

ON BEING DEEPLY CONSERVATIVE

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This essay is a reflection on the meaning of “conservative.” Given current usage, it is almost inevitable that many people will assume that I am talking about the opposite of “liberal.” While that conclusion is not surprising, it is unfortunate. A division of thinking into liberal and conservative does damage to almost all institutions, but none more so than religious institutions.

The use of “liberal” and “conservative” in the United States today has a double origin: the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century and the progressive movement at the end of the nineteenth century. The split between the left and right sides of the French assembly gave us “conservative” meaning before the revolution and “liberal” meaning after the revolution and freedom from the tradition of king and priest. Throughout the nineteenth century, liberalism was concerned with freedom of the individual from government interference. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that in the United States everyone was liberal, that is, skeptical of government intrusion.

Toward the end of the century, however, some people began to recognize that the chief threat to individual freedom was not the government but the unrestrained business corporation. Thus began a crisis that liberalism has never fully recovered from. People who thought of themselves as liberal now had to reverse their thinking about the role of government. The transitional term was “progressive” which at first was up for grabs. Many of the early progressives were Republican business men who believed that the needed progress was the adjusting of individuals to the age and the needs of the machine culture.

The term progressive, however, soon became the cover for liberalism to reverse its thinking and invite in the government to help those who were most exposed to economic exploitation.¹ After the election of 1912, progressive became equated with liberal. Those who were still suspicious of government and fought progressive reforms came to be called conservative. As is often pointed out, a twentieth-century conservative is what the nineteenth century called liberal.

The result by the late twentieth century was a confusion in the meanings of both terms. Liberalism, having nearly reversed its meaning, was and is unsure of what it stands for. It still professes to defend the freedom of the individual but at the same time it depends on the government to help various groups. Conservatism, during the first half of the twentieth century, had a fairly consistent meaning of skepticism about utopian social planning by government. In the second half of the century, its defense of private business against government regulation overwhelmed other concerns. The bankruptcy of the current usage of “conservative” is indicated by its separation into two camps with conflicting agendas: “social conservatives” and “economic conservatives.” Republican conservatives of 1950 would not recognize much kinship with either group.

It seems likely that what economic conservatives are advocating undermines what “social conservatives” are defending, a kind of nineteenth-century morality. The term “social conservative” is rather funny because “social” was always a mantra of the progressive reformers

(“socialist” got a very bad reputation). As for conservatives standing for something called “traditional values,” value has almost no moral history before the nineteenth century. In the 1960s, “values” was a main category of those trying to overthrow traditional notions of virtue. Values represented what individuals choose without much attention to any tradition. “Value” did originate as an economic term before it migrated into ethics so perhaps there is some logic to “economic conservatives” latching on to “values.”

One of the unfortunate parts of the story is that ‘progressive’ was set against ‘traditional’ in the late nineteenth century. That development still affects us and our use of liberal and conservative. John Dewey had a lot to do with setting progressive against traditional. By the 1930s, Dewey had become very critical of progressive schools and tried to reconstruct the meaning of “progressive.” He failed because he made no serious attempt to rethink his use of “traditional” when applied to schools.² To this day much of educational writing and many schools of education use “traditional” as a description of what is wrong with education. They equate “traditional education” with nineteenth-century schools. To reject the authority of king and cleric may be healthily liberating; but for education to reject tradition is suicidal.

It might seem desirable to avoid the terms conservative and liberal but they are not going away. What is needed is a conservative approach to the meaning of conservative, that is, an appreciation of the roots of the term that go back well before the French Revolution. In a longer view of history, the current use of “conservative” in the United States ought not to go unchallenged. Conservative in the past has logically meant to have a respect for the deep past and a distrust of theories to radically change things. To call Ted Cruz or Newt Gingrich a conservative is a bizarre use of language.

