

Opposing Strains

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In *The Conservative Mind* (1953) Russell Kirk delineated six “principles” or “canons” of conservative thought. First among these was “belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as consciences.” The life of the political community is not a mere artifact, and human rights and duties cannot be disposed at our convenience; rather, we are responsible to the divine. And this responsibility has public consequences. Kirk went on to argue that conservatives believe “political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems,” and thus, technical or procedural fixes offer no lasting solutions.

In the introduction to his anthology, *The Portable Conservative Reader*, nearly thirty years later (1982) Kirk again placed a “transcendent” orientation as the first of conservative principles, observing that “conservatives generally believe...there exists a transcendent moral order, to which we ought to try to conform the ways of society.” He contrasted this view with liberal utilitarianism and with a philosophical radicalism that detests “theological postulates” and that attempts to conceptualize human society as just so much matter in motion. For Kirk, any genuinely conservative mind had to it a religious cast, a sense of piety, a concern,

as it were, for the rights of God—though he demurred from doctrinal disputes.

More recently, however, Professor Jerry Muller, in a widely reviewed “anthology with an argument” entitled *Conservatism* (1997), takes a far different tack. Implicitly in his selection of texts and explicitly in his carefully argued introduction, Muller reinterprets the tradition in such a way as to leave little room for any genuinely religious dimension to conservatism “properly understood.” As with religion, so too with the other mythopoetic elements that many have associated with the conservative mind. All “romantic” nostalgia for “lost causes” championed by such “literary” conservatives as Kirk appears as an aberration to Muller. In contrast to Kirk’s transcendent view, holding first place among Muller’s conservative principles is the prudent defense of existing human institutions based on a profound sense of the limits of reason, an “epistemic modesty” directed equally against grand ideological schemes—and against every form of religious “enthusiasm.” Conservatives, according to Muller, properly hold religion at arm’s length, and they view the prophet and the saint with suspicion.

Realizing that his view is not immediately perspicuous, Muller works to distinguish thinkers he calls “the orthodox” from those who are properly conserva-

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tives. This distinction is made in hopes of *excluding* the orthodox, who are often mistakenly identified as the truest conservatives. According to Muller, the orthodox are those who come to the defense of threatened institutions because they believe such institutions correspond to the divine will. The Catholic legitimist monarchist of the nineteenth century and the evangelical defender of the nuclear family in America today would both be orthodox rather than conservative. Conservatives, in contrast, defend threatened institutions merely because they have shown themselves to serve some human purpose—this must be so, else how could they have survived over generations?—and because conservatives doubt that the innovators who set out to dismantle settled institutions fully grasp the complexities of a functioning society, and so likely fail to see the “latent functions” which such institutions serve. The only conservative certainty, in Muller’s view, is that any progressive innovation will bring in its wake unintended, and often harmful, consequences.

In short, whereas according to Kirk the antithesis of conservatism is liberal utilitarianism, according to Muller the very essence of conservatism is “historical utilitarianism.” Moreover, whereas Kirk’s conservatism tends toward a critique of the Enlightenment as such, Muller argues that conservatism is best understood as a current *within* Enlightenment. True conservatism for Muller is a “critique of liberal or progressive arguments ...on the enlightened grounds of the search for human happiness, based on the use of reason.” Whereas from Kirk’s perspective, the secular, social-scientific mindset of many contemporary “neo-conservatives” can only be understood as derivatively conservative, from Muller’s perspective these very qualities render neoconservatism the truest inheritor of the conservative tradition in

America today. It matters a great deal, then, whether one writes on a conservative mind “from Burke to Eliot” (as Kirk does) or on a conservatism “from Hume to the Present” (as Muller does). Is the embattled Christian Edmund Burke (1729-1797) the true father of conservatism, or must we acknowledge as a godfather the notorious atheist David Hume (1711-1776)?

