

young, so that they may experience it as truth in mind and soul, and make it their own. It is a pity to see youth rejecting a patrimony that they neither know nor understand. For truth, as related to man, has a way of imposing itself on the consciousness of man through experience, not with the immediacy of the law of gravity, but over time.

James Bryce in *The American Commonwealth* said that “morality with religion as its sanction” has always been “the basis of social polity.” However, “Suppose men ceased to believe that there was any power above them,” that nothing existed “but what their senses told them of...[W]ould the moral code stand unshaken?” Bryce wondered if custom, the perceived benefits of stable government, and “orderly self-restraint” would be sufficient to restrain violence and “the self-indulgent impulses of the individual.” I think not, but time will tell since it is no

longer mere conjecture. I attended a public school for the first five of my school years and we began each day with a reading from the Bible. Since then we as a nation seem bent on removing every vestige of religious belief from schools and public gatherings.

C. S. Lewis declared that if you noticed that students could “not get the answer to sums” and then “discovered that schools had for some years ceased to teach arithmetic...you would know both the cause—ignorance—and the remedy.” Lewis was writing about the decline of Christianity in Great Britain, but the analogy is brilliantly precise.

“Is religious faith a necessary ground for conservatives?” I would say yes. Tradition is more than mere custom; it is grounded in a transcendent order. “He who sets to work on a different strand destroys the whole fabric.” We must know and love God as the Creator first, and the rest follows.

Purifying the Dialect of the Tribe

Marion Montgomery

SO IMPORTANT, and ultimately decisive to the health of family and community, is this theme of “religious faith as a necessary ground for conservatives” that we must first come to terms to be sure our terminology is substantively informed. This is a formidable task, in so far as a decay of terms has become such a deliberate strategy in contentions for social

and political power. How volatile is such a term as *religious faith*, and how explosive and implosive the common media expletive which is assumed to carry popular argument when used pejoratively: *Conservative*. What, pray tell (if one may still use that mannerly phrase), is “religious faith”? Did not the Ayatollah Khomeini exercise a *religious faith*, and as a *conservative*? That is, if we allow Dan Rather or National Public Radio or the Public Broadcasting Service to supply us

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shallow terms. And what of those hard line Marxists of the Russian Duma—or Attorney General John Ashcroft or evangelical Christians from Jimmy Swaggart to Jerry Falwell? All, all are “conservatives,” to hear the media tell it. Our terms require cautionary quotation marks or italics as a preliminary.

Though the term *religious faith* is not used to describe the usual media spokesmen for the political left, being reserved by them for their version of the “Conservative,” it might seem appropriate often enough to a neutral observer. One needs only to observe the piety of address by the “leftist” version of the “common good” to recognize as much, observing as well that the “common good” is at best only tenuously anchored in the realities of human nature. My own cautionary note, hardly neutral, is necessary since in the political arena where popular opinion so easily wavers and turns, the common good is usually appealed to with expectations of a response as affected by residual memory of Christian charity, though Christendom’s values have been so largely excluded from that arena, and most usually by those making the appeal. We are not likely to distinguish between the substantive commitment of ourselves as persons to stewardship in visiting and sustaining widows and orphans and the easier pretense to salvational effects by a general health insurance plan through nationally mandated law.

There is a certain relief to most of us in contributing to public causes at a distance, through Community Chest offerings or, more usually, in response to summary fiat at the congressional level. Political rhetoric does not lag in taking advantage of such surrender to a convenient relief of conscience, a conscience actual to us but necessarily denied by the manipulators of political power beyond its possible biological causes as rationalized by partial history colored by psychological memory. The gather-

ing effect is one of increasingly consolidated centralized power in the interest of erecting an icon to still our innate “religious” inclination, turning worship toward illusional versions of a future City of Man. For it is with religious commitment, through the intensities of religious faith, that we yet advance versions of a secular city as a New Eden by denying St. Augustine’s City of God. In this department, the ancient concern for the common good in relation to transcendent vision becomes reduced to idol worship, that worship requiring a reduction of the *person* to an egalitarian integer in the measuring of social and political ground.

Reduced to an “individual,” we are to be enlisted in a cause, seduced to contribute to a political or a social cause exponentially agitated by religious intensity, lest lingering guilt be our only political wages and we therefore increasingly become unhappy subjects of centralized power. The strategy enforces the reductionism of the reality of our personhood, for it is always as person that we consent to our own repackaging through such conjured “religious guilt” relocated to social and political causes. This strategy in pursuit of political power pragmatically requires the deliberate separation of positive law from natural law (in the Thomistic sense of those terms), with an intent through a positive law systematized to achieve a reconstitution of human nature itself. Consider, for instance, the recent rhetoric concerning tax rebates, the opposition to which intends a radical socialism made appealing to the have-nots through now somewhat ancient and subtly disguised Marxist definitions.

