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Kenneth R. Craycraft

Virtue Among the Ruins?

I was using the not-very-imaginative locution "virtue among the ruins" before I read Jeffrey Stout's *Ethics After Babel*, but I would be remiss not to make note that he has used it in print ahead of me. Of course we both owe Walker Percy (who in turn owes Evelyn Waugh), due credit for the theme. Stout does not use a question mark in his chapter heading of this name because he is more confident than I (and more confident than Evelyn Waugh and Walker Percy), of the practicability of being able to recover a common moral language in these ruinous times. I do not despair of the possibility of recovering this pre-modern language and the ideas behind them, and even of teaching them to a new generation of students. But, in the words of Percy, "now in these dread latterdays of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world" I do not have much hope for any public consensus that there is such a thing as virtue, much less that we will ever have universal agreement about what constitutes it.

The despair of the practicability of a common moral language is multiplied by the common practice of conservatives to use the language of the ruins. The strains coming from contemporary mainstream conservatism (or as it is almost always called now, neoconservatism), have become nothing more than variations on a theme from Hobbes. American conservatives are not conservative; they are liberal. Inasmuch as they are conservative at all, they do not conserve traditional, pre-liberal categories of moral and political discourse, but rather something very un-conservative: Enlightenment Liberalism. Evidence for this assertion comes by examining two cardinal doctrines of the new conservatism, both of which come from the most secular and iconoclastic branches of Enlight-

enment Liberalism: "rights" as the fundamental system of justice, and "pluralism" as the God-ordained order of the universe.

Witches, Unicorns, and Human Rights

If any modicum of consensus exists in American political discourse, it is that all human beings have rights "because we exist," to quote moral philosopher Joseph Biden. From the far Left to the far Right, individuals and groups assert their rights. Conservatives usually favor "negative" rights, the right to be left alone from government and other people. Liberals typically favor a more positive, active definition of rights, asserting rights to minimum food and shelter, health care, and jobs with a minimum wage. While it makes perfect sense for liberals to invoke rights as the central category of justice, it is a dubious doctrine for conservatives to hold.

By rights, says Alasdair MacIntyre, "I mean those rights which are alleged to belong to human beings as such and which are cited as a reason for holding that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness." And in a now famous sentence from *After Virtue*, MacIntyre asserts, "there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns." When I was awarded the Weaver Fellowship in 1988, I was shocked to hear anyone say such a thing. I was on my way to becoming a "conservative" liberal, like most conservatives today. There were two traditions to choose from: Marxism or Lockeanism, and rights was the central category of justice

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for both. Since then, Ernest Fortin and Stanley Hauerwas have convinced me (the former somewhat indirectly, the latter explicitly) that MacIntyre is correct, and that the use of rights as the paradigm of justice constitutes an endorsement of the classical Enlightenment Liberal project. "Conservatives" who believe in rights are conservative liberals. Rights are a fiction, invented by Hobbes in the seventeenth century, and propagated by his followers thereafter. There is no conservative doctrine of rights, and the liberal one is false.

For Christians in America, the implications of this point are serious indeed. Walter Berns points out that our "government is instituted by men (not God) in order 'to secure these rights,' and a government so instituted is indeed one founded on genuinely secular moral presuppositions." Berns goes even further when he bluntly states: "The very idea of natural rights is incompatible with Christian doctrine and, by its formulations, was understood to be incompatible." Berns then notes that, despite Locke's ostensible adherence to Christianity, both he and Hobbes "were enemies of all revealed religions." As a conservative Catholic Christian this presents an especially important problem for my future work as a scholar and teacher.

At least since 1963 when Pope John XXIII wrote his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, the language of rights has been adopted by the Church in much of its moral argument. In the beginning of a long discussion of various human rights, John XXIII says: "Human beings have the right to choose freely the state of life which they prefer." If, however, he means that each person ought to have a civil or political right to such choices, the language is unfortunate, but not disastrous. If he means, however, that God endows each person with a right to reject His love and grace in choosing the state of life he or she prefers, we are in murky if not opaque theological waters. As a teacher of Catholic theology and political theory, I hope to be able to work toward a recovery of an interpretation of *Pacem in Terris*, and other subsequent documents, consistent with a view of justice that does not invest individuals with rights, but commends them to virtue.