Faced with such a stark contrast, someone of a conciliatory disposition might argue that Kirk and Muller are merely focusing their attention on two *complementary* aspects of conservatism. Kirk is attending to the religious dimension of much conservative reflection, whereas Muller is developing the “epistemic modesty” which characterizes most conservative theories. Anyone familiar with the tradition can recognize elements of both these tendencies jostling about in the writings of thinkers widely identified (and self-identified) as conservatives. The difference between Kirk and Muller must then be a matter merely of emphasis.

But such an attempted reconciliation cannot, in the end, be sustained. Faith in God or a transcendent ordering principle in the universe would seem, as it were, the height of epistemic *immodesty*: to claim to know God’s will is no small thing. On the other hand, to cling rather desperately to fragile and flawed human institutions out of nervous concern about the human propensity to lose our way seems warranted only in the absence of faith in any transcendent support for what we have come to know as justice and the human good.

That we are confronted with conflicting rather than complementary views is evident when we consider how each position would “explain” the elements of the other as they appear in the common tradition. Here, Muller largely follows the line of the “positional” interpretation of conservatism offered by Samuel Huntington many decades ago. Conservatives defend existing institutions when they

are subject to critique. By historical contingency, by mere accident, conservatism's emergence in the eighteenth century happened to occur in a world in which Christian institutions were prevalent. Thus, many of the seminal conservative texts evidently come to the defense of a specifically Christian social world, a world organized institutionally around public acknowledgement of a transcendent order. But there was no logical necessity for the conservative genesis within such a milieu; it was an historical happenstance.

Muller shows how, with the passing of time, the institutions conservatives seek to conserve have changed. For example, whereas Joseph de Maistre held written constitutions to be anathema and extolled monarchic absolutism, American conservatives usually venerate their written constitution and reject monarchy of any kind. Muller concludes that since conservatives have so often shifted their defensive front, there simply is no *content*, no particular social or political order, which can be identified as the conservative arcadia. Rather, conservatism is a meta-theory, and the one constant in conservative thought is an emphasis on what might be termed "traditionality" or "institutionality" as such. From Muller's perspective, Kirk's transcendent view of conservatism simply mistakes an historical accident for an essence.

Muller's arguments are astute, and his scholarly range is impeccable. He is surely correct that thinkers of the right have never been limited to those of orthodox religious views. But has he gotten to the core of things when he argues that conservatives defend religion, like other human institutions, for its social utility: that, and nothing more? How might Kirk respond in defense of his insistence on a transcendent referent as the conservative's first principle? Is Kirk able to explain Muller's account of epistemic modesty within a view which gives priority to

the transcendent?

Kirk, I believe, would start with the conservative's first feeling, the intuition that constitutes his moral source—namely, the sense of *loss*, and hence, of *nostalgia*. Those who are secure in the enjoyment of their own are often progressives of a sort, so confident in the solidity of their estate that they do not shrink from experimenting with new modes and orders. This was true of the French nobility of the *ancien régime*, who were often avid readers of the democratic theories of the *philosophes* and who in practice rejected their patrimonial duties for the novelties of the Court. This was true also of the planter class of the antebellum South, at least in the 1840s, whose writings are filled with an exuberant modernity. The conservative spirit arises only when loss is at hand, or, probably more frequently, when loss has occurred. Consequently, there is *always* a "reactionary" dimension to conservatism; the conservative arrives "too late" for mere conservation.

While in possession, we take our good for granted and, so, often fail to recognize it. But in the face of loss, the human good is vividly revealed to us. We lament the loss of goods, not the loss of evils, which is why lament *illuminates*. (Is it not striking that whereas antebellum Southern intellectuals championed the economic and moral superiority of the "peculiar institution," postbellum Southern conservatives did not *lament* the loss of slavery, but rather lamented the loss of gentility, gallantry, and the virtues of the yeomanry?) While it may be true that nostalgia views the past through "rose-colored glasses," such a criticism misses the point. To see the good while blinkered against evils is, nevertheless, *to see the good*. This is a source of knowledge, as well as a moral source. And here we may begin to glimpse facets of the human good beyond social functionality or mere utility, beyond all our theorizing.

