

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Is Religious Faith a Necessary Ground for Conservatism?

THIS ISSUE OF *Modern Age* presents to its readers and auditors the symposium that follows, in the form of the participants' responses to and reflections on the question, "Is religious faith a necessary ground for conservatives?" The question is certainly a fundamental one in an age that is not at ease with, and often antagonistic to, traditional religious belief and expression. Acceptations and affirmations, it is almost unnecessary to say, are unavoidable casualties of systemic conditions that mark "the flight from God" and an incessant search "after strange gods." The relentless expansion and even the increasing legitimization of the spirit of modernity in our time pose today more than mere threats to religious faith in the context of sacramentality, divine mystery, canonicity, moral virtues. Indeed, this profane spirit, as it has gained more and more dominion, and as it has been certified both politically and culturally, threatens the very survival of the religious idea rooted in and defined by our Judeo-Christian heritage.

The symposiasts who give witness here are attentive to the magnitude of the threats that directly or indirectly endanger our sacred patrimony. As such, they are not in the least afraid to take a

stand and to speak out their concerns and anxieties. Their candor, individually and collectively, is paradigmatic at a time of history when religious and spiritual principles are being especially subjected to an aggressive and arrogant nihilism. The willingness of these symposiasts to confront their adversaries, to identify their power and to oppose their stratagems at their operative levels of spiritual and moral warfare is yet additionally paradigmatic. To be sure, the symposiasts often speak from different perspectives and their answers to the central question being asked have different and differing dimensions. Hence, though there is necessarily no unanimity of response to the question, there is at the same time a profound and shared recognition of the dynamic role of religious belief in the life of the community.

What most distinguishes the essays that appear here is the wisdom and the insight that the symposiasts convey; their testimony, which is essentially and refreshingly non-sectarian in tone and temper, is rooted in the virtue of reverence. No shouting, no doctrinaire pontification, no harsh outcries or unreasonable words or demands badger the reader who peruses these essays and measures the

validity of their particular viewpoints or resolutions. Of course, there are strong, and strongly held, positions that these writers voice, but that is as it should be in a symposium that offers “a collection of opinions” on some special question or topic of intellectual, philosophical, historical, and socio-political import. And particularly in the instance of religious and spiritual matters in the monolithically secular society and culture of the present day there are enormous obstacles to dialogue that would permit “the light of transcendence” to penetrate. The symposiasts are completely aware of these obstacles in their multiform manifestations, and go on to address them in the special context of a modernity that would annul the religious past and sensibility.

Thus, as one of the writers observes, identifying here a fear that the symposiasts as a whole feel and express, “Without an openness to the revelatory dimension of reality we will be unable to carry on the great global conversation of the day.” Clearly, when such an openness disappears, the very meaning of civilization, and of human existence as a whole, is threatened with extinction in the third millennium. The writers who contribute to these pages of *Modern Age* affirm, then, the categorical need of religious understanding in the face of an oppressive secularism that would silence not only religious questions but also ongoing intellectual conversations. One of the main values of this landmark issue of *Modern Age* is that of reminding us that moral, religious, and spiritual considerations help in understanding the life of the polity and in molding the character and ethos of a humane civilization—especially if we are not to fall into the clutches of ideology from which no redemption is possible.

Again and again, it will be seen, the symposiasts choose to give personal witness in their responses and very often employ a religious language in their state-

ments. No dialogue can be credible or helpful in which forthrightness and candor are absent. Thus, words like “piety” (as “the only answer to modernity’s impiety”), or phrases like “religious faith enables one to see life with a clearer vision,” underscore the kind of sincerity that not only lies at the heart of the personal testaments of these writers but also broaches the religious truth that takes one “beyond the frozen void” of spiritual devolution in the modern world. It is very heartening, if not inspiring, to come across these palpitant words of belief in one symposiast’s personal testament: “Man is a soul, a breath of destiny, destined for immortality.... Nothing I have read and learned over the years has shaken this simple belief in the almightiness of God and man as His special creation.” The personal note, charged as it is with the accent and the conviction of religious belief and experience, is frequently heard in the essays included here. And this personal note, far from being merely or purely evangelical—that of the religious enthusiast or apologist—is more often than not an integral dimension of a creedal statement that helps one to travel over the rainbow bridge from reason to revelation.

