

The Dualistic Answer

What is Conservatism?, edited by Frank S. Meyer. *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. 242 pp. \$4.95.*

I DON'T THINK it possible to overstate either the importance of this book or of the current in American life it reflects.

Its title is, however, at least in my opinion, misleading. I suppose the choice was dictated by unavoidable practical considerations. But the book seems to me to be no more concerned with conservatism than the Constitution was. Its vision—or that part of it I want to delimit — is the vision of Washington when he sought to keep both Hamilton and Jefferson in his cabinet; or perhaps it would be clearer to say: the vision of the Hamilton who, with Madison, wrote *The Federalist Papers*, not of the Hamilton who, when the Constitution and the government were established, turned his attention to making America something his old colleague Madison didn't at all like.

The authors of what I would call the important portion of the book have a single point: that Western greatness rests upon the tension, the fruitful dialogue, that takes place between two points of view. It would be sensible to call one of these conservative and the other liberal. Indeed, nothing else really makes sense. But that isn't what the book does: it calls "conservative" the present drive to restore both of these views to health, and "liberal" that present unhealthy state which makes each a travesty of itself, and takes both of them out of the mainstream of Western thought and feeling.

If one comes at the book as I do, two of the most brilliantly illuminating articles are those by Garry Wills and Stanley Parry. I can use them as an example of the merit I find in many of the contributions. Wills begins by pinning down the fact that liberalism and conservatism are two ways of life equally indigenous in the Western bloodstream: "The conservative claims guardian-

ship over the storehouse of Western wisdom. The Liberal contends that the genius of the West lies in its capacity for innovation, in a daring reliance on reason and a resiliency towards change." Mr. Wills believes both are right. The problem is *how*, in what kind of political and social actuality, they are brought together, for they can be, and have been, brought together in different ways. Thus, Wills argues, we must stop thinking in terms of "conservatism" vs "liberalism" and begin thinking in terms of *kinds* of conservatism and *kinds* of liberalism. The two always exist, and always in some sort of relationship; but they have different manifestations, depending upon the overall view of life that dictates the nature of both. The problem becomes, then, how to sort out the kinds of relationship possible, and to achieve the kind that preserves and furthers the potentialities of life in the Western world. As to what kind this is, Mr. Wills has some very definite and very brilliant things to say.

Father Parry wants to drive home the fact that, in their present forms, there is something radically wrong with both the liberal reliance on reason and the conservative reliance on tradition. Appeals to tradition are valueless because there is at present no healthy tradition available. In a similar way appeals to reason and freedom are valueless because no one can talk a civilization into health. The experience of meaning is either there or not; and when it is not, no talk about it makes sense to those who have not had the experience. From here Father Parry proceeds to suggest quite specifically and with great brilliance what can be done.

Professor Wills in his way and Father Parry in his both succeed in dispelling large portions of the miasma that has prevented our clear realization of what can and should be accomplished. So do the other contributors. True, the book has essays by modern conservatives pure and simple (Kirk, for example) and by modern (or rather, old-fashioned) liberals pure and simple (Hayek, for instance). But what Frank Meyer and those closest to his position are seeking to do is to clarify the fact that each of these views can exist in a healthy state only when in proper relationship to the other and to an underlying reality.

We have, then, three parties: one liberal in the sense of Garry Wills' definition and Hayek's practice, one conservative in Wills' sense and in a way typified by Russell Kirk, and a third, which is perhaps more than anything else a movement

whose existence and promise rises out of Frank Meyer's vision. In the sense that all three views have to exist in opposition to the present nature of American life, within which healthy traditions have almost totally disappeared and where there is no room left for freedom and almost nothing exists that seems worth reasoning about, all are opposed to the mainstream of modern drift. But since these men are set not at all on conserving but on restoring a different way of life, it is only in a very limited and somewhat self-crippling way that the movement can be called conservative. It might better be called Republican, in the sense that it seeks to restore the vision of society that established the American Republic. For—make no mistake about it—these men are not trying to conserve our present way of life, its traditions, its authorities, its version of freedom, or its use of reason. They are revolutionists; and if they are conservatives, they are conservative revolutionists in the sense that Lord Acton pointed to when he said of the Founding Fathers: "The great revelation of America was that of a revolution effected by conservatives."

I don't know if other readers of this volume would agree with me as to the focal point about which this movement turns. What I notice is that all here represented who seem able to find ground for reconciling the claims of freedom and daring with those of tradition and authority do so because they have, basically, a religious view of the world. For instance, Stephen Tonsor traces the historic rise of the modern versions of liberalism and conservatism to the rise of "a doubt as to the nature and purposes of God in history." Or, as Father Parry puts it, "the organizing principle of the tradition, its root perception, is held by the way of belief, of faith." Given the faith, one is forced, it seems, to see liberalism and conservatism as complements of one another. That is to say, given the basically religious view, one is forced to think in terms of an objective reality that transcends human understanding, and is forced to insist upon the right of men freely to seek to understand and embrace it. At the same time, one is also forced to work for a political and social world in which the maximum of respect is shown to the ways and choices of others, whether these are expressed through traditional ways of acting and feeling or through a demand for reason and daring in the hope of a closer approximation to the good.

But what these writers offer is not their religion but its consequences. They are attempting, with their faith as their sustenance, to make clear how

the claims of authority and tradition and those of reason and freedom are two halves of a single coin, not because the relationship is defined by any church authority, or by any set of traditional folkways, or in laws, or in any ideology, but because it exists in objective reality. They are working, therefore, toward the creation of a world in which both liberals and conservatives may be fully themselves by being complements of one another, albeit complements always existing in tension. Within that framework, I suppose each has his view; but these men have put their personal views aside, just as the Founding Fathers did, in the interests of a prior claim. They do indeed share, to use Frank Meyer's concluding words, "a consensus . . . of the same quality as that which united those who created the Constitution and the Republic."

Reviewed by VINCENT MILLER

Prayer and Paradox

The Supreme Court and Public Prayer: The Need for Restraint,
by Charles E. Rice. *New York: Fordham University Press, 1964. 202 pp. \$5.*

UP TO the year of Grace 1961 the constitution of the State of Maryland required that candidates for certain offices swear to a belief in God as a condition of appointment. One Torcaso, who would not swear, and was for that reason denied a notaryship, took his protest to the Supreme Court. Holding for Torcaso in 1961, Mr. Justice Black spoke for the Court as follows:

... (N)either a State nor the Federal Government can constitutionally force a person "to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion." Neither can constitutionally pass laws or impose requirements which aid all religions as against non-believers, and neither can aid those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against those religions founded on different beliefs.... (Emphasis supplied.)

This rising suggestion that no-God "religions" had now achieved parity with theistic faiths was further sharpened two years later when the