

Letter to Yourselves

This 1969 essay by L. Brent Bozell Jr., which stated so many of the modern Catholic's grievances against the American conservative "movement" so clearly and so early, is also very difficult to find online. I thought I would reproduce the text here, that it might be rediscovered by a new generation of Catholics to whose troubles it still speaks so effectively.

I very much want to say these things without sounding reproachful or smug. If I fail in this, I wish you would lay it to weak craft, not weak intention. It may be that you deserve reproach; but my credentials, plainly, are not the best for dishing out. After all, I have shared many of your errors and defeats, and have been involved in others that you have managed to avoid. But more important: the reason for opening this discussion is to encourage a common advance toward political wisdom—a prospect that could be badly hurt by recriminations. Would it not be better, then, for you to say these things? It would; but the fact is that you are not saying them, and have sent out no signal that you mean to have them said. There is silence in your ruins.

I.

Historians will differ as to the moment when the movement you lead ceased to be an important force in America. (My own view is that the hour struck in 1964,

with Goldwater's defeat.) But there will be no one to dispute that it was all over by November 1968, with Nixon's victory. This is because 1) Nixon in 1968 was your man, and 2) Nixon in 1968 had repudiated you. He was your man in the sense that whatever remained of your energies was committed to his election and whatever remained of your hopes was committed to the success of his presidency. He had repudiated you in the sense that he had pointedly and recognizably rejected every distinctive feature of your movement: that is, everything that set it apart from other political forces in the country. He had rejected everything that gave it an identity—or, more to the point, a being. And since he did this with your full knowledge and thus with your implied assent, He was free to ignore you upon assuming the presidency; and you were powerless to affect his future course. Everything he, and you, have done since the inauguration merely confirms this relationship, or the lack of one. Nixon's resurrection, in a word, was your funeral, and all that has been missing is a suitable oration.

I speak of the distinctive features of the conservative movement in America without venturing any opinion as to what “conservatism” is. Some of you have treated it as an ideology; others as an attitude toward the public life; others as a style. It may be all of these things and more, but here I am concerned only with how it has “come on” to the country as a political movement since it acquired an identity and shape after World War II and the Roosevelt

years. I am concerned, if you like, with its program. For this purpose it can be reduced to four propositions, and for three of these there is a convenient symbol, or hero-figure, who dispenses with any need for elaboration. There is anti-statism, as represented by Taft. There is nationalism, as represented by MacArthur. There is anti-Communism, as represented by (Joseph) McCarthy. The fourth is constitutionalism, which has never had a single champion of the stature of the others, but which may be recalled by thinking of Bricker, or more recently, Thurmond. All of these propositions were faithfully summed up in Goldwater, who ran for president on the strength of them.

Perhaps there is some conservative argument not covered by the above headings; but I think you must agree that should these four propositions be abandoned, and nothing of comparable seriousness put in their place, then the movement itself would be abandoned. And isn't that really what happened? The conservative program was trounced in Goldwater's moment, and had been forgotten by Nixon's; some time in between it was simply abandoned. Again the symbols tell the story. Taft, MacArthur, McCarthy, Goldwater—all former allies of Nixon's and all honored by you—fell into obsolescence in 1964-68, a final, formal, irrelevance, which their liberal opponents, older or longer dead than they, have so far been spared; and this is because most of you who honor them no longer deemed it profitable to assert what they had asserted, to

re-light the torch which they had carried.

Nixon. There is a sentiment among many of your followers to “give him a chance.” But this makes sense just to the extent, no more or less, that it makes sense to give you a chance. The political Nixon—however one may size up the “real” Nixon—is a resultant of forces; there is no major political figure in memory of whom this is so palpably true. Therefore he will move away from the course on which he is presently embarked only if you can convince him that it is in his political interest to make your program his. Can you? Do you want to? It seems to me that you have already given the answer; it came last spring, during the season for selecting presidential candidates. Reagan was your natural candidate. He was the obvious heir, as Nixon by that time was not, of Goldwater and the conservative program. What is more, he had flair, style, freshness—qualities that more than offset Nixon’s “experience” in the scales of winner-potential. In fact, however, you did not neglect Reagan because he “couldn’t win”; there was actually very little talk of that in your conversations. You neglected him because Nixon was early in the field, had initiative, momentum; to push Reagan in the circumstances would have required the kind of energy that carried the day four years before at San Francisco. But you no longer had much energy, which is a function of will, which is in turn a function of conviction. And so candidate Nixon carried you along, hearing scarcely a word from you protesting

the policies he was offering the country. Is it sensible to expect that President Nixon will find a better chance to be harassed by your energy?

II.

Let me suggest an explanation for your failure of energy. It is certainly not a matter of laziness or funk. Nor is discouragement the answer quite, although it would be strange if that were not involved. Disillusionment, I think, is the correct explanation; and this is a promising development if the word is properly understood, because it means emancipation from illusions.

What might prompt disillusionment, apart from a direct infusion of grace? Ordinarily it comes from some striking visitation in the order of existence—from the impact of something felt or experienced which shakes one's own being at its roots and calls for a reorientation toward reality. I grant that rational argument may do the trick in some cases, but surely it is the rare man whose illusion can be wrecked by reason alone; in any event, I am unaware of the contemporary argument, unless it has appeared in these pages, which might have turned off the conservative movement.

