

A Thesaurus of Wisdom

The Wisdom of Conservatism, edited by Peter Witonski, *New Rochelle, N. Y.*: Arlington House, 1971. 4 volumes, 2,396 pp. \$40.00.

“THE STUPID PARTY” was John Stuart Mill’s contemptuous appraisal of conservatives. And for much of this century most American intellectuals shared Mill’s belief. However, it appears that now—some two decades after the publication of Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*—it finally has become intellectually respectable for one to consider himself a conservative. Manifestations of this growing respectability can be witnessed in the United States, where increasing numbers of scholars have been gravitating toward the Right on many key issues. We find an acknowledgment of conservative insights regarding, for example, the nature of man, the need for order, authority, and roots, and the proper role of government. For many years conservatives have warned that cultural, economic, and especially political power must be diffused, balanced, and limited. When too much power is concentrated in the hands of government, contends the conservative,

there is a diminution of personal freedom and an exacerbation of problems that already exist.

In the new preface to his work, *The Quest for Community*, Robert Nisbet tells us that increasing atomization exists in our society because the government, unfettered by sufficient restraints, has implemented urban renewal programs which have tended to destroy cultural diversity and centers of community life. Edward Banfield in *The Unheavenly City* and Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* explain how government programs, intended to help the poor, have rather added to their woes. There are many other scholars who have come to doubt the wisdom of centralized power in the hands of bureaucracies. Peter Drucker, for example, tells us in *The Age of Discontinuity* that the only things that the government has been able to do effectively is to wage war and to inflate the currency. And Richard Goodwin—a genuine New Frontier Liberal—counsels us to be wary of the notion that “social justice” can be achieved through the coercive power of the state.

In line with these scholars is Daniel Patrick Moynihan, former advisor to Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, who warns us that we must get over our addiction to centralization. “In domestic affairs,” he counsels us, “we have got to become a great deal more rigorous in the assessment not only of the reality of the problem, but to the nature of the proposed solutions.” We must, he continues, “pay special attention to what we are good at, and work from strength. The federal government is good at collecting revenues, and rather bad at disbursing services.” It has been, he notes, the conservatives, not the liberals, who have furnished the persevering opposition to the misguided attempt to augment the power of the federal government.

The liberals, Mr. Moynihan concludes, must “see more clearly that their essential interest is in the stability of the social order, and given the present threats to that stability, it is necessary to seek out and

make much more effective alliance with political conservatives who share that concern, and who recognize that unyielding rigidity is just as much a threat to the continuity of things as is an anarchic desire for change.”

We have also the remarkable example of Nathan Glazer, who, with Mr. Moynihan, produced the controversial work, *Beyond the Melting Pot*. Mr. Glazer informed us in the October, 1970 issue of *Commentary* that because of—among other things—the attempt of the radicals to sabotage both the social organization and the university, he has become “deradicalized” and now considers himself a “mild conservative.” The radicalism of the 1960’s, he argues, was beset with error and confusion, so that our main task, “if we are ever to mount a successful assault on our problems, must be to argue with [radicalism] and to strip it of the pretension that it understands the causes of our ills and how to set them right.”

In this context it is difficult to imagine a more opportune time than now for the publication of *The Wisdom of Conservatism*. Edited by Dr. Peter Witonski, a Fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, this excellent set of four volumes contains selections from the writing of such “conservative” masters as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Burke, Adams (John), Babbitt, Oakeshott, Eliot, Weaver, Kirk, Goldwater, Friedman, Buckley, Meyer, and others.

Conservatism—as Dr. Witonski correctly asserts in his Introduction—is not a system but rather a style of thought, one that is concerned not only with politics but with “all aspects of life and civilization.” And although there is no fixed set of dogmas, no official “party line,” there are certain dispositions, certain habits of thinking, which make contemporary American conservatism distinguishable from, say, contemporary liberalism. Among these dispositions are:

1. A recognition of the mixed and immutable nature of man in which evil and

irrationality always lurk behind a curtain of civilized behavior.

2. A belief in natural inequality among men in matters of body, mind, and spirit, with the only genuine equality being metaphysical and equality before the law.

3. The belief in the inevitability of social classes, and the futility of attempts to level; variety rather than uniformity is ultimately better.

4. An understanding that cultural, economic and especially political power must be diffused, balanced, limited.

5. An appreciation of the idea that private property is important for liberty, order, and progress.

6. The belief that order and stability (what Moynihan refers to as "The Politics of Stability") are the primary obligations of good government; and belief in the notion that order and stability benefit from a respect for tradition and restraint in society.

7. The recognition of the essential role of religious feeling in man and of organized religion in society.

It is true, of course, that not all conservatives hold to every single view mentioned here. Conservatism, as Russell Kirk has observed, cannot be reduced to a set of abstract formulas and pretentious phrases. Consequently, conservatives disagree about which aspects of conservative thought should be emphasized. That Mr. Witonski has included here persons who place emphasis on such dissimilar aspects of conservatism as do Milton Friedman and Dr. Kirk indicates that he has—what is sometimes called in conservative circles—the "fusionist" or "centrist" position. For many years American conservatives have been engaged in internecine warfare; the battle lines have been drawn between those who consider themselves "libertarians" and those who have been called "traditionalists."

Rooted in eighteenth and nineteenth century conservative thought, traditionalist

conservatism abstracts from the corpus of Western belief its emphasis upon value, virtue, and order. Generally speaking, traditionalists subordinate the freedom of the individual to what they consider to be the appropriate demands of society and moral authority. Tradition—that is, the accumulated wisdom of the past—takes precedence over reason as the proper guide to right conduct and normality.

