

# Varieties of Conservatism

Barry Alan Shain

IN ASKING WHETHER “religious faith is a necessary ground for conservatism,” the editors of *Modern Age* have invited us to examine a perplexing conundrum at the heart of philosophical conservatism. This is an issue that I first took notice of while reviewing for this journal John Kekes’s *A Case for Conservatism*. In it, Kekes suggests that conservatism is most compatible with an anemic level of religious belief, possibly even with disbelief. But while writing my review, I discussed Kekes’s claim with a friend and fellow conservative, Bruce Frohnen, who was similarly certain that conservatism demanded religious faith. Although I rarely take middling positions, in this instance I found something to defend in both of their stances. Nonetheless, in the end, I concluded that American conservatism, although historically grounded in the moral teachings of Christianity and the faith that hopefully accompanies it, does not demand religious faith. The authentic Christian life, including the absolute necessity of faith, sets higher and more demanding standards than does conservatism. The two, even if they properly overlap, should not be conflated or con-

fused.

Yet conservatism, whatever else it demands, insists that the historical practices of a particular people be awarded a formative role. This means that what is abstract in theory must be filtered through a particular set of practices, historical traditions, and moral and religious commitments that gives to each conservatism its particular form. And in America, given the formative and continuing significant role played by Protestant Christianity, this demands that its practices and norms must be accepted as part of the fabric of American conservatism. This does not demand religious faith, but surely one can more easily embrace Christian-informed practices if guided by the dictates of faith. Our history, then, speaks strongly in support of the importance, if not the necessity, of faith to American conservatism.

Conservatism, however, demands more than a deep respect for a people’s inherited ways. It also rests on a philosophical rejection of the hubris readily associated with the last years of the Enlightenment. Conservatism reflects a pervasive humility concerning the ability of unaided reason to understand the moral universe and to create appropriate social structures. At its essence, conservatism is shaped by an epistemic stance that embraces traditionalism, not out of a dogmatic love of the past, but out

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of a radical uncertainty concerning man's ability to understand complex social systems. As Edmund Burke noted, "it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes." And, clearly, almost all conservatives accept this moderate skepticism as an essential element of philosophical conservatism.

Of course, there are other essential elements which most conservatives would identify as part of the core holdings of conservatism. They include communalism, localism, familism, a recognition of human depravity, and foundational religiosity. As Russell Kirk observed, "the family, religious association, and local community—these, the conservatives insisted, cannot be regarded as the external products of man's thought and behavior; they are essentially prior to the individual and are the indispensable supports of belief and conduct." And each of these elements can be readily understood as a reflection of the epistemic humility and the distrust of abstract reason at the core of philosophical conservatism. For conservatives, then, most men in order to flourish need others in close proximity to help shape their moral and political environments. Almost all of us, alone, are too weak, selfish, and benighted to live well without the close cooperation of others. Aristotle knew as much. The Christianity that undergirds the moral anthropology of American conservatism teaches the same.

In opposition, liberal rationalism holds that man with the aid of his natural reason (the divine origin is now commonly suppressed or forgotten) can know and follow the good without the aid of God or other men. It is a hubristic perspective, the arrogant product of The Fall. As an-

ticipated in Genesis (3:5), liberal rationalism would have us replace the God who became man with the humanistic man who would become god. In effect, then, in our contemporary world there are two religious faiths in conflict, one with confidence in the reason and teachings of man and the other dependent on the love and Revelation of God. And when viewed in this way, conservative humility must reject the arrogant humanistic faith in man and urge that men turn to God for guidance and true moral knowledge.

Truly religious faith (that is, in the God of Revelation), in its rejection of the arrogance and confidence associated with the Enlightenment, embodies epistemic doubt. Man, from the perspective most particularly of the Reformed tradition, cannot trust in his own reason. But herein lies the source of tension. Faith in the teachings of Revelation, although reflective of an individual humility *vis-à-vis* God, when projected outward has the potential (too often realized) of becoming another source of epistemic arrogance. This is not to suggest, though, that this is a necessary condition of religious faith and that, therefore, conservatives must live perpetually in a state of radical skepticism. Localism and other essential elements of conservatism, most particularly given America's Congregationalist inheritance, can protect us against such dangers. But what I want to suggest is that those who reject the Enlightenment's confidence in human reason and yet do not enjoy the blessings of faith, should still be recognized as conservatives. What I am arguing is that the rejection of the religion of man should be viewed as essential to conservatism, rather than the existentially and theologically more important, but politically less critical confidence in God's love and His Revelation. This claim, then, is a position that men of faith and those without can share.

But if not the ways of God as revealed

through faith, must not man embrace the arrogant and contemptible ways of the radical Enlightenment and, thus, reject one of the defining elements of conservatism? I believe not. And here I think David Hume is most instructive in pointing to a kind of conservatism that we might describe as conventionalist. In fact, in keeping with the epistemic humility that I have characterized as the hallmark of conservative thought, I would go so far as to argue that a variant of moral and political thought that is recognizably conservative should include a postmodern form of conventionalism, that is, a foundationless conventionalism. By this I mean that conservatism, given its normally “underdetermined” character, should include a form that abandons the quest for an absolute foundation and turns for guidance in matters moral, political, and social to the inherited ways of a people (of course, nothing is claimed regarding theological truths). Thus, those without faith and who believe that the ways of their society, and in the American instance one richly founded on deep religiosity, can provide the essential template for social and moral thinking, should be recognized as conservatives. William Golding, the Nobel Laureate in literature, may be such a figure and his novels may be shaped by the contours of such a conservative philosophy.

My claim thus is different from that of John Kekes who seems to believe that conservatives should be devoid of faith, and also from that of Bruce Frohnen, who finds that devoid of faith, one cannot be a conservative. In contrast, my claim is that a lack of religious faith should not preclude one from being counted as a conservative. Conservatism is, accordingly, capable of accommodating those of traditional belief as well as those of postmodern uncertainty, if you will, both Catholic adherents of natural law and many followers of Hume. It is the arrogant modern thinker, with “religious”

faith in unaided human reason, who should be excluded from the ranks of conservatism rather than a certain kind of conventionalist postmodern. Indeed, when properly delimited (and this is essential), there is no reason to leave the postmodern intellectual space to the likes of Richard Rorty.

Faith in the teachings of the God of Revelation is possibly a product of culture or more likely a gift of God, but neither can be chosen. Faith in the rationalism of the Enlightenment can, however, be rejected through a right understanding of man’s essentially deformed condition. One, then, cannot choose to have faith, but one can choose to turn away from the Enlightenment’s apotheosis of man and towards the modest truths of conservatism. Right thinking about such matters, then, rather than faith, must serve as the necessary ground of conservatism. One must not confuse the demands of Christ with those of a political community (though, importantly, they may be combined).

In sum, I find that our history demands a deep respect for our Christian inheritance and the teachings of Reform Christianity. Faith, from this perspective, may not be essential to American conservatism but, given its transformatory qualities, it is greatly desirable. The core philosophical holdings of conservatism, although suggestive of a certain tension between the epistemic humility of conservatism and the theological confidence of faith, suggest that theological faith when properly contained in the political realm by the constraints of localism, must be recognized as a desirable antidote to the siren calls of humanism. But given that faith is individually and socially uncontrollable, although immensely desirable, it cannot be viewed as essential to all varieties of conservatism. Faith, in a world for many of postmodern uncertainty, cannot be a necessary ground for conservatism.