Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism

Frank S. Meyer

occasional papers

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Foreword

What is the conservative committed to? According to some, the answer is quite simply nothing. Certainly, the argument goes, they are not committed to individual freedom: they defend only order, morality, religion and virtue — all 'traditionally' conceived. So it seemed to many classical liberals, libertarians and 'Old Whigs' in the early 1960s when they denounced traditionalists in the name of individual liberty, private property and reason. And so it also seems to many classical liberals and libertarians today.

Yet there is a more interesting — and more plausible — answer to this question. It was proferred in the 1960s by Frank S. Meyer, an American conservative who reserved his most severe criticism for conservatives he thought had misunderstood conservatism and its relation to liberal ideas — and so, he thought, misunderstood the basis of their own beliefs.

Meyer began his political life as a communist. Born in New Jersey in 1909, he was educated in Princeton, the London School of Economics, and Oxford, where he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and was later elected president of the students' union as a self-proclaimed communist. Some 14 years later in 1945 he broke with the communist movement, having read and been deeply influenced by Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. By the late 1950s he had joined the *National Review* and had acquired a reputation as an uncompromising defender of individualism and individual freedom. He took issue with such prominent conservatives as Russell Kirk for lacking clear and distinct principles and for failing to understand the institutions that made up a free society.

Yet for all his criticisms of conservatives, it was conservatism that Meyer embraced. His complaint was that conservatives failed to ask, and properly answer, the question 'what should conservatives conserve?' Meyer's answer was that they should conserve an inheritance at whose core lay a respect for individual freedom. But too many so-called conservatives, in his view, mistakenly elevated the claims of society above the individual, and were even willing to use the power of the state to try to enforce citizen virtue. This he thought a mistake because it failed to recognise that the achievement of virtue could not be a **political** question: the only political end was the preservation of freedom. Only free men could become virtuous. 'Unless men are free to be vicious they cannot be virtuous. No community can make them virtuous.'

In saying this, however, Meyer also tried to steer away from the kind of liberalism that embraced utilitarianism and had grown relativistic and unable to resist the moral onslaught of totalitarianism. In the end he was a 'fusionist' (although he disliked the label), for he tried to argue that a plausible conservatism must absorb the best of both the liberal and the traditionalist elements of its inheritance. To this end he edited an anthology, What *is Conservatism?*, published in 1964, with contributions from 'conservatives' of varying stripes ranging from Russell Kirk and Willmore Kendall to F. **A.** Hayek and William F. Buckley. He himself tried to argue that there was a discernible consensus among conservatives.

Few were persuaded by Meyer that such a consensus actually existed or could be forged. But the interest of Meyer's contribution lies less in his assessments of what would hold existing conservatives together than in his account of what a plausible conservatism would amount to. Here Meyer has much to offer. And at a time when many conservatives are beginning to speak out again about the nature and the teachings of their tradition, Meyer's answer to the question 'what is conservatism?'is worth reprinting — and re-reading.

Chandran Kukathas

Editorial Note

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Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism

Frank S. Meyer

The intellectual bankruptcy of the collectivist Liberalism* which has dominated American thought for the past half century becomes every day more obvious. The imagination, the verve, the spiritual passion that once characterised it in its days of movement towards power have long since been replaced by a tired repetition of slogans empty of content and sustained only by the weight and inertia of bureaucratic power.

Power, Liberalism still has beyond doubt; but power has only the next to the last word in the affairs of men — not the last word. Power is wielded by men, controlled by men, divided by men, limited by men, as they are guided and inspired by their intellectual and spiritual understanding. There may be a gap of years, of decades, between the onset of the impotence of a false world-view, and the decay and defeat of the power structure which has arisen upon the foundations of that world-view. But its defeat is, given time, the necessary result of the reemergence of truth in the consciousness of those who are concerned with matters of the intellect, with matters of the spirit, of those who — though they may have little control over material power at the moment — determine the foundations of the future.

The last half dozen years have seen an intellectual revolt, unparalleled in a century, against the concepts upon which Liberal collectivism is based. It is ironic, although not historically unprecedented, that such a burst of creative energy on the intellectual level should occur simultaneously with a continuing spread of the influence of Liberalism in the practical political sphere, to the point where it has now captured the decisive positions of power in the Republican as well as in the Democratic party. But ironic or not, it is the case. For the first time in modern America a whole school of thought has consciously challenged the very foundations of collectivist Liberalism; two intellectually serious journals, *Modern Age* and *National Review,* have established themselves integrally in the life of the nation; and an increasing number of the newer generation of undergraduates, graduate students, and young instructors in the universities openly range themselves against the prevailing Liberal orthodoxy. Most important, perhaps, an intense and far-reaching discussion has been taking place

* 'Liberalism' in American usage normally means 'socialism', as opposed to the 'classical liberalism' to which Meyer later refers.

among the enemies of Liberalism on the meaning and matter of their position in the circumstances of mid-20th-century America.

