

THE PROBLEM WITH CONSERVATISM

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My first conservative experience was in second grade, when I learned *America the Beautiful*. Verses one and two were merely baffling. I could not picture waves of grain, I could not believe that mountains were purple, and I could not form an association between liberty and pilgrim's feet. But the third verse broke me like glass and made me an idolater. *O beautiful for patriot's dream, that sees beyond the years, we warbled; thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears.* Somehow the song called forth in my childish heart an answering music that I had never heard in church. I seemed to hear the whine of gulls and the murmur of the sea before a white throne; I was afflicted with a sense of the Fall and a longing for the City whose light is the Glory of God. But I misidentified the City. The song sent me questing for Columbia, not the New Jerusalem. I was told to seek in the ideal futurity of my nation what cannot be made by hands.

What then is a Christian to make of conservatism? The danger, it would seem, is not in *conserving*, for anyone may have a vocation to care for precious things, but in conservative *ideology*, which sets forth a picture of these things at variance with the faith. The same is true of liberalism. From time to time the Christian may find himself in tactical alliance with conservatives, just as with liberals, over particular policies, precepts, and laws. But he cannot be in strategic alliance, because their reasons for these stands are different; he is living in a different vision. For his allies' sake as well as his own, it behoves him to remember the difference. We do not need another Social Gospel -- just the Gospel.

In a previous essay I described liberalism as a bundle of acute moral errors, with political consequences which grow more and more alarming as these errors are taken closer and closer to their logical conclusions. Conservatism may be described as another such bundle. The parallel is not perfect, for American culture is balanced at the top of a liberal ridge and is only now considering the descent. Because conservative moral errors have had less time to work among the powers and principalities, we cannot always speak of their political consequences. But we can anticipate their fruits by their roots. The moral errors of conservatism are just as grave as those of their opponents.

A minor difficulty in setting forth these errors is the ambiguity of the term "conservatism." Conservatives come in many different kinds, and their mistakes are equally heterogeneous. I should like to stress, therefore, that not every conservative commits every one of the errors that I describe in the following pages. But there is a common theme. Each kind of conservative opposes the contemporary government-driven variety of social reformism in the name of some cherished thing which he finds that it endangers. One speaks of virtue,

another of wealth, another of the peace of his home and the quiet of his street -- but although these pearls are of very different luster, none wishes his to be thrown before swine. So it is that conservatives are often able to make common cause, one putting his pearl in another's casket. And so we set to work.

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The first moral error of political conservatism is *civil religionism*. According to this notion, America is a chosen nation, and its projects are a proper focus of religious aspiration; according to Christianity, America is but one nation among many, no less loved by God, but no more.

Our civil religion seems to have developed in four stages. Stage one is the Massachusetts colony. Although the Puritans accept the orthodox view of the Church as the New Israel, they also view it as corrupt. Therefore, the Church's role of City upon a Hill has passed to themselves -- to the uncorrupted remnant of the faithful which has fled to North American shores. Like the Israelites, they view themselves as having entered into a special covenant with God to be His people. However, the same blessings and curses are appended to their covenant as to the one at Sinai; therefore, says Governor Winthrop, if the settlers embrace the present world and prosecute their carnal intentions, "the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us [and] be revenged of such a perjured people."

Stage two is the colonies just before the Revolution. Increasing unity among the settlers has given rise to a *national* sense of covenant with God; however, the shared experience of English harassment arouses suspicion that the covenant has been breached. Isaiah's warnings to Israel are invoked by way of explanation: "How is the faithful city become an harlot! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers." Preachers like Samuel Langdon declare that if only the people turn from their sins, God will remit their punishment, purge the nation of wrongdoers, restore a righteous government -- and deal with the English.

Stage three is the early and middle republic. God is still understood as the underwriter of American aspirations, but as the content of these aspirations becomes more and more nationalistic it also becomes less and less Christian. It would appear that God cares at least as much about putting down the South and taking over the West as he does about making his people holy; patriotic songwriters like Samuel Francis Smith use expressions like "freedom's holy light," but they mean democracy, not freedom from sin.

