

THE CULTURAL CONSERVATIVES

by Russell Kirk

In practical politics, what we call the conservative movement in America is a coalition of several interests and bodies of opinion. In popular journalism, the word "conservative" has come to imply virtually any person who resists the great grim tendency toward a totalist state; or perhaps anybody who sets his face against Communism. So we ought not to be surprised that within this camp called conservative there flourish factions and deep differences of opinion. It is only in their opposition to Leviathan that the several factions join forces.

I have been asked to offer you four lectures on the varieties of the conservative impulse, my general title playing on William James's book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. So I mean to take up, during this year, four aspects of this subject: the ideas and approaches of the cultural conservatives, the libertarians, the neo-conservatives, and, in another lecture of the series, the popular conservatism of the American people. I confess that this general subject is not wholly congenial to my temperament: for my own tendency is to avoid fission and to promote amicable relationships among groups that have common objectives. I do not wish to consign to arbitrary categories persons who object to being ideologically tagged.

Conservative Impulse. Still less do I desire to manufacture an ideology called conservatism, and demand conformity to its political dogmas. For the conservative impulse is the negation of ideology. Conservatives do not believe that man and society may be perfected through revolutionary politics — the conviction that lies at the heart of every ideology.

So I propose, in these four lectures, to examine the several positions I have mentioned, praising each of them where praise seems due, but scourging them with whips of scorpions, now and again, for certain vices of commission or omission. I commence with the body of opinion called "cultural conservatism."

That term is at least three decades old. From time to time it has been applied to me, although I never have described myself as a cultural conservative; some of you may have hear Mr. Irving Kristol apply it to me in this very room, a few years ago. What has been meant by this term? Why, presumably those who employ it have regarded a "cultural conservative" as a person who endeavors to preserve the customs, the institutions, the learning, the mores of a society, as distinguished from men and women whose immediate interest is practical politics of a conservative cast. The implication of some writers who

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draw this line of demarcation seems to be that nasty though conservative politicians are, possibly some feeble defense may be made for the good, if foolish, intentions of mere cultural conservatives.

Defining Culture. For understanding the concept "culture" and its relationship to a conservative order, the best book to read is T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, published in 1948; I commended that slim volume to President Nixon, in a private discussion with him, as the one book which he ought to read for guidance in his high office. Just now permit me to quote a brief passage from that defense of culture. "It is commonly assumed that there is culture, but that it is the property of a small section of society; and from this assumption it is usual to proceed to one of two conclusions: either that culture can be only the concern of a small minority, and that therefore there is no place for it in the society of the future; or that in the society of the future the culture which has been the possession of the few must be put at the disposal of everybody."

As Eliot goes on to point out, culture is a great deal more than this vulgar assumption allows. Man is the only creature possessing culture; and if culture is effaced, so is the distinction between man and the brutes that perish. "Art is man's nature," in Burke's phrase and if the human arts, or culture, cease to be, then human nature ceases to be.

What are conservatives trying to conserve? Why, culture, primarily. Some people called conservatives may lie upon their hoards of gold, like so many Fafnirs, muttering "Let me rest: I lie in possession." But the genuine conservative knows that he is the guardian of a great deal more than stocks and bonds. This reflection leads us to a fresh employment of the phrase "cultural conservative."

For last year there was created an Institute for Cultural Conservatism, with an office but a stone's throw from here; Mr. William Lind is its director. The Institute has published a small book or large pamphlet entitled *Cultural Conservatism: Toward a New National Agenda*. I offer you some observations upon that publication, which already has made a considerable splash, including a public discussion in these very premises.

Collective Conscience. Mr. Lind and his co-author, Mr. William Marshner, define "culture" somewhat broadly, in anthropological fashion for the most part. In their words, "It is the ways of thinking, living and behaving that define a people and underlie its achievements. It is a nation's collective mind, its sense of right and wrong, the way it perceives reality, and its definition of self. Culture is the morals and habits a mother strives to instill in her children. It is the obligations we acknowledge toward our neighbors, our community, and our government. It is the worker's dedication to craftsmanship and the owner's acceptance of the responsibilities of stewardship. It is the standards we set and enforce for ourselves and for others; our definitions of duty, honor, and character. It is our collective conscience."

