

"No society can be neutral with respect to religion, for public appeal either may or may not be made to religious principles. If—in the Western world—all discussion must be limited to maxims drawn from non-Christian sources, secularism is enthroned." --an excerpt from this essay

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We live in a secular, by which I do not mean a neutral, society. No society can be neutral with respect to religion, for public appeal either may or may not be made to religious principles. If—in the Western world—all discussion must be limited to maxims drawn from non-Christian sources, secularism is enthroned. There was a time when one could say— and Hilaire Belloc did say—“the Faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith.” That time is no more, for the acids of modernity have done their work—the churches, not to mention the souls of men, are empty.

And that is not all; no public acknowledgment can now be made of Christianity’s historical importance. During the debate leading up to the drafting of a constitution for the European Union, those opposed to any mention of Christianity constituted a majority. Former French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who presided over the constitutional convention, left no one in doubt that “Europeans live in a purely secular political system, where religion does not play an important role.”¹

At the recent celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, the first step on the road to a unified Europe, the European Union again refused to recognize Europe’s Christian heritage, although German Chancellor Angela Merkel did opine that it would be permissible for people to express their personal views of the matter—as long, apparently, as they did not raise their voices in public. To do so might disorient a population that, however well programmed, remains discontented—this to the utter bewilderment of *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum, who reports that the last half century witnessed a rise in living standards, improvements in health, and longer life expectancy. What, then, could be wrong?

Nor is contentment noticeably greater in the United States, where material life has also improved and where, polls assure us, belief in God continues to be widespread. To be sure, “god” may no longer be the familiar Deity of the Old and New Testaments, for the de-Christianization of the country is well underway. Courts interpret the Constitution to mean that every sign of the Christian Faith, unless it is blasphemous, must be removed from public view. Taking their cue from the French Revolution’s pagan calendar, publishers insist upon “B.C.E.” (Before the “Common Era”—whatever that means) rather than B.C., and “C.E.” rather than A.D.

As December 25 approaches, businesses instruct their employees to greet customers with “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” Booksellers, magazines, and television treat with seriousness anti-Christian screeds such as *The Da Vinci Code* and do everything in their power to stimulate interest in the so called Gnostic Gospels. While they portray Christianity as the religion of “crusaders,” bigots, and yahoos, the “mainstream media” show deference to Islam and Buddhism and remain “non-judgmental” concerning scientology and other cults. “There are those,” G. K. Chesterton wrote, “who hate Christianity and call their hatred an all-embracing love for all religions.”

How did Western society arrive at its present “Christophobic” state? The trail is long but clearly marked. The Scientific Revolution succeeded in providing convincing explanations for what had once seemed the sacred mysteries of nature. Inspired by the achievements of science, the Enlightenment taught that all truth claims had to be subjected to rational scrutiny; those that failed the test of rationality had to be rejected. Naturally, then, doubt began to creep in concerning supernatural claims. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold could write that “The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore / Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled. / But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar.”

Soon thereafter, Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, which advanced the theory—as a historical reconstruction, it could not be other than a theory—of natural selection. The theory ruled out any teleological understanding of nature. As a result, many spiritual holdouts lost their faith and began to question the status of traditional moral principles. Some managed to cling to the essentials of Judeo-Christian morality, citing common sense rather than divine revelation. Others looked to Kant, who argued that reason prescribed the moral law. But toward the end of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche posed the question directly: if Christianity is untrue, why should one be bound by Judeo-Christian morality?

Nietzsche knew that his question carried with it radical implications. “What I relate,” he wrote in 1887, “is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism.”² Those words were prophetic; the specter of nihilism³ has haunted not only the modern mind, but the politics and societies of the modern world. And as it turned out, not many have been able to share Nietzsche’s view that nihilism could be overcome by the analytically simple but existentially difficult expedient of affirming a world without meaning and a life beyond good and evil.

Nietzsche's contemporary, Fyodor Dostoevsky, agreed that nihilism—a word coined by his liberal rival, Ivan Turgenev—was the greatest threat confronting a world in which “God is dead.” If God was indeed dead, Dostoevsky reasoned, “everything is permitted.” In his novel *The Devils*, he has Nikolai Stavrogin, perhaps the most demonic figure in all of world literature, say this: “I formulated what appeared to be the rule of my life, namely, that I neither know nor feel good and evil and that I have not only lost any sense of it, but that there is neither good nor evil (which pleased me), and that it is just a prejudice.” After violating a young girl, he stands by while she hangs herself. For most people, Dostoevsky recognized, the removal of Christianity as the foundation for morality could only mean that ideas of good and evil were merely conventional.