Stage four is the late republic. By this time American culture has become not just indifferent to Christianity, but hostile to it. Conservatives still want to believe that the nation is specially favored by God, but the idea of seeking His will and suffering His chastening has been completely lost. President Eisenhower remarks that what the country needs is a religious foundation, but that he doesn't care what it is. President Reagan applies the image of the City Upon a Hill not to the remnant of the Church in America, but to America *as such* -- its mission

not to bear witness to the Gospel, but to spread the bits and pieces of its secular ideology.

The root mistake is confusing America with Zion. She is not the inheritor of a covenant, not the receiver of the promises, not the witness to the nations. It may well be that all nations have callings of sorts -- specific purposes which God in His providence assigns them. But no nation can presume to take God under its wing. However we may love her, dote upon her, and regret her, the Lord our God can do without the United States.

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The second moral error of political conservatism is *instrumentalism*. According to this notion faith should be used for the ends of the state; according to Christianity, believers should certainly be good citizens, but faith is not a tool. To be sure, the pedigree of instrumentalism is not purely conservative; it has followers on Left as well as Right. For instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wanted the state to invent a civil religion to his order, *then* make use of it. Its articles would be proposed "not exactly as religious dogmas" but as "sentiments of sociability without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject." Most instrumentalists, however, are not so fastidious. They are willing to make a tool of whatever religion comes to hand, whether civil, traditional, or revealed. Religious conservatives who pine for the days when jurists called America "a Christian country" and recognized Christianity as "the law of the land" are deeply in error if they think such statements expressed belief; what they expressed was instrumentalism. In those days the religion that came to hand was Christianity (or at least its civil religionist counterfeit), and the speakers were interested primarily in how it could be used. The eminent nineteenth-century jurisprude Thomas Cooley admitted as much. Supreme Court Justice David Brewer, controversial author of *America a Christian Country*, was only slightly less explicit.

Viewed from this perspective, the contrast between the jurisprudence of yesterday and today is not nearly as sharp as religious conservatives make it out to be. Although language describing Christianity as the law of the land has disappeared from our cases, judges and legislators are just as interested in the social utility of the faith as they were before -- and just as indifferent to its truth. Consider for example the 1984 Supreme Court case *Lynch v. Donnelly*, which concerned whether a Christmastime nativity display could be financed by a municipal government. Members of the Court likened erecting a creche to adopting "In God We Trust" as the national motto and opening judicial sessions with the invocation "God save the United States and this honorable Court." By the comparison, they meant three things.

These acts and declarations have nothing to do with religion. They do not "endorse" the faith, but merely "acknowledge" it, said Justice O'Connor. Indeed they have "lost through rote repetition any significant religious content," said Justice Brennan. Otherwise, they said, they would be establishments of religion, which are forbidden.

On the other hand, they are socially indispensable. They are "uniquely" suited to serve "wholly" secular purposes (Brennan) which could not reasonably be served in any other

way (O'Connor). These purposes include "solemnizing public occasions" (Brennan and O'Connor), "expressing confidence in the future and encouraging the recognition of what is worthy of appreciation in society" (O'Connor), and "inspiring commitment to meet some national challenge in a manner that simply could not be fully served if government were limited to purely non-religious phrases" (Brennan). The last of these purposes is especially interesting -- in plain language, it means getting people to do something they would refuse to do otherwise.

In fact, they are a noble lie. Obviously, if the mottoes and creches and so forth had really lost *all* their religious content they would be completely useless for achieving any purposes whatsoever, secular or otherwise. Our rulers feel *free* to use them because they have lost religious meaning for *them*; they *work*, however, because they retain this meaning for the masses.

