidi’s moral system, on the other hand, is limited to an overriding universal principle of avoiding harm to any person. In a nutshell, Koppel argues that tradition is necessary for society, whereas Heidi’s society is detached from tradition and therefore lacks bonds that rely on tradition, ethnicity, or history that would enable it to survive over time.

Richard A. Shweder and Jonathan Haidt, two social scientists, have identified a core moral system consisting of three fundamental principles: (1) Fairness toward other persons and their rights; (2) loyalty to one’s family, community, or nationality; and (3) restraint and respect for a certain order. Against this backdrop, Koppel argues that the moral systems that guide Shimen and Heidi are completely different. He convincingly argues that these three elements are intrinsically incorporated into Shimen’s halakhic worldview. Regarding Heidi and her friends, on the other hand, they value



the principle of fairness to the exclusion of those of loyalty and restraint.

Since Koppel tried “to represent Heidi’s views fairly and to give her the strongest possible arguments on behalf of those views,” one wonders if she herself would have agreed to the aforementioned categorical division. Heidi has adopted a point of view sensitive to the needs of the weaker elements of society, and the pursuit of social justice is crucial to her. Moshe indeed argues with her about the proper ways to achieve that noble goal. However, is it possible to deny that the duty of loyalty guides Heidi in her actions, a loyalty to her fellow citizens of the United States of America and their welfare, overcoming religious, ethnic, economic, and political gaps dividing them? Rather, Heidi can argue back: Why does Shimen’s attitude toward his fellow American citizens rest upon the principle of fairness? Why is it not based on loyalty to the political community? Does a norm of fairness that applies to every person, whether or not he or she is a member of a given political community, enable the maintenance of a thriving liberal state? Where is the virtue of patriotism? We will return to this last question later.

Another problem: According to Koppel, Shimen’s opposition to marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew constitutes an example of loyalty to the Jewish nation. For Heidi, however, support for this marriage would be an example of restraint and respect for the liberal order in which the family should be made to overcome spouses’ religious differences. Thus, contrary to Shweder and Haidt’s thesis, the dispute between Heidi and Shimen is not necessarily based upon the primacy of loyalty or restraint. Rather, the controversy revolves around these questions: Should we prioritize loyalty to the ethnic group (Shimen) or the political group (Heidi)? And should we exercise more restraint toward a religious order (Shimen) or a liberal order (Heidi)?

One question popped into my mind while reading the book in Princeton’s James Madison Program—where I am currently a postdoctoral research associate—located at the same address of the former university’s kosher dining hall. Is Shimen a patriot? Koppel writes: “Shimen

identifies strongly with his community and much less with the country in which he happens to live.” On the one hand, the political community is a purely coincidental matter, and Shimen’s attitude toward it is indifferent and cold. On the other hand, he and his friends “are also grateful for the freedom and security afforded them by the United States and by the cultural openness so central to the American ethos.” Shimen acts more as a guest who utters an uncommitted thank you to his hosts in a hotel than as a member of a group of people working in fraternity to build their common homeland. What about patriotism? The vitality of patriotism is obviously apparent in Koppel’s discussion of the State of Israel. Adi, the Israeli figure equivalent to that of Heidi, is called to task for not identifying with her own political community. Here I wrote a side note to myself: “Adi wants to be Shimen!” Adi’s attitude toward her political community is cold; she wants America.

In the next phase of the book, Koppel takes on the question of faith with personal and intellectual courage from the point of view of the skeptic. He presents a position I believe will be difficult for much of the traditional Israeli public to digest. Not in vain does he choose to plant the bomb far away from the eyes of casual readers skimming through, content with the book title, preface and introduction, chapter titles, and opening and closing paragraphs. Only after exhausting readers with complex discussions in the fields of anthropology, game theory, political economy, halakhic development, and language theory, does the author turn to the meaning of faith. Even at that, he suggests that readers skip the third part of the book if they hold the naive faith instilled in them from infancy. Koppel addresses only those whose minds are torn between modern reason and traditional religious faith.

Shimen is not a philosopher. He holds true to Jewish religious faith, not by choice, but out of respect for the tradition into which he was born and educated. A man loves his son not because a rational investigation has revealed that his son is the best of his cohort. Similarly, a person maintains the Jewish faith not because a rational inquiry has revealed

it has become clear to him as true but because of a previous personal commitment to the Jewish people. Thus, tradition precedes faith. For her part, Heidi’s attitude towards Shimen’s faith is skeptical. In the words of Professor Leon Kass: “We are too worldly to submit to the genius of tradition.” But Shimen does not feel the need to justify himself. He has no need to formulate his faith. Although “he had a few bones to pick with the Creator...for him this was an entirely intimate matter.” Koppel, however, did choose to examine his own faith here. He put in Heidi’s mouth a deadly attack on the standard principles of naive faith: the creation of the world, Torah from Heaven, miracles, the Holy Spirit, reward and punishment, the Chosen People, and the future resurrection of the dead. Koppel does not dismiss Heidi’s claims; some will say he accepts them. Thus, Koppel formulates an abstract faith.