Surely, we begin to suspect, *religious faith* must be discovered in some ground more persuasive of truth as independent of political conveniences, some truth more steady than the wishful thinking allowed when faith—our act of believing truth—is loosed at random in our fragmenting world. In that world faith is en-

couraged to settle upon the materialistic limits of human nature as ultimate. Such a randomness of faith has yielded a variety of strange ideologies in recent history, as recent “conservative” prophets from T. S. Eliot to Eric Voegelin have warned us. In the light of such warnings, then, we might point to the range of false gods currently worshipped. Take two seeming dissimilars—one yet far removed, the other as close as TV or Internet ads. The Muslim extremist practices what Eliot or Voegelin or St. Augustine or St. Thomas would see as a Manichaeian rejection of the *body*, an ancient heresy vaguely recognized in residual “Western” sensibilities. We have daily reports of walking bombs in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as illustrations of that strange outlandish heresy. On the other hand, the “liberal” extremist (whom we would more aptly term *modernist*) advances his secularist faith in an adverse species of Manichaeism through a distortion of the reality of human nature as intellectual soul incarnate. This is an obverse version of the ancient heresy, secularized modernism. He rejects the spirit in pursuit of establishing our appetitive nature as the limit of man himself—man thus determined as limit by materialism. Materialism, reduced to abstract formulae by gnostic reductions of reality, becomes fascinating as a magic determined by advanced technology.

Not that such an intentional reduction may not avail itself of the lingering “spiritual” hunger yet to be fully exorcised from human consciousness, though that attempt has been long underway, undertaken first long before Marx’s shibboleth in support of this reductionism: *religion as the opiate of the people*. What Marxism quickly recognized a century ago is the convenience of our “religious” sentiment, requiring only that it be diverted to a worship of material existence, requiring nevertheless an abstract god to replace the Transcendent God. Hence the new

god of any acceptable order, the State. That lingering sentiment in us becomes a distortion of a faintly remembered admonition: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). What is set aside by modernism is, on the one hand, God as Father, substituting the State as defined by positive law divorced from natural law. Thus the “family” has its origin in fathers of the state, whose progeny, much deformed, are before us daily in the evening news. News itself is seen to require either violence or titillating scandal, though *scandal* lacks counterpoint in righteousness. Thus charity as a Christian virtue has become homeless, reduced to a vague concern for the general welfare. Such a generalized good tends to deny a substantive relation to the realities of our givenness as requiring charitable stewardship. The pretense becomes that charity is to be pragmatically found in salvational effects through a general health insurance policy or a universal social security, demanding of us an egalitarian reduction of *person to individual*. Hence the individual becomes a cipher in activist systems imposed from the top. For by modernist principle man must be reconstituted by this gnostic manipulation of being.

If God the Father is set aside in an apotheosis of the State, the scriptural admonition that the person keep himself “unspotted from the world” is also to be set aside, this maneuver an enticement which leads (through “political correctness”) to inevitable aberrations as, for instance, to pornography as appetitive fillip to be enjoyed under the rubric of *free speech*. It is a setting aside learned of those pivotal Albigensians of the thirteenth century, who as last-ditch old Manichaeans proved ravenous of being, of the world, through appetitive pleasures of the body practiced in the name

of a revenge against creation itself. The scandals now routine on the evening news out of Washington (and Atlanta and elsewhere—even abroad) speak of this new “process” as a system justified by larger concerns for the general good, again as executed by positive law made sterile by exclusion of natural law. The fatherless and the widows in their affliction, however, prove but the more afflicted by the absence of a present local love to them in their afflictions, however many electric fans we may supply to the poor in heat epidemics or however severe the penalty for fathers who abandon children. State agencies instead are charged by law as surrogate parents and husbands to the orphans and the widows of the State.

Indeed, spiritual shibboleths inherited from a supposedly benighted past often prove convenient to argument in the social and political arena, especially recognizing (as the modernist does) the vestigial memory of old spiritual concerns which yet threaten a revival within the “popular spirit” at the expense of modernist doctrine. That such a danger to modernist doctrine lingers in the popular spirit is evidenced by implication perhaps in the growing cynicism of that “popular spirit” in response to social and political programs to be rigorously imposed by a sterile positive law in support of redefinitions of the “common good.” How odd, then, these mirror images each of the other: the Muslim fanatic and the Liberal fanatic, the reverse image obscuring a common likeness of a dislocated “religious faith” in obverse species of Manichaeism. The one rejects the body in pursuit of martyrdom to gain a transcendent paradise, the other rejects the spirit (though often hedging that rejection by pragmatic rhetoric) to gain an immanent paradise.