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The third moral error of political conservatism is *moralism*. According to this notion God's grace needs the help of the state; Christianity merely asks the state to get out of the way. We might say that while instrumentalism wants to make faith a tool of politics, moralism wants to make politics a tool of faith; on this reading, what instrumentalism is to secular conservatives, moralism is to religious conservatives. Surprisingly, though, many religious conservatives seem unable to tell the difference. Whether someone says "We need prayer in schools to make the children holy" or "We need prayer in schools to make the country strong," it sounds to them the same.

Now I am *not* going to complain that moralism "imposes" a faith on people who do not share it. In the sense at issue, even secularists "impose" a faith on others -- they merely impose a different faith. Every law reflects some moral idea, every moral idea reflects some fundamental commitment, and every fundamental commitment is religious -- it proposes a god. Everything in the universe comes to a point. For moralism, therefore, the important distinction is not between religion and secularism, but between faiths that do and faiths that do not demand the civil enforcement of all their moral precepts.

To the question "Should the civil law enforce the precepts of the faith?" the Biblical answer is "Some yes, but some no; which ones do you mean?" The New Testament does contain literally hundreds of precepts. However, Christianity is not a legislative religion. While the Bible recognizes Torah as a divinely-revealed code for the ruling of Israel before the coming of Messiah, it does not include a divinely-revealed code for the ruling of the gentiles afterward. To be sure, the Bible limits the kinds of laws that Christians can *accept* from their governments, for *we must obey God rather than men*. (Acts 5:29, NIV). However, it does not prescribe specific laws that they must *demand* from them.

It is not even true that *all* of God's commands limit the kinds of laws that Christians can accept. To see this, contrast two such precepts: (1) I am prohibited from deliberately

shedding innocent blood; (2) I am prohibited from divorcing a faithful spouse. Both precepts are absolute in their application to *me*, but that is not the issue. If we are speaking of governmental enforcement, then we are speaking of their application to *others*. Now the former precept should require very little watering down in the public square, for even non-believers are expected to understand the wrong of murder. That is why I may be confident in condemning the legalization of abortion. But the latter precept requires a good deal of watering down in the public square, for before the coming of Christ not even believers were expected to understand the true nature of marriage. *Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard*, said Jesus, *but it was not this way from the beginning.* (Matthew 19:8, NIV.) No doubt the Pharisees to whom He was speaking were scandalized by the idea that their civil law did not reflect God's standards fully. They must have been even more offended by the suggestion that it was not intended to. Among religious conservatives this suggestion is still a scandal, but it does not come from liberals; it comes from the Master.

Christians, then, may certainly commend a law as *good* or condemn it as *evil*. They may declare a good one *consistent with the faith* or an evil one *inconsistent with the faith*. They may even call the former *acceptable to Christians* and the latter *unacceptable to Christians*. But not even a good law may be simply *identified* with the faith; they must not speak of a tax code, marriage ordinance, or welfare policy as *Christian* no matter how much, or even how rightly, they desire its enactment or preservation. *That* predicate has been preempted by the law of God. The civil law will be Christian -- if it still exists at all -- only when Christ Himself has returned to rule: not when a coalition of religious conservatives has got itself elected.

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The fourth moral error of political conservatism is *Caesarism*. According to this notion the laws of man are higher than the laws of God; according to Christianity the laws of God are higher than the laws of man. With this error we have come back to secular conservatives. The peculiar thing about American Caesarism is that the state never *says* that its laws are higher than the laws of God; it achieves this result simply by refusing to acknowledge *any* laws of God. All this in the name of equal liberty for all religious sects.

George Reynolds, a Mormon living in Utah Territory, was charged during the 1870s with the crime of bigamy. In his defense he argued that the law was an unconstitutional infringement of his free exercise of religion. Accepting his appeal, the Supreme Court disagreed. Although it said all sorts of interesting things about why free exercise of religion is good (and why polygamy is wrong -- for instance because it leads to a patriarchal rather than republican principle of authority in government), the heart of the rebuttal was a simple distinction between opinions and actions. Appealing to Thomas Jefferson's idea of a "wall of separation between church and state," it held that what people believe is the business of the church, but that what they do is the business of the state. Therefore, the First Amendment does not mean that people may act as their religion requires, but only that they may think as their religion requires; free exercise of religion makes no difference whatsoever to the scope of

state power over conduct.

