

Christopher Olaf Blum

## On Being Conservative: Lessons from Louis de Bonald

Of the many attempts to define conservatism in recent decades, one of the most compelling is Robert Nisbet's: "The essence of this body of ideas is the protection of the social order—family, neighborhood, local community, and region foremost—from the ravishments of the centralized political state."<sup>1</sup> This definition was the fruit of Nisbet's long study of the French conservative tradition, and especially of its founder, Louis de Bonald (1754-1840). Bonald contended that the purpose of political power was the protection or, as he put it, the "conservation" of intelligent beings. And "what is the conservation of a being?" asked Bonald: "its existence in a condition conforming to its nature," that is, its physical, and especially its moral "perfection."<sup>2</sup> Family, parish, and guild, Bonald taught, were nurseries of virtue, of man's true perfection and happiness. To destroy these nurseries of virtue was the chief object of the architects of the modern state. "To Rousseau," Nisbet wrote, "the real oppressions in life were those of traditional society—class, church, school, and patriarchal family."<sup>3</sup> The remedy sketched by Rousseau and attempted with alarming success by the French Revolution was to replace these smaller, inherited structures of society with the single, impersonal power of the General Will. This is the mad dream of those whom

Burke called "sophisters, economists, and calculators." To attack these mad dreamers is indeed to be a conservative.

But it is not enough to attack the egalitarian, bureaucratic state. To be a conservative is first and foremost to defend or to conserve something *good*. Thus Nisbet's definition challenges us to build, to cultivate, and to *be*, even more than to attack. And so we must first understand what is the real worth of true community: community of place, community of work, and the primeval community of the family. To do so we might follow Nisbet's example by considering the life and teaching of Louis de Bonald.

### The Sense of Place

Nisbet argued that the unhealthy "quest for community" begins when people lose the experience of real community in their lives—and by real community he would have us think not first of relations of sentiment but of real belonging to an association that provides some social or even economic function. His point is a sound one, and we shall return to it. Yet there is a kind of commu-

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nity of sentiment that comes from the identification of a person with his region or place that is, or can be, more than mere sentiment; it can be a cast of mind that informs one's moral outlook and choices. Such a sense of place is "conservative" in the best sense of the term, as it was in the case of Bonald.

Bonald hailed from one of France's poorer and more hardscrabble regions, a region known as the Rouergue, which might be described as the Appalachia of France. His family had roots going back several centuries in the neighborhood of Millau, a market town located at the end of the gorges of the Tarn and Dourbie rivers. Bonald described the Rouergue as "a rude land, where one must be always creeping and climbing."<sup>4</sup> In the river valleys, men grew vines on steep terraces chiseled out of the rock, and harvested chestnuts to roast for sustenance through the long winters. On the windswept uplands, they grazed sheep and planted wheat and rye to make the hard, dark bread that was their staff of life. A local proverb celebrated this bread: "Lou po dur / Ten l'oustal segur" (which might be Englished as "Bread tough as bone / keeps well the home"). It was a land of sturdy, independent peasants who did not take kindly to foreign authorities and had more than once risen in revolt against the French crown. With such a hard place as his home, Bonald could never be a romantic given to waxing about the beauties of barren heaths and forlorn ruins. Rather, he was a conservative: he loved the land because it gave him life.

Bonald was fiercely loyal to the Rouergue. He fairly reveled in the conservative temper of the region's peasants. "I am fortunate," he wrote to his friend the Baron von Senfft, "to live in a land-locked region, far from the borders, without great wealth, without any industry save the agrarian one that most inspires religious sentiments and modera-

tion. Our people are spirited and have good sense."<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere he explained the agrarian roots of their conservatism: "The inhabitants of the south of France are much more often landowners than those of the northern provinces, and...because they are more often landowners, they have shown in general greater attachment to their laws and more fidelity to their sovereigns."<sup>6</sup> Like Chesterton and Belloc after him, Bonald saw the wide ownership of real property, of land, as the true well-spring of a devotion to the common good. His love for the Rouergue extended even to its cuisine. While living as an émigré in the Rhineland during the French Revolution he opined that "the manner in which the French and the Spaniards nourish themselves is certainly more healthy than the way of the English, the Germans, and the Dutch, because the former eat much bread and little meat, while the others eat much meat and little bread."<sup>7</sup> We may be confident that the bread he had in mind was not the Parisian brioche, but the hard, dark loaf of his home.

