

Christian, Therefore Conservative

Edward E. Ericson, Jr.

THE QUESTION BEFORE US is whether religious faith is a necessary ground for conservatives. My answer is no, for the plain fact is that I know and honor many conservatives who are not religious. When, however, the question is whether religious faith is a necessary ground for my own conservatism, the answer is yes. I am both a Christian and a conservative. And I insist on that order: Christian first, then conservative; Christian, therefore conservative. Augustine is right: first belief, then understanding.

More challenging to me than conservatives who are not religious believers are religious believers who are not conservatives. Since I have spent my career as a professor at Christian colleges, I live among many intelligent and devout people who are theologically conservative but culturally and politically liberal. Knowing and honoring them has forced me into lifelong soul-searching about my linkage of Christian faith and conservatism. Nonetheless, I cannot evade what for an academic is the double burden of the scandal of the cross and identification as a conservative. Gradually, this

double burden has had a liberating effect. True, I wish I had as many conservative allies among my fellow communicants in the Reformed tradition as I do among Roman Catholics. But I think that my outlook approaches a seamless consistency and gives me a firm place to stand as I assess the world around me. I belong both to the Christian church and to the conservative movement. I am more active in the former than in the latter because of my ordering of priorities.

What follows is a distillation of what I believe. George Nash, in *The Conservative Movement in America*, identifies “five distinct impulses” in contemporary conservatism: libertarianism, traditionalism, anti-Communism, neoconservatism, and the Religious Right. Three of these impulses—traditionalism, anti-Communism, and (with some discomfort) the Religious Right—appear prominently in my world view. They provide, by my lights, logical extensions of my Christian faith into the public arena: I think that the writings of John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper, the two leading influences on contemporary Calvinist intellectuals, provide greater sanction for conservatism than for liberalism. But the two writers who have most immediately influenced my thinking are Russell Kirk and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (both born in 1918).

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I came to Christ as a child through the ministrations of Godly parents, and in no way do I wish to minimize the subjective factor of personal experience. But one way to formulate why I am a Christian as an adult is to affirm that Christianity provides the best explanation of reality. I believe that in the beginning God created the universe and all that is in it, and He created humanity in His own image. The human fall into sin deeply distorted but did not erase that divine image. In His grace God provided a way of redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The universe is as the Bible says it is: a moral universe in which good and evil are real categories and human beings are free moral agents with responsibility to tend to their eternal souls and to the whole range of the created order. My world view emphasizes what C. S. Lewis calls “mere Christianity” and what Solzhenitsyn calls the “timeless essence of humanity,” with those “fixed universal concepts called good and justice.”

In *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk, one of the fathers of modern American conservatism, offers a credo consonant with these central Christian teachings: “Conservatives believe that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead.” *The Politics of Prudence*, Kirk’s late-in-life summation of the principles of conservatism, lists as the first principle, “The conservative believes that there exists an enduring moral order. That order is made for man, and man is made for it: human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent.” A conservatism that seeks “the restoration of the ethical system and the religious sanction upon which any life worth living is founded,” Kirk has said, “is conservatism at its highest,” and it is my kind of conservatism.

What this perspective seeks to con-

serve is, in a nutshell, Western culture. The West’s two fountainhead sources are Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian thought. The great tradition of Western culture has proven peculiarly absorptive; it has brought influences from many disparate sources into a rich conversation. But it is Christianity that has for centuries formed its core. And it is, above all, this core to which “conservatism at its highest” remains faithful.

According to this view, reality is objective, and its source is God. Human beings find meaning in life by attaching themselves to this reality and its transcendent source, not by trying to construct their own version of reality. This vision accords primacy to the individual, who bears God’s image, but it locates him within community, since we are all his image-bearers and thereby share a common human nature. Christian conservatism hews a middle path between the modern errors of individualism and collectivism. It places a premium on human liberty, but it distinguishes liberty from license by placing limits on liberty; it proposes an ordered liberty. Freedom is constrained by moral laws that are built into the universe. These laws provide norms for good behavior. The goal is to live a good life, and this means living in harmony with the universe as it really is.

Because human beings are at one and the same time both grand (via creation) and miserable (via the fall), our lives are open to high drama, even to heroism. As Solzhenitsyn avers, “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” Great literature is the record of this drama. Writers who are not Christian—the ancient pagans, for instance—glimpse this overall pattern. But Christianity gives the fullest, most intellectually satisfying account of it. And part of that account is that, in our fallen condition, we cannot be restored to our full humanity as God’s image-bearers

apart from the redemption provided by Christ's sacrifice.

The drama of our lives is to be played out in all spheres of human activity. These include politics and economics. However, as Solzhenitsyn says, "... the state structure is of secondary significance. That this is so, Christ himself teaches us. 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's'—not because every Caesar deserves it, but because Caesar's concern is not with the most important thing in our lives." So I reject the primacy of politics, which I think some conservatives share with liberals and leftists.

The longstanding Christian world view retains numerous adherents among the populace today. Among intellectuals, however, it headed into eclipse 200 years ago with the Enlightenment, which gave birth to the modern age. If Enlightenment thought played a certain, albeit limited, positive role in the founding of the United States, it was a disaster for Christianity; for it set in motion a rejection of God and a substitution of man for God. The Enlightenment promulgated what Solzhenitsyn has called "rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy: the proclaimed and practiced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. It could also be called anthropocentricity, with man seen as the center of all."

Human autonomy turned the old order on its head. Pride, long understood as the root sin of all sins, became a virtue; and it spawned utopian dreams of human perfectibility. Religion became privatized, and politics took religion's place as the prism through which to view everything and the instrument through

which to improve the human condition. By the twentieth century, utopian dreams turned into totalitarian schemes. The longest lasting of these, Soviet Communism, eventually collapsed of inner rot. It collapsed because its understanding of human beings was false.

The "core of the whole Communist system," Solzhenitsyn asserts, is "atheism." Moreover, "the primary trait of the *entire* twentieth century" is precisely that "men have forgotten God." Václav Havel, too, sees in the twentieth century "a great departure from God which has no parallel in history" and thinks that "we are living in the middle of the first atheistic civilization." By revering God, our ancestors, Havel insists, "knew something more essential about [the universe] than we do, something that escapes us." The great drama of our postmodern era is the contest between atheism and theism.

These dissidents urge neither returning to the past nor perpetuating the status quo. Rather, they encourage us to regain our moral bearings from the premodern wisdom that Enlightenment-spawned modern culture has jettisoned and once again apply the old verities to ever-changing social phenomena. As just one example pertinent to my profession, consider the declaration by a Renaissance Calvinist, Sir Philip Sidney, that the "end of all human learning [is] virtuous action." This is wisdom beyond what university curricula now transmit, and the young would be better off if they were made aware of it. The old books have many more such insights for us.