

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

explained the truth of the human person, seeing this truth as hugely important in combating the most dangerous of modern evils, such as abortion, euthanasia, fetal exploitation and fetal stem cell harvesting, and human cloning.

The natural law contains some understanding of the inviolability of the human person. The law specifies moral principles that should be obvious to everyone. Thus we do see countless non-Christians and even pagans living according to a moral code.

The law, however, goes only so far. It cannot answer the deepest questions: Why are we here? Why are we free? What is the meaning of history? What is the meaning of suffering? How can we answer the problem of evil? How can God be with us and even live in us? What makes marriage and family more than a contract between individuals? How are marriage and family the key ingredients of community? Such questions find answers in revelation. Although the law and revelation do not contradict each other, law cannot stand alone; it needs revelation to explain why it exists at all. Without faith in the truth of revelation, we have a skeletal code of morality provided by the natural law, and so we can know how to act. Yet without faith in revealed truth, we can never really know the *why* of things. Without faith our knowledge is thin. Our lives are thin. Especially we can never make sense of suffering, which Christianity, alone of all religions, satisfactorily—gloriously—explains through the Cross of Christ.

Nor can we through reason alone ever touch fully the purpose of freedom. Yes, we may discover through reason that our freedom is meant to enable us to do good. It is faith, however, that tells us that freedom allows us to become who we are meant to be, because only faith knows the full truth of who we are in the first place—children of God, made in his image. Thomas Dubay, in his book *Authenticity* (1997), has said that there is no fully authentic natural man. Because man is made in the image of God, anything less than a reflection of that image is a falling off, a falling away from the truth of the human person. The freedom that Christianity understands, then, is exactly the conformation of the person to Christ. The more we are like Christ—in other words, giving ourselves in love as he does—the more we live in freedom. To be like Christ, Pope John Paul continually emphasizes, we give ourselves, not assert ourselves. Self-donation, not self-assertion, is our true freedom. This self-giving love is the antithesis of individualism. Individualism, on the one hand, is essentially selfish and leads to the misery of enslavement to self. Self-donation, on the other hand, is the very definition of freedom.

The freedom of self-donation cannot exist without virtue. A person becomes truly himself, that is, his best self, through habits of virtue. Virtue, if it is to sustain one through severe temptation, requires faith. Virtue, in order to become the mature mastery of self through disciplined habits, needs a living, vibrant faith. Otherwise morality becomes a feeble residue of a once living faith and forgets what the good man, the free man looks like. Morality then becomes prey to attack both from relativists, who insist that no morality is true, and from authoritarians, who move swiftly into the void left by absentee free and virtuous people. Virtue is the expression of freedom. It is also the foundation of order and the antidote to chaos. Absence of virtue creates chaos, which is an irresistible lure for the imposition of tyrannical power.

Freedom survives only with virtue and order. The order within which it flourishes is community, knit together by stable marriages. The community ordered in freedom and virtue shares a common vision and is therefore resistant to fragmentation, which takes hold when freedom is mistakenly defined as

self-assertion. Fragmentation, that is, the idolatry of the individual will, is detrimental to a free people. Essentially it is a refusal to recognize truth. What is truth, a fragmented society asks. Who guarantees that anything is certain? Do I decide truth? Am I my own god?

The conservative finds in Catholic Christianity the answers to the primary questions that concern him regarding freedom and order: What is freedom *for*? Why are we free? What is the truth of the human person? How can we be certain of truth? How can we have authentic community?

Catholic Christianity boldly answers that freedom is living in Christ. The freedom God gives us is true freedom, bestowed in love. With his grace, we are free to grow in virtue, so that we can gradually put aside our enslaving selfish and distorted passions, thus seeing more clearly the beauty of Christ.

Catholic Christianity offers the conservative a real guarantee of truth, a relief from the modernist idolatry of individualism and the impossible, crushing

burden of myself as my own god. Christ has given us his Church, which is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—the Body of Christ, containing perfect truth and unity. Authority comes from no human source but from Christ himself.

As Christ promised us, he has not left us orphans but has given us his Holy Spirit, who guides us in every moment. Each day, if we choose, we can participate in the sacrament of the eucharist, when Christ gives us, fully and completely, under the appearance of bread and wine, his very body, blood, soul, and divinity. In the eucharist God himself breaks the radical barrier between divine and human and comes to live in us. He offers us not a symbol of himself but himself in stunning reality.

In partaking of his body in communion, we are joined in the universal community of the Church, by which Father, Son, and Spirit link us with all those baptized, living and dead. The conservative who seeks the final answer to freedom and order in community will find it here.

## *Beyond the Frozen Void*

*Bryce Christensen*

THOUGH SHREWD ENOUGH to hide a dark perspective from public view, Marx's gifted collaborator, Friedrich Engels, anticipated a grim ending for the proletarian paradise he promised his followers. Hence, despite his political optimism for the coming century, he confessed a cos-

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mic hopelessness for the coming eons:

Millions of years may come and go, hundreds of thousands of generations may be born and die; but inexorably the time comes when the sun exhausts itself and its warmth is no longer sufficient to melt the ice coming from the poles...and finally there is not enough warmth for life itself. Gradually, the last traces of life disappear and the earth becomes a dead, frozen globe, like the moon.<sup>1</sup>