It is to this discussion that I want to address myself, with the hope of helping to clarify some of the issues which divide counsels and hinder the growth of intellectual understanding among the opponents of collectivism. Semantic difficulties are added to substantive difficulties in any such discussion, and I ask the indulgence of my readers in accepting the word 'conservative' as an over-all term to include the two streams of thought that in practice unite to oppose the reigning ideology of collectivist Liberalism. I believe that those two streams of thought, although they are sometimes presented as mutually incompatible, can in reality be united within a single broad conservative political theory, since they have their roots in a common tradition and are arrayed against a common enemy. Their opposition, which takes many forms, is essentially a division between those who abstract from the corpus of Western belief its stress upon freedom and upon the innate importance of the individual person (what we may call the 'libertarian' position) and those who, drawing upon the same source, stress value and virtue and order (what we may call the 'traditionalist' position).

But the source from which both draw, the continuing consciousness of Western civilisation, has been specifically distinguished by its ability to hold these apparently opposed ends in balance and tension, and in fact the two positions which confront each other today in American conservative discourse both implicitly accept, to a large degree, the ends of the other. Without the implicit acceptance of an absolute ground of value, the preeminence of the person as criterion of political and social thought and action has no philosophical foundation, and freedom would be only a meaningless excitation and could never become the serious goal of a serious politics. On the other hand, the belief in virtue as the end of men's being implicitly recognises the necessity of freedom to choose that end; otherwise, virtue could be no more than a conditioned tropism. And the raising of order to the rank of an end overshadowing and subordinating the individual person would make of order not what the traditionalist conservative means by it, but the rule of totalitarian authority, inhuman and subhuman.

On neither side is there a purposeful, philosophically founded rejection of the ends the other side proclaims. Rather, each side emphasises so strongly the aspect of the great tradition of the West which it sees as decisive that distortion sets in. The place of its goals in the total tradition of the West is lost sight of, and the complementary

interdependence of freedom and virtue, of the individual person and political order, is forgotten.

Nevertheless, although these contrary emphases in conservative thought can and do pull away from each other when the proponents of either forsake one side of their common heritage of belief in virtue as man's proper end **and** his freedom under God as the condition of the achievement of that end, their opposition is not irreconcilable, precisely because they do in fact jointly possess that very heritage. Extremists on one side may be undisturbed by the danger of the recrudescence of authoritarian status society if only it would enforce the doctrines in which they believe. Extremists on the other side may care little what becomes of ultimate values if only political and economic individualism prevails. But both extremes are self-defeating: truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uninformed by moral value rots at its core and soon brings about conditions that pave the way for surrender to tyranny.

Such extremes, however, are not the necessary outcome of a dialectic between doctrines which emphasise opposite sides of the same truth. Indeed, a dialectic between different emphases based upon the same fundamental understanding is the mode by which finite men have achieved much of the wisdom contained in tradition. Such a dialectic is in the highest degree necessary today between the libertarians and the traditionalists among conservatives. It cannot fail to achieve results of the greatest significance, if only the protagonists, in pressing that aspect of the truth which each regards as decisive, keep constantly in their consciousness other and complementary aspects of the same truth.

The tendency to establish false antitheses obstructing fruitful confrontation arises in part from an inherent dilemma of conservatism in a revolutionary era, such as ours. There is a real contradiction between the deep piety of the conservative spirit towards tradition, prescription, the preservation of the fibre of society (what has been called 'natural conservatism') and the more reasoned, consciously principled, militant conservatism which becomes necessary when the fibres of society have been rudely torn apart, when deleterious revolutionary principles ride high, and restoration, not preservation, is the order of the day. For what the conservative is committed to conserve is not simply whatever happen to be the established conditions of a few years or a few decades, but the consensus of his civilisation, of his country, as that consensus over the centuries has

reflected truth derived from the very constitution of being. We are today historically in a situation created by 30 years of slow and insidious revolution at home and a half century of violent open revolution abroad. To conserve the true and the good under these circumstances is to restore an understanding (and a social structure reflecting that understanding) which has been all but buried; it is not to preserve the transient customs and prescriptions of the present.

