

The Mystery of God-Given Limits

John Rodden

RELIGIOUS FAITH is a necessary ground for conservatives. The conservative commitment to preserve “the permanent things” is only possible if one trusts in an eternal, invisible realm that underpins visible reality, not merely in this temporal world. But I would argue that religious belief is also an indispensable ground for the other two major political traditions—for liberalism and radicalism too. The liberal insistence on the fundamental liberty of a self-governing humankind rests on a belief in free will, not in determinism. And the radical conviction in the equal worth of human beings ultimately turns on acceptance of our common possession of divine souls, not on materialism and Darwinism.

Of course, I recognize that many self-identified conservatives (and a great many liberals and radicals) consider such opinions laughable. But I mean to suggest that, when you work your way toward the bottom of each of these three traditions, you see that Charles Péguy is right: “Whatever begins in *politique* ends in *mystique*.” Even as you more fully em-

brace your own political tradition, therefore, you can also grant that conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism overlap in important ways. All three value tradition, liberty, and equality—though they prioritize them differently.

In saying this, I am speaking very personally. Each of the great political traditions attracts and has influenced me precisely because it affirms a fundamental commitment to metaphysical values. I am indebted to them all. So I suggest: Yes, let us honor their profound differences and resist any impulse to collapse them into a hodgepodge. But need we invariably see them as mutually hostile? I think not.

I realize that this response to the symposium question may seem confused or eccentric. But I am not interested in wrangling over the correct terminology for my current political outlook. I do believe a substantial aspect of it is properly termed “cultural conservatism,” but it also possesses elements of “nineteenth-century liberalism” and even “socialism,” owing to the strand of populist, rustic, backward-looking English radicalism represented by William Morris and George Orwell.

Mine is an eclectic cultural conservatism, which might be better characterized as “radical populism” or Tory Radicalism in the contrarian spirit of William

JOHN RODDEN is the author most recently of *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of Eastern German Education, 1945-1995* (2002) and *Performing the Literary Interview: How Writers Craft Their Public Selves* (2001).

Cobbett, Orwell, and Christopher Lasch—and, above all, G.K. Chesterton. But the label does not overly concern me. What I do know is that I subscribe to an egalitarian, anti-elitist politics at odds with traditional conservatism—and also to an anti-progressive, tradition-minded politics quite resonant with cultural conservatism. I distrust elites, whether in the form of aristocratic castes or Leninist vanguards. Like Chesterton, whose thought also eluded political labels, I share a belief in the emotional sustenance of small property, a distaste for industrialism, an antagonism to monopolistic practices, and a faith in the common sense of common people (like my immigrant, working-class Irish parents).

I have long discerned these features as part of Orwell's intellectual physiognomy too—what has been called Orwell's "Tory growl." Indeed, both Chesterton and Orwell remind me of a simple truth: Radicalism need not mean progressivism, and a repudiation of Marxism need not imply acceptance of social injustice.

I acknowledge that this emphasis on religion effectively defines "conservative" to exclude such positions as neoconservatism and libertarian conservatism. Most neoconservatives consider religion an essential condition for social harmony, but they support "religious faith" for functional reasons, not from a stance of personal belief. Similarly, the politics of libertarian conservatives is rooted not in religion per se, but in a moral and political economy of *laissez-faire*. (By contrast, fundamentalist conservatives obviously base their politics in their faith tradition.)

Here again, however, I wish to emphasize that my allegiance belongs to none of these aforementioned conservative positions. In practice, therefore, I am stressing that one must be religious to be a cultural conservative. For me, the value of cultural conservatism is precisely its will to conserve—not just high "culture"

in the narrow sense, but all that sublimely uplifts and nurtures life. It is a practical philosophy that wisely acknowledges human limits. It starts with an acceptance of the conditions of Reality—yes, the conditions, but not the outcome. I stress this, because the not-infrequent conservative acquiescence to injustice is unacceptable to me. A "decent" conservatism still battles injustice, but it acknowledges that most human beings need a stable environment and the ownership of property—to know, to see, and to handle something, however small, that is their own. (Neoconservatism, in its championing of progress, large corporations, and capitalism, does not prize such values.)