It does not follow, of course, that Christianity is the true religion, and atheist crusaders such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Michel Onfray insist that they can articulate a world view based solely upon science and reason. What is at first somewhat surprising, many who presently identify themselves as conservatives—must we include Hitchens, whose work the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Weekly Standard* now welcome?—seem to agree. One of the most intelligent of them, Jerry Z. Muller of the Catholic University of America, has presented a scholarly argument for a secular conservatism in *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present*

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4

“There is,” Muller confidently asserts, no necessary link between conservatism and religious belief.”⁵ Rather, he insists, the contrary; conservatism, rightly understood, is secular through and through. That is why he chose to begin his book with Hume rather than Burke. “The thought of David Hume,” he tells us, “marks a watershed in the development of conservative social and political thought into a coherent, secular doctrine.”⁶ That is true, but it requires a very selective reading to conclude that conservatism is “a product of the Enlightenment,” that its arguments take place on the “enlightened grounds of the search for human happiness, based on the use of reason.”⁷ Those who dispute such a claim are, Muller says, “orthodox” rather than “conservative.” So be it; according to the *Oxford*

English Dictionary

, “orthodox” means “right in opinion

In order to buttress his case, Muller points out that few of the major figures of the Enlightenment favored a popular revolution of the kind that was acted out in France in the tumultuous decade of the 1790s. With the important exception of Rousseau, who was never a philosophe, that is true; most favored rule by Enlightened despots such as Frederick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, and Joseph II of Austria. The first two were atheists and the third a secularizing revolutionary. But calling attention to the fact that the philosophes distrusted the unenlightened masses looks suspiciously like a way of diverting attention from Voltaire’s decidedly anti-conservative, and certainly anti-Christian, “*érasez l’infâme*.”

Part of Muller’s strategy in fact is to restrict his analysis to social and political thought, where relativity reigns. (“I reprobate no form of government,” Burke wrote, “merely upon abstract principles.”⁸) In that way, more profound questions may be ignored; or as Muller puts it, by showcasing the “social scientific cast of conservative thought” one can set to one side “more literary and romantic strands of conservatism that traffic in the nostalgic evocation of the past.”

9

One is reminded of what Samuel Johnson said of the politician George Lyttelton, namely that “politics did not...so much engage him as to withhold his thoughts from things of more importance.”

10

Muller has nothing good to report of an orthodoxy that holds that secular thought imposes unnecessary limits upon the search for truth—especially upon “truth” that means something more than historically useful. The orthodox, he says, are really reactionaries who believe that modernity represents a decline from a better time and who are prepared to defend lost causes. He cites in this regard the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s— John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Nelson Lytle. It is true that these contributors to the famous symposium, “I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition,” were reactionaries—Tate, a Catholic convert, entitled one of his books *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas*

—but under conditions of modernity it is reactionaries who are the true conservatives. “I loved and admired and longed for the better things of the past,” the Catholic historian John Lukacs has written, “especially of a past whose presence I could still see and hear and smell and sense, physically and mentally: that was how I became a reactionary.”

11

Muller is not alone in his effort to excommunicate reactionaries and secularize conservatism. Heather Mac Donald, a contributing editor to the Manhattan Institute's City Journal describes herself as a "skeptical conservative" who grounds her "ideas in rational thinking and (nonreligious) moral argument." She takes strong exception to the view "that what makes conservatives superior to liberals is their religious faith—as if morality is impossible without religion and everything is indeed permitted, as the cliché has it."¹² If she really believes this to be a cliché, she—like the philosopher and secular conservative John Kekes (and like Nietzsche)—is oblivious "to evil as a spiritual disorder, to evil as rebellion, to the mystery of evil."

13

Perhaps that is why she can assert with such confidence that "Western society has become more compassionate, humane, and respectful of rights as it has become more secular." Leaving aside her talk of "rights," best understood as the ever-increasing demands of the left, that is hardly the conclusion forced upon us by a century that witnessed two world wars, Auschwitz, and the Gulag Archipelago.

