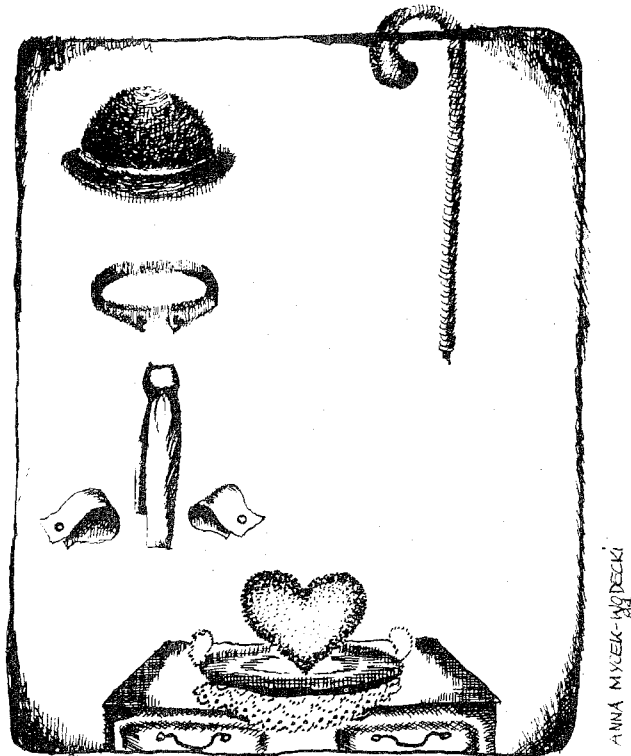


COMMENT

The contemporary ideological debate on social issues sometimes resembles a squabble between two second-graders as to which has the tougher father. Common sense and principle fall victim to pride and enthusiasm. *Conservative* and *liberal* have too often become, in modern usage, handy but meaningless epithets tossed about by single-issue demagogues for their own political convenience, thus demonstrating the present aridity of our language, by which, as Evelyn Waugh once observed, "One grows parched for that straight style of speech in the desert of modern euphemisms, where the halt and lamed are dubbed 'handicapped'; the hungry 'underprivileged'; the mad, 'emotionally disturbed.'"



Evidence of *conservative* as a stereotype is the ease with which writers, speakers, and cartoonists so effectively portray conservatives as heartless, condescending, bigoted, macho, jingoistic oafs who hide their swastikas and KKK sheets under their already overstuffed three-piece suits as they belly up to the country-club bar to protect (*manfully*, of course) the privileges of white, suburban, male jet-setters. One must admit that there is sometimes a touch of truth in these, as in all caricatures. There are, to be sure, a few conservative writers and politicians who strongly resemble what my grandfather on the Great Plains described as a South Dakota rainstorm: lots of lightning, lots of thunder, lots of wind—and no rain. They wrap themselves in the cloak of conservatism and pontificate on

social, political, and military issues with great sound and fury (which in their case signifies nothing). Their conservatism is what Russell Kirk has called the "shop-and-till" variety; they subscribe to no coherent, multidimensional ideology based upon religious, historical, philosophical, or political principles; instead their perspective is nothing more than a greasy olio of bigotry, greed, snobbery, and fear. Conservatism, like patriotism, can sometimes be the last refuge of a scoundrel.

This kind of conservative—as well as his "philosophy"—becomes an easy mark for conservatism's enemies, who are legion. With the conservative view thus discredited in the eyes of the indiscriminating, the political, social, and economic battlefields are won by the mountebanks who are quick to peddle their snake-oil utopianism of "new" ideas and "rainbow coalitions" to a gullible public, many of whom find eventually, with Edmund Burke, that it "is a general popular error to imagine the loudest complainers for the public to be the most anxious for its welfare."

Thus to many the phrase "conservative humanitarian" would seem to be an oxymoron, a self-contradictory figure of speech designed to fool the politically naive. But such is not necessarily the case. True conservatism has always believed in both the dignity and freedom of the individual and in the normative framework of civilized behavior, thus creating the fruitful tension that Burke believed "must be maintained between the claims of freedom and the claims of order."

Maintaining such a tension in the modern technological and morally aseptic world is never easy. Humanitarianism was in the 1960's and 1970's, if not before, subverted into mere political activism and the single-issue politics of the radical fringe movements which usurped what should have been the concerns of true conservatives—racial and sexual discrimination, consumer rights, ecology. But these humanitarian interests were torn away from their moral roots and became the playthings of the politicians, the lawyers, and the social scientists who could use them for what could by no stretch of the imagination be called altruistic purposes.