The task is a daunting one, if one considers

another body of seemingly settled doctrine, Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, which discusses a human right to religious freedom, or a right of "conscience." In an introduction to this document, John Courtney Murray, S.J. said:

It was, of course, the most controversial document of the whole Council, largely because it raised with sharp emphasis the issue that lay continually below the surface of all the conciliar debates—the issue of the development of doctrine. The notion of development, not the notion of religious freedom, was the real sticking-point for many of those who opposed the Declaration even to the end. The course of the development between the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and *Dignitatis Humanae Personae* (1965) still remains to be explained by theologians.

Whether this development can be explained is still an open question. Theologians have not done the work that Fr. Murray indicates is necessary, with the result that the document is almost universally read as endorsing the rights doctrine regnant among contemporary liberals, whether of the Right or Left.

From a Christian point of view, it simply makes no sense to say that we have a fundamental human right to religious freedom, which necessarily entails a right to reject God's love and grace. If rights are fundamental to humanity—if we have them because we exist—then they must be given to us by God. Since rights entail a claim, a sanction, or both, a human right to religious liberty means that we have a claim against God to reject him, and that that rejection is sanctioned by God who has given us the right in the first place. There can be no room for just punishment in this scheme. God cannot justly punish the exercise of a claim which he has sanctioned by creating.

"Conservative" Rights Theories

To be less parochial, non-theologically minded conservatives have equally dubious grounds for adhering to a doctrine of human rights. Conservative thought holds that moral and political truth exists and can be known, and that certain natural constraints (or revealed ones) govern human behavior. But

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the notion of human rights arose precisely because these ideas were rejected. While Locke attempted to soften the edge of this "strange new doctrine," the only internally coherent system of rights is that of Hobbes. If one cannot accept, with Hobbes, that "every man has a Right to every thing; even to one another's body ... because there is nothing to which every man had not Right by Nature," then one cannot accept a rights framework. I know of no coherent case that can mitigate this harsh, but internally consistent, notion of the rights of non-political man.

Moreover, Hobbes's "warre of every man against every man" also denies the fundamental precept of conservative thought that man is naturally political—a *politikon zoon*—and that the natural order is one of harmony, not war. Christians believe that the Fall has upset this harmony, but the original "state of nature," that state of man as created, is one of natural harmony and sociability. A rights doctrine rejects a view of natural harmony for one of strife, enmity and conflict. Within a rights paradigm, harmony is conventional, the result of contract among individuals, all of whom fear the other's right to take whatever they will by whatever means.

Nor does it do for conservatives to try to cling to a category of negative rights. One of my teachers at Boston College, Frederick Lawrence, has shown how the idea of "negative" rights is kith and kin with liberal positive rights. The notion of rights, from the Left or the Right is "the product of an attempt to define human equality independently of any religion or metaphysics." Rights theories of all political persuasion "are signaled by the notorious modern dichotomies between nature and freedom, nature and history, and nature and art, which were exploited till our own day by the movements of idealism, historicism and romanticism." Lawrence explains that both negative and positive rights

depart from the modern assumption that the chief concern or issue of modern politics is power. First, commercial democracy is based on consent to governmental power as guarantor of public safety and comfort.... Second, socialist politics of compassion grounds the legitimacy of governmental power upon the extent to which it bolsters

equality not merely of opportunity (i.e., the political right ... to acquire and dispose of one's property within the limits of the law and the civil right to freedom of expression and to self-government), but of the satisfaction of aggregate societal needs (under the heading of ... rights to such things as health, housing, education, employment, sanitation, etc.) by attempting to reconcile older liberalism's means with socialist or collectivist ends in what has been called welfare economics.

Neither is a conservative moral or political point of view.

Pluralism: The Jealous God

A commitment to pluralism has become one of the staples of contemporary conservatism. As with rights, a pluralism that is a concession to the exigencies of modern political life is regrettable, but somewhat understandable. John Courtney Murray has said that pluralism seems to be written into the script of history. But a conservatism that sees pluralism as somehow in the proper and natural order of things, is a conservatism that has again given in to modern liberalism. A pre-political commitment to pluralism as a universal moral principle—as a dogma—has no place in conservative thought; it is essential, however, to liberalism.