Still favored by many conservatives, this doctrine has startling implications. It means, for instance, that in throwing Christians to the lions for refusing to worship Caesar, the Romans did nothing to infringe the free exercise of Christianity; after all, while being devoured, the martyrs were still at liberty to believe that Caesar was only a man.

A century later, in cases involving other religious groups, the Court conceded the point. Announcing its discovery that faith and conduct cannot be isolated in "logic-tight compartments," it now decreed that "only those interests of the highest order and those not otherwise served can overbalance legitimate claims to the free exercise of religion." But this was too much for judicial conservatives, and the experiment was ended in 1992. Writing for the Court in *Employment Division v. Smith (II)*, Justice Scalia appealed to a notion to which we will return later: that the issue in free exercise cases is not whether the state's motives are "compelling," but whether they are "neutral." A law that does not expressly single out a particular sect may burden any religious practice to any degree, so long as this burden is "merely the incidental effect" of the law and not its "object." In other words, repression is fine so long as it is absent-minded. Pastoral care and counselling could not be forbidden *as such* but could be forbidden as an incidental effect of regulations for the licensing of mental health practitioners; the sacraments of baptism could not be forbidden *as such* but could be forbidden as an incidental effect of regulations for bathing in public places. To be sure, since the recent action of the Court, Congress has reinstated the compelling-interest doctrine, lauding its deed as a "Religious Freedom Restoration Act." But surely this is overstatement. After all, even under the compelling-interest doctrine, "legitimate" claims to the free exercise of religion can be swept aside whenever the state thinks its reasons are good enough. So much we would have had without a First Amendment.

As our own times have made clear, even releasing nerve gas in public places can be an exercise of religion. Perhaps the blame for our troubles lies with the Framers, for refusing to distinguish the kinds of religion whose exercise should be free from the kinds of religion whose exercise should not. But, foolishly thinking ignorance a friend of conscience, we have followed their lead. Afraid to judge among religions, we put them all beneath our feet; pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of equal liberty, we tumble headlong into Caesarism.

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The fifth moral error of political conservatism is *traditionalism*. According to this notion, what has been done is what should be done; although Christianity cherishes the unchanging truths of faith, it insists that any merely human custom may have to be repented. *That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun*, writes Koheleth, "the Preacher." *Behold, I will do a new thing; now shall it spring forth; shall ye not know it?* answers God. (Ecclesiastes 1:9, Isaiah 43:19, ASV.)

An illustration of the mischiefs of traditionalism may be found in the 1992 Supreme Court case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which reaffirmed the supposed right to take the lives of one's unborn children. By inventing the right in the first place, the Court had shattered tradition; no such use of lethal violence by private individuals had ever been sanctioned in common law. But *Roe v. Wade* had stood for twenty years. So far as the Court is concerned, that makes it a new tradition -- and as such, unassailable. Amazingly, the Court upheld *Roe* even while admitting that it might have been decided incorrectly. "[W]e are satisfied," says the majority, "that the immediate question is not the soundness of *Roe's* resolution of the issue, but the precedential force that must be accorded the ruling."

Just how does an unsound precedent have force? The answer, says the Court, is that "for two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized their intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail An entire generation has come of age free to assume *Roe's* concept of liberty[.]" To put the idea more simply, sex has been separated from responsibility for resulting children for so long that to change the rules on people now would be unfair. Therefore, never mind whether what was done was right; what matters is that it was done. The fundamental principle is to be unprincipled.

Moral errors gain their plausibility from the truths that they distort. It is certainly true that precedents, traditions, and customs should not be needlessly disturbed; the gain in goodness from a particular change must always be balanced against the harm of change *as such*. But this truth applies to the choice between a good law and a still better one, not to the choice between a good law and an evil one. The question to ask about moral evil is not whether we have got used to it, but whether it can be stopped.

