

To See Life With a Clearer Vision

Milton Birnbaum

The very word "conservative" proves as slippery, when examined, as other terms in constant use.¹
—Austin Warren

MY ANSWER to the question, "Is religious faith a necessary ground for conservatives?" "Yes," but only within the framework of what I mean by three basic terms: "religious," "faith," and "conservative." I consulted several dictionaries and found their definitions of these three terms quite similar, but since *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (subsequently referred to as AHDEL) contains the word "Heritage" in its title, and since "Heritage" is an essential element in the preservation of conservatism, I opted for the AHDEL definition.

"RELIGIOUS"

The adjective is a variant of the noun "religion," which the AHDEL defines as a "bond between man and the gods, perhaps from *religare*, 'to bind back.'" As an etymological clarification, the AHDEL definition is adequate, but, obviously, there are complicating problems. As George Bernard Shaw observed in his preface to his *Plays, Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898), "There is only one religion, though there are a hundred versions of it." My own personal religion is

modern (centrist) Orthodox Judaism. The features of my religion that I would like to emphasize are the following:

1. *The continuity of the tradition.* One of the basic books of the Hebrew canon, *The Ethics of the Fathers*, begins as follows: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets handed it on to the men of the Great Assembly." The Torah, as interpreted by Orthodox Judaism, was handed down from generation to generation—and continues to be so. By contrast, there was an organization spawned during the post-Woodstock era which called itself by the acronym COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics). It should be added that this organization was founded by professional prostitutes.

My embrace of modern (centrist) Orthodox Judaism makes me in turn embrace the importance of the past not because I follow George Santayana's dictum, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," but because I believe that our spiritual and cultural fathers were superior in their moral wisdom to those who succeeded them. It is significant that Santayana made his observation in a book entitled *The Life of Reason* (1905) and that what he had in mind was the evil of the past, not its glory. I believe that Leo Strauss offered a more salubrious guide to living

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when he declared, "The facile delusions which conceal from us our true situation all amount to this: that we are, or can be, wiser than the wisest men of the past. And it seems to me that the cause of this situation is that we have lost all...authoritative traditions in which we could trust."²

At the same time, I recognize that religion can be an Achilles spear, for it can heal or it can destroy. Religion has sometimes assumed a relentless intolerance by denying to others different roads to divinity. One should recall Jonathan Swift's observation (in his *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, 1711), that "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

2. *Havdalah*. At the close of every Sabbath and Jewish holiday, a prayer is said in which the closing line is the following: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hast made a distinction between the sacred and the profane." My belief in modern (centrist) Orthodox Judaism provides me with the importance of observing qualitative differences not only in the cultural contributions of various eras, but also in the different so-called "lifestyles."

One of the more distressing features of the post-World War II period has been the blurring between the sacred and the profane. In several instances the profane has become the sacred. We have "holy" days that have been transformed into "holidays" so as to facilitate the transactions of business. We have adopted the use of the words "shrine" and "enshrinement" to create various Halls of Fame in which former sports celebrities (in baseball, basketball, etc.) are "enshrined."

Canonization has now become enlarged to facilitate the admission of all kinds of books into the Western and Eastern canons of literature. Until the beginning of World War II contemporary literature was almost never included in college literary studies, but since the end of World War II the erosion of standards has opened the gates to admit books of

dubious literary worth. Literary critics such as Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold have been replaced by "lit crit" specialists whose criticism is marked by a jargon that jars the nerves and muddles the mind. The twin criteria of ethics and aesthetics have been replaced by the trendy triad of "race, class, and gender."

I believe that there are qualitative differences between the past and the present; between the relative values of different disciplines; between the "best sellers" of today and the classics that have endured. We should not encourage a culture in which "Everybody [and everything] is above average." Similarly, we should not worship at the altar of newness. There is a lust for the latest (be it in the arts or philosophy or religion) which can easily become a false god—a "novolatry." Whereas in the sciences (medicine, technology, etc.), the latest may be the best, in the humanities, in religion, in "lifestyles" this is not so. The new fashion which allows children to call their parents by their first names and encourages students to do likewise with their teachers; the trend to have professors in the classroom use foul language so as to impress their students with the fact that they are "with it"; the disappearance of distinctions, in dress for different occasions and for different professions—all these trends tend to create a culture that is "weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable," to adopt here Hamlet's melancholy description of "all the uses of this world." It is not that new generations are incapable of producing greatness, and it is not that everything old is worthy of exaltation, but greatness cannot be achieved overnight; only that whose worth has escaped "the ravages of time" can be considered truly great.