Mac Donald is not the only conservative journalist eager to defend a secular point of view. John Derbyshire, who writes regularly, and often interestingly, for the *National Review*, reports that he grew weary of reader e-mails pestering him about his religious beliefs. And so, in a piece dated October 30, 2006, he responded to their importunities. "Q. Are you a Christian? A. No. I take the minimal definition of a Christian to be a person who is sure that Jesus of Nazareth was divine, or part-divine, and that the Resurrection was a real event. I don't believe either of those things... Since about the end of [2004] I've been coming clean with myself, and quit going to church. No, I am not a Christian."

14

In the spirit of Christian charity, I will not enumerate the reasons Derbyshire cites for his unbelief; suffice it to say they do not rise to the level of Ivan Karamazov's refusal to accept a world in which innocent children suffer. As to whether or not an irreligious person can be a conservative, he naturally replies in the affirmative. "The essence of modern conservatism is the belief in limited government power, respect for traditional values, patriotism, and strong national defense." This definition reduces conservatism to little more than the platform of the Republican Party.

In a piece entitled "Let's Be Rational,"¹⁵ Anthony Daniels, the British psychiatrist and prolific writer who sometimes uses the nom de plume Theodore Dalrymple, recalled a colloquium he attended with American conservatives. "I happened to mention," he wrote, "that I was not religious, unlike the other members of [my] panel.... I was surprised afterwards that several of the audience approached me and thanked me for it. What was there to thank me for? They said that they, too, were without religious faith, in short atheists, and it was a relief to them that

someone, otherwise of like mind with the majority of the audience, had confessed it.”

Each of these “skeptical conservatives” seems to believe that conservatism can rest on secular foundations because secularism, when properly presented, is at least as credible as religion. The historical record suggests otherwise. Great numbers of those living in secular societies suffer from existential angst and look to non-Christian and secular religions in a sometimes-desperate effort to recover meaning and direction. This is especially true of intellectuals, who, as Paul Hollander has written, “find it less tolerable and more troublesome to live in a world of ‘disenchantment’ from which ‘the ultimate and sublime values have retreated’—as Max Weber characterized the corrosive process of secularization.”¹⁶

Hollander concerned himself primarily with the political religion of communism, while Joseph Schumpeter identified democracy as the substitute faith of intellectuals deprived of religion. But there is also the endless list of social causes, headed, most recently, by the campaign to halt “global warming” (or when we are all shivering, “climate change”). As Burke sagely observed, “man is by his constitution a religious animal,” and if “we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization among us, and among many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition, might take the place of it.”¹⁷

This recognition helped to lead the philosopher Roger Scruton to conservatism. In 1968, he looked on as students, votaries of the religion of revolution, rioted in Paris and, as a result, broke with leftist friends; and although he did not immediately regain his faith, he always recognized that the central manifestations of the culture to which he was heir “derived from the Christian faith. Even the pagan writings of D. H. Lawrence depend for their penetration on a language rooted in the *Book of Common Prayer* and in the imagery of the Psalms and the Gospels.

Four Quartets owed its immense

power over people of my generation to its ability to summon the ghost of a Christian belief that had all but died in us, but which was seeking to breathe again.”

18

It was the author of the *Four Quartets*, the self-described reactionary T. S. Eliot, who argued that culture, as that which makes life worth living, was essentially the incarnation of a people's religion. That did not mean that all Europeans believed the Christian Faith to be true, but that what they thought and did drew meaning from a Christian culture. "Only a Christian culture," Eliot wrote, "could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith."

19

If Christianity were to go, Europe, he warned, would face a long night of barbarism—and so it does.

This was not, as Eliot made clear, an argument for the truth of the Christian Faith; he knew that belief—in Christianity or in atheism—is finally a matter of ultimate conviction, and ultimate convictions can neither be proved nor disproved. Nevertheless, it was more than a reaffirmation of Christianity's social utility. He was not merely claiming that the historic Faith made for a more disciplined social and political order, but that it allowed men to reflect upon permanent things, to preserve a culture in which the perennial questions concerning truth, morality, and meaning could be seriously confronted. No wonder then that Russell Kirk identified Eliot as the principal conservative thinker of the twentieth century, a man who sought order in society and, more important, in the soul.²⁰

Professor Muller mentions Eliot only once, and then in passing, perhaps because, like most secularists, he would prefer to ignore those who profess the Christian Faith. And in the current world of conservatism, he can do so with confidence. He and those of like mind have succeeded in making conservatism over in their own image; they have taken over the *National Review*, launched new magazines, and set the agendas for influential think tanks. At the same time, they studiously ignore, when they are not attacking, the work of reactionary conservatives such as the Agrarians, Russell Kirk, or George F. Kennan.