First, he reduces naive faith to three principles: The Torah was given in divine revelation; those who keep the laws of the Torah will be rewarded; and the Jewish people move toward redemption. Next, he reduces these three principles to one abstract conception whereby “Judaism is a directed process linking the Jewish past with the Jewish future.” Here are the details: (1) “Judaism developed helter-skelter from some special origins in the murky past” (Torah from Heaven); (2) “the process is limping forward in some vaguely-understood positive direction” (messianism); and (3) “leading a life bound to Torah is its own reward” (reward and punishment). Aside from the noteworthy statement that commitment to tradition precedes belief chronologically, Koppel’s bold conclusion is that life in light of tradition constitutes the essence of faith. Just like tradition, faith is a mindset linking past and future via a cautious optimism toward the prosperity of the concrete community. Thus, social prosperity has turned out to be, in Koppel’s thought, the fundamental touchstone for religious and traditional life.

Shimen is a devout Jew, a merchant by profession; he is neither an American patriot nor a philosopher. He thanks American society for its generosity but does not actively believe in the ideals upon

which the United States was founded. He maintains a naive Jewish faith and feels no need to articulate or justify it in the face of Heidi and Koppel's skepticism. If so, one might ask: In what way is he a modern person? Why was Shimen chosen as an example for a proper balance between tradition and modernity?

The reader might initially expect to encounter here arguments routinely propagated by the Israeli religious right. However, he will soon discover that Koppel's discussion, rooted mostly in the United States, adds a rich layer of complexity to Israeli discourse. The author's implicit approach to patriotism and his explicit approach to faith demand nothing less than a thorough rethinking of the dynamics of contemporary Israeli political theory. To the extent that the book participates in the controversies between conservatives and progressives, it also fuels an additional internal debate among Israel's traditional camp. Which version of tradition should be promoted, and how?

A non-Jewish equivalent to Koppel's thesis can be found in an article recently published by Allen C. Guelzo and James Hankins at *The New Criterion*. They call for a renewed balance between tradition and modernity and for a measure of loyalty to Western traditions and civilization. Sharing Koppel's view, Guelzo and Hankins argue: "A culture that cannot balance the modern and the traditional, one that is all for the modern and all against the traditional, will end up destroying itself." However, despite the commonality, there seems to be a gap between their view and Koppel's. Koppel's tradition is ethnic, religious, and national while being explicitly immersed in a pluralistic conception recognizing the value of different human traditions. However, Guelzo and Hankins speak in favor of a Western tradition that itself contains diverse nations, ethnic groups, religions, languages, subcultures, and even countries with conflicting interests. Koppel shares a profound respect for the treasures of Western culture, but

he does not explain whether this is due to respect for tradition in a broad sense transcending the Jewish tradition or whether it is a component of his modern thought. Discussing the concept of tradition from such a comparative perspective can add an important tier to the thesis presented in this book, which nevertheless presents a fascinating and elegantly elucidated position by an influencer of Israeli politics that is well worth getting to know.

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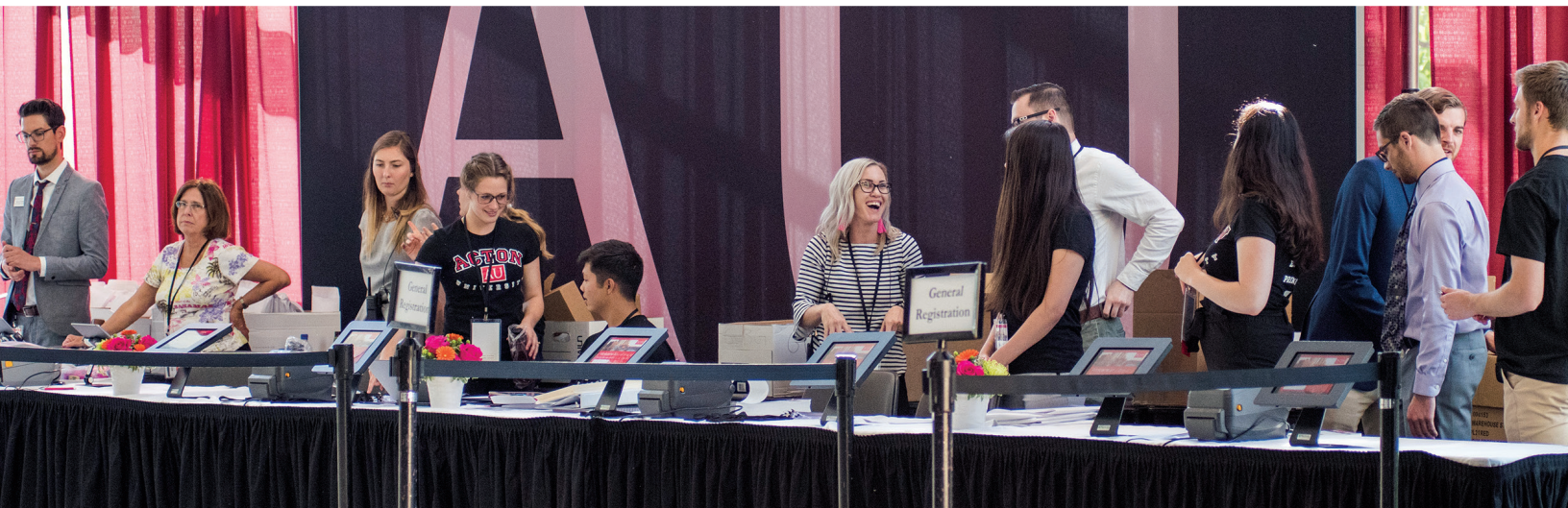
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