It is here that the dilemma of conservatism affects our present doctrinal discussion. The need in our circumstances for the most vigorous use of reason to combat the collectivist, scientistic, amoral wave of the present tends to induce in the libertarian an apotheosis of reason and the neglect of tradition and prescription (which he identifies with the prevailing prescriptions of the present). The traditionalist, suspecting in this libertarian tendency the same fever to impose upon men an abstract speculative ideology that has characterised the revolution of our time — as well as the French Revolution and its spiritual forbears — tends to recoil and in his turn to press a one-sided position. Too often he confounds reason and principle with 'demon ideology'. Rather than justly insisting upon the limits of reason — the finite bounds of the purview of any one man or any one generation, and the responsibility to employ reason in the context of continuing tradition — he seems sometimes to turn his back on reason altogether and to place the claims of custom and prescription in irreconcilable opposition to it.

Both attitudes obscure the truth; both vitiate the value of the dialectic. The history of the West has been a history of reason operating within tradition. The balance has been tenuous, the tension at times has tightened till it was spiritually almost unbearable; but out of this balance and tension the glory of the West has been created. To claim exclusive sovereignty for either component, reason or tradition, is to smirch that glory and cripple the potentialities of conservatism in its struggle against the Liberal collectivist Leviathan.

Abstract reason, functioning in a vacuum of tradition, can indeed give birth to an arid and distorting ideology. But, in a revolutionary age, the qualities of natural conservatism by themselves can lead only to the enthronement of the prevailing power of the revolution. Natural conservatism is a legitimate human characteristic, and in settled times it is conducive to good. It represents the universal human tendency to hold by the accustomed, to maintain existing modes of life. In settled times it can exist in healthy tension with the other equally natural human characteristic, the dynamic impulse to break beyond accepted

limits in the deepening of truth and the heightening of value. But this is only possible before the fibres of society have been loosened, before the 'cake of custom' has been broken. Then these two human tendencies can be held in just proportion, since men of all conditions believe, each at the level of his understanding, in the same transcendent Ground of truth and value. But when, through whatever cause, this unity in tension is riven, when the dynamic takes off into thin air, breaking its tension with the perpetual rhythms of life — in short, when a revolutionary force shatters the unity and balance of civilisation — then conservatism must be of another sort if it is to fulfil its responsibility. It is not and cannot be limited to that uncritical acceptance, that uncomplicated reverence, which is the essence of natural conservatism. The world of idea and symbol and image has been turned topsy-turvy; the life stream of civilisation has been cut off and dispersed.

This is our situation. What is required of us is a **conscious** conservatism, a clearly principled restatement in new circumstances of philosophical and political truth. This conscious conservatism cannot be a simple piety, although in a deep sense it must have piety towards the constitution of being. Nevertheless in its consciousness it necessarily reflects a reaction to the rude break the revolution has made in the continuity of human wisdom. It is called forth by a sense of the loss which that cutting off has created. It cannot now be identical with the natural conservatism towards which it yearns. The world in which it exists is the revolutionary world. To accept that, to conserve that, would be to accept and conserve the very denial of man's long-developed understanding, the very destruction of achieved truth, which are the essence of the revolution.

Nor can the conscious conservatism required of us appeal simply and uncomplicatedly to the past. The past has had many aspects, all held in measured suspension. But the revolution has destroyed that suspension, that tradition; the delicate fabric can never be re-created in the identical form; its integral character has been destroyed. The conscious conservatism of a revolutionary or postrevolutionary era faces problems inconceivable to the natural conservatism of a prerevolutionary time. The modes of thought of natural conservatism are not by themselves adequate to the tasks of a time like this. Today's conservatism cannot simply affirm. It must select and adjudge. It is conservative because in its selection and in its judgment it bases itself upon the accumulated wisdom of mankind over millenia, because it accepts the limits upon the irresponsible play of untrammelled reason

which the unchanging values exhibited by that wisdom dictate. But it is, it has to be, not acceptance of what lies before it in the contemporary world, but challenge. In an era like ours the existing regime in philosophical thought, as in political and social actuality, is fundamentally wrong. To accept is to be not conservative, but acquiescent to revolution.