No “pluralist game” or politically correct precept, it is good to see, distracts one from affirming one’s “Western creed, Western identity,” or from revering sacred “images of perfection and transcendence.” Throughout, the relations between religion and conservatism are examined, and re-examined, from a variety of perspectives, and with a keen perceptiveness. Some of the essays fervently endorse the absolute need for conservatives to have a religious faith. Thus, one of the writers emphatically declares that Catholic Christianity is the religious faith that “perfectly embraces the conservative ideal.” Another writer insists, following Russell Kirk, that “conservatism at its highest” signifies the prior acceptance of

“the West’s two fountainhead sources ...Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian thought.” Hence, “to regain our moral bearings from the premodern wisdom that Enlightenment-spawned modern culture has jettisoned,” we must apply “the old verities to ever-changing social phenomena.” In the course of emphasizing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s prophetic warning that “men have forgotten God,” several of the symposiasts also enumerate the terrible human costs of modern man’s adherence to “liberationist thought.”

In this respect, too, another writer focuses on the flaws of the liberal mind: “its iconoclastic tendency with respect to the inherited [wisdom] is matched by its blind subscription to ephemeral goals often based on dubious science.” What this writer sees, in essence, is that the quarrel between liberalism and conservatism is about the nature of the good and the place of biblical morality in the public square. Further amplifying this theme, as we read in another essay, is that, because “faith precedes our thoughts and actions,” no conservative can escape the need to find God that “most often means affirmation of the religious tradition in which we already find ourselves.” He concludes that “Those who try to get rid of Christ only reinvent him” in the “armed doctrines” of ideology. Thus, still another writer notes that religious belief is not only imperative for conservatism but also “an indispensable ground for the other two major political traditions—for liberalism and radicalism too,” as a necessary prelude “to honor the integrity of God-given limits.”

On the other hand, some of the symposiasts frankly aver that, insofar as we live in a world of “postmodern uncertainty,” faith is individually and socially uncontrollable, though immensely desirable, and simply “cannot be viewed as essential to all varieties of conservatism.” “One must not confuse the demands of Christ with those of a political commu-

nity (though, importantly, they may be combined).” We are encouraged, then, to accept the fact that traditionalism has its “modifiers”; that, historically, conservatism “could coexist with cautious modifications accumulating through the age”; that, furthermore, “conservatism is not the *product* of religion, but an independent factor in human disposition, thriving in one civilization more than in another.” The fact is inescapable that there are “divergent sources of conservatism,” or as one writer tells us: “this variety of grounding makes for somewhat different conservatisms and hence for intellectual liveliness.”

Whatever the extent and the depth of the demurrals and the qualifications that some of the contributors cite in discrete estimations of the strains of religious faith in conservatism—“even the religion of Edmund Burke is clouded with uncertainties,” we are told—the symposiasts do concur that “being conservative is a quest for order in the realms of human experience.... The notion that man can create his own order, fashion his own paradise, build a universal utopian society, has been the human casualty of the past two centuries.” One symposiast further specifies the basic texture of this concurrence in these words: “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.”

The contributors to this special issue of *Modern Age* finally remind us that “the prevailing contemporary intellectual world view” is massively hostile to “foundationalism and logocentrism.” Ultimately what this means is that conservatives must earnestly strive to discern how the “decay of terms has become such a deliberate strategy in contentions for social and political power,” and how “rhetorical wars are destructive of persons and families and communities.” In

this connection, no words better summon us to the true nature of the burden of our common responsibility than these: “And so, in meditating upon *religious faith*, or *conservative*, or *liberal*, or *freedom*, or *individual rights*, or *common good*, we discover that our first task (in T. S. Eliot’s phrase) is to be that of purifying ‘the

dialect of the tribe.’” No words can also better express the guiding purpose of this symposium that is distinctly consonant with the original intent of *Modern Age* to nurture a “Conservatism of Reflection.”

—George A. Panichas