

## Prophets of Piety

It was in the early 1980s, while I was attending graduate school, that a professor at Michigan State University gave me an extra copy of a small book by Richard M. Weaver—*Ideas Have Consequences*. Reading this small, lucid volume constituted for me an epiphany of piety. It has become a friend, the kind of book one can return to periodically for spiritual refreshment. I have come to believe that if there is to be a fourth generation of conservatives it will be necessary for the third generation to communicate the essential features of conservatism, and Weaver's book is probably best suited to do this. Let me explain why.

One of the reasons I attended a land grant college was to become a professional in resource economics and policy in order to influence environmental policies in a way that was consistent with my sense of man's stewardship of nature. Having gone through the usual science and math courses at a typically secular undergraduate college, I still suffered to some extent from the modern point of view. By "modern" I mean the view which includes a generally uncritical attitude toward science and technical progress. Indeed, the proponents of modernity shrink at the very idea that there is anything at all to criticize here. I don't mean minor, ad hoc criticisms, but a generic critique of the scientific and industrial enterprise.

What is impressive about *Ideas Have Consequences* is that Weaver dares to do just that. He outlines a convincing vision about how life should be lived. This vision, or "metaphysical dream" as Weaver calls it, is vitally important because it enables us to order our world. However, one of the difficulties with a worldview—with anything that deals honestly with fundamental issues—is that it confronts us with an either/or situation. It is

hard to take the middle ground and say: "Well, I kind of like it." The inclination is far more often to accept it eagerly or to despise it completely. I found that I was immediately attracted to Weaver's vision.

There was a cost to this. It meant that I had to change the way I saw the world. It was as though the merry-go-round had suddenly reversed: I saw the same objects but from the opposite point of view. That required some rethinking and a sort of repentance, a turning away from certain habits of thought while acquiring others. All of this pivoted on the issue of piety. Piety involves a sacramental vision of things and a respect for that which is not of our own making. The impiety of the modern world became increasingly and painfully clear as I absorbed the full meaning of Weaver's book. It also became clear that the task of the conservative was to pass on this spirit of piety and to try to see it spread to others.

### Respect for Creation

Piety, as I discovered from Weaver, begins with respect for the world that has been given to us in both its moral and natural dimensions. It requires the recognition that values have status in being; they are objective and real and independent of our subjective feelings or considerations of utilitarian function. They require a response from us because of what they are, not because of what they do. Once this is understood it is easier to recognize, by analogy, that creatures also

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have status in being; that is, beings have value because of what they are, not merely in how they function. Thus, as Weaver writes elsewhere, children and the elderly have traditionally been accorded respect because as human beings they have intrinsic value, even though they don't function well socially. An exclusive preoccupation with function at the expense of status leads to the devaluing of human life and the tragedy of abortion as well as to the abuse of lesser creatures.

However, to grasp this spirit of piety—what beings are, not just what they do—is one of the most difficult things for a young conservative to do. First, because youth is by temperament not inclined to it; piety requires the habit of self-denial. And second, because of the way we live today: delaying gratification is not what we are taught and it strikes us as a repulsive novelty. Our world is one which strives for instant satisfaction. The worm of impiety tends to put selfish, materialistic interests first while insisting on the goodness of doing so.

Unfortunately, this worm infects many aspects of what has come to be called the "conservative movement." In economics conservatives have stressed the social utility of self-interest. Of course, the importance of freedom to pursue self-interest has served as an important criticism against utopian schemes that would deny this all-too-human trait in favor of a society supposedly held together by brotherly love alone. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize limits to the legitimate exercise of self-interest, not just in the usual sense of respecting property rights but in the unusual sense too. Is it right, for example, to have a market in abortion? A conservative should immediately see that abortion is an act of enormous impiety.

But the worm of impiety is more subtle. In one economics textbook, for instance, abortion is used to illustrate demand curves. The matter-of-fact casualness in using this example communicates to the student that the taking of human life is just a matter of buying and selling as in any other market transaction. It tends to desensitize the student to the moral dimension of the issue and so render him that much less pious. The example is one of enormous intellectual disrespect. What

publisher would accept a corresponding example using Nazi concentration camp victims? What is the demand curve for dead Jews?

Public choice theory is also liable to the charge of impiety. Its basic teaching is that: we cannot talk about the existence of objective values. Only subjective, self-interested preferences can be dealt with and so, ultimately, no distinction can be made between my preference for ice cream and my preference for not killing unborn children. Clearly, it is impious to place one on the level with the other. In fact, with this view one cannot even defend one's preference for the market.

This same view of values contributes to the tendency today to overextend the concept of privatization. This is a perfectly legitimate approach to deal with some economic problems, but it can be abused. To admit that there are objective values is to admit that there are limits on the market. Yet to those in the conservative movement who are thoroughly enamored with the market it is unthinkable to appeal to anything else. They fail to see that it is equally utopian to deny that man has a need to transcend the self in some areas of life. To insist that we speak only in terms of a universe closed to the transcendent, based solely on the natural outflows of self-interest—a cosmos of commercialism—is just as utopian as any scheme that denies that people act in self-interested ways.

