

Conservatism --- The Persuasion for All Ages

by Joseph G. Blake

In 1900, as England laid the venerable Victoria to rest, the twentieth century dawned full of new hopes and optimistic faith in the future. Indeed, there was good reason to believe in the realization of this better world. A. J. P. Taylor has written, "In 1914 Europe was a single civilized community, more so even than at the height of the Roman Empire." Probably no age has known a wider expanse of human freedom than that one. A man could travel the length of Europe from London to St. Petersburg without a passport. The currencies of Europe were solidly based, with no fear of immediate collapse. Most of the great countries of Europe had some form of constitution. Even Russia was on the way toward a limited constitutional system. England and France had attained a high degree of personal freedom while Germany and Austria-Hungary had achieved significant limits on state authority. As Taylor pointed out, "Nearly everywhere men could be sure of reasonably fair treatment in the courts of law. No one was killed for religious reasons. No one was killed for political reasons, despite the somewhat synthetic bitterness often shown in political disputes. Private property was everywhere secure, and in nearly all countries something was done to temper the extreme rigours of poverty."

However, by the year 1968 history recorded a different direction in the twentieth century. A shot at Sarajevo forced the great powers into one of the most irrational conflicts of all times. This "Great War" saw American liberals clamoring to join the fight "to make the world safe for democracy." What emerged from the Versailles Conference was a political, social, and

economic wasteland in which democracy or few other nations of decency would survive. Rather the West was plunged into the Great Depression and the horrors of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia.

As the twenties closed, communism had assumed the reins of power in Russia and Nazism would soon roar into the seat of authority in Germany. In Russia and Germany concentration camps and the totalitarian court of justice began to engulf the political opposition. The hideous murder of Nicholas and his family was typical of the bloodthirsty atrocities of the new revolutionary Russia, all too well documented. In Germany the Nazis began the systematic murder of Jews with greater efficiency than Henry Ford's automobile assembly line. Yet totalitarianism also spread to Italy with Mussolini and Spain was engulfed in a civil war between the Fascists and Communists followed by the despotism of Franco.

Yet even today, after the fall of Hitler, the totalitarian ideologies march onward. Unlike in 1914, a wall stands in Berlin giving witness to East Germany's unwillingness to allow her citizens the right to travel or to emigrate. Czechoslovakian students demand the right to travel and must consider the government's willingness to discuss the subject a concession. In Russia, the regime continues a virulent propaganda campaign of anti-Semitism while intellectuals must fear repressive intimidation from Moscow.

Yet the seeds of this evil fruit were not merely planted at Versailles. The evil tree first bore fruit in 1789 when the French Revolution began its inevitable path toward the Reign of Terror. This bloodshed was the product of the anti-intellectual French Enlightenment.

Fundamentally, the Enlightenment denied part and parcel the basic principles upon which Western culture rested. In the pretentious writings of Rousseau, full of "soapy sentimentalism," the conservative Edmund Burke found the basic liberal error — namely, a denial of original sin. Rousseau believed that man was naturally good and was corrupted by his institutions such as private property. Quite logically, the liberal would

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assume that if man's institutions were corrected, human perfection would follow. He also inevitably denied the precepts of Christianity as delusions.

All too often we dismiss the concept of original sin as some quaint biblical myth. In this dismissal of the Genesis account, we achieve not a liberation from falsehood, but a closing of an avenue of insight into ourselves. The course of evil, be it racial discrimination in Alabama, mass murder in Germany, or political dishonesty in government, is rooted in the veil which surrounds man's soul. Man is an ambivalent creature with free will who is, as Pascal said, capable of grandeur and misery. His acts of venial and mortal evil are not the product of some irrational force like sex or the drive for power. Nor is it rooted in some economic or nationalistic cause. Rather evil is the result of

the fundamental freedom with which creation has endowed man.

Yet Rousseau was the spiritual father of a whole host of falsehoods which carried man deeper into the wells of perversion. These ideologies promised some quick, easy solution to all the world's evils. They promised Utopia or some other thousand-year *Reich* rooted in panacea. As T. S. Eliot said:

"The kind of political theory which has arisen in quite modern times is less concerned with human nature, which it is inclined to treat as something which can always be re-fashioned to fit whatever political form is regarded as most desirable. Its real data are impersonal forces which may have originated in the conflict and combination of human wills but have come to supersede them."