Thus compassion, empathy, loyalty, and integrity—the quietly heroic qualities that mark the civilized and socially sensitive man and woman—became institutionalized and politicized. In an age in which heroism is suspect, elaborate welfare systems, with their supporting bureaucracies, were built upon the miseries of the poor, the old, and the weak, in the process stifling those people they were supposed to help and condemning them to generation after generation of social and spiritual oblivion. When benevolence and social conscience become nothing more than a legal code and a political sideshow, the soul of a nation is dying.

As the superstate has arrogated the responsibility for the redistribution of wealth, the restructuring of American society, and the control of charity, the system has become

dehumanized and wasteful, as the poor become nothing more than names on computer printouts, and as social-services budgets at all governmental levels climb faster than those for education, defense, and law enforcement.

But the blame for the present chaos cannot be placed only on the liberals, the politicians, and the social scientists, for conservatives themselves have often failed in their moral responsibility. Instead of facing the emerging problems of society and coming forward with suggestions for their amelioration, many conservatives have reacted by ignoring the realities and doing nothing, by proposing anemic and transparently self-serving solutions in order to salve their consciences, or by indulging in ad hominem arguments. And so the conservative position on a wide range of issues is made to appear impotent, uncaring, concerned only with what appears to be nit-picking about constitutional issues while the genuine needs of the nation are forgotten. Again, Burke may remind us that it is the heart, not the head, which should inform the philosophy of the conservative humanitarian: "It is not, what a lawyer tells me I *may* do; but what humanity, reason, and justice tell me I *ought* to do."

In contrast to the nominal, shop-and-till conservative, the conservative humanitarian believes that human nature is somehow badly flawed, that out of this imperfect spiritual and intellectual condition arise the social, political, and ethical problems that plague our world, that utopia is impossible (although there is always hope of improvement), and that human beings cannot solve their difficulties with only political solutions. The conservative humanitarian must view the present from a historical perspective, recognize and respect reality, and revere human life and dignity. Facing social

complexity without oversimplification and constant change without despair, the humane conservative must, as Dryden put it in another context, "patch the flaws and buttress up the wall" of the social edifice, avoiding the temptation to "mend the parts by ruin of the whole" and to "physic their disease into a worse."

Central to the social philosophy of the conservative is a strong belief in the importance of community, a consensus among thinking people about those policies and practices that are conducive to the development, maintenance, and enhancement of a free, open, and healthy society which permits its members to enjoy their lives and property within reasonable limits. Such a community must meet directly and unequivocally the dangers facing it. But the solutions must not destroy the freedoms that nourish that community.

Conservatives must not be paralyzed by the enormity of human suffering into doing nothing, nor must they be intimidated by the power of their entrenched enemies. Instead they must work within the framework of traditions and principles to preserve the well-being of the individual and the continuity of society. They must be active in the world around them; they cannot be resigned to the status quo of agony or of indifference; they cannot be merely, to use Emerson's phrase, "conservatives after dinner." Only by vigorously combining the wisdom derived from history and tradition with a vibrant sense of community can a people develop a social philosophy that is more than what Disraeli called "an unhappy cross-breed, the mule of politics that engenders nothing."

—Robert C. Steensma

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LIBERAL CULTURE

The End Nears...

"The end nears when fools are hailed and the sages ignored—"

This bit of ancient wisdom came to our minds when we were going through *Time* magazine's cover story on one Shirley MacLaine, a successful actress and a quasicultural emblem of the liberal America. The gist of *Time*'s text is, as usual, an extravagantly weird celebration of a quite vicious case of insipidity—and *Time*'s seasoned editors know well that extolling fools in its pages makes them both thrive even more. Why do the editors do this? It is difficult to explain other than by citing their rampant cultural insouciance and irresponsibility.

The seven-page feature contains not one clear sentence about Ms. MacLaine's overt procommunist sympathies; instead, *Time*, with its liberal-journalistic perfidy, calls Ms. MacLaine a "political activist" and eagerly notes that she's worth \$15 million. Indeed, it's not only easy but downright fun to be radical in today's America with such an amount of cash at hand.

Ms. MacLaine, in addition to various and sundry other pastimes and occupations, writes books. According to *Time*, one of them, *Out on a Limb*, was a best-seller: "176,000 in hard-cover and about 1.2 million in paperback." The book

contains priceless nuggets of knowledge like this one: "Jesus Christ developed mystical powers during years of study among holy men in India." Such a revelation should not be too surprising, given the author, whose intellectual self-description is as follows: "Philosophically, celebrating myself is what I am into." *Time*, it seems, is into the subject of its cover story. It would be unfair, though, to blame *Time* for single-handedly creating an American darling out of a dunce: its liberal brethren in foisting idiocy upon America provide the main impetus to the cultural vector of our time that insists that common sense be silenced in the face of celebrity. This is how clowns become sages and the end nears. □