Bonald valued the earnest hard work of tilling the land under an unforgiving climate. He lived in exile from his ancestral home for a decade, and when he returned, he faced the task of rebuilding his family's patrimony from the ravages of the Revolution. Early on in the Revolution's course, his wife had been forced to hide with his younger children among the rocks and crags of his property from the marauding revolutionaries who were terrorizing the local nobility. Then his farm was confiscated as the forfeited property of an émigré, and Madame de Bonald could only regain it by selling her own dowry to buy it back. When Bonald at length returned, he found his land stripped of its trees and in need of careful attention. For the last half of his life, he labored to reclaim the land's fertility. "I live in a sad and poor countryside," he wrote to a friend in 1833 after thirty years

of these labors, “and with a few resources (which however I lack) I would render it more agreeable and, especially, more fruitful.... I do not desire luxury, for I do not love it, but utility and a certain fittingness, which are not found without one another.”<sup>8</sup> Bonald knew that we grow to love the place where we live and labor, and that this love engenders a duty to make the land fit for human dwelling.

Bonald’s love for his native Rouergue, and his belief in the goodness of the hard work of making the land fruitful, led him to express a view of the Italian landscape that one might find surprising. When his friend the Baron von Senfft was living in Florence, Bonald wrote to him about the Tuscan countryside: “Everything to be seen in lovely Tuscany appears beautiful and good, for there nature has done more for material flourishing than education and even governments have done for moral flourishing. There you will find, it seems to me, more to flatter the eyes and satisfy the imagination than what nourishes the mind.”<sup>9</sup> Natural beauty was not, for him, the highest good. Nor was unproductive man-made beauty much to his liking. He condemned the eighteenth-century fashion, associated with the name of Capability Brown, of tearing down formal lines of trees and uprooting peasant hamlets and gardens in order to achieve a certain idealized “rustic” landscape. He saw this as the product of a sentimentalism akin to Rousseau’s that had abandoned a “noble and perfected nature” for a “simple, pastoral, childlike, and familiar nature.” This romantic “disposition of mind” had “changed the garden in which art had perfected nature by disposing its different beauties with order into an uncultivated and uncouth field under the name of the English garden.”<sup>10</sup>

With convictions such as these, it is not surprising that Bonald admired Oliver Goldsmith’s deeply conservative poem

“The Deserted Village,” for the poet’s condemnation of the English garden was the same as his: “the land, by luxury betrayed, / In nature’s simplest charms [was] at first arrayed. / But verging to decline, its splendours rise, / Its vistas strike, its palaces surprise.”<sup>11</sup> It was a curious luxury, that luxury of the eighteenth-century English garden, which would raze to the ground a village with its offending human messiness to replace it with striking vistas and surprising glimpses of buildings. But a luxury it was, and one not unlike that profligate love of liberty displayed throughout the French Revolution, in which hospitals, orphanages, monasteries, schools, and even villages commons were nationalized and put to “enlightened” public use by the all-powerful General Will. A true conservative instinctively opposes such wanton destructiveness.

Before we take leave of the theme of land and place, we must revisit our original point about the conservative temper, or that little patriotism for the familiar that shapes our character and helps us to pursue the good. For Bonald, this was indeed a most important part of the life of virtue. Witness his letter to a long-time correspondent in which he discusses the cast of mind of one of their common friends: “I received a letter from our friend written from Montauban. I believe that some distaste for the countryside has laid hold of him.” Bonald then relates their friend’s dizzying itinerary throughout southern France, and concludes: “I see with some pain this mania of running around, this need to change place that has seized him, and I do not believe it to be a good sign.”<sup>12</sup>

