Allan Carlson

Compassionate Conservatism: Ten Lessons from the New Agrarians

The architects of the term "compassionate conservatism" set out it appears to create a tension with this phrase, to suggest that in the past these two words might not always have been compatible. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "compassionate" as characterized by "fellow-feeling; ...the emotion ...when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it." The same source defines "conservative" as a person or party or movement "characterized by a desire to preserve or keep intact or unchanged," one dedicated to "the maintenance of existing institutions."

However, under at least one interpretation, the two words could be seen as fully compatible. If we assume that suffering, misery, and distress are the consequence of *sin* brought into the world by Adam and his mate, *and*—most importantly—exhibited solely on a personal level, then we can still show compassion toward the suffering without openly challenging any existing institution: be it politics-as-usual in Washington, D.C., or down at the statehouse, or morals-as-usual in Hollywood, or business-as-usual on Wall Street. Private acts of pity and help would be sufficient to show compassion, without any systematic challenge to the way things are.

Yet those employing the phrase today often have something different in mind. Their rhetoric reflects the assumption that at least some *institutions*—such as those on Wall Street or Capitol Hill or in Hollywood—are in need of sprucing up; that existing structures have become corrupted themselves and either get in the way of compassionate acts, or in certain cases actually *cause* misery and suffering. And this raises the semantic, and perhaps the logical problem: How can one *keep things intact* and *unchanged* (that is, act on the "conservative" principle) if the goal of *compassion* requires institutional change? Can the "conservative" also be an activist? Or, in more extreme cases, can the "conservative" properly become a political "radical"?

Others have explored this theoretical conundrum with great subtlety. Here, I will simply relate the story of an earlier band of thinkers who struggled with many

Allan Carlson is president of the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society and author of *The New Agrarian Mind: The Movement toward Decentralist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Transaction Publishers).

of the same basic questions, and who developed answers from which we might learn. I call this group the "New Agrarians," a label that includes the well-known Southern Agrarians, but embraces as well other twentieth-century American writers and thinkers who focused on a common set of themes.

In discussing the New Agrarian version of "compassionate conservatism," a useful place to start is a 1934 essay entitled, appropriately enough, "The Task for Conservatism." Written by the popular historian Herbert Agar, it appeared in a remarkable, albeit short-lived journal, *The American Review*. This article stands as a model of "activist" or "radical" conservatism.

Agar was writing, it should be recalled, at the very worst point of the Great Depression. One-third of American workers were unemployed; the nation was littered with failed banks; stock certificates issued during the exuberant 1920s had been rendered worthless. Agar argued that the label "conservative" had been thoroughly twisted by what he called the "apostles of plutocracy" into the defense of economic "gamblers and promoters." He observed that "according to this [strange] view, Mark Hanna was a conservative." Agar sought to save the term by appealing to "another, and an older, America," a time when there was virtue in and a moral plan for the nation.

Central to this plan, Agar said, was "[t]he widest possible distribution of [productive] property." For Thomas Jefferson, this had meant a nation of self-sufficient farmers. For John Adams, this had meant "an interdependent community" of farmers and modest merchants, with government holding the balance. All of the American founders, Agar maintained, had held that "a wide diffusion of property...made for enterprise, for family responsibility, and in general for institutions that fit man's nature and that gave a chance for a desirable life." Physical property, in short, was so important to the full and rich human life that everybody should have some.

But America had lost its way, Agar continued. Under current economic conditions, the ownership of real property fell into ever fewer hands. "The normal human temptation to sacrifice ideals for money" had grown, lifting "the rewards for a successful raid on society to dangerous heights." A culture of widely distributed property had fallen under assault by "the barbarism based on monopoly." The great banking houses and financial institutions had destroyed "an entrenched landed interest" in the South during the Civil War. In 1914, the same group determined that America no longer needed an agricultural surplus for export, and it set out to destroy the independent farmer as well.