#### A Humane Economics

It is from this attitude that economics itself must be redeemed. We need to work out a new, or at least greatly modified, economics that reflects traditional values, rather than the utilitarian and pragmatic orientation implicit in much of modern economic thought. This concern is reflected in the work of the German economist Wilhelm Roepke, as well as in the writings of the Southern Agrarians. Whatever insights of conventional economics can be retained, they must be derived from a perspective that remembers transcendence and piety, especially in the areas of environmental and welfare economics. If such an economics the legitimate exercise of self-interest would be allowed because it respects the limits of the individual while recognizing it as a moral and social duty du

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rived from a transcendent view of life. This school of thought could be called by a number of names: metaphysical economics, prescriptive or even axiological economics. It would seek policy solutions that preserve community, stability, and home and would use intelligence and discrimination in the selection of technologies.

But conservatives are infected with the disease of modernity in other areas. There is a broad spectrum of issues that reflect the same assault on our status as beings. Can we really be happy with such things as organ transplants, genetic manipulation, "fetal tissue research," and a host of other trends? We now live in a world that brings children (donor babies?) into existence for the purpose of providing others with young organs. This is what comes of not recognizing the abstract rights of other creatures. We are on an ever-expanding spiral of impiety as we develop an incapacity to leave anything alone which is not of our own making. We are concerned for the utility they can provide us to satisfy our immediate self-interest. Very few seem concerned any more in asking whether or not we have a moral justification to do these things.

For all the talk among conservatives about private property rights, the one right that many of them do not respect is the right of the Creator in His property, which includes human beings. Without ever confronting this question, always leaving it for someone else, we end up acting and talking and forming policy as if there were no God. In other words, we become functional, if not substantive, atheists. This is the obstacle, the mental block, many would-be conservatives must overcome, and it begins by restoring a sense of the sacred. It means recognizing that man is not God and must submit his will to objective standards. If we are not seeking to conserve this worldview, I don't know what conservatives are trying to do. They become no different than liberals, with whom they quibble over the means to achieve the same ends. Indeed, some have argued that such conservatives and libertarians are but the recycled leftist liberals of a few decades ago.

In the course of discovering more about Weaver and the Southern Agrarians, I also

found that they affirmed my own criticism of feminism. War against nature takes its most pernicious form in this ideology. It is one thing to affirm, as in the Judeo-Christian worldview, that men and women are equal as human beings, as creatures made in the image of God. It is quite another, however, to insist that this is to be translated into equality of social function, where "equality" is taken to mean "identity." Such a confused view does a disservice to both genders, and the result is an immoral, degenerate, and quite unhappy society.

#### Nature and Nature's God

The hostility to the nature of genders is related to that of the biological in general. We have become a society so inured to the impiety of manipulating nature that we take a dim view of the biological—including conception, birth, and maternal nurturing. It is almost a crime now for a woman to believe that her primary vocation is that of wife and mother. This office is constantly portrayed as trivial, irrelevant, and degrading. As a result there are unhappy women past the child-bearing age, unhappy women who have pawned their children off to day-care centers and thus missed out on enormous domestic joys, and a youth which has no identity save what can be copied from television and other media. It is surely not surprising that the suicide rates and the drug problems of young people are so high today. Ironically, the present ideology exhibits not only misogyny—a hatred of women—but also a pervasive "misotesty"—an intense hatred of anything masculine.

Nor is it surprising to see that a society which turns women into killers of their own unborn children would also wish to turn women into killers on the battlefield by promoting the use of women in the military. One of the greatest impieties of the age is surely the female soldier. Indeed, if this trend continues it will not be long before we register women for the draft and from there we will in fact draft them into actual combat.

As gender issues become increasingly subject to public policy debate it will be ever more important for true conservatives to oppose this egalitarian trend. In general the

separateness and natural differences of genders must be respected and protected by public policy, not undermined and perverted by it. Specifically, conservatives will be called upon to affirm women in their traditional roles centering on their life-bearing and nurturing strengths, and to affirm men in their traditional roles as providers of material and spiritual leadership and protection. We must also restore a sense of chivalry, the practice of self-denial in submission to a transcendent ideal of manliness. The conservative vision should promote the full meaning of the concept of "husbandry": not just the frugal use of scarce resources but also the wise stewardship of those gifts given to us.

As we move into the next century it will be increasingly important for genuine conservatives to speak out in favor of respecting limits. There are natural, social, and moral limits to man's life that are increasingly threatened by hedonism and the lust for power. If the best in Western civilization is to survive,

there must be those who are willing in their professional work and in their personal lives to preserve and defend respect for these limits. We must remember that we live in a world that was created and given to us for a purpose; that there is a plan that transcends the immediate physical world; that there is a corresponding duty placed on each individual to conform to the divine pattern; that liberty is the freedom to do what we ought, to have our passions conform to reason, not to submit reason to the service of passion. Finally, we must recognize that the practice of piety is painful and arduous, insofar as respect for limits means denial of self and the discipline of the will. It is to the credit of Richard Weaver and other like-minded conservatives that they understood the needs of this age and were prepared to meet them. In my own case discovering their understanding, their vision, and their answers was as exciting as it was satisfying.