Another great conservative writer of the early nineteenth century, Jane Austen, had a similar view of the importance of place. Consider the contrast in her immortal classic *Mansfield Park* between the settled love of Fanny Price for Mansfield and all its

ways, and the restless, perpetual motion of Henry Crawford that threatens the good of the Mansfield community. Just as Miss Austen holds up for our admiration Fanny's love for the simple pleasures of country life, so also Bonald would have us take delight in our native place. One of the most moving passages in his letters is what he wrote to his son Maurice, away at boarding school: "You ask us for details, and I will give them to you.... We have had a superb harvest of hay, but the stubborn dryness has made us lose all our grain, and there is nothing on the Larzac, nothing on the Causse, nothing at Caumels. Henriette has raised pretty partridges that go off running around all day and return at night. I am going to begin the labor of diverting the river.... Bourrié brought me a most handsome dog for the sheep. You see, my friend, that I am giving you details. At your age I loved them, and you bring me pleasure by your interest in this land, which has been the pride of our family in times of trouble."<sup>13</sup> The love of place, as Bonald knew, brings strength of character and convictions that can withstand adversity.

How are we to profit from this? Few of us have been raised on an ancestral plot. Bonald, I fear, would say that Americans are more likely to be as orphans and nomads than a people wedded to the land and to place. Some of us may be able to follow the example of Russell Kirk, and choose to live in our ancestral community, even at the cost of inconvenience and reduced income. To do so would be noble. When we choose a spiritual good, such as attachment to home, over a material one, we are fulfilling Bonald's intuition of what it is to be a conservative.

### The Nobility of Work

We now turn to a second kind of real community, community of work. As in the case of belonging to the land or to a place, so also

in the case of belonging to a profession or to a community of work: few now know what this might mean. We are rootless cosmopolites, changing our occupations, on average, seven times over the course of our lifetimes; we endlessly recast our résumés and recreate ourselves in new contexts. Robert Nisbet was surely right: we breathlessly chase after a merely sentimental attachment to community because our need to serve as the subordinate part of some truly coherent common endeavor too often remains unsatisfied. We sense that we are interchangeable, standardized, disposable parts within the modern economy and bureaucratic state—which is to say that we are not parts at all, but mere particles of sand in some great heap or pile.

Bonald knew from his inheritance that individual men and women are called to service, called to pay back through their work what they owe to their society. And he knew that this work was to be done in a communal context, a context of belonging. Bonald's own situation, of course, was much different than our own. He was the eldest and only surviving son of a landed noble family. He lost his father when he was quite young, and he was raised by a pious and austere mother, who in turn sent him to board near Paris at a school known for its high moral standards. From these influences he gained a strict Christian piety and spirit of service. As an adult, he took as his device or motto the Latin phrase *prodesse non praeesse*, which may be rendered "to serve, not to be served." He understood his life as a nobleman to be a vocation of service.

Under the Old Regime, Bonald served as mayor of his home town Millau. He was popular and effective, and was even chosen again by the citizens after the French Revolution had made the post an elective one. Millau was not an easy town to govern, for it had been riven by religious division in the

sixteenth century. Bonald considered one of his greatest achievements to have been his successful heading off of a municipal riot that was brewing between the representatives of the Protestant and Catholic communities in the Revolution's early days. Bonald is known, of course, as a firm partisan of the cooperation of throne and altar, and so indeed he was. What is less known is that he wrote forthrightly and intelligently on the need for mutual forbearance and toleration between the divided Christian churches and saw the reunion of the churches as one of the most pressing needs of the nineteenth century. This conviction stemmed from his experience as mayor, which he had undertaken out of a spirit of service.

Bonald wrote eloquently about the vocation of the nobility, which he saw as "a heredity devotion to public service."<sup>14</sup> For the nobleman simply to cultivate a life of pleasure was an extreme dereliction of duty. Consider this acerbic judgment about the moral failure of the pre-revolutionary monarchy: "The government," he wrote, "was wrong to allow great lands to accumulate in the same families: every landowner who possessed two manor houses had destroyed a family."<sup>15</sup> Why did Bonald see an empty manor house as tragic diminution of human community? We may find an answer in his portrait of the ideal nobleman:

If there were in the countryside and in each village a family whose considerable fortune—relative to that of its neighbors—assured them an independent existence, and which enjoyed among the inhabitants of the countryside a kind of consideration from its ancestry and the extent of its properties, a family with exterior dignity and, in its private life, much modesty and simplicity, which submitted to the severe laws of honor, gave an example of all the virtues and every decency, which joined to the neces-

sary expenditures and indispensable consumption of its estate—already a benefit to the people—that daily beneficence which in the countryside is a necessity more than a virtue, a family, finally, which was uniquely devoted to the duties of public life and available to serve the state: can we not see in this family great advantages for the moral life and well-being of the people?<sup>16</sup>



Louis de Bonald

This was Bonald's sense of his own vocation, and it was another ideal that he shared with Jane Austen, as witness her portrayal of Mr. Knightley of Donwell Abbey in *Emma*. The nobleman belonged to his community; he was its servant; his wealth was for its sake, and not for the sake of his own pleasures.

Perhaps now it begins to become clear why Bonald was so pleased by his son's desire to hear of the details of life at home, and why his friend's restlessness disturbed him. For a nobleman to fulfill his duty, to answer his vocation, he needed to find his contentment at home. A private life of "modesty and simplicity" was, therefore, of paramount importance. To run after the pleasures of novelty, the pleasures of noisy and luxurious Paris, was to leave the path of duty.

From Bonald's teaching and example we can profit in the way that we always profit from seeing a noble ideal portrayed convincingly. Our sense of the possibilities of goodness is extended; our idealism is summoned forth; our hearts are encouraged. But of course, the ancient nobility of Christendom dwells not on our shores. What would Bonald say to us? We might glean an answer by considering what he had to say about the trade guilds of the Old Regime. "The corporations of arts and trades," he wrote, "were a sort of hereditary municipal nobility that gave importance and dignity to the most obscure individuals and the least exalted professions." In other



words, to possess a trade—to be, say, a member of the carpenters guild or the stone-masons guild—was a kind of privilege, a kind of “municipal nobility.”

Just as landed nobility implied a vocation to serve, so also did this civic nobility, and thus Bonald speaks of the “dignity” of craftsmanship, for it is a worthy achievement to ply one’s chosen craft with honesty and skill. The guilds of the Old Regime also helped to knit the broader society together, for they acted like extended families. “The power of the masters,” he observed, “restrained youths who lacked education, who had been taken away from paternal authority at an early age by the necessity to learn a trade and win their bread.”<sup>17</sup> There are two crucial insights here. The plain one is that young men and women need the close mentorship that an apprenticeship brings, for without it they wander the halls of our cavernous schools as so many nomadic barbarians. Yet still more important is the second lesson: by destroying the community of work we adults have abdicated our essential responsibility as moral educators of the young. Our places of employment are alienating factories or, now, factory-like offices, and we are therefore reduced to wringing our hands and dreaming up government programs to attempt to take the place of real community of work.

One might object that the life of the trade guilds is no more relevant to our condition than is that of the landed gentry, and there would be more than a grain of truth in that. Yet the general principle that Bonald saw in the trade guilds is a perennial one. That principle is that work is not chiefly to be done for the sake of getting and spending; rather, work is to be done out of a duty to use our talents in the service of our community. To be conservative, Bonald tells us, is to cultivate man’s moral perfection. It is, therefore, truly conservative to be animated by a sense of vocation, a sense of service.

### The Bond of Matrimony

We come at last to the first community, and the most important one: the family. Of the great conservative writers of the French Revolutionary period—Burke, Maistre, Gentz, and the rest—Bonald is without question the great champion of the family because he was the defender of the permanence of the marital bond, that daily-kept promise that is the foundation of all human community. Of his many achievements in his fifteen years of service as a legislator during the Bourbon Restoration, he was most proud of his role in the repeal of legal divorce in 1816. To understand the significance of this, we must consider the meaning of the French Revolution.