In general terms, Muller might not find much with which to disagree in these considerations. He agrees that conservatives resist institutional innovation as proposals for change come before a body politic. Presumably, it would be no insuperable blow to his view if one were to dwell on the sense of loss that accompanies change—though it appears he finds nostalgia to be nothing more than an irrelevant distraction for the hard-headed “historical utilitarians” who are his conservatives. What is genuinely different in the Kirkian account is this matter of the moral source, the motivating impulse, and the acknowledgement of the *discoveries* which can be made in tradition.

Muller, we saw, held conservatism to be a tendency within Enlightenment, engaged like other Enlightenment doctrines in “the search for human happiness, based on the use of reason.” “Reason,” of course, is a loaded term, which when used in the context of Enlightenment or modernity often obscures more than it reveals. After all, were the Scholastic theologians, against whom the philosophers of the Enlightenment arrayed themselves, really partisans of unreason? Kirk is no more an irrationalist than was Burke before him. But conservatives have rightly seen that the peculiarly reductionist mode of “reason” deployed by moderns has excluded entire realms of existence from our contemplation; under the modern dispensation, our vision of the human whole has been darkened. Kirk, like Burke, is led by the ensuing “intimations of deprivation”—a term of art from George Parkin Grant—to discover dimensions to “human happiness” beyond the narrowing strictures of Enlightenment thought. Here, we may find a true assessment of the good of religion, as conservatism encounters it.

As the mention of Scholasticism indicates, one of the grand conceits of Enlightenment thought is that it alone can establish a basis for universal principles

in a “pure” science. The Enlightenment forerunner Thomas Hobbes dismissed all previous political thought as nothing but “Aristotelity,” and in like manner, Enlightenment characteristically “constructs” its deepest philosophical opponents as “tradition” and “superstition,” as something “beneath” reason which at length will be overcome by “progress.” Muller’s account of the nature of conservatism nearly accepts such denigration of tradition by limiting authentic conservatism to ineffectual cautionary admonitions about the limits of reason. But there is no need for the conservative to accept this partisan description of pre-Enlightenment social forms as being grounded in unreason. Nor is there any need for conservatives to accept the Enlightenment conceit of a monopoly on reason and universal right.

For as conservative thinkers over the generations have intuited, and as Pierre Manent has argued so persuasively in *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (1996), the dominant political tradition of modernity did not simply discover a pattern laid up in heaven to contemplate. Rather, Enlightenment liberalism was a *project* that set out to transform the world in a quite partisan way. Moreover, this multi-generational project was aimed against a particular enemy—namely, the Church, and with it, the social world that Christianity had brought into being in Europe. Thus, the famous “state of nature” which grounds liberal argument is a cunning substitute for the biblical account of Eden. The bourgeois virtues of the modern commercial republic, in turn, are meant to supersede the classical and Christian virtues, which in some cases now assume the character of vices. The sovereignty of the people as the sole legitimating principle of the liberal regime places in question the sovereignty of God. Far from a pattern laid up in heaven, the liberal order of modernity bears the marks of its struggle against its peculiar foe.

The construction of the modern liberal democratic regime has followed a circuitous path amidst many contingencies. In different times and places the partisans of progress have sided with enlightened monarchs, with parliaments, with executive agencies, and lately with constitutional courts. (If conservatives have changed their defensive front, so too have liberals changed their mode of attack.) Still, there are permanent, necessary features of the world remade by Enlightenment—our world.

Foremost of these is its secularism, the negation of the Christian social spirit. The reductionist mode of reason that Enlightenment has followed, its eschewal of teleology, has yielded a consistent human effect, bringing in its wake a consistent and pervading sense of *loss*. Various thinkers conceptualize this fundamental loss in different ways. They speak of the erosion of *Gemeinschaft*, of a process of *Entzauberung*, of the loss of the “sacred canopy.” What has been lost is our *assurance* that we dwell in an ordered and purposeful *cosmos*, whatever the state of our intellectual *conviction* concerning God’s Providence. What has been lost is our charged *awareness* of the depth and eternal destiny of every human soul when we live surrounded by men who seem to live as if God did not exist. What has been lost is the virtue of religion—and the “human happiness” which comes from giving God His due.