Libertarian conservatism, on the other hand, stresses personal freedom and the innate importance of the individual. Rooted in the classical liberal thinking of the nineteenth century, libertarian conservatism, which draws from the same source—the Western heritage—as traditionalist conservatism, holds that each person must be emancipated as much as possible from the demands of society and government. Reason—unrestricted by inherited wisdom—is stressed.

This is where the "centrist" steps into the picture. Believing that both conservatives and liberals of the nineteenth century have much to contribute, the centrist—and it seems fair to say that Witonski is one—attempts to reconcile libertarian with traditionalist conservatism. Perhaps the most prominent centrist in the conservative movement was Frank S. Meyer, who before his untimely death was a senior editor of *National Review*. Educated at Princeton, Oxford, the London School of Economics, and the University of Chicago, Mr. Meyer was for many years a member of the Communist Party. But like John Braine, Whitaker Chambers and other intellectuals, he—after much reflection and soul-searching—left the Party and made his gradual and apparently inevitable journey to the Right.

In the essay "Freedom, Tradition and Conservatism"—which originally appeared in *Modern Age* and now appears in Volume IV of *The Wisdom of Conservatism*—Mr. Meyer walks a tightrope between traditionalist and libertarian conservatism, attempting to demonstrate that they can be reconciled, since "they have their roots in a common tradition and are arrayed against a

common enemy." Each group, he writes, implicitly accepts—to a large degree—the ends of the other. For without "the implicit acceptance of an absolute ground of value," the libertarian emphasis on the primacy of the person as the criterion of social, political, and economic thought and action has no philosophical foundation. For Mr. Meyer, the classical liberals deserve our gratitude for their defense of personal freedom, but their utilitarian philosophy, he contends, is finally unable to provide an adequate defense of the freedom they value. For the utilitarian position easily can lend itself to serious infractions of freedom and justice for the sake of "the greatest good" for the "greatest number."

On the other hand, the traditionalist emphasis on virtue as the end of man's being implicitly recognizes the necessity of freedom to choose between good and evil, right and wrong; otherwise, "virtue could be no more than a conditioned tropism." And, moreover, the elevation of order to "the rank of an end overshadowing and subordinating the individual person would make of order not what the traditionalist conservative means by it, but the rule of totalitarian authority, inhuman and subhuman."

There are, alas, extremists on both sides. "Extremists on one side," Mr. Meyer asserts, "may be undisturbed by the danger of the recrudescence of authoritarian status society, if only it would enforce the doctrines in which they believe," while extremists on the other side may "care little what becomes of ultimate values if only political and economic individualism prevails." Both extremes, however, are self-defeating. For

truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon brings conditions that pave the way for surrender to tyranny.

The conflict examined by Mr. Meyer results from false antitheses. Besides the false antithesis between freedom and order, there is the false antithesis between reason and

tradition. By placing an inordinate emphasis on certain values to the exclusion of other no less important values, neither side can see the plausibility of opposing positions.

Traditionalist conservatism is worthy of our gratitude for its awareness of the value of tradition; and this heavy reliance upon "the wisdom of the ages" furnishes the traditionalist with historical perspective—a perspective which blesses him with an antidote to both utopian and apocalyptic thinking. However, when this devotion to tradition becomes excessive—as it sometimes does with the traditionalist—there results an unwholesome distrust of reason. The repudiation of reason apparently results from the traditionalist's inability to distinguish between the use of the rational faculty advocated by, say, Thomas Aquinas, and the application favored, for instance, by the eighteenth century *philosophes*. Aquinas placed immense value in rationality, for man is, after all, a rational animal, and it is, among other things, his reasoning capacity which helps distinguish him from beast. But the Angelic Doctor also recognized that reason has its limitations. Right reason for Aquinas is reason functioning in the light of tradition and common experience; it is reason tempered, too, by moral authority. The *philosophes* advocated reason unfettered by reality, an application of reason which results in an arid and distorting ideology. Reason assumes an Olympian posture and becomes the only valid way to knowledge of truth and of the real world.

It is the latter notion concerning reason and its application that the traditionalist properly reacts against; but much too often he overreacts and denigrates the value of rationality. For their part, the libertarians—like the eighteenth century *philosophes*—tend to deify reason; it becomes apotheosized, and there is a consequent rejection of tradition and prescription.

But what more may we say regarding these respective positions? There are, it seems, two points that we might consider. First, the traditionalist should keep in mind

the distinction between abstract reasoning and the reasoning which operates within tradition. He should realize that while it is important to acknowledge and to value "the wisdom of the ages," it also is imperative to remember that tradition—like personal judgments—must constantly be reexamined in the light of new evidence and common experience. True, there should be a presumption in favor of traditional ways of viewing and doing things, that is, a tradition should be considered valid until proved otherwise. But there also needs to be an awareness that there are bad as well as good traditions. Here right reason is required; for reason—tempered by moral authority and historical perspective—can help us distinguish between healthy and unhealthy traditions.

Second, the libertarian—like the traditionalist—puts undue emphasis on certain values to the neglect of other no less important values. By denigrating tradition and prescription, his abstract reasoning functions in a vacuum. He needs to recognize that there is no real antagonism between reason and tradition. We should embrace both—reasoning functioning within tradition. As Frank Meyer put it:

[We want neither] ideological *hubris* abstractly creating utopian blueprints, ignoring the accumulated wisdom of mankind, nor blind dependence upon that wisdom to answer automatically the questions posed to our generation and demanding our own expenditure of our own mind and spirit.

Frank Meyer's essay, it should be pointed out, is one of many luminous and superb essays republished in Mr. Witonski's anthology. *The Wisdom of Conservatism* is the definitive anthology of conservative thought. It has an immense reference value, and should be purchased by every public library.

Reviewed by HAVEN BRADFORD GOW