3. *Self-transcendence*. My endorsement of modern (centrist) Orthodox Judaism also provides me with a sense of self-transcendence, by which I recognize that, important as man's material contribu-

tions and progress may be, he should recognize the evanescence of materialism and the superiority of spirit. "From dust to dust" reveals to me that our earthly journey is terminal and that without spirit man is dust. Adam was merely dust until God breathed spirit (a soul) into him. Such knowledge leads us to wisdom and humility. Even Shaw advised us, "Look at the stars; there are more important things than personal things." Perhaps Professor George Panichas, the editor of *Modern Age*, has unwittingly provided the answer to the symposium question he posed when he called his latest book *Growing Wings to Overcome Gravity* (1999). Growing Platonic wings will enable us to make the transition from self-absorption to self-transcendence. This self-transcendence will facilitate our seeing the stars.

4. *Free Will*. Above all, my faith teaches me that there is free will. "I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore, choose life...." (Deuteronomy, XXX, 19). Having been inundated by the current emphasis on victimization and victimhood, I sometimes am tempted to endorse I.B. Singer's response when he was asked whether he believed in free will: "Of course I believe in free will; I have no choice." Upon reflection, I realized that no one forced Singer to make that statement; he had free will and had chosen to exercise it.

"FAITH"

The AHDEL must have been following St. Paul's description of "faith" when it gave as one of its definitions, "belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence," Although St. Paul's definition that "Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen" cannot be improved on, I hasten to add that Maimonides, Aristotelian though he was in his stressing the importance of reason, nevertheless recognized its limitation in dealing with "the eternal ques-

tions"; he opted for the belief in revealed religion and in a personal God. Perhaps the best example of faith in action in this century (if not in the history of mankind) is that shown by those Jews who were awaiting death in the extermination camps during the Holocaust and yet did not renounce their God but kept their faith.

"CONSERVATIVE"

The AHDEL definition of the term is "tending to favor the preservation of the existing order and to regard proposals for change with distrust." There are, of course, all kinds of conservatives (political, fiscal, cultural, social, religious, even culinary and sartorial), not to mention paleo- and neo-conservatives. And it should be recalled that it has been said in various ways by several authors that he who is a radical after the age of thirty has no mind and he who is a conservative before the age of thirty has no heart.

Russell Kirk, perhaps the paradigmatic conservative (whose six canons of conservatism as outlined in his Introduction to *The Conservative Mind* [1953] best state the creed for conservatives), once voted for Norman Thomas for President of the United States and, later on, for Eugene McCarthy for the same position. In both instances, however, it should be pointed out that Kirk was merely applying his second canon of conservatism: "Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems...." I would classify myself as a cultural and religious conservative, but even in these areas, I reserve the right to dissent when I feel it necessary.

Reflecting on the world's existence from time to time, I can share Thomas Hobbes's observation (in his *Leviathan*, 1756) that man's existence is "poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In my most gloomy moments, I can even empathize with

Hamlet when he says (Act II, Scene 2): “What a piece of work is a man; how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties; in form and moving, how express and admirable; in action, how like an angel; in apprehension, how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?”

In my more rational moments, however, I recognize that Hamlet’s basic problem was not existential angst, nor the Oedipus complex. His basic problem was that he lacked religious faith. Had he

religious faith, he would not have regarded human existence as the “quintessence of dust.” My religious faith enables me to see life with a clearer vision—and hope. It is in this sense that I am a conservative—wishing to conserve what has proved to be worthwhile.

1. From Foreword to George A. Panichas, *The Courage of Judgment: Essays in Criticism, Culture, and Society* (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1982), x. 2. Quoted in Richard Bernstein, “A Very Unlikely Villain (or Hero),” *The New York Times* (Section E, 4), January 29, 1995.

Towards a Eucharistic Conservatism

Anne Husted Burleigh

RELIGIOUS FAITH is indeed a necessary ground for conservatives. More specifically, Christianity is the religious faith that perfectly embraces the conservative ideal. Even further, Catholic Christianity is the fullest expression of Christian faith.

To be sure, Christianity is in no way political. Its mission to bring all of creation into the kingdom of Christ transcends politics and will be fulfilled only in heaven. Yet Christianity is an incarnational religion; it considers creation as a gift of God, upon which God has bestowed his imprint, willing even to be born of a woman and to walk among us as a man. In this world that the Lord has given us, politics—through which we reflect on how we ought to live together—

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is a proper human concern. Thus politics is a proper concern for Christians, specifically Catholic Christians. Conservatives find that the Catholic view of human nature and of the world suggests a political philosophy with which they themselves are quite at home.

Conservatives want to conserve the two foundation stones of a free society: respect for the freedom of each human person and respect for the order in which freedom is rightly exercised. Freedom and order are most fully explained by Christian faith, particularly by Catholic faith.

The Christian begins with an understanding of the human person as sacred, sacred because he is created by God. His origin is in God; he is made for God. The human person, as a consequence, is a subject, not an object. He cannot be an object of utility. Pope John Paul II, in the many documents of his pontificate, has