Bonald was convinced that France had suffered not one but *three* revolutions: “The long series of Revolutions that France was destined to travel through began under the Regency, with the revolution of morals, and continued, soon after, with the revolution of doctrines, and ended—with the century—by the revolution of laws, the complement of the other two.”<sup>18</sup> Of the Regency of Philippe d’Orléans in the first quarter of the eighteenth century it will suffice to say that his rule included generous patronage for the young Voltaire’s scurrilous poetry. As to the change of doctrine, we can place that at the century’s mid-point, with the publication of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*, which contained a plea for the legalization of divorce. The French Revolution completed the work by decreeing a secular marriage law in September, 1792. This law included as one of its provisions the right of either spouse to gain a divorce upon the simple allegation of incompatibility. Neither cause nor proof of misdeed was required, and the party wishing the dissolution of the marriage needed only to wait six months after the initial petition and to submit to a meeting of the extended family

in front of a judge. The so-called “right” of the individual to dissolve the marriage bond was thus enshrined as sacred. Marriage, as it has existed in France for over a thousand years, was abandoned.

The restoration of marriage in France was in large part Bonald’s work. His was not the only voice raised in protest against the law of 1792, but his was one of the most persuasive. His tract *On Divorce* (1801) was timed to coincide with the debate over the divorce law by Napoleon’s government and helped to influence that regime’s decision to make divorce more difficult to obtain. The lasting restoration of permanent marriage was, however, only won after the battle of Waterloo. Louis XVIII had upon his restoration granted France a constitution providing for an elected chamber of deputies. Bonald was one of those elected to the famous conservative chamber of 1815, known as the *chambre introuvable*, or the chamber whose equal (for conservative conviction) could not be found. It was this body’s achievement to have “stopped the Revolution and...even forced it to give up some of its ground.”<sup>19</sup> To him fell the honor of proposing the abolition of divorce, in a speech of December 26, 1815. Consider just one passage from that speech, a passage with a certain haunting quality. “When society,” he said,

has come to the point where the headstrong loves of youth—that inextinguishable nourishment for the arts—have become in myriad ways the concern of all ages; when marital authority is the butt of jokes, and paternal authority thought tyrannical; when obscene books, displayed everywhere, sold or loaned at so low a price that you might thought them to be given away, and teach the child things that nature does not reveal to the grown man; when human nudity, the distinctive characteristic of extreme barbarism, offers itself everywhere to our eyes in public places, and when the woman herself, clothed without being covered, has discovered the art of insulting modesty without offending good taste; when religion has lost all its terrors,

and when enlightened spouses see in their reciprocal infidelities only a secret to keep from one another, or perhaps a secret to share: in times such as these, to tolerate divorce is to legalize adultery, it is to conspire with man’s passions against his reason, and with man himself against society.<sup>20</sup>

Small wonder that Robert Nisbet would say that “some of the deepest problems we face in the social order today are close kin to those Bonald and his fellow conservatives faced in their day.”<sup>21</sup> Close kin indeed. We should find this passage to be sobering. In 1815, Bonald and his fellow French conservatives could contemplate legal action to shore up society’s moral fiber, to help weak souls to make good on their sworn commitment to live their lives for a community larger than themselves. They did outlaw divorce, and, in spite of frequent challenges, it remained outlawed in France until 1884.

Yet man, as we know, is fully capable of rebelling against even the best of laws, and our own moral condition is so far gone that we, alas, have no such a measure available today. Here in America we are not even able to protect a child in his mother’s womb. Allowing as we do this physical assault upon the family in the name of individual rights and choice, is it surprising that we fail to protect the family’s moral unity? Bonald said of divorce that “the men who introduced it in our laws have always defended it as the seal and the special character of the Revolution.”<sup>22</sup> The same can be said today of abortion, the very standard of the revolutionary spirit in our times, the ultimate expression of individualism and autonomy, the ultimate rejection of community.<sup>23</sup>

In times such as these, we conservatives need especially to cultivate the virtue of hope. And in spite of the contemporary darkness of illegitimacy, divorce, abortion, and all the rest, there does remain cause for hope. For marriage and the family come from God, and ultimately, in His Provi-

dence, God protects the good things that He ordains for our perfection and happiness. God is a conservative. There is certainly a reason for hope.