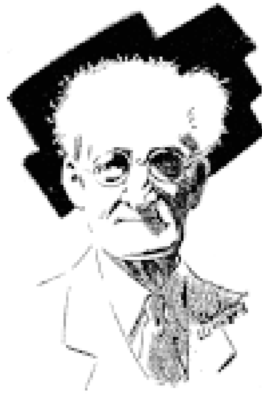
Agar called for an effort—at once "radical" and "conservative"—to restore the Property State. This "redistribution" of ownership must become "the root of a real conservative policy for the United States." As he explained, the ownership of land, machine shop, small store, or a share of "some necessarily huge machine" needed to become the normal thing, in order to set the necessary moral tone for society. Agar stressed the radical and political nature of this attempt, for it was on its face inconsistent with existing economic developments. As he wrote: "It must be produced artificially and then guarded by favorable legislation." All the same, such an effort was necessary to rebuild a humane America, a compassionate America, an America that would make for "stability in family and community life, for responsibility, [and] for enterprise."

Agar was not alone is this appeal to a *radical conservatism*. The whole line of New Agrarians agreed on the same orientation. Agar's special focus was on the power of *private property* as a defense of liberty and the source of the good life. But the New Agrar-

ians pressed other points as well, insights that might contribute in our time to a richer understanding of the term "compassionate conservatism," insights into what an "activist" conservatism might look like.

The second lesson from the New Agrarians will seem strange to many: it is love of the earth, a genuine ecological sensitivity. Liberty Hyde Bailey, named Dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University nearly a century ago, crafted most of the themes that would characterize twentieth century agrarian thought, and an environmental passion was at the core of his vision. Bailey's most provocative book appeared in 1916. Entitled *The Holy Earth*, it emphasized "the oneness of nature and the unity in living things," a process guided by the Great Patriarch, God the Father. As Bailey explained:

> Verily, then, the earth is divine, because man did not make it. We are here, part in the creation. We cannot escape. We are under obligation to take part and do our best living with each other and with all creatures. We may not know the full plan, but that does not alter the relation.



Liberty Hyde Bailey

Every man, Bailey said, should know "in his heart…that there is goodness and wholeness in the rain, in the wind, the soil, the sea, the glory of sunrise in the trees, and in the sustenance that we derive from the planet." The true conservative, then, begins as an ecologist, aware of the inner-connectedness of our lives with the Creation.

The third lesson is the positive value of human fertility. Harvard sociologist Carle Zimmerman, founder of the discipline of "rural sociology" in the 1920s, was the New Agrarian writer most committed to dismissing the gloom of Malthusian ideas. Instead of fretting about "overpopulation," Zimmerman celebrated high human fertility and an abundance of large families as signs of social health. In his book *Family and Society*, Zimmerman called "an absolutely stable or decreasing population …unthinkable for the survival of a nation." In his massive tome *Family and Civilization*, he stressed that hope for the future rested on "the making of *familism* and *childbearing* the primary social duties of the citizen." Zimmerman's celebration of small family farms rested on their very biological vitality. As he wrote: "These local family institutions feed the larger culture as the uplands feed the streams and the streams in turn the broader rivers of family life."

The fourth lesson from the New Agrarians is the virtue of self-sufficiency; recognition that liberty rests on a family's ability to meet its own basic needs. The economist Ralph Borsodi emphasized the need to ground one's life outside large impersonal institutions such as the corporation or the state. All families, he said, should produce two-thirds of needed goods and services within their homes, workshops, and modest gardens. He showed how new technological innovations—especially electricity and the internal combustion engine—allowed for an efficient decentralization of most productive activity. The truly "free person" was *not* "merely the man who has the infinitesimal fraction of the political power represented by a vote." Rather, the free man was one "so independent" that he could "deal with all men and all institutions, even the state, on terms of equality." Only the self-sufficient household could support this level of independence.