The reactionaries are not likely to reverse things, secularism being the reigning civil religion. They can, however, let in light from the East—from Russia. Russian conservatives warned, early on, against following the secular path taken by the West and against the spread of Western decadence (stamped with the export label "democracy") around the world. They have always been closely tied to an Orthodox Church that is resistant to change and to compromise with modernity—hence the savage persecution of it by the Soviet regime. One of Lenin's

greatest achievements, according to Christopher Hitchens, was “to create a secular Russia. The power of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was an absolute warren of backwardness and evil and superstition, is probably never going to recover from what he did to it.”²¹

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who, unlike Hitchens, lived in a secular Russia, has described Lenin’s “achievement” with greater precision: “tens of thousands of priests, monks, and nuns, pressured by the Chekists to renounce the word of God, were tortured, shot in cellars, sent to camps, exiled to the desolate tundra of the far north, or turned out into the streets in their old age without food or shelter. All these Christian martyrs went unswervingly to their deaths for the faith; instances of apostasy were few and far between.”²²

While it would be wrong to say that Orthodox Russians go in search of suffering, they do recognize the possibility of spiritual benefit. George Kennan, who identified closely with the Russian people, called attention to the fact that they had been “purged by hardship of so much that is vulgar and inane in the softer civilizations.”²³ We know too that Dostoevsky’s four years of penal servitude in Siberia were decisive in what he called “the regeneration of my convictions,” by which he meant his Christian faith and reactionary beliefs that happiness is not the goal of life, that reason has its limits, and that hidden beneath radical social and political activity lie disorders of the soul.

As Dostoevsky’s twentieth-century heir, Solzhenitsyn is Russia’s leading reactionary. He too found God in a forced labor camp and has confronted “the destructive spirit of secularism.”²⁴ Concerning the latter he had much to say in the commencement address he delivered at Harvard University in 1978. To the dismay of those gathered, he made it clear that he did not regard the West as a model for a post-communist Russia because “through deep suffering, people in our country have now achieved a spiritual development of such intensity that the Western system in its present state of spiritual exhaustion does not look attractive.”²⁵ Having lived in the United States for two years, he was appalled by what he witnessed—the mindless consumerism, the stupefying effect of television, the moral and aesthetic nihilism of popular music, the ubiquity of pornography, and the pandemic (and increasingly nihilistic) crime.

In attendance on that rainy summer afternoon was Richard Pipes, Harvard professor of history and a conservative who, if not secular in outlook—he describes himself as a “nonobservant Orthodox Jew”²⁶—has, like the secular conservatives, concerned himself almost exclusively with political and social questions. In a written response to the address, he stated his objections to Solzhenitsyn’s criticism of the West and to his charge that modern man had “placed too much hope in politics and social reforms.”²⁷ “The central postulate of Solzhenitsyn’s case—the corrupt nature of man and, its corollary, the futility of manipulating his social and

political environment—is axiomatic for all Russian conservatives.”

28

It would be more accurate to say that Russian conservatives believe that social and political reform, while not futile, cannot provide answers to the most profound and enduring questions of human existence. Pipes was, however, in no mood to make distinctions because he disliked Solzhenitsyn for personal reasons. As he reported in his memoirs, he had, in 1975, sent the Russian a copy of one of his books, *Russia under the Old Regime*—along with a letter and personal dedication. A year later, in the course of an address at the Hoover Institution, Solzhenitsyn “delivered a blistering attack on me and my book” because it linked tsarism with communism. From that moment on, Pipes regarded him as a “fanatic” and a “false prophet.”²⁹

This bitter experience reawakened Pipes’s long-standing interest in Russian conservatism, but because of other projects and a period of government service in Washington, he published *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture* only in 2005, making it clear that he sided with the “critics.” The quintessence of Russian conservatism, he wrote in his introduction, was its defense of autocracy. Pipes belongs to that school of historians of Russia which holds that the period of Mongol occupation (1240-1480) left a legacy of “oriental despotism” that was far worse than Western absolutism.