This definition, or rather description, certainly enlarges upon the fallaciously narrow understanding of culture that Eliot rebukes. But the Lind-Marshner description is immediately followed in their pamphlet by a short paragraph seeming to disparage the "high culture" of the fine arts and literature; and in a chapter-note, they instruct us, "To

most Americans, the word 'culture' no doubt suggests something much narrower in meaning and much more dispensable from the point of view of ordinary people. The word suggests 'cultivation' of tastes and manners, perhaps to an artificial or hoity-toity degree. This is not what we mean at all."

Herculean Task. Despite these words, one trusts than the men and women associated with the Institute for Cultural Conservatism are not votaries of what is all too accurately called "pop culture"; and indeed in the final chapter of this pamphlet they show some concern, after all, for a high culture. They need to become aware of Eliot's argument that different levels of a culture are complementary, not antagonistic; and that although what is called a high culture cannot survive the ruin of the general culture, also the general culture must be nurtured and elevated by the upper levels of a nation's cultural inheritance.

But definitions aside, what does this Institute for Cultural Conservatism aspire to accomplish? Theirs is a Herculean task: the reinvigoration of our culture in the sense that a nation's culture is the complex of beliefs, customs, habits, arts, crafts, economic methods, laws, morals, political structures, and all the ways of living in community that have developed over the centuries. The American culture is sunk in difficulties today; the Cultural Conservatives exhort us to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. They declare, with some courage, "The politics that carry us into the twenty-first century will be based not on economics, but on culture." And they present us, in their pamphlet, with recommendations for action — very specific recommendations, perhaps too specific for an introductory publication, some of them. But before taking up their agenda, we need to say something about the roots of culture. As the Cultural Conservatives remind us, culture is an organic growth. How did it begin?

Culture from the Cult. Why, culture is produced by the cult. This basic truth is expounded in our century by such eminent historians as Christopher Dawson, Eric Voegelin, and Arnold Toynbee. The primitive community is one of common worship — common endeavor to communicate with a transcendent power. Once people are joined in the cult, cooperation in many other things becomes possible. Systematic agriculture, military defense, irrigation, architecture, the visual arts, music, government, the more intricate crafts, economic production, and distribution — all these aspects of a culture arise from the cult. Out of little knots of worshippers in Egypt, Babylonia, India, or China arise simple cultures, for those joined in religion can dwell together and work together in relative peace. Presently those simple cultures grow into intricate cultures, and those intricate cultures into great civilizations.

The culture, the civilization, which the Cultural Conservatives hope to reinvigorate is the American manifestation of what is called Christian civilization. This great culture originated in a little cult of Galileans nearly two thousand years ago. It is indebted for much to the earlier Hebraic and classical cultures, but in its works, moral and material, it has become the greatest of all civilizations, ever since culture began. Nowadays that Christian culture seems decadent; some people say that already we are living in a post-Christian era. This Christian culture, in its American form, is what our friends the Cultural Conservatives are laboring to conserve and renew.

They are not quite so bold as to say precisely that. They mention "Western, Judeo-Christian values," and devote a whole chapter to "Religious and Moral Institutions"; they show how essential is religion to the civil social order. This discussion they conclude with a paragraph that has met with a hostile reception in certain quarters:

In calling for a new and positive look at religion's social and cultural unity, cultural conservatives appeal to all fair and open-minded persons, including those who decline to affirm a religious belief personally. One's ability or inability to credit religious doctrines should not distort the perception of a social fact: that religion is beneficial on a massive scale.

Christian Understanding. Here I sustain the Institute for Cultural Conservatism: though themselves professed Christians, the authors of this little book are quite right in seeking alliance with men and women who, though they do not accept the cult, very willingly accept the culture that has sprung from the cult, who know, indeed, that they and their posterity could not exist outside the culture. It would be remarkably foolish to insist upon adherence to a body of religious dogmata by all friends to our cultural patrimony — especially when various camps of Christians cannot agree among themselves upon certain of those dogmas.

My present point is that the principles and policies of the Institute for Cultural Conservatism are founded upon the Christian understanding of the human condition; and what they are determined to conserve is not nineteenth century Utilitarianism, or the twentieth century ideology of Democratism, but Christian civilization as it has been realized in American beliefs, customs, habits, and institutions. Amen to that.