Situations of this nature have arisen again and again in the history of civilisation; and each time the great renewers have been those who were able to recover true principle out of the wreck of their heritage. They were guided by reason — reason mediated, it is true, by prudence, but in the first instance reason. Like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, confronting the chaos in the body politic and in the minds of men created by the overweening pride of the Athenian *demos,* we do not live in the happy age of a natural conservatism. We cannot simply revere; we cannot uncritically follow tradition, for the tradition presented to us is rapidly becoming — thanks to the prevailing intellectual climate, thanks to the schools, thanks to the outpourings of all the agencies that mold opinion and belief — the tradition of a positivism scornful of truth and virtue, the tradition of the collective, the tradition of the untrammelled state.

The conservative today, like the conscious conservative of all revolutionary eras, cannot escape the necessity and the duty to bring reason to bear upon the problems that confront him. He has to separate the true from the false, applying basic principle to the task of cutting through the tangled mass of confusion and falsehood; he has the responsibility of establishing in new circumstances forms of thought and institutional arrangements which will express the truth of the great tradition of the West. Respectful though he is of the wisdom of the past and reverent towards precedent and prescription, the tasks he faces can only be carried out with the aid of reason, the faculty which enables us to distinguish principle and thus to separate the true from the false.

The projection of a sharp antithesis between reason and tradition distorts the true harmony which exists between them and blocks the development of conservative thought. There is no real antagonism. Conservatism to continue to develop today must embrace both: reason operating within tradition: neither ideological ***hubris*** abstractly creating Utopian blueprints, ignoring the accumulated wisdom of mankind, nor blind dependence upon that wisdom to answer automatically the questions posed to our generation and demanding our own expenditure of our own mind and spirit.

Closely related to the false antithesis between reason and tradition that distorts the dialogue between the libertarian emphasis and the traditionalist emphasis among conservatives is our historical inheritance of the 19th-century European struggle between classical liberalism and a conservatism that was too often rigidly authoritarian. Granted there is much in classical liberalism that conservatives must reject — its philosophical foundations, its tendency towards Utopian constructions, its disregard (explicitly, though by no means implicitly) of tradition; granted it is the source of much that is responsible for the plight of the 20th century; but its championship of freedom and its development of political and economic theories directed towards the assurance of freedom have contributed to our heritage concepts which we need to conserve and develop, as surely as we need to reject the utilitarian ethics and the secular progressivism that classical liberalism has also passed on to us.

Nineteenth-century conservatism, with all its understanding of the pre-eminence of virtue and value, for all its piety towards the continuing tradition of mankind, was far too cavalier to the claims of freedom, far too ready to subordinate the individual person to the authority of state or society.

The conservative today is the inheritor of the best in both these tragically bifurcated branches of the Western tradition. But the division lingers on and adds to the difficulties of conservative discourse. The traditionalist, although in practice he fights alongside the libertarian against the collectivist Leviathan state of the 20th century, tends to reject the political and economic theories of freedom which flow from classical liberalism in his reaction against its unsound metaphysics. He discards the true with the false, creating unnecessary obstacles to the mutual dialogue in which he is engaged with his libertarian ***alter*** ego. The libertarian, suffering from the mixed heritage of the 19th-century champions of liberty, reacts against the traditionalist's emphasis upon precedent and continuity out of antipathy to the authoritarianism with which that emphasis has been associated, although in actuality he stands firmly for continuity and tradition against the rising revolutionary wave of collectivism and statism.

We are victims here of an inherent tragedy in the history of classical liberalism. As it developed the economic and political doctrines of limited state power, the free-market economy, and the freedom of the individual person, it sapped, by its utilitarianism, the foundations of belief in an organic moral order. But the only possible basis of respect for the integrity of the individual person and for the

overriding value of his freedom is belief in an organic moral order. Without such a belief, no doctrine of political and economic liberty can stand.

Furthennore, when such a belief is not universally accepted, a free society, even if it could exist, would become licentious war of all against all. Political freedom, failing a broad acceptance of the personal obligation to duty and to charity, is never viable. Deprived of an understanding of the philosophical foundations of freedom and exposed to the ravening of conscienceless marauders, men forget that they are fully men only to the degree that they are free to choose their destiny, and they turn to whatever fallacy promises them welfare and order.

The classical liberal as philosopher dug away the foundations of the economic and political doctrines of classical liberalism. But however much he may thereby have contributed to our misfortunes, he himself continued to live on the inherited moral capital of centuries of Christendom. His philosophical doctrines attacked the foundations of conscience, but he himself was still a man of conscience. As Christopher Dawson has said: 'The old liberalism, with all its shortcoming, had its roots deep in the soul of Western and Christian culture'. With those roots as yet unsevered, the classical liberal was able to develop the theories of political and economic freedom which are part of the conservative heritage today.