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The sixth moral error of political conservatism is *neutralism*. This may come as a surprise, because neutralism also comes in a liberal variety. Whereas the liberal sort of neutralist exclaims "Let a thousand flowers bloom!", the conservative sort cries merely "Leave me alone!" In essence, conservative neutralism is the notion that because everyone ought to mind his own business, moral and religious judgments should be avoided. By contrast, while agreeing that one ought to mind his own business -- St. Paul warns three times against busybodies -- Christianity holds that moral and religious judgments can never be avoided. They must be straight and true before people can even agree as to what their business is.

Not everyone reaches neutralism by the same route, but conservative thinker Michael Oakeshott follows a well-worn path in deriving it from traditionalism. Conservatives, he says, seek activities whose enjoyment springs "not from the success of the enterprise, but from the familiarity of the engagement." What makes this disposition intelligible in politics is "the observation of our current manner of living" together with the belief that laws are "instruments enabling people to pursue activities of their own choice with minimum frustration." But to say

this is to reject the view that laws are "plans for imposing substantive activities"; therefore, he holds, conservatism has "nothing to do" with morals or religion.

Of course the conclusion does not follow, and if it were really true then conservatives could make no decisions at all. Rather than being indifferent to questions of good and evil, Oakeshott himself maintains the good of minimizing frustration, and rather than holding no opinion about religion, he holds the opinion that it is better to be ignorant of truth than to be pestered about it. For example he says that people of conservative disposition "might even be prepared to suffer a legally established ecclesiastical order," but "it would not be because they believed it to represent some unassailable religious truth, but merely because it restrained the indecent competition of sects and (as Hume said) moderated 'the plague of a too diligent clergy.'" The difficulty is plain: If not by his own moral and religious standards, then how does Oakeshott know that competition is indecent and diligence a plague? Why not condemn complacency and sloth instead? Neutralism just does not work.

Not even rules *designed* to tell what counts as pestering can work in a neutral way. Always we must add others to make them work -- and what we add makes a difference to the outcome. Christianity recognizes this. For example, consider the principles of Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty. Each one targets the same problem: Knowing where the business of one party ends and the business of another begins. The former, a precept of Catholic social thought, holds that greater and higher social institutions like the state exist just to *help* lesser and subordinate ones like the family. Therefore, to destroy the lesser institutions, absorb them, or take away their proper functions is "gravely wrong" and a "disturbance of right order." The latter precept is more prominent in Protestant social thought. Ordering social institutions horizontally instead of vertically, it says that each has its own domain, its own authority, and its own ruling norm, for instance love in the case of the family and public justice in the case of the state. Therefore, each should be protected from interference by the others.

Both rules, we see, are meant to deal with meddling. Well and good. But applying either one requires a vast amount of other knowledge which one must get from somewhere else -- just what the neutralist would like to think unnecessary. To test my college students I used to ask "To which institution would a subsidiarist give the task of instructing children in sexual mores -- state, or family?" Almost all replied "The state." Families need *help*, they argued, because they do a poor job in this area: They rarely teach children about contraception, sexual preferences, or the many other things which young moderns need to know. I was astonished. Couldn't my students tell the difference between helping the family and absorbing its functions? On reflection their answer was not astonishing at all. They shared neither Christian presuppositions about what sex is for nor Christian presuppositions about how a family works; why then should they have reached Christian conclusions in applying Christian social principles?

There is nothing exceptional about the principles of Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty; *no* definition of meddling or intrusion can work in a neutral way. Particular moral and religious understandings are always presupposed, and changing them changes the

way our definitions work. It follows that forbidding moral judgments will not keep busybodies out of other people's hair. Somehow they must learn the meanings of "other," "people's," and "hair."