Marx, for example, attempted to reduce history to a narrow economic interpretation of all its events. Hegel, likewise, sought a sure answer which inevitably denied the wide variety so typical of history if not human nature itself. Freud dreamed of man as an instinctual domain, eliminating the scope of humanity for the sake of libidinous urges. Others presented the nationalistic and racial determinism which built the stage for Mussolini and Hitler. In all of this was the same lie — denial of the basic truth of human nature, its free character.

The denial of this freedom must inevitably construct a uniformitarianism demanding strict conformity and obedience. Thus, in this century, history records the banning of books in Germany and elsewhere and the blind loyalty to the Communist Party of its members. Those that go along survive (if you care to call this survival). Those who disagree must face the martyrdom of Bonhoeffer or the disgrace of Pasternak.

Yet conservatism does not offer mere resignation to the evils of the world. The conservative in his realization of original sin does not advocate that we ignore the evil in ourselves or in society. He agrees wholeheartedly when the *Book of Common Prayer* implores, "Grant that the old Adam in these persons may be so buried that the new man may be raised up in them." But the effort to overcome the consequences of human imperfections is fraught with difficulty and pain. All of us will not be struck with the hand of God as St. Paul was on the way to Damascus. There is no easy principle to cure the larceny in our individual hearts.

Today, many Christians invoke love. Indeed, God is love which is "the ground of our being." Yet the mere verbal assertion of this truth does not mean its accomplishment. All too often this concept is turned into an ideological panacea in which love does not emerge but as emotionalism and an orgy of feeling. Rather, the true quest for love as well as the cure for personal larceny lies in the complex web which characterizes human existence. I am reminded of this discussion between Roper and Sir Thomas More in Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons*:

Roper: My God wants service, to the end and unremitting, nothing else!

More: Are you sure that's God? He sounds like Moloch. But indeed it may be God. And whoever hunts for me, Roper, God or Devil, will find me hiding in the thickets of the law! And I'll hide my daughter with me! Not hoist her up the mainmast of your seagoing principles! They put about too nimbly!

The last two centuries have seen the highest of all blasphemies—the effort of man to be God. Pseudo-philosophers have come declaring the arrival of a fabricated Messiah, replacing the true one. Even men

of learning have assumed this sophistry and have called it wisdom. Is it any wonder, then, that we find ourselves in this disillusioned community of despair? As C. S. Lewis writes, "We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

Where, then, does our salvation lie? It does not lie in some new construction of falsehood or in the temporary escapes of drugs or sex. We cannot continue to drink falsehood and hope to protect our hearts from the worms which bore through them. Rather, hope lies in the restoration of the basis of our culture.

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uity. The great insight was not a negation of being or indifference toward it. Rather, it was the effort to find out what being is. In many ways this discovery enabled Western man to achieve dominion over creation while his Asian and African cousins continued in primitive methods to escape being or ignore it. Perhaps this also would explain the great material disparity between Western man and his cousins.

This effort is one which does not presume complete knowledge about man but rather affirms man's incomplete view of himself. True knowledge about reality begins in realizing the limits of man's reason and with a deep respect for his past, what Chesterton called "democracy of the dead." The heritage of the past is not merely quaint customs and venerable traditions. Rather it contains the few bits of wisdom which are the product of centuries of an agonizing search. Let us not be so pretentious as to assume infallibility for ourselves while dismissing our ancestors as deluded. This would be the greatest act of self-deception. We might do well to read the works of Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, and Thomas (even Eugene McCarthy reads Aquinas) to discover what animated the grandeur of the Middle Ages. It is not mere vanity which made the cathedrals of Chartres and Cologne possible. Rather they are the products of a deeply cohesive community whose remaining remnants were destroyed in World War I.

Some would deny the relevance of the Middle Ages out of chronological snobbery. Yet their pride confounds their view of facts which would seem to place us close to Babylon and the Middle Ages closer to Eden. Like all liberals they believe that moral progress continues ever. We may have material progress but we certainly may not entertain notions of total moral superiority over the Middle Ages.

Others would say I am advocating the reconstruction of feudalism (some of its less admirable qualities may well be part of the liberal welfare state) or the imitation of Gothic architecture. This would not be the case. Rather we might give close attention to that great age of faith so that this atomic age might be more tolerable, if not Christian.