"Pluralism is a jealous god," writes Richard John Neuhaus. "When pluralism is established as dogma, there is no room for other dogmas. The assertion of other points of reference in moral discourse becomes, by definition, a violation of pluralism." This is the inevitable result of a philosophical commitment to pluralism, as the very adherence to the position rises out of a rejection of truth.

Or rather, it is the democratization of truth. Since there is no transcendent truth, democracy is the means by which we establish a "truth-like substance." Democracy is the political reification of philosophical pluralism. This commitment to democracy-as-philosophy has been the rallying cry of so-called conservatives especially in the two years since the remarkable events in Eastern and Central Europe in the fall of 1989. Conservatives want to export American Democracy, an idea that in its current form (if not in its very

genius), rejects any notion of truth beyond the rights and values of individuals in the democratic process.

Pope John Paul II has recently decried this kind of pluralism in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. He criticizes a form of democracy which excludes from the public arena anyone who holds to a view of truth that is not radically pluralist and individualist. "Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and skeptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life," the pope explains. "Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends."

The pope is not simply concerned about a place for Catholics in democratic societies, but about the very possibility of the preservation of true freedom in a dogmatically pluralist regime. "If there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power." Such a democracy, he concludes, "easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism." True liberty can only be maintained by a commitment not to pluralism, but to truth. There is an "essential bond between human freedom and truth." A notion of freedom "which detaches itself from obedience to truth" becomes "self-love carried to the point of contempt for God and neighbor."

An example of how this kind of talk makes conservatives nervous is the treatment given this very passage by Michael Novak. In a column in *Crisis* magazine, Novak modified the Pope's teaching that true freedom is only found in *obedience to truth*, by saying that John Paul advocates liberty in *obedience to* [the search for] *truth*. Novak's alteration seems more consistent with the view of democracy that the Pope criticizes, and it raises again the commitment of this influential neoconservative to philosophical pluralism. Advocacy of democracy that only allows *the search for truth* is not a conservative position, but a Liberal one which is (at best) in tension

with Christianity.

While John Courtney Murray acknowledges that pluralism is probably with us to stay, his is at least a more conservative response when he says, "Religious pluralism is against the will of God. But it is the human condition.... It will not marvelously cease to trouble the city." Conservatism will only have a future if we at least see, as Fr. Murray does, that pluralism is not a blessing to be celebrated, but a problem to be overcome. Politically, this means persuasion that there is such a thing as political truth, and that it is knowable. As a Catholic, I have, and will convey to my students, a further commitment to persuade others that Christianity is the true faith, and Catholicism the historic expression of that faith. It does no one any good to hide from the embarrassing fact that we believe in truth—if indeed we do. We might acknowledge that pluralism has hegemony in our society, but we need not be its advocates and defenders.

Can We Rebuild?

In applying for the Weaver Fellowship, I was required to state that it is my vocational intention to teach on some level, and I have not altered from that commitment. How does one teach among the ruins? I love the camaraderie of the university, with its several departments. At Boston College, some members of the departments of philosophy, theology and politics share a fruitful collegiality, and adhere to a common ideal of education. But BC, like most universities, is losing its way. Like many "conservative" institutions, it is more and more concerned with conserving liberalism, and not historic, orthodox Roman Catholicism. I believe in truth, beauty, goodness, and I believe that these are universal and knowable. But that does not matter when you are talking to people who are not so convinced, or who have an epistemological or philosophical framework so faulty that it prevents them from seeing this possibility. And the cause is hindered greatly when "conservatives" acknowledge and even advocate the major categories of thought which make such convincing almost impossible.

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incommensurability among moral languages,
not because truth is relative or unknowable,
but rather because the very possibility of
truth has been rejected. The ruins are all
around us. But we can still affirm and teach
virtue, truth, beauty, goodness. It might be
in the small "sectarian" college, or among

small, lonely numbers in a larger university.
And perhaps this is not so bad. Commitment
to truth and to its vigorous defense may create
the witnesses to that truth which will convince
others of the need to conserve something that
was great and good. Until then, we must teach
and practice virtue among the ruins.