The misunderstanding between libertarian and traditionalist are to a considerable degree the result of a failure to understand the differing levels on which classical liberal doctrines are valid and invalid. Although the classical liberal forgot — and the contemporary libertarian conservative sometimes tends to forget — that in the **moral** realm freedom is only a means whereby men can pursue their proper end, which is virtue, he did understand that in the **political** realm freedom is the primary end. If, with Acton, we 'take the establishment of liberty for the realisation of moral duties to be the end of civil society', the traditionalist conservative of today, living in an age when liberty is the last thought of our political mentors, has little cause to reject the contributions to the understanding of liberty of the classical liberals, however corrupted their understanding of the ends of liberty. Their error lay largely in the confusion of the temporal with the transcendent. They could not distinguish between the **authoritarianism** with which men and institutions suppress the freedom of men, and the **authority** of God and truth.

On the other hand, the same error in reverse vitiated the thought

of 19th-century conservatives. They respected the authority of God and of truth as conveyed in tradition, but too often they imbued the authoritarianism of men and institutions with the sacred aura of divine authority. They gave way to the temptation to make of tradition, which in its rightful role serves as a guide to the operation of reason, a weapon with which to suppress reason.

It is true that from their understanding of the basis of men's moral existence, from their reverence for the continuity and precedent that ties the present to the past, contemporary conservatism has inherited elements vital to its very existence. Yet we can no more make of the great conservative minds of the 19th century unerring guides to be blindly followed than we can condemn out of hand their classical liberal opponents. Sound though they were on the essentials of man's being, on his destiny to virtue and his responsibility to seek it, on his duty in the moral order, they failed too often to realise that the **political** condition of moral fulfilment is freedom from coercion. Signally they failed to recognise the decisive danger in a union of political and economic power, a danger becoming daily greater before their eyes as science and technology created apace immense aggregates of economic energy. Aware, as the classical liberals were not, of the reality of original sin, they forgot that its effects are never more virulent than when men wield unlimited power. Looking to the state to promote virtue, they forgot that the power of the state rests in the hands of men as subject to the effects of original sin as those they govern. They could not, or would not, see a truth the classical liberals understood: if to the power naturally inherent in the state, to defend its citizens from violence, domestic and foreign, and to administer justice, there is added a positive power over economic and social energy, the temptation to tyranny becomes irresistible, and the political conditions of freedom wither.

The tendency of the traditionalist conservative to insist that the crystallisation of a conservative outlook today requires only that we carry on the principles of those who called themselves conservatives in the 19th century oversimplifies and confuses the problem. That the conservative is one who preserves tradition does not mean that his task is arid imitation and repetition of what others have done before. Certainly in ultimate terms, upon the basic issue of human destiny, truths have been given us that we cannot improve upon, that we can only convey and make real in the context of our time. Here indeed the conservatives of the 19th century played a heroic part, in preserving in the teeth of the overwhelming tendency of the era the age-old image

of man as a creature of transcendent destiny.

In the political and economic realm, however, these truths establish only the foundation for an understanding of the end of civil society and the function of the state. That end, to guarantee freedom, so that men may uncoercedly pursue virtue, can be achieved in different circumstances by different means. To the clarification of what these means are in specific circumstances, the conservative must apply his reason. The technological circumstances of the 20th century demand above all the breaking up of power and the separation of centres of power within the economy itself, within the state itself, and between the state and the economy. Power of a magnitude never before dreamed of by men has been brought into being. While separation of power has always been essential to a good society, if those who possess it are to be preserved from corruption and those who do not are to be safeguarded from coercion, this has become a fateful necessity under the conditions of modern technology. To the analysis of this decisive problem and to the development of political and economic solutions of it, classical liberalism contributed mightily. If we reject that heritage, we should be casting away some of the most powerful among our weapons against socialism, Communism, and collectivist Liberalism. The traditionalist who would have us do so because of the philosophical errors of classical liberalism, like the libertarian who rejects tradition because it has sometimes been associated with authoritarianism, seriously weakens the development of conservative doctrine.

The historical fact is — and it adds to the complexity of our problems — that the great tradition of the West has come to us through the 19th century, split, bifurcated, so that we must draw not only upon those who called themselves conservatives in that century but also upon those who called themselves liberals. The economists of the liberal British tradition, from Adam Smith through and beyond the vilified Manchesterians, like the Austrian economists from Menger and Bohm-Bawerk to Mises and Hayek, analysed the conditions of industrial society and established the principles upon which the colossal power that it produces can be developed for the use of man without nurturing a monstrous Leviathan. Without their mighty intellectual endeavour, we should be disarmed before the collectivist economics of Marx, Keynes, and Galbraith. And in the sphere of political theory, who has surpassed the 19th-century liberals in their prophetic understanding of the looming dangers of the all-powerful state? Conservatives today can reject neither side of their 19th-century

heritage; they must draw upon both.