With this high aspiration, the authors of *Cultural Conservatism* advance programs for renewal and reform — innovative programs, some of them. That is as it should be: Edmund Burke remarked that his model of a statesman was one who should combine a disposition to preserve with an ability to reform. In that spirit, the ten "Policy Areas" of the book are presented.

But various readers of the little book have grown uneasy at a neoteristic tone in various of the proposals; and I am one such reader, in certain instances. Lind and Marshner recommend that the federal government authorize new "empowerments." They argue that "empowerment" is not at all the same thing as the increasing of governmental powers and activities. This thesis they illustrate by a sentence borrowed from Mr. Michael Novak:

Huge Boondoggles. Among such people-empowering actions by our own government might be cited the Homestead Act, the land-grant colleges, the Highway Act, rural electrification, the Social Security Act, food stamps, housing assistance, AFDC, and a host of others.

Should we rejoice at such "empowering"? The Homestead Act opened up the West for exploration far too rapidly, sweeping away most of the national treasure of the public lands; the land-grant college subsidies seem to this speaker, a graduate of one such, a dubious blessing, for higher education should have been left to the several states; federal highway

building has produced huge boondoggles and social mischief, often; rural electrification could have been carried out perfectly well without federal direction and privileges; the Social Security system, compulsory saving, is in deep trouble and a prop of demagoguery; the food stamp program has become a permanent sore and the prey of the racketeer; "housing assistance" has been a dismal failure in the federal projects; aid to dependent children has given us, though unintentionally, an American proletariat (a condition described elsewhere in this pamphlet). Save us from more empowerment of this sort! Incidentally, the Novak passage is extracted from "The Future of 'Economic Rights,'" an unpublished paper. Let us devoutly hope that it never may be published.

Taking Truth Where We Find It. Here I may add, parenthetically, that the Lind-Marshner pamphlet cites and quotes from many and disparate sources, ranging from Amitai Etzioni to the Cato Institute. Some critics have raised their eyebrows at this eclecticism, but I am not among them: we must take the truth where we find it, and the Cultural Conservatism people prudently seek to attract to their proposals a considerable range of people who do not call themselves conservatives at present.

It would require days, rather than hours, for me to discuss with you adequately the ten Policy Areas of this *Cultural Conservatism* pamphlet. I turn for our present purposes to one chapter merely, that on Welfare. It has been severely criticized by some members of the staff here at The Heritage Foundation, I am told.

The preamble to our federal Constitution declares that the Constitution is meant to provide for the general welfare. And religious doctrines of charity have persuaded the American people, from the earliest times, to make public provision for the unfortunate, when necessary. It does not follow that a large part of the population ought to be kept in idleness and comparative poverty at public expense; nor does it follow that Congress ought to be harassed annually by a belligerent welfare lobby. The Cultural Conservatives are endeavoring to extricate the nation from this slough of poverty, crime, and indolence, this ruin of cities and corruption of character.

The New Proletariat. For there has grown up in these United States an ugly and sinister thing, a genuine proletariat. In the old Roman definition, a proletarian is one who gives nothing to the commonwealth but his progeny — who presently grow worse than himself. Lind and Marshner call this proletariat "the underclass." They propose to supplant "dollar welfare" by "cultural welfare," that the evil may be diminished; for they know that one must address causes, not effects merely. The liberals fondly fancied that if they would throw a great deal of money at the proletariat, somehow the proletariat would grow happy; that did not happen. Libertarians may fancy with equal silliness that some "test of the market" gadget would work wonders in the slums. These Cultural Conservatives know that the "dysfunctional values" of the underclass "must be replaced with functional, traditional values, with special emphasis on delayed gratification, family, education, work and abstinence from crime, extramarital sex and drugs."