The fifth lesson from the New Agrarians

is the bond we hold with ancestors and posterity. The Midwestern writer Louis Bromfield emphasized the linkage of generations in his great novel, *The Farm*. Drawing on his own family history, Bromfield described the apogee of his family farm under the tutelage of his grandparents, here fictionalized as Maria and Old Jamie. During this time, the Farm was a cornucopia. The breakfasts alone on weekend gatherings were magnificent: "sausages, waffles, and maple syrup from Jamie's own maple-grove, fresh strawberries or peaches if it were summer…hot fresh rolls, and sometimes chicken and mashed potatoes, home-dried corn, and an array of jams and preserves…." Maria presided over the day as "a kind of priestess," watching happily as all her children and grandchildren consumed what she had grown and prepared.

Later, when Bromfield himself resolved to return to the land and to build the Farm again, he saw this as a way to restore the bond of generations: those who went before, with *those to come*. As he wrote in the agrarian book *Pleasant Valley*: "[I sought] a piece of land which I could love passionately, which I could spend the rest of my life in cultivating, cherishing and improving, which I might leave together, perhaps, with my own feeling for it, to my children who might in time leave it to their children." Our humanity, said the Agrarians, rested on this family chain-of-being and its rootedness in a place.

The sixth lesson, taught with special energy by the Southern—or Vanderbilt—Agrarians, is suspicion of the industrial mindset. The conservative must serve as watchdog over industrialism's mindless sprawl. In their great volume *I'll Take My Stand*, the twelve Southerners accepted industrialism when it assured "the laborer of his perfect economic security" and protected labor as "one of the happy functions of human life." Yet in the early decades of the twentieth century, they said, the assumption behind machines had been that "labor is an evil"; the new technological devices did not so much "emancipate" workers, as "evict" them. The Vanderbilt Agrarians criticized modern advertising and modern salesmanship as "the great effort of a false economy of life to approve itself." The industrial mindset, they added, damaged art, manners, learning, and even romantic love. In an insightful turn of phrase, the poet and critic John Crowe Ransom emphasized that industrialism was a force "of almost miraculous cunning but *no* intelligence." It had to be controlled, he said, "or it will destroy the economy of the household." In short, the Southern Agrarians saw one of conservatism's central tasks as the defense of humane institutions—religion, home, art, family, the higher learning—against the revolutionary force of industrial organization.

The seventh lesson from the New Agrarians is the importance of local attachment and regional identity. In his splendid essay "Still Rebels, Still Yankees," Donald Davidson showed how *differences* in key aspects of life—from way of thinking to daily behavior—continued to give a marvelous variety to America. And in his volume *Land of the Free*, Herbert Agar lashed out at so-called "world cities" such as Chicago, London, and New York. With their cosmopolitanism, their skepticism, their falling birthrate, their lack of morals, and their imitative and decadent art, such cities were the sure signs of the *end* of a civilization, marked by "a hospitality to death."

Fortunately, Agar continued, America still had a healthy "native" culture, born—as in ages past—out of farming settlements. As he explained:

> [T]here are signs of the conversion of the intellectual class in the Mississippi Valley to the idea that if America is to have a culture of her own the intellectuals had better stay at home

> and take part in that culture instead of streaming to New York and becoming good little copies of an alien civilization.

Agar had special praise for the regional cities of Nashville (home of the Southern Agrarians) and Indianapolis (home to novelist Booth Tarkington). He might have added Cedar Rapids, Iowa (home to artist Grant Wood, novelist Ruth Suckow, and poets Paul Engle and Jay Sigmund), and other cities of the regionalist revival of the 1930s, which had also held on to their native-born writers and artists. Agar continued, "As a result of their secession from the world-city, there are now four or five country towns where the local life is richer, where American Culture is closer to defining itself."

The eighth New Agrarian lesson is the necessary role of religious faith as the source and protector of community. The Iowa-based Roman Catholic priest Luigi Ligutti was the most effective New Agrarian advocate in the 1940s and 1950s. As leader of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, he emphasized how the ownership of land and other productive property and the control of technology for human ends were mandates from God. "This thesis is true," Ligutti concluded, because it "fulfills God's intention in man's creation, because it exhibits Christ's love for mankind, and because it furnishes all of us with the assurance of a good life here on earth and a good life for eternity."

