

William A. Rusher

## Conservatism's Third and Final Battle

The conservative intellectual movement originated in two quite different—and by no means always comfortably compatible—sets of beliefs: The doctrines of classical liberalism, grounded in the British Enlightenment's emphasis on political and economic freedom, and the far older tradition that derives its core principles from our Judaeo-Christian heritage itself. In the United States, as the twentieth century approached its midpoint, both were discouragingly out of fashion. But classical liberalism never lacked for assertive spokesmen and passionate defenders, and in the field of economics the so-called Austrian school of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek maintained a distinction that even its worst critics were hard put to deny.

It was traditionalism—"Burkean traditionalism," as it was often called—that seemed to have no advocates at all. When Russell Kirk published *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, his bibliography was impressively detailed but pathetically short of works published after 1900. His very chapter headings, as his narrative approached the twentieth century, told the story: "Conservatism Frustrated: America, 1865-1918," "English Conservatism Adrift: the Twentieth Century," and so on.

But Kirk's great book was to change all that, and to change it, what's more, for all

practical purposes single-handedly. This young professor of history at Michigan State had studied deeply and analyzed the world profoundly. He was not unduly impressed with the Enlightenment. His mind reached back behind it, deep into the Christian centuries that had constructed and defined the Western world. It was there that he found the principles he would proclaim, and by which he meant to live. As the first "canon of conservative thought" he posited the proposition that a "divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty that links great and obscure, living and dead. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems." It was a rich loam indeed, in which Kirk found the roots of what he taught the world to call "conservatism."

Without question, we owe a great deal to Whittaker Chambers, who persuaded his fellow editors at *Time* to devote a major portion of an issue of the magazine to this profoundly important book. But no amount of hyping, even by *Time*, could

---

William A. Rusher is a Distinguished Fellow at the Claremont Institute. Longtime publisher of *National Review* (1957 to 1988), he is a syndicated columnist and author of *The Rise of the Right*. This essay was originally delivered as part of the Russell Kirk Memorial Lecture Series (April 1998) at The Heritage Foundation. It is printed herein with permission.

possibly have made *The Conservative Mind* the success it became, or to decree the immense effect it was to have. *The Conservative Mind* resonated in many thousands of hearts because it filled a mighty void. To a world fresh from one immensely bloody war and already gripped in the icy embrace of another, both fought against despotism that professed to know what was best for mankind, Kirk offered a faith that was far deeper, and far truer. He found it, moreover, not in the implications of some new scientific discovery or some catchy social theory, but in the long and honorable past of our own civilization.

The subsequent intellectual history of the conservative movement has largely been the story of how the two great strands of conservative thought, classical liberalism and Burkean traditionalism (the "Blue and White Niles of the conservative movement," as I have sometimes called them), have come to recognize each other. They have recognized each other not as adversaries, but as complementary aspects of a single overarching worldview. To borrow a military metaphor, it has sometimes seemed to me that the conservative movement's resolute opposition to the advance of world communism was its response to the great but essentially tactical problem of our time. Its commitment to political and economic freedom (the contribution of classical liberalism, as we have seen) was its profound strategic contribution, the enormously important insight that human freedom makes possible a level of political and economic well-being that no dirigiste system can hope to equal. But Kirk's traditionalism is neither a strategy nor a tactic; it is, in the fullest sense of the word, a philosophy. As such, it is the bedrock of American conservatism.

It is nearly fifty years now since American conservatives, becoming aware of themselves and each other and drawing on the works of Hayek, Kirk, and Chambers,

launched the great intellectual and ultimately political enterprise called the conservative movement. Now, conservatives are in general a rather saturnine bunch. In the earliest days of the movement, we learned the ashy taste of defeat.

And when, in the fullness of time, victories began to come our way—at first, just one or two, then ultimately victories beyond imagination or measure—we morosely refused to admit that anything had changed very much. Like Evelyn Waugh, we complained that our political representatives, for all their vaunted success, hadn't managed to turn the clock back by so much as a single minute. We pointed out that the national debt was still rising, that the federal budgets were still expanding, and that taxes overall were still increasing.

All of these things are still true, and all are deplorable. But it takes a very selective analysis of the state of our nation to conclude that conservatives therefore have little or nothing to cheer about. Just for one thing, the conservative movement's steadfast opposition to the advance of world communism culminated in the near-total collapse of the foe. For another, over the past quarter-century it has become plain to just about everyone that economic freedom deserves to rank with political democracy as one of the fundamental preconditions of human happiness. Socialism, in all its forms and guises, has joined communism on the ash heap of history.