Perhaps the only good thing that Donald Trump has done is to pull away the curtain on what is called conservatism in the United States today. There is a multiplicity of theories in conflict with one another. The political stance is almost entirely negative. As the world of politics, has become more complex, it is not difficult to point out the failures of government and other organizations. According to today’s conservative, everything would work well if only each individual were “responsible.” What passes for conservative economic theory might work in a world of healthy middle-aged men (assuming there were women to do the unpaid work). People who call themselves social conservatives also want individuals to be responsible for themselves; although they are against “big government” they do invoke government for controls in the sexual area.

Despite these recent contortions, a more genuine conservative attitude has lived on among people who care for the land, forest, and lakes; people who work to preserve or repair urban neighborhoods; people who celebrate ancient religious rituals. I don’t think one can give up on the term conservative and the task of conserving various traditions lest they fall into decay through neglect.

Many authors raise a passing complaint about the opposition of liberal and conservative but then with a reluctant sigh they go right ahead and describe the world that way. If they try simply to substitute new words, one of two things is likely to happen: either the new contrast will die aborning, or else it will succeed in getting a following but with the result that the original

problem is further obscured.

The most effective strategy is not to abandon either liberal or conservative. Instead of replacing the terms, it is their opposition that has to be replaced. What so often happens when there is a contentious and murky opposition between A and B is that the way out of the conflict is the discovery that B and A entail each other. The argument has to be restated by finding the starting point at which A and B agree and the subsequent point at which they diverge. Arguments are most intense when both sides are right - and both sides are wrong. John Dewey regularly used this mode of reasoning: not a middle ground between A and B but a restatement of both A and B.

When Dewey's attempt at a solution did not work well it left people confused as to which side he was on. Dewey, of course, thought he was on both sides – and neither side. When Dewey did not go deep enough historically (for example, his analysis of “religious” is surprisingly shallow) he is unpersuasive.³ When he writes to overcome superficial dichotomies of freedom versus discipline, child versus curriculum, or academic education versus industrial education he has a surer footing.

In trying to overcome a split between liberal and conservative, it is important to start with terms that are descriptive adjectives (liberal, conservative) rather than with the ideological abstractions, conservatism and liberalism. By definition, these latter two words are opposed. But if one starts from conservative, there is no reason why liberal has to be the opposite of conservative. In fact, the only way to conserve all that is best in the past is to be liberated from elements that are always a threat to our continuity with the past. Conversely, the only way to be liberated in the present is to draw from the conserved past. The intellectual class – authors, scholars, professors – must recognize a positive meaning of conservative as the needed context for their liberalizing work.

Education

A 1949 document on education had this interesting description of education: It has a two-fold function: to pass *on* tradition and to *pass* on tradition. The two processes are in tension with each other. But it is clear that the second – to *pass* on or critically examine a tradition – cannot happen unless the tradition is being passed *on*. Even as tradition is accepted and passed *on*, it is helpful to ask what particular elements may have grown up within the tradition which prevent a fruitful appreciation of the whole tradition. The community of today may have to be liberated from some present constraint by discovering deeper in the tradition why that element is there and how best to change it.

Fundamental to education is the understanding that one cannot simply step outside one's tradition or simply shuck it off. For example, whatever moral code was absorbed in one's childhood has to be reconstituted in one's adulthood. To suppose that one can simply adopt another way of thinking and acting is the sure road to illusion and self-deception. A critical approach to one's tradition means challenging one premise and seeing how that move affects the rest. Liberation is usually to something better *within* the tradition. If there is any liberation *from* one's tradition, it has to be to a deeper, richer tradition that includes some of the best elements of

the former tradition.

The twofold function of education requires distinct forms or settings in which the emphasis is on one of the two functions. The primary role in the passing *on* of tradition is the family and its extension to tribal, ethnic, national, and religious loyalties. Mostly through story and ritual, a person absorbs a way of being in the world and looking at the world. Tradition is mainly the *passing on*, only secondarily is it *what has been passed on*. As often happens in the English language, the verb disappears into the noun, and we confuse tradition with the residue left by tradition.