Ligutti emphasized the historic role of various churches in building rural communities in America: "The Mormons in the West, the Mennonites in the Middle West, the Amanas in Iowa, the Lutherans in Minnesota and the Dakotas, Father Pierz in Stearns County [Minnesota]...and Father Tracy in Nebraska." In 1946, Monsignor Ligutti joined with 75 other religious leaders—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish—in a statement declaring "God's intention in creation" to allow man to live in dignity and "to establish and maintain a family." Land was "God's greatest material gift to mankind." "The farm is the native habitat of the family." And the farm itself served to bind the true community together. Ligutti framed the appropriate words for a devout Catholic farmer:

Luigi Ligutti

> How can I, a farmer, grow in appreciation of my noble calling? It is not merely clods of inert soil I work with, but millions of God's invisible creatures. It is not just a wheat shoot or a kernel I behold, but God's rain, sunshine, blue sky, captured therein and held prisoner so that on the altar [Christ] himself may become a prisoner of love.

The ninth New Agrarian lesson is the unique power of marriage, a point made with special effect by the contemporary writer Wendell Berry. Proper marriage, the Kentuckian writes, is a sexual *and* an economic unit; the sexual function without the economic function is ruinous, with "degenerate housewifery" and "degenerate husbandry" the result. When brought together, though, the consequence is beauty. As Berry explains in his poem "The Country of Marriage":

> *Our bond is no little economy based on the exchange*
> *of my love and work for yours, so much for so much*
> *of an expendable fund. We don't know what its limits are*
> *that puts it into the dark. We are more together*
> *than we know, how else could we keep on discovering*
> *we are more together than we thought?*

Marriage, so understood, is an economy of joy. Berry's fictional character, Mary Penn, described how, with "a joyous ache," she knew that she "completed" her husband, as he "completed" her:

> When had there ever been such a yearning of halves toward each other, such a longing, even in quarrels, to be whole? And sometimes they would be whole. The wholeness came upon them as a rush of light...so that she felt they must be shining in the dark.

Marriage is, in fact, a "great power" able to transform not only individuals, but the world. Held in the grip of marriage, time flows over husband and wife "like swift water over stones," smoothing and shaping them to "fit together in the only way that [human] fragments can be rejoined."

The tenth and final New Agrarian lesson is this: resist the temptation to use government to pursue good ends. The *only* true rural communities that survived the great consolidation of state power in the twentieth century were those who fiercely kept the government at bay. A telling example here is the Old Order Amish. In one sense, they are America's only true anti-statist libertarian community. That is, they fiercely fought numerous state governments, with many of their leaders imprisoned along the way, but in the end they *won* the right to educate their children in their own way. They sought and *won* exemption from all forms of federal Social Security. They have refused to accept other forms of state welfare, relying on their own community for help in emergencies. They have also refused most forms of farm subsidies and support payments. At the same time, they are eager participants in market transactions, and foes of government regulation. And they have grown, from a community of 5,000 in 1900, all located near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to 150,000 today, with colonies in a dozen states.

Contrast the survival and *growth* of the Old Order Amish with that of the rest of rural America, whose numbers fell from 30 million in 1900 to only four million this year. These vanished millions were the families who submitted to state authorities, who took the advice of the government extension agents, who entered the string of state programs designed "to save the family farm," whose children attended the government schools. They are mostly gone now, rural ghosts. It is the Plain People who survive.

These then are the "Ten Commandments" of the twentieth-century New Agrarianism. They illuminate a genuine, even a radical vision of *compassionate conservatism*, one worthy of both words in the phrase and—I suggest—one worthy of our fresh contemplation. For we live in another time, one of exuberant prosperity, with the value of stock certificates once more soaring. We live in a time when Mark Hanna has again become a hero to many self-styled conservatives. And we live in a time marked by a degraded, dehumanizing culture, a so-called "world culture," featuring at its core "a hospitality to death." Perhaps, if we take compassionate conservatism seriously, the Agrarian Mind in some form will have another opportunity on history's stage, in the century that now dawns.