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The seventh moral error of political conservatism is *mammonism*. According to this notion wealth is the object of commonwealth, and its continual increase even better; according to Christianity wealth is a snare, and its continual increase even worse. Mammonism, as everyone really knows, is what the Big Tent is all about. Ditch the social issues, man, but for God's sake hold onto that capitals gains tax reduction! To keep your liberty you have to keep your money.

Christians, of course, are not the only ones to have criticized mammonism. Warnings against the love of wealth were a staple even of ancient pagan conservatism. The idea was that virtue makes republics prosper, but prosperity leads to love of wealth, love of wealth leads to loss of virtue, and loss of virtue makes republics fall. Thus if you want your republic to endure, you will do well to seek a site unfavorable to great prosperity -- not too warm, not too fertile, not too close to the trading routes. That our secular conservatives disagree with their ancient counterparts will strike no one as a new idea. Odder is the ease with which modern Christians make their peace with mammonism.

An extreme example is found in the turn-of-the-century Baptist preacher Russell Conwell, who maintained that to make money is the same thing as to preach the Christian gospel. However that may be, to preach his own gospel was certainly the same thing as to make money. So eager were people to hear his oft-repeated *Acres of Diamonds* speech that he is said to have earned, over a period of years, perhaps six million dollars from speakers' fees alone. Though peanuts by the standards of modern televangelists, at the time that was real money. An inventory of Conwell's more astonishing claims would include at least the following. (1) It is your Christian duty to get rich, and ownership of possessions makes you a better person. (2) The overwhelming majority of rich people are morally upright, and that is exactly why they are rich. (3) It is "all wrong" to be poor, and God does not approve of poor people. That Jesus explicitly contradicts each of these claims (Matthew 6:19-21, Matthew 19:23-24, Luke 6:20) leaves Conwell cold.

A more temperate but still objectionable form of mammonism is found in *Toward the Future*, a "lay letter" published in 1984 by a committee of prominent Catholic conservatives. Jesus told the story of a master who entrusts his servants with the care of his money while he is travelling to a distant place to receive a kingship. Upon his return, he finds that one servant has buried his share while the other two have made investments. The timid servant he scolds, fires, and orders thrown out of the premises, but the bold ones he praises and rewards with yet greater responsibilities. Traditionally the Church has understood this parable to mean that just as a king in this world expects his agents to take risks, not burying his money but investing it to earn a return, so God expects his people to take risks, not burying their gifts but using them to

build up the Kingdom of Heaven. By contrast, the lay letter understands it to mean simply that God expects his people to invest their money to earn a return. "Preserving capital is not enough," the authors teach; "it must be made to grow." The use of gifts for the sake of the Kingdom becomes the growth of wealth for the sake of wealth.

To be sure, the lay letter's defense of enterprise is not altogether wrong. Material things are not intrinsically evil, it is not a sin to engage in honest business, and, despite its dubious motivational underpinnings, the capitalist type of economy may well be superior to the alternatives. Indeed the cooperative sort of socialism seems to ignore the circumstance of the Fall, and the compulsory sort cannot even be established without the sin of theft. In a fallen world, much can also be said for the "invisible hand" of the market, by which independent individuals, even though selfish, bring about a social good which was no part of their intention. But even Adam Smith recognizes that the invisible hand does not work unless laborers and businessmen submit themselves to the restraints of justice, and that an interest in wealth alone will not induce them to do so. After all, if winning is all that matters, why keep the competition going at all? For instance, why not use one's wealth to wring special privileges from the government and so become more wealthy still? Capitalism depends on a moral spirit which it cannot supply and may even weaken; it is, in the most exact of senses, a *parasite* on the faith. But a Christian parasite is not by that fact Christian.

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The eighth moral error of political conservatism is *meritism*. According to this notion I should do unto others as they deserve. With the addition of mammonism, matters become even simpler, for then those who need help are by definition undeserving, while those in a position to help are by definition deserving. That meritism is not a Christian doctrine comes as a surprise to many people. Large numbers think the meritist motto "God helps those who help themselves" is a quotation from the Bible. What the New Testament actually teaches that in what we need most, we are helpless; the grace of God is an undeserved gift. According to Christianity I should do unto others not as they deserve, but as they need.