The wisdom in our tradition is also always present, ready for rediscovery. "We may say," T. S. Eliot wrote in the 1930s, "that religion, as distinguished from modern paganism, implies a life in conformity with nature. It may be observed that the natural life and the supernatural life have a conformity to each other which neither has with the mechanistic life: but so far has our notion of what is natural become distorted, that people who consider it 'unnatural' and therefore repugnant that a person of either sex should elect a life of celibacy, consider it perfectly 'natural' that families should be limited to one or two children. It would perhaps be more natural, as well as in better conformity with the Will of God, if there were more celibates and if those who were married had larger families."<sup>24</sup> This is a sentiment with which Louis de Bonald, the father of a large family, would surely agree.

To be a conservative, according to the definition of Robert Nisbet, is to protect family, neighborhood, local community, and region. Family as something necessary to life, springing from the creative fidelity of a man and a woman to their mutual vow; the workplace as a locus of responsibility and mutual encouragement and even correction and moral growth; the homeland, the region, as the source of our moral vision and our patriotism: these are the ideals of Louis de Bonald, and these are the convictions of a conservative. When we choose hearth and home over novelty and distraction, meaningful work and a spirit of service over mere profit-seeking, and the self-denying and fruitful love of family over mere pleasure, then we too are following the conservative way.

1. Robert Nisbet, *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 55.
2. Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux, Oeuvres de M. de Bonald* (Bruxelles: Société Nationale pour la Propagation des Bons Livres, 1845), III: 31.
3. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order & Freedom* (1953; Oakland: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1990), 96.
4. Bonald to Justin de Bonnes, letter of June 5, 1840, in Louis de Bonald, *Réflexions sur la Révolution de Juillet 1830 et textes inédits*, ed. Jean Bastier (Paris: DUC, 1988), 133.
5. Bonald to Senfft, letter of June 19, 1831, in Jean-René Derré, *En Marge de la Sainte-Alliance: Lettres de Bonald au Comte de Senfft* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967), 82.
6. Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir, Oeuvres*, III: 377.
7. Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir, Oeuvres*, IV: 128.
8. Bonald to Mme Victor de Sèze, letter of August 6, 1833, in *Lettres inédites du Vicomte de Bonald à Madame Victor de Sèze*, ed. Henri Moulinié (Paris: Alcan, 1915), 159-60.
9. Bonald to Senfft, letter of 6 February 1833, in Derré, ed., *En Marge de la Sainte-Alliance*, 92.
10. Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieuse* (1796), *Oeuvres* III: 252-53.
11. Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village," in Roger Lonsdale, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse* (Oxford, 1984), 523-33 at 530.
12. Bonald to Madame de Sèze, letter of July 3, 1818, in Moulinié, ed., *Lettres inédites*, 53.
13. Bonald to Maurice de Bonald, letter of July 27, 1803, in Bastier, ed., *Réflexions sur la révolution du juillet 1830*, 117-18.
14. Bonald, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, in Christopher Olaf Blum, ed., *Critics of the Enlightenment: Readings in the French Counter-Revolutionary Tradition* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2004), 75.
15. Bonald, *Pensées sur divers sujets* [1817], in *Oeuvres*, VI: 87.
16. Bonald, *Pensées, Oeuvres*, VI: 52-53.
17. Bonald, *Thoughts*, in Blum, ed., *Critics of the Enlightenment*, 72-73.
18. Bonald, "De l'éducation publique," *Le Conservateur* #53 (1819), V: 19.
19. Bonald, "De la Chambre de 1815," *Le Conservateur* #43 (1819), IV: 158.
20. Bonald, "A Proposition to abolish Divorce," in



Louis de Bonald, *The True and Only Wealth of Nations: Essays on Family, Economy, and Community*, ed. Christopher Olaf Blum (Naples, Florida: Sapientia Press, forthcoming).



21. Nisbet, "Foreward," Louis de Bonald, *On Divorce*, trans. Nicholas Davidson (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1992), x.

22. Bonald, "A Proposition," in Blum, ed., *The True*

*and Only Wealth of Nations*.

23. See Christopher Shannon, *Conspicuous Criticism: Tradition, the Individual, and Culture in American Social Thought, from Veblen to Mills* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), 186-187.

24. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939; New York: Harcourt, 1977), 48.



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