The very hesitancy by some Western liberal activists to exclude from their rhetoric any acknowledgment of our residual sense of man’s spiritual nature

gives cause for some hope perhaps, though their rhetorical appeals tend to suggest the “spiritual” to be for them only a remainder, a vestigial impediment to evolutionary progress, which is best accounted for by sophisticated psychological theories based in biochemical evidences. The “spiritual” thus becomes susceptible to excision by the latest genetic science. A careful tolerance of suffering “unsophisticated” individuals is required, in the interest of enlisting them at last to join in the pursuit of a City of Man. But even that hedged deference to what is considered biological history, an uncertain and thus a dangerous biochemical memory in “evolved” man, might instead suggest a reality: there is a common ground which is almost but not absolutely lost. Sometimes it may suddenly and arrestingly appear as a truth to us as intellectual creatures, a moment of vision. I mean especially that sudden vision of recognition of the *givenness of myself as person*, beyond those systematic reductions of my “self” toward making me an egalitarian cipher in the struggle for power over being itself. That country recovered as ever present—the country of *givenness*—might indeed serve my recovery to a faith born of a desire common to persons for a proper end beyond the vague wishful thinking centering in the reductionist immanent “humanitarian” ground of merely social and political ends, as if these were man’s ultimate accidental end. What if there is a truth independent of man’s manipulative intentionality in his reduction of truth itself to a power over being?

If such a ground is actual, we may in reflecting on it recognize that some of those insistent upon or consenting to the epithet “conservative,” no less than their opposing “liberal” antagonists, eschew the ground of givenness. Even some “conservatives” are oriented by a faith in a “humanitarianism” convenient to the moment’s conflict among contending ide-

ologies for lordship through an ideologically consolidated power. How inevitable, then, are rhetorical wars destructive of persons and families and communities. These wars, we know well enough, always prove to be impervious to geographical limitations. Wherever and whenever idea may tempt us to reduce idea to a pattern for an idol, this reducing of community to tribes deracinated as warring clans in pursuit of a lordship purged of stewardship, we discern the banners symbolic of increasingly random abstract idols.

Our idols have become legion, the scriptural allusion here being intentional. They are erected in a widening desert but bearing names that speak a common pathology of spirit. Thus in our present pseudo-intellectual climate, intellect having become bemused by technological magic, we float our contending shibboleths, the same banners ironically claimed by warring factions that may be violently antipathetic to each other at the level of political spectacle. All, all would affirm *freedom, justice, common good*, those terms giving rise to a cynical characterization by our common sense, making the “public spirit” increasingly restless. *Lip service* to empty terms fuels cynicism in the “public spirit,” where yet we maintain a catalogue of inherited terms now shorn of historical grounding in reality itself. The terms become verbal shuttlecocks, used in mock wars in public debate. Or at times, when sufficiently supported by the “public spirit,” they may become deadly stones hurled with devastating impact—often compounded as in *racist religious right* as an executioner’s phrase. (Nor are they restricted to the political Left or Right, as memories of the fate of Kulacks under Stalin or of Jews under Hitler remind us.) In desperate defensive moments, the terms may even become convenient stone doors to close out any other inhabitants from this house of our humanity commandeered by mod-

ernism. Consider current signs in the “bipartisan” self-congratulations that dominate our present headlines in celebration of centralized control of secondary education. Whose banner is it—of the Left or of the Right—that declares the role of centralized government that of establishing by positive law that “no child shall be left behind”?

Listening to the cacophony of contending shibboleths (making it sometimes difficult to distinguish in our sound bites between a rap star and a senator), we must cry out an ancient summons to the recovery of terms to the ground of reality itself: *Distinguish!* It is a cry for the recovery of a *shared* name to our common recognition of the thing itself—to the possibility of a common consent to actual truth. Instead, current political intentionalities are artificially sweetened by residual appeals to our distorted sense of charity. Palliatives of pseudo-truth about human dignity itself are ladled to us as if human dignity depended upon every child’s math and grammar score as his ultimate fulfillment. There is no shortage of helpful mechanics to that gradual perversion of human dignity by technological instruments promising us federally approved vitamin-added nutrition to the anemic “public spirit” through universal (and hence reductionist) “education.” The additives, one might discover by careful analysis, are derived by a now traditional positivistic program which has gradually excluded the spiritual dimension of the *person*. It will, of course, be relabeled as “congressionally approved.” And so, in meditating upon *religious faith, or conservative, or liberal, or freedom, or justice, or individual rights, or common good*, we discover our first task (in T. S. Eliot’s phrase) to be that of purifying “the dialect of the tribe.” That is a task requiring long thoughts, not actualized readily in op-ed pieces or in journal essays since these prove most often but slight enlargements of sound bites.