Aristotle taught that vices tend to come in pairs, because one can miss a mark either by way of excess or by way of deficiency -- by going too far or by failing to go far enough. That is certainly the case here, for the conservative mistake of meritism stands opposite to the liberal mistake of propitiationism -- doing unto others as they *want*. In fact the commonest way to fall into either mistake is by sheer recoil from the other. The reason is easy to see: We tend to think of justice and mercy as antithetical, so that to practice either I must slight the other. By this line of reasoning the conservative emphasis on desert is a preference for justice, while the liberal emphasis on desire is a preference for mercy. By contrast, in the Christian account of things justice and mercy are *corollaries* which must be united. They are united in the Atonement because God neither waived the just penalty for our sins nor inflicted it on us, but took it upon Himself. This staggering gift also teaches what the unity of justice and mercy requires: sacrifice. If to *us* justice and mercy seem irreconcilable, the reason is probably that we are loath to pay the price of their reconciliation; we are afraid of sacrifice and shrink from

the way of the Cross.

What does the contrast between meritism and charity look like in ordinary human relationships? Consider the governmental policy of paying women cash prizes for bearing children out of wedlock. Liberals want to continue the policy because they cannot tell need from desire. Meritists propose ending it because the subsidies are undeserved. Although a Christian may accept the cutoff, he cannot accept it for the reason given. All of us at all times need and receive many things that we do not deserve. The problem with the subsidies is that they are *not* what is needed. They so completely split behavior from its natural consequences that they infantilize their supposed beneficiaries; to infantilize them is to debase them, and no one needs to be debased. Very well, says the meritist to the Christian, but we both support a cutoff. The rationales differ, but so what? They don't make a difference in practice, do they? To be sure they do. After achieving the cutoff, the meritist thinks his work is done, but the Christian thinks his work has only begun. He must now find another way to offer help; and he had better be prepared to pay the price. I am not recommending a return to liberal ideas of sacrifice, such as high taxes to support salaried bureaucrats. For a portrait of the true price of helping, think of Mother Theresa.

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We have considered what Christians are to make of political conservatism. It might also be asked what political conservatives are to make of Christians. I am afraid that the more faithful we are to our identity in Christ, the less reliable they will find us even as occasional allies; and we must be honest with them. The Christian thinker Michael Novak wrote in his 1969 book *A Theology for Radical Politics* that because God is the source of all truth and good, whatever is true and good is *ipso facto* Christian. At that time finding truth and goodness on the Left, he therefore baptized the Left. Like many Christians of the time, what he forgot was that in order to identify the true and the good, one must have a standard. "Every explanation of the meaning of human existence," said Reinhold Niebuhr, "must avail itself of some principle of explanation which cannot be explained. Every estimate of values involves some criterion of value which cannot be arrived at empirically." By the time he wrote *Confessions of a Catholic*, fourteen years later, Novak had arrived at the same insight. As he explained, his former self had erred in taking his principle of explanation and criterion of value from a worldly faction instead of the community of faith. The "reference group" of Christian activists like himself had somehow become "others on the Left"; it should have been others in the Lord.

To repeat the error would be a shame, for the reference group of Christians can no more be others on the Right than others on the Left. Citizenship is an obligation of the faith, therefore the Christian will not abstain from the politics of the nation-state. But his primary mode of politics must always be *witness*. It is a good and necessary thing to change the welfare laws, but better yet to go out and feed the poor. It is a good and necessary thing to ban abortion, but better yet to sustain young women and their babies by taking them into the fellowship of faith. This is the way the kingdom of God is built.

It is not by the world that the world is moved -- yet how it pulls. Ah, God, help us let go of the heights and the depths, the thrones and dominions, the powers and principalities; to be not conservatives, nor yet liberals, but simply Christians. *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.*