The function of *passing on* tradition, that is, critically exploring the process and its elements, is the role of the school, or more precisely, the classroom. The institution of the school can be part of the traditioning process and an extension of the family. Especially when the students are young children, schools cannot distance themselves far from the family. But as students get older, already beginning in elementary school and continuing to all forms of adult and university education, traditions are conserved and kept healthy only by asking tough questions of them.

University faculties are often criticized for being too liberal. I think there is a criticism to be made here but that formula puts it badly. A college professor's job is the liberalizing of thought. The problem would not be solved by hiring professors who are conservative to balance professors who are liberals. The question for all professors is whether there is a conservative context for liberal thinking.

For example, in the area of religion, many professors are dismissive or contemptuous of religion but without much knowledge of religious traditions. The professor's teaching should liberate the mind but that cannot happen unless he or she knows exactly what in the tradition needs liberation. If you are a teacher in the United States, you are awash in religious traditions that are part of the fabric of the nation. An historian or a sociologist who is ignorant of religion will be hampered within his or her own field of scholarship. The classroom is not a place for proselytizing for liberalism or conservatism. The traditions of the students deserve respect and the tradition of the teacher needs acknowledgment. The problem of some college professors is that they assume they are removed from any tradition except science, rational inquiry, and the search for truth.

Those who think of education as an enlightening of the mind usually have Socrates as their hero and model. Socrates plays that part in modern educational theory, though some philosophers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, struggled with an ambivalent attitude toward Socrates. Since Nietzsche's time, there has been a resurgence of interest in Socrates' opponents, the Sophists.⁴ Like the Pharisees in the New Testament, the only picture we get of the Sophists is drawn by their opponent. One could not deduce from the New Testament that the Pharisees were the reformers of the tradition, those who emphasized love as the basis of law, those whose views were very similar to the reformer, Jesus of Nazareth. So also we could not get from Socrates that the Sophists (meaning wise men) saw education as a function of community, and teaching as the provision of good example. What is called "Socratic questioning" presupposes a passing *on* of the tradition by means of family and civic community.

The chief lesson that Socrates left us (one not always remembered by those who invoke his name) is that a teacher cannot transmit knowledge to the student. Some people who do accept this principle conclude that “no one can teach anyone anything.” But they are considering “teaching” in too narrow a context. If they would go back before Socrates in Greek thought, or to the prophets in Israel or to Buddhist tradition in India, they would find that teaching is showing a way of life to those who are being initiated into a community and providing good example to participants in the community, whatever their age. Enlightening the mind can only take place if this wider meaning of teaching exists.

In a poll of professors in schools of education they were asked “Should teachers be conveyors of knowledge who enlighten their students with what they know” or should teachers “See themselves as facilitators of learning who enable their students to learn on their own.” The vote was 92 to 8 percent in favor of the second description. What I find depressing is that apparently 100 percent of the professors answered the question as it was posed. Why would someone think that those two descriptions are logical alternatives?

Most experienced classroom instructors understandably shy away from the metaphor of “conveyor of knowledge.” They know that there is no way to guarantee enlightenment of students by trying to pass knowledge from the head of the teacher to the head of the student. But the alternative that the survey question offered (“facilitators of learning who enable their students to learn on their own”) is loaded with the therapeutic language that either avoids asking what teaching is or assumes that teaching is an obstacle to learning.

Presumably teachers want to be people who make learning easier (facilitators) although learning is sometimes hard work. Teachers might want to “enable” learning but whether that can be done and how it can be done are questions about the nature of teaching. Why students are better “learning on their own” rather than in dialogue with the human race and with their physical environment is a puzzle to me.