The authors make ten recommendations toward this end of fundamental reform, "cultural welfare." They are the forming of pacts with black and Hispanic communities; alternatively, the recognition of new leaders in those communities; a "tough love" approach to material

welfare; reform of institutions that are agents for providing welfare money and materials, including more use of such mediating agencies as churches; promotion of the transfer of public housing to tenant ownership and control; governmental support for mediating institutions that sponsor "volunteer" building of houses for sale; public sponsorship of revolving venture capital undertakings for small family businesses; educational vouchers for the children of poverty-level households; inner-city enterprise zones, to bring employment and male responsibility to blighted districts; taking the feeble-minded "street people" back off the streets.

These measures would not of themselves convert the American urban proletariat into a responsible and commendable working class, but they surely would make a beginning; and I do not see why any of these recommendations should be seriously objected to. They display some social imagination; and until now our national and state "welfare" programs, with few exceptions, have been grimly unimaginative.

A Basis for Discussion. With the pamphlet's recommendations for the family, education, institutional design, economics, conservation and environment, religious and moral institutions, crime and punishment, military reform, and community preservation I am in sympathy, and for the most part I find the specific proposals sensible and well reasoned. Here and there phrases might be improved; now and again the Institute may be unjustifiably hopeful in attaining a reform; there is a tendency at some points to rely unduly upon the federal government apparatus — although Lind and Marshner distinctly are not centralizers on principle. But these flaws are much outweighed by the vigor and persuasiveness of their arguments, generally speaking.

It needs to be emphasized that this little book *Cultural Conservatism: Toward a New National Agenda* is intended merely as a prologue to studies, debates, and recommendations for action that presumably will continue for years. This pamphlet is a basis for discussion, not an immutable manifesto. We ought to take care not to discourage the growth of cultural conservatism by inflexible opposition to one or another of the Institute's proposals, regardless of the general merits of the concept of cultural conservatism.

Preoccupied with Economics. This pamphlet is to be supplemented by six-page bulletins entitled "Cultural Conservative Policy Insights." The first of these, entitled "American Competitiveness: Back to Basics," has reached me. I am somewhat taken aback: this "insight" could have been produced by any one of a score of existing "free enterprise" outfits. Really, future Policy Insights must be more insightful than this first Insight, if the Institute for Cultural Conservatism is to achieve any substantial results.

The first paragraph of *Cultural Conservatism*, the Institute's basic manual, commences thus: "For much of this century, America's national agenda has been preoccupied with economics." The authors would transcend this preoccupation. They continue, "Conservatives were seen as those concerned mainly with economic freedom and with increasing the common prosperity by spurring economic growth." The authors ask us to take broader views.

Just so. Yet this first Policy Insight takes another tack: it has much to say about competitiveness, and little about culture. Its economic views are sound enough, but platitudinous. This Insight does contain a section about education; yet its concern for education is founded upon a passion for economic productivity, rather than upon the redemption of culture.

The Insight advances the dubious, though old, notion that formal schooling results in much greater economic productivity; it does not mention the argument, advanced elsewhere by Cultural Conservatives, that family structure and moral habits loom larger than schooling, in economic concerns as in much else.

Emancipating Religion. However that may be, certainly the restoration of learning, at every level of education, is the first necessity for the salvation of our culture. This is a labor not primarily political. Yet to restore humane learning to the rising generation of Americans, political pressure must be applied at local, state, and federal levels. And the work of reform must be carried on by other folk than educationist functionaries, whose dull-wittedness has had much to do with our present intellectual decay. It may be necessary, also, to take political action to protect America's churches from interference by federal agencies, an ominous tendency of recent years, so that the churches may function freely as "mediating structures" and as centers for community and for education; but such political action would be devised to emancipate, not direct, the practice of religion. Repeatedly, the authors of *Cultural Conservatism* make clear their intention to rely upon voluntary and local associations and organizations for the renewal of our culture — and not to rely upon centralized political authority.

In short, I declare that the Cultural Conservatives deserve sympathy and help in their endeavor to contend against enormous odds. Just forty years ago, T. S. Eliot wrote that "the culture of Europe has deteriorated visibly within the memory of many who are by no means the oldest among us." You and I, ladies and gentlemen, are four decades farther down the road toward the triumph of the counter-culture, or the anti-culture, to be celebrated with an ear-blasting flourish of acid rock. As Eliot continued, we are "destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanized caravans."