Critics of autocracy first appeared in the eighteenth century, but they failed to mount a serious challenge to the reigning conservatism. The only good thing that Pipes could find to say about the conservatives was that they did not preach antiwesternism—at least until Tsar Alexander II liberated the serfs in 1861. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century they embraced nationalism and “antiwesternism became something of an obsession.”³⁰ In this connection, Pipes reserved his harshest criticism for Dostoevsky, though he conceded that the great writer was not primarily a political or social thinker. But that is precisely the point. Dostoevsky’s concerns were of a higher order; in the words of the critic Konstantin Mochulsky (as quoted by Pipes), he “alone spoke of the crisis of culture and of the approach in the world of unprecedented catastrophes.”

31

He foresaw, in short, the coming of nihilism and totalitarianism. No matter—he was critical of Western secularism and therefore linked in Pipes’s mind with Solzhenitsyn, who, one should note, has never expressed sympathy for autocracy.

Prior to his address, Solzhenitsyn had enjoyed favorable press in the West, but his criticism of secularism’s emptiness produced anger and resentment—and not only from Pipes. *The New York Times*

the

Washington Post

, and the

National Review

published indignant editorials and quickly moved to adopt a dissident more congenial to the secular mind: the nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov. Sakharov was a courageous man who mastered the language of Western liberalism (“human rights” and such) and declared his irreligion. Not surprisingly then, the European Parliament awards an annual Sakharov Prize, and Washington, DC, renamed a street “Andrei Sakharov Place.”

None of this disturbed or distracted Solzhenitsyn, who continued with the work to which he has dedicated his life. In 1994, he returned to Russia, only to find, as he had feared he might, many of the social pathologies that he had left behind in the United States—crime, corruption, hedonism, narcotics, the disintegration of the family. “Today,” he has said, “when we say the West we are already referring both to the West and Russia.... We should not use the word ‘the West’ but the word ‘modernity.’”³²

Despite his continued efforts, these problems, and others, remain, but as a recent reviewer for *The University Bookman* wrote, “today conservatism (particularly religious conservatism) as an intellectual movement is perhaps stronger in Russia than in almost any other European country.” Aleksandr Panarin, one of the conservative revival’s leaders, declared that “in history, written in the language of morality, our ancestors do not appear backward at all; on the contrary, they can serve as an inspiring example for us.”

³³

And so they do.

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ENDNOTES

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2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1968), 3.

3. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, “nihilism” means “1. A doctrine that all values are baseless and that nothing is knowable or can be communicated. 2. Rejection of all

distinctions in moral values, constituting a willingness to refute all previous theories of morality.

3. The belief that destruction of existing political or social institutions is necessary for future improvement." I would add "the view that life possesses no meaning, in the sense of an ultimate goal." I do not refer to Leo Strauss's misleading definition: "a revolt against civilization as the culture of reason." He meant a revolt against the Enlightenment. See his "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* (Spring 1999), 353-78.

4. On Muller and Russell Kirk, see the excellent essay by Mark C. Henrie, "Opposing Strains," *Modern Age Journal*

(Winter 2002), 24-29.

5. Jerry Z. Muller, ed.,

Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought From David Hume to the Present (Princeton, 1997), 13.

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7. *Ibid.*, 5.

8. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969), 228.

9. Muller, *Conservatism*, xiv.

10. Cited in *T. S. Eliot, Christianity and Culture* (New York, 1949), 158.

11. John Lukacs, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (New York, 1990), 302.

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13. Michael Henry, "John Kekes and the Predicament of the Secularist," *Modern Age Journal* (Winter 2007), 60.

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23. George F. Kennan, *Sketches From a Life* (New York, 1989), 108-109.

24. Solzhenitsyn in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, 582.

25. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: The Address, Twelve Early Responses, and Six Later Reflections* (Washington, DC, 1980), 12.

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27. Solzhenitsyn in *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, 19.

28. Pipes in *ibid.*, 116.

29. Pipes, *Vixi*, 114-15.

30. Richard Pipes, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics* (New Haven, 2005), 118.

31. Ibid., 137.

32. Cited in Joseph Pearce, *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 292.

33. Cited in Ethan Alexander-Davey, "The Rebirth of Russian Conservatism," *The University Bookman* (Fall 2006), 6-7.