In other words, both conservatism's major tactical initiative and its central strategic insight have been validated by victories that, three decades ago, would have been derided as unimaginable. And all this has happened in our time, right before our eyes, and with our happy complicity.

So I don't share the usual conservative appetite for doom and gloom. No doubt this is in part simply a temperamental idiosyncrasy. The glass is always both half-full and

half-empty. "This is the best of all possible worlds," chirps the optimist. "Yes," groans the pessimist, "I'm afraid you're right." But it is a sin against reality itself, it seems to me, not to admit and rejoice in the fact that, in its first half-century, conservatism has won two of the three great battles it was founded to wage.

It is this third battle—Russell Kirk's battle—the philosophical battle between post-Enlightenment modernity and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, that is still going on. It is hardly surprising that this should be what the communist hymn, "The Internationale," called *la lutte finale*—the final conflict—for it involves mankind's deepest convictions.

The opening paragraph of the first chapter of Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* asserts that "Every man participating in a culture has three levels of conscious reflection: his specific ideas about things, his general beliefs or convictions, and his metaphysical dream of the world." It is at this latter level, the deepest of all, that Kirk summons conservatives to take issue with modernity.

Modernity's "metaphysical dream of the world" took shape in the Enlightenment. It was a dream that henceforth humanity, guided by reason and the scientific method, would shape the world and human destiny by its own free choice, without reference to a god. As Nietzsche, in the next century, put it: "Where is God? We have murdered him, you and I."

The Enlightenment was, of course, the fount of many developments, for both better and worse. It was, as we have seen, the source of the emphasis on the individual, and therefore upon both political and economic freedom, that have flowered into democracy and free enterprise. Yet, we must recognize that, in declaring man's independence from God, the Enlightenment be-

came the vector of what Richard Pipes describes in his history of the Bolshevik Revolution:

Perhaps the most pernicious idea in the history of thought, that man is merely a material compound, devoid of either soul or innate ideas, and as such a passive product of an infinitely malleable social environment.

I am sure I do not need to trace for you the appalling consequences spawned by that vicious assumption in the ensuing two centuries. Hundreds of millions of people have died in an attempt to validate one or another of its logical implications.

It was against this hugely popular and immensely powerful "metaphysical dream of the world" that Kirk defiantly raised the ancient banner of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the essentially religious dream of the world that had been dominant in the centuries before the Enlightenment, and that he believed was infinitely superior to it. Of course, the Judaeo-Christian tradition had retained many supporters in the two centuries after the Enlightenment. But it is not, I think, too much to say that, by the middle of the twentieth century, it had almost totally lost its grip on elite intellectual opinion in the Western world. With the publication in 1933 of the *Humanist Manifesto*, signed by John Dewey and other prominent philosophers and described by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as a "profession of anthropological atheism based on the theory of evolution," the leading Western thinkers cut their remaining ties to the pre-Enlightenment Christian centuries. They nailed to their mast the banner of what became known as "secular humanism." Twenty years had to pass before Kirk published *The Conservative Mind*, and the philosophical quarrel was opened.

Perhaps the most important reinforcement Kirk's position has since received occurred in 1978, when Alexander

Solzhenitsyn addressed the commencement audience at Harvard University. His personal history and his intellectual force conduced to give his remarks special significance, but it was their unexpected content that made them resonate with such extraordinary power.

Not surprisingly, the speech marked the point at which Solzhenitsyn fell from grace with the established elites of Western civilization. He began to assume the lineaments in which he has subsequently been portrayed: As a cranky old man, a prophet perhaps, but woefully out of step with the march of contemporary events. The transformation, of course, was inevitable. For, in his speech, Solzhenitsyn did a quite extraordinary thing: He rejected secular humanism bag and baggage, and called openly for the reintegration of the Judaeo-Christian tradition into the ongoing culture of the West. In doing so, I believe, he laid down much of the intellectual agenda of the twenty-first century.

Solzhenitsyn said,

The mistake must be at the root, at the very basis of human thinking in the past centuries. I refer to the prevailing Western view of the world which was first born during the Renaissance and found its political expression starting in the period of the Enlightenment. It became the basis for government and social science and could be defined as rationalistic humanism or humanist autonomy: the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him.

Solzhenitsyn acknowledged that the Middle Ages had favored an "intolerable despotism of man's physical na-

ture in favor of the spiritual one." But modern Western civilization is based on the dangerous trend toward "worshipping man and his material needs." This trend has now resulted in

total liberation...from the moral heritage of Christian centuries.... All the glorified technological achievements of Progress, including the conquest of outer space, do not redeem the twentieth century's moral poverty. I am referring to the calamity of a despiritualized and irreligious humanistic consciousness.