The Institute for Cultural Conservatism means to defend our ancient edifices. In this endeavor it reinforces those conservative organizations and groups that from some years past have been laboring with fortitude in this vineyard of general culture and high culture. I think particularly of the Rockford Institute and its many publications, conspicuous among them its magazine *Chronicles*; of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which has done so much to introduce right reason to the rising generation; of the previous work of the Free Congress Foundation people in the field of family protection.

The Anti-Culture. I hope that these groups, and others, will make common cause in defense of the patrimony of culture that we have inherited here in America. Differences about details and programs notwithstanding, we share certain enduring first principles. The adversaries of true culture are powerful and belligerent; our united strength will be

required if we are to withstand those barbarians. Cultural decadence is far advanced already.

In recent months I have been delivering a series of monthly lectures, my subject the relationship between the Constitution and political economy, at the University of Detroit. That University's campus, like a good many others nowadays, is hemmed in by dangerous slums — except across the road in Palmer Park, where the handsome houses still look decent because many of them are inhabited by dealers in narcotics. Nearly all the white population of the city has fled to unattractive new suburban sprawl north of Eight Mile Road, outside the city limits. Detroit, which I have known all my life, can boast of the highest rate of murder in the United States. In the county courthouse, an incumbent demagogue recently ordered the venerable portraits of the city's early leaders removed from the walls, because there were no blacks and only one woman among the portraits. The big department stores have been pulled down. The city, founded at the very beginning of the eighteenth century, looks as if it had been heavily bombed by some merciless enemy power. Need I go into the rate of what used to be capital crime, of abortion, of rape, of robbery? Splendid churches stand derelict; as in Chicago, some of those grand churches will be demolished this year. Think of the London of Orwell's *1984*, and you will have a picture, not exaggerated, of the Detroit of 1988. Such is the anti-culture.

Looting and Burning. When the cult withers, after some interval the culture follows its mother cult down the road to Avernus. Into Detroit were poured immense quantities of public funds, from the Eisenhower Administration to the Reagan Administration. The more the political power intervened, the worse Detroit grew. On leaving the governorship of Michigan, George Romney declared on television that the principal causes of the devastating riots in Detroit in 1967 had been federal highway building and urban renewal; he was perfectly accurate. Stupid public policy combined with the decay of moral habits to send the proletariat looting and burning, in Detroit and a score of other cities. Britain has suffered similar experiences. In Detroit, I lecture on constitutional doctrines amidst the ruins.

The Cultural Conservatives do not fancy that their efforts can restore the cult. That, if it is to occur, lies beyond the scope of institutes. As George Washington put it concerning the Constitution, "The event is in the hand of God." Yet meanwhile, practical measures may be undertaken to shore up our culture — indeed, to breathe fresh life into it. Unless such moral and political imagination is exercised, the culture we have known in America will dissolve with some rapidity — for the process began early in this century — and there will remain no heritage for The Heritage Foundation to be concerned about.

Collapse of Rome. Ancient history no longer is taught in our public schools — or in many private schools. That is a pity in more ways than one; for it is easy enough to trace a parallel between the decline of the Roman culture — *Romanitas* — and the decay of our own culture. I think of how the population of the city of Rome shrank from some two million to some five thousand, at the city's nadir — the population that had lived on bread and circuses having been extinguished by malnutrition, so far as historians are able to say, during those years when the empire of the West collapsed altogether.

The Roman culture was succeeded, gradually, by the new Christian culture. We have no prospect of such a transformation of our present culture. The principal alternative to our American culture, with its Christian and Hebraic and classical roots, is the gristly Marxist anti-culture; so our need for conserving our culture is somewhat urgent.

"When I am dead, let earth be mixed with fire," said a sardonic Greek of ancient times. Some of us present today will expire before our culture dies; but others present may live to see the collapse of our outer order and our inner order — supposing that nothing is done to arrest our cultural decay. The authors of *Cultural Conservatism* are not disposed to await the end with a shrug.

They have given us vigorous suggestions for a change of heart and a change of policies; they do not pretend to offer us instant remedies for all the ills to which flesh is heir. I earnestly hope that this little book, their initial proposals, will be widely read and discussed. Unless such healing attention is given to our patrimony of culture, earth may be mixed with fire sooner than most Americans think.