What is “trans-mitted” (traditioned) in education are the human use of physical objects, including writing, community practices, religious rituals. Knowledge in the form of beliefs is secondary; beliefs are the least inadequate expression of the life of the community. Many practices of a community are meaningful precisely because they are meaningless to outsiders. Dietary laws are the most obvious case for reminding members several times daily that they belong to this community. Reformers often miss this point. In the 1960s the Catholic Church abolished the rule of meatless Fridays. Anthropologist Mary Douglas said of the Catholic Church’s attempt to substitute love of neighbor for not eating meat on Friday: “The color signals are being manned by color blind people.”⁵

Religion has never fared very well in the classroom. On one side, the rationally trained teacher is impatient to cut through the seeming irrationality of much in the tradition. On the other side, the classroom instruction is under the watchful eye of the guardians of orthodoxy. Frequently, the classroom is forced into trying to be an extension of the community’s effort to pass *on* the tradition. The madrassas of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan today are doing something not so

different from what many Christian church schools have done. Ultimately, this effort will be futile but in the short run it can be dangerous. The tragedy is that the classroom, while indeed a threat to elements in the tradition, is nonetheless needed to conserve the tradition. The classroom has to be allowed to do its work of liberalizing the mind.

The classroom can open up a dialogue with other religions but first of all it has to begin a dialogue within the tradition. That means an appreciation of the deep past. The problem with many self-described religious conservatives today is that they are not that much interested in the past – the whole past. They have favorite ‘propositions’ that are supposed to embody eternal truths but that attitude shows little respect for the past or for key monuments of tradition, including literature that is called sacred. As George Lindbeck noted, fundamentalism is a product of modernity; fundamentalists “are likely to be suffering from vulgarized forms of rationalism descended from Greek philosophy by way of Cartesian and post-Cartesian rationalism reinforced by Newtonian science.”⁶

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is a twentieth-century phenomenon. The name comes from a series of twelve paperbacks published between 1910 and 1915. A defense of the fundamentals of Christianity might be a worthy project. But the fundamentalist movement was a defense of the bible seen as a series of divine pronouncements. Since a defense of every statement in the bible would be an impossibly complicated undertaking, the actual defense is a highly selective one. Defending the idea of creation makes sense, although getting into a scientific fight with biologists, astrophysicists and anthropologists seems an ill-advised way to go about it.

The emotional center of the fundamentalist mentality has usually been moral questions that so upset the nineteenth century. Much of the language of sexual morality was born in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Terms such as sodomy, masturbation, sado-masochism are no help to thinking about the sexual life of human beings.

Abortion, for example, has obvious moral implications. But it was in the late nineteenth century that it became the enormous crisis that is still with us. Evangelical Protestants supported the physicians in their successful attempt to outlaw abortion except for cases decided by physicians. There is no obvious proposition in the bible for condemning abortion so fundamentalists simply lump it with murder.⁷ The Catholic church had little to say in the movement that made abortion illegal. The Catholic church had always opposed abortion but it distinguished between abortion in early and later stages of pregnancy. A Catholic who is deeply conservative would side with the great majority of Catholic thinkers, including popes, who did not think that early abortions are homicides.

The most curious example of finding divine pronouncements in the bible concerns homosexuality. “Homo-sexual” is a peculiar word, half Greek and half Latin, invented in 1870. It was coined as the name of a crime or a disease, a way to stamp some human beings as a deviant form of the human species. The bible has no such word and no such idea; it literally has nothing to say about homosexuality. That fact has not prevented the growth of a widespread

belief that the bible condemns homosexuality. The usual texts cited include Leviticus 18: 22: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” and Leviticus 20: 13: “If a man lies with a man as with a woman it is an abomination; they shall be put to death.” (The advocacy of the second part of this verse seems neglected in today’s preaching). The assumption that Christians regulate their moral lives according to the Book of Leviticus is intriguing. If that is going to be done, then perhaps Leviticus, chapter 19, on love of one’s neighbor, is more relevant to the question of homosexuality than chapters 18 and 20.