Differences of emphasis between libertarian and traditionalist cannot be avoided and should not be regretted. Conservatism has no monolithic party line. Our task is to overcome the 19th-century bifurcation of the Western tradition in fruitful dialogue, not to perpetuate it by refusing to understand the breadth and complexity of our heritage, out of a narrow historicism that unearths outworn party emblems.

I am well aware that what I have been saying can be criticised as eclecticism and attacked as an effort to smother principle. But it is not the laying aside of clear belief, either by the libertarian conservative or by the traditionalist conservative, in order to present a front against contemporary collectivist Liberalism, that is here conceived. Rather it is the deepening of the beliefs which each holds through the development of their implications in a dialectic free of distorting narrowness. That deepening — and the development of a common conservative doctrine, comprehending both emphases — cannot be achieved in a surface manner by blinking differences or blurring intellectual distinctions with grandiose phraseology. It can only be achieved by hard-fought dialectic — a dialectic in which both sides recognise not only that they have a common enemy, but also that, despite all differences, they hold a common heritage.

As Americans, indeed, we have a great tradition to draw upon, in which the division, the bifurcation, of European thought between the emphasis on virtue and value and order and the emphasis on freedom and the integrity of the individual person was overcome, and a harmonious unity of the tensed poles of Western thought was achieved in political theory and practice as never before or since. The men who created the Republic, who framed the Constitution and produced that monument of political wisdom, ***The*** *Federalist Papers*, comprised among them as great a conflict of emphasis as any in contemporary American conservatism. Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, Jay, Mason, Madison — among them there existed immense differences on the claims of the individual person and the claims of order, on the relation of virtue to freedom. But their dialectic was conducted within a continuing awareness of their joint heritage. Out of that dialectic they created a political theory and a political structure based upon the understanding that, while truth and virtue are metaphysical and moral ends, the freedom to seek them is the political condition of those ends — and that a social structure which keeps power divided is the indispensable means to this political end. The debate from which our American institutions

arose is a fitting model for our debate.

That debate will the more rapidly and the more profoundly develop the energy and the fruitfulness and the eventual understanding that are intellectually inherent in the opposed emphases if we constantly keep in mind the vision of life against which we are jointly engaged in fateful combat: the Liberal collectivist body of dogma that has pervaded the consciousness and shaped the actions of the decisive and articulate sections of society over the past half century or more.

In opposition to this image of man as neither free nor inspired by a transcendent destiny, the differences between libertarian and traditionalist are thrown into their true perspective: differences of emphasis, not of underlying opposition. In the light of it, libertarian and traditionalist, as they deepen their understanding in a commonly based dialogue, can maintain a common front and a common struggle. The desecration of the image of man, the attack alike upon his freedom and his transcendent dignity, provide common cause in the immediate struggle. As with our ancestors who laid the foundations of the Republic, the challenge to our common faith inspires us, without surrendering our differences of stress, to create a fundamental unity of doctrine within which libertarian and traditionalist, respecting each other, can mutually vindicate the true nature of man, free and responsible, against the arid, mechanistic, collectivist denial of man's nature which transitorily prevails.

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Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism

Frank S. Meyer

The demise of socialist dogma has brought to the fore some underlying tensions between its opponents, above all between liberals and conservatives. These differences were explored by Frank S. Meyer, the American conservative writer, in the 1960s. This CIS Occasional Paper reproduces an essay of his first published in 1960. In it, Meyer argues that the 'libertarian' and the 'traditionalist' opponents of socialism (or what he called 'collectivist Liberalism') have exaggerated their differences. Western civilisation embodies a balance between, on the one hand, the freedom, rationality and individuality valued by libertarians, and, on the other, the virtue, continuity and organic order valued by traditionalists. 'The history of the West has been a history of reason operating within tradition . . . The projection of a sharp antithesis between reason and tradition distorts the true harmony which exists between them and blocks the development of conservative thought.'

According to Frank Meyer, libertarians need to understand that the political goal of freedom serves the moral end of virtue, while traditionalists should avoid translating their respect for custom and established institutions into illiberal politics.

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