Such a conservatism is irreconcilable with a postmodernist *Weltanschauung* because it insists that human beings do need a "ground." And this cultural conservatism parts company with progressivism because it holds that the only secure ground is the unmoved Mover Himself.

And here arises a related question: Must that ground of religious faith be institutionalized, that is to say, organized religion? Could it be "spirituality," rather than "religion"? What needs emphasis is that the ground must be firm. And that means that the "spiritual" will inevitably be incarnated in customs and folkways, and "organized" in local and larger institutions. Spirituality without ecclesiology turns "faith" into a private affair. If one seeks God and rejects any relationship to a church, the likelihood is that one becomes engulfed in a subjectivist program of mere self-seeking. Such a path rejects the need for community altogether, and thereby leads to the abyss of solipsism. True spirituality embraces both private and social morality, both reverent prayer and respectful protest, both *politique* and *mystique*. It honors statecraft as well as soulcraft.

These views emerge from my struggle

with my own Catholic faith. I have not always held these convictions, let alone lived them out. I am a first-generation Irish-American cradle Catholic. But it was not until my intellectual life awakened in graduate school that I started to read Catholic periodicals seriously. Until then, I had unthinkingly professed traditional beliefs without converting those beliefs into standards for assessing political affairs. Soon I became a liberal “*Commonweal* Catholic” (and even began writing for the magazine); a churchgoer, loyal to my Catholic faith and to Church tradition, though sometimes critical of the Vatican and its conservatism, and often dissenting from its pronouncements. Throughout the 1980s, I considered myself a “Vatican II Catholic liberal.”

In my mid-30s, I underwent a five-year personal crisis that I later realized was, at bottom, a crisis of faith. Now that things were no longer going swimmingly, I was no longer a *Commonweal* Catholic. Instead I had become merely a “cultural Catholic”—à la Michael Harrington, a onetime *Commonweal* contributor who had not seen the interior of a church in decades. Harrington, like my hero George Orwell, was a democratic socialist and an atheist by conviction, though both of them were also spiritual men, “religiously musical” (in Max Weber’s phrase).

I was not an atheist, formally speaking. Rather, I just stopped attending church, stopped praying, stopped believing in anything outside the values of the secular academy. In short, I was a functional atheist. I regarded Catholicism much in the same way as I did my Irishness: as part of my cultural identity. But sin, the Eucharist, Christ’s Passion—all that possessed no mystical reality for me. I was a man of faith, but in humanistic ideals, not in the supernatural. Routine churchgoers, like my former self as cradle Catholic, seemed to be the real atheists and nihilists to me.

Rediscovering my faith during the last decade has felt like a religious conversion—and my politics have undergone a corresponding transformation. The critical utopian socialism à la William Morris of my undergraduate years, and the congeries of Vatican II liberalism and radical humanism of my graduate school days, have given way recently to an idiosyncratic Christian populism indebted above all to Chesterton. Today I am a Chestertonian, or, as the phrase used to be, a “Chesterbelloc Catholic”: a Catholic persuaded by the populist vision of Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc that the Church, as the body of Christ, is the light of the world.

Both in my political and in my religious outlook, I find myself today a twice-born man, more patiently accepting “things as they are.” I am better able to honor the mystery of God-given limits. My admiration for Orwell endures, and I am still inspired by his moral courage and intellectual integrity. And yet I am wary of fixing my gaze on dazzling communitarian ideals that are beyond me and my fellow citizens. Better to honor “where people are” in their lives—and to legislate from there—rather than to mesmerize them with a vision that is far beyond their moral reach.

Nonetheless, I continue to oppose right-wing views of Catholicism that over-emphasize authority, hierarchy, and obedience. I identify with the Thomist tradition, as exemplified in Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which supported popular sovereignty, urged just government limitations on wealth, and called for economic reform and aid to the poor.

These positions doubtless mark my conservatism as eclectic. But I take solace from the fact that both Chesterton and Orwell gloried in their own idiosyncratic, Pickwickian politics.