He concluded by calling crisply for dramatic change:

It would be retrogression to attach oneself today to the ossified formulas of the Enlightenment.... We cannot avoid revising the fundamental definitions of human life and human society. Is it true that man is above everything? Is there no Higher Spirit above him? If the world has not come to its end, it has approached a major turn in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

It will exact from us a spiritual upsurge, we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life.... No one on earth has any way left but—upward.



Alexander Solzhenitsyn

It is amusing to speculate what Harvard must have thought of this spectacular eruption of anti-secularism at its 1978 commencement; but I suggest to you that, in the long perspective of intellectual history, Solzhenitsyn's address may be the most memorable and most decisive ever given at Harvard. For he was sounding the trumpet for the opening of the final battle of conservatism: Kirk's battle, the battle between two diametrically opposed "metaphysical dreams of the world."

How is the battle going? I was interested to read somewhere that the suave and witty Chinese communist leader, Chou En-lai, upon being asked around 1950 what he thought of the Enlightenment, replied, "It's too soon to tell." He recognized that, for all the dominance of secular humanism among intellectuals, the battle was not yet won. Science, to which humanism looks for the ultimate answers, enjoyed enormous prestige, but still faced daunting challenges. The origins of life, and indeed of the universe itself, still eluded it. The jury, so to speak, was still out.

Certainly, the battle has been both long and hard. All of us are, inescapably, children of the Enlightenment. We have been taught from childhood; the knowledge has seeped into our very bones that the materialist concept of reality is modernity's working model, and that, in many ways, it has worked wonderfully well. If religious convictions survive in us at all, they tend to be pushed into the background and treated as matters of strictly personal interest, without acknowledged relevance to society as a whole. And, indeed, for many people—including many conservatives of a classical liberal bent—such convictions do not, in fact, survive.

And yet I believe there are clear signs that the intellectual weather is changing. In the nearly fifty years since Chou En-lai's cautious assessment, there have been some highly interesting developments in the realm of science itself. In 1933, when the *Humanist Manifesto* was published, it seemed inevitable to its authors, and to many others, that the onward march of

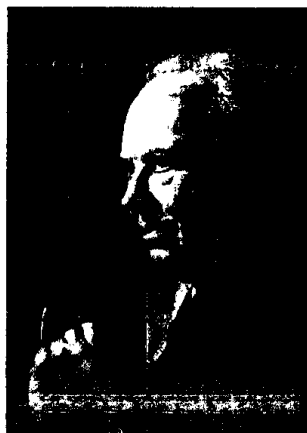
science would soon answer the few remaining really difficult questions about the nature of reality. Anyone who chose to continue to believe in the existence of a divine Creator would be free to indulge his fantasy without troubling the rest of the world about it. In the past half-century, science has probed ever deeper into the secrets within the atom, and peered ever further into the vast spaces beyond our galaxy. It

has found itself face to face, not only with ever more difficult questions, but also with questions that science, by its very nature, will be forever unable to answer.

The central such question, of course, involves the origin of the universe. Just now, the most popular scientific explanation is that it originated in the so-called Big Bang, in which existence itself—

together with such attributes as time and space—sprang into being from an infinitely small point and expanded with unimaginable speed and overwhelming velocity into the three-dimensional congeries of galaxies we know today.

Now, the concept of the Big Bang can (perhaps) explain many things; but what it cannot do, and what it appears science can never do, is explain what caused the Bang. We are left, as mankind has been left since St. Thomas Aquinas, to posit a First Cause Uncaused, or, in other words, a Creator. I have neither the time nor the necessary knowledge to take you on a journey along the frontiers of modern science and to point out the growing number of similar questions to which it appears science not only does not have—but can never have—the answers. Suffice it to say that, again and



Russell Kirk

again, modern science reports encountering phenomena that seem permanently fated to defy its understanding.

Some scientists deny this, of course, but by no means all of them. In 1991, I had the honor of moderating a conference of eminent scientists at the Claremont Institute on the subject of "The Permanent Limitations of Science." No view was excluded, and some of the speakers insisted, in effect, that science had no limitations. Henry Pierce Stapp, for one, long a senior staff physicist at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, professed to find a value system in the implications of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle." But I think it is noteworthy that the former director of the Laboratory, Dr. Edward Teller, made no such sweeping claim for science. He had been asked, he said,

If somebody came to you and told you that, on rational grounds (by which perhaps one means scientific grounds), we can resolve all the problems that face us humans, what would I think of such a man? I answered without hesitation: I would call such a person a monster.