Wherever there is a sense of loss, the conservative knows that there lies an indicator of the human good, and the conservative is disposed to act in light of this revelation of the moral order. Here, we see that a necessary effect of Enlightenment liberalism is to eclipse our sense of the sacred. Conservatism in the Kirkian tradition is the grand quest to find a way “back” to a social and cultural world fit for *children of God*, the quest to recover the full amplitude of the human good—and indeed, of human nobility—under

the “enchantment” of a transcendent order. Conservatism is not the same as pious orthodoxy, for conservatism is a partisan doctrine shaped in response to the comprehensive challenge of the liberal regime. But conservatism is a truly critical resource precisely because it is not trapped within Enlightenment presumptions but seeks always to go beyond them. Insofar as the “story” of the modern age is the construction of the secular liberal regime, so the “under-story” of the modern age is that of conservatism’s rebuke to liberal reductionism. Because liberalism is permanently marked by its conflict with the Church, so—*contra* Muller—the quest for an eclipsed transcendence is a permanent feature of conservatism and not a mere accident of origin.

But what of “epistemic modesty”? As this account should make clear, being a *quest* to order the social world in light of a posited transcendence, conservatism is not characterized by the fideistic assertiveness which Muller seems to identify at the core of religion. (And indeed, Christianity, unlike Judaism or Islam, never has provided a comprehensive ordering of the *saeculum*, so for Christians, at least, there is nothing inherently agnostic in this.)

Moreover, we must take care to locate the boundaries of conservative certainty and doubt, in contrast to Enlightenment certainty and doubt. After all, Kant—no conservative—also expounds upon the limits of reason. Here, Burke as usual provides the model. The *philosophes* doubted the universal applicability of Christian “morals” in light of the diverse folkways of “natural men” whom European explorers had discovered in their voyages. A common trope of the French Enlightenment was to question the incest taboo as an unscientific “prejudice” of Christian civilization. But the Enlightened builders of the liberal regime (Kant among them) were quite certain that

they had discovered principles of political right which were universally applicable—and which in time might be applied beyond politics to the sphere of morals. Burke in contrast was guided by a kind of certainty in (traditional) morals, while he viewed with the deepest skepticism speculative theories of political right. Thus, it may be said that whereas the Enlightenment “builds down” from the certainty of politics to doubtful questions of morals, the conservative “builds up” from the certainty of morals to doubtful questions of politics. Epistemic modesty is not an exclusively conservative principle, but epistemic modesty with respect to claims of political right may be. In any event, a universal *principle* of epistemic modesty would itself be a kind of grand theory, thus violating the strictures of epistemic modesty.

Finally, it must be observed that the combination of “historical utilitarianism,”

“epistemic modesty,” and a positional interpretation of conservatism leaves Muller’s conservatism vulnerable to the charge of historicism or relativism. It is no small irony that Kirk is so often accused of historicism when in fact he insists on the priority of a transcendent moral order, but then by insisting on transcendence is accused of an “orthodoxy” which is not truly conservatism.

Conservatism remains a rebuke to modernity, proclaiming again and again that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of” in the reductive philosophy of the Enlightenment. In its active cultivation of piety, conservatism keeps alive a dimension of the human good which no “progress” can render permanently inaccessible. Precisely in refusing to make its peace with the modern age, conservatism will retain its voice even when modernity shall at last have been overcome.

Good Sense, Conservatism, and Faith

James Kalb

IS RELIGIOUS FAITH necessary for conservatism? A more basic question is whether it is necessary for good sense, since it is for the sake of good sense that we are conservative. If it were otherwise, conservatism would be a hobby or an ideology, and it is neither; it is simply the appearance good sense takes on in an overly-

rationalistic world.

Conservatism begins with the acceptance of limits. It tells us that not everything can be said, let alone proved; that we did not make the world and cannot remake it; that we are creatures of habit; and that loyalty to the ways and understandings that order a particular social world is necessary for our lives to be coherent and reasonable. As Joseph de Maistre points out, we are not simply

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