My point is that anyone deserving the name conservative ought to treat the biblical literature with respect rather than as a grab bag full of divine propositions to be ransacked in support of a moral position. Jim Wallis has regularly pointed out to his fellow evangelicals that there are hundreds of biblical texts about caring for the poor. Enthusiasts for Leviticus might start with Leviticus, chapter 25, on forgiving debts.⁸ The clearest criterion in the New Testament for judgment of one’s life is in Matthew 25: 31- 46. “I was hungry and you gave me food...I was naked and you clothed me...As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Christians who seem obsessed with hitting people over the head with the Ten Commandments might try occasionally reading the Sermon on the Mount.

When the Clintons were in the White House the Southern Baptist Convention decided that the New Testament text “wives obey your husbands” had preeminent importance. Their decision was the lead story on all four network news programs. I was asked by a CBS talk show if I would participate in a discussion of this momentous event. I said that I would be happy to discuss how one might be morally inspired by reading the bible, but discussing a divine mandate that Hilary should obey Bill was about the last thing in the world I would like to do.

Conservative Reform

In all religions, though most obviously Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions, which are mortgaged to the past, the great reforms are conservative. Reform means forming anew but one cannot do that without a return to origins and a breadth of knowledge about subsequent tradition. A patchwork of biblical and patristic statements will not be conservative enough.

In the great reformation of Western Christianity, Martin Luther returned to the origins of the Christian church, proclaiming *sola scriptura* as the criterion of belief. He was not opposed to tradition but he saw the need to challenge numerous accretions within the tradition. Roman Catholic officials, in a legitimate concern that tradition be defended, insisted on a second source of divine revelation: tradition as well as scripture. Thus began a controversy that lasted into the twentieth century: Is revelation contained in scripture alone or is it contained in both scripture and tradition? The problem with the question was the word “contained.” A rethinking of the relation between scripture and tradition first required a recognition that revelation is not contained anywhere. The scripture is not a “deposit of revelation” but testimonies of faith in a revealing God. And tradition is not a supplementary list of beliefs but the life of the church that is in constant need of reformation.

Pope, Benedict XVI, was an interesting test case for a conservative attitude. The young Joseph

Ratzinger rebelled against the deadening Neo-Scholasticism in the seminary of the 1950s. That was a healthy and intelligent reaction. Ratzinger became a keen student of Augustine which was undoubtedly helpful. In his reading of Bonaventure, Ratzinger played with some radical ideas of reform around the idea of revelation.⁹ Unfortunately, he did not seem to develop a deep appreciation of Thomas Aquinas, a source which has fueled much of the best Catholic church reform during the past century. In his years at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and as Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger fell back on formulas that emerged out of sixteenth-century polemics. He constantly used “the Christian faith” when in fact he was referring to Roman Catholic doctrine. He referred to “the Christian revelation,” as a source of absolute truth.¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas would have found the phrase “the Christian revelation” unintelligible, as would every other prominent Christian writer before the sixteenth century.

My hope for Ratzinger as pope was that he would become more conservative: some Aquinas with the Augustine, a bit of Meister Eckhart with the Bonaventure, less reliance on sixteenth century polemical phrases; a use of the word faith more in line with the bible, and a use of “revelation” that connected with his own younger self in the 1950s. I thought that perhaps being pope would be liberating; at the least a pope does not have to worry about career advancement.

The old have a good chance to be liberal conservatives, an opportunity to recover some of the rebelliousness of their youth but now chastened by a wider experience of what life brings: the good and the bad, joy and sorrow, fear of death and the quiet acceptance of one’s mortality. If there is a conflict of the generations in the world, it is usually not between the young and the old, but it is rather a clash of the young and the old against the middle. The most radically subversive teachers in the world are probably grandparents who, despite the approach of death, are a sign to the very young that life and death are not mutually exclusive, nor are liberal thinking and a conservative respect for the past.

¹ Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

² John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

³ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 23.

⁴ G.B. Kerfeld, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 42.

⁶ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 51.

⁷ Robert Burt, *Death is that Man Taking Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁸ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

⁹ Josef Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*