And the eminent biologist Dr. Leon Kass, a member of the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago, declared that, for science,

the nature and meaning of living beings, and of life altogether, will forever lie out of reach. Modern biology will never be able to tell us what life is, what is responsible for it, or what it is for.... [T]he task of harmonizing competing goods, both for any individual and especially among individuals who seek them variously, will always remain the work of a largely autonomous ethical and political science, helped, where possible, with insights mysteriously received from sources not under strict human command. Biology may do some of its finest work when it is brought to acknowledge and affirm the mysteries of the soul and the mysterious source of life, truth, and goodness.

I suggest, therefore, that the really interesting question is what is going to happen

when the fat and happy Enlightenment confidence in the omniscience of science encounters, as it is shortly bound to do, this sober realization, on the part of scientists themselves, that science does not have, and will never have, the answers to the truly fundamental questions that religion—specifically including the Judaeo-Christian tradition—purports to answer.

Now, public opinion polls have clearly established that the American people are already—or perhaps I should say still—the most religious-minded of all Western societies. (In this respect, as in others, most Americans disagree with the intellectual elite.) And in the past twenty years we have seen a remarkable mobilization of a segment of religious believers for direct political action. In a sense, therefore, it can be said that the philosophical battle that Kirk envisioned and Solzhenitsyn called for is already well and truly under way at the social and political level, under the rubric of what is often called the "culture war."

If what we have seen thus far is the shape the battle is going to take, we conservatives are going to have to prepare ourselves to lose many allies who fought at our side in the struggles against communism and democratic socialism. Many libertarians and some classical liberals are simply not ready to accept a "metaphysical dream of the world" that has a central religious component. By the same token, however, we can expect to gain immense numbers of recruits in some hitherto almost wholly inaccessible segments of the population, notably including both blacks and Hispanics. Over time, I am confident that the conservative movement will win this final battle too, and that Kirk's vision of an America true to its Creator will be realized.

But let me suggest that the battle may not take the form I have described—a knock-down, drag-out free-for-all between the



remaining secular humanists and the regiments of the Religious Right. We have all witnessed occasions on which an unfashionable idea, but one with ultimately overwhelming justification, presents itself at the door of received opinion. At first, and for as long as possible, it will simply be ignored. Then it will be misrepresented and ridiculed. Next it will be denounced. And then, finally, it will (if it must) be accepted, with the dismissive comment, "We knew that all along."

I suggest that this may be the final whimper of the intellectual elite, when the inadequacy of science to answer the ultimate questions is plain to everyone. It was Pascal who said that "Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."

If the battle between modernity and the Judaeo-Christian tradition follows this second scenario, victory for the latter may come somewhat more quickly and painlessly than one might currently suppose. There are, I believe, immense moral reserves in the character of the American people, the heritage of those Christian centuries, still available to be drawn on in times of crisis. But it will be necessary for many Americans to put aside one all-too-convenient crutch, which is the legacy of the 1960s—that decade in which, two centuries after the Enlightenment and thirty years after the *Humanist Manifesto*, the moral bottom temporarily fell out of American society. I am referring to the current almost universal unwillingness to be "judgmental."

The problem, as usual, concerns the definition of the term. Every Christian knows that he must not judge, lest he be judged; that he must forgive his neighbors their trespasses against him; that it is one of the properties of God Himself always to have mercy. We are acutely aware of our own sins, and feel in no position to cast the first stone. All this is true, and of the very essence

of Christianity.

But this personal awareness of sin, and our corresponding reluctance to condemn others, must not be allowed to elide into the very different proposition, one that states there is no such thing as an objective sin, or an objective wrong—or that, if there is, we are in no position to say so. If a sin or a wrong can never be identified and defined as such, then we have effectively banished all moral standards from human acknowledgment and denied them all human support.

I do not believe that this is what most Americans intend, or in the long run will countenance. I believe that this country will, in the century ahead, acknowledge anew its dependence upon God and His laws, and reincorporate that recognition into the ongoing cultural and intellectual tradition of the West.

I do not want to be understood here as saying more than I have said. The differences among religions, and among Christian denominations and liturgies, will remain as vigorous in the twenty-first century as they have been in its predecessors. The distinction between the roles of church and state will remain and perhaps even sharpen, as the churches awaken to a new realization of their obligations. I do believe it is possible, and indeed likely, that, by the end of the twenty-first century, it will be common ground—not only among the vast majority of mankind but among the intellectual elites—that realism, at a minimum, requires us to recognize the existence of a Creator to whom mankind owes obligations that can only be described as moral.

The achievement of that realization will constitute the third and final triumph of the conservative movement as we have known it. Beyond it, in the centuries that lie ahead, we can hope that humanity will press on to a deeper and more ecumenical knowledge of its God, and find in obedience to His will the only freedom worth having.