What has not had to be argued, but has simply happened, is this: your supposed enemy, secular liberalism, has fallen—yet no one imagines that you brought it down; the whole

country is writhing in the agonies of its death—yet no one reaches out to you for support; history is burying secular liberalism—yet history is not asking you to furnish a substitute. None of this, I repeat, needs to be argued. If the secular-liberal system is still giving off signs of vitality, like Nixon staggering brightly from press conference to empty press conference, every sensitive person recognizes them to be false signs. They are the busy motions pumped into themselves by rulers severed from an organic constituency. Every truly vital man in the country, every vital force, scorns and condemns this system; secular liberalism has become the universal epithet. Yet none of these men, none of these forces, is inquiring into your system, into the “conservative program.” Do you regret that? That is indeed a shattering experience: at the moment of your enemy’s finish, and thus at the finish of your own *raison d’être*,—not to be wanted. And not very much to want yourselves.

I think this experience can be described even more sharply. Secular liberalism has lost its war for historical existence, but it has not lost any of the battles it has had with you. On every front where your program has confronted secular liberalism’s, you have been beaten. Consider (against the background of one of Nixon’s press conferences) your campaigns against big government, against Keynesian economics, against compulsory welfare; your defense of states’ rights and the constitutional prerogatives of Congress; your struggle for a vigorous

anti-Soviet foreign policy; your once passionate stand for the country's flag and her honor. Is there a single field which the secular liberals have had to yield to the secular conservatives? That is one side of the coin. The other is that secular liberalism has, nevertheless, died—and for causes apparently unconnected with your ministrations. Some say it succumbed from existential wounds, an inability to cope with reality. Do you deem yourselves sufficiently close students of reality to have helped significantly to inflict the wounds? Others lay the failure to an organic weakness or “sickness,” a self-contained fault of the system. Has your criticism of secular liberalism persuasively diagnosed this sickness? Still others say the basic cause is in the order of ideas. Do you claim to have located the fundamental errors, or to have corrected them? I do not mean, with these questions, to chide you; I concede that men are hard to find in our time who ought to feel any more comfortable with them. The point is simply that, taking both sides of this coin together, it is not surprising you should neither be called, nor offering yourselves, as secular liberalism's heir—that it is not surprising you are disillusioned.

III.

What, then, are the illusions from which events and history are trying to free you? There are, I think, two principal ones, and they are closely related. The first is the illusion of an essential dichotomy between “conservatism”

and “liberalism”: the belief that they differ significantly in the things that matter. The second is the illusion that politics—the ordering of public life—can proceed without continuing reference to God.

What I have suggested as a way of accounting for the exhaustion of your movement may be a good entry to the first illusion. Is it not clear that what we are dealing with here is not two corpses, but one? What is being discarded by history is a whole approach to man and to politics. This approach has had its better and worse expressions, and I have no doubt that yours was one of the better; but all of these expressions were faulted by a similar flaw, and thus similarly fated to obsolescence when man and his politics cried out for an expression of reality. This is why your moment of distress coincides with secular liberalism’s, why it is not traceable to any particular defeat of conservatives by liberals, but to common failure to have anything appropriate to say.

To recognize contemporary conservatism and contemporary liberalism as branches of the same tree would not be disconcerting. After all, commentators on all sides have long acknowledged a common-parenthood: nineteenth-century liberalism. What most of the commentators have stressed, however—and thus what is responsible for the illusion—is the dissimilarities of the offspring. I think it is time to focus on the similarity.

But before doing that, let me acknowledge a strain of contemporary conservatism which is properly linked with the eighteenth century rather than the nineteenth, with Burke and Johnson, say, rather than Mill and Spencer. There is certainly a deep gulf between traditionalist conservatism and libertarian conservatism which has so far resisted all efforts to “fuse” them; and I have no hesitation in admitting a distinct preference for the former—for its essential piety toward history, especially that part of it which God has been in since the Incarnation. It does, however, run the danger of slipping over into positivism, into an intimate friendship with the is or was, and thus of forgetting that Christ came to transfigure history. But the reason I want to acknowledge this strain is not to debate with it, but to point out that despite the redoubtable labors of Mr. Russel Kirk and his associates, it has had a relatively minor impact on the program which you have oppose to secular liberalism. Thus the nineteenth-century liberal remains a just and useful symbol of the common conservative-liberal heritage.

The common heritage, as well as the similarity it has preserved, was succinctly isolated by Robert Fox in a recent review of Professor Mario Pei’s book, *The America We Lost*. The ideal of the nineteenth-century liberal, Fox pointed out, was self-fulfillment. It was not then, as it has become with secular liberalism, an exclusive materialist ideal, preoccupied with wealth, sex and attendant

pleasures. It also acknowledged the spiritual dimension and the need for moral discipline, which is the part of the heritage that your branch alone has preserved. Where it abused reality, according to Fox, was in supposing that the spiritual dimension could be sustained and moral discipline imposed by the naked strength of the individual; it did not recognize that most of the individuals who managed the feat were living off the capital inherited from institutionalized Christianity. Now what this has meant for the present seems perfectly obvious, especially in the light of the gradual erosion of Christian institutions over the past hundred years, and their precipitous collapse more recently. It has meant that the nineteenth-century goal of self-fulfilling the whole man has remained open to a moral elite (and I do mean to include most of yourselves) to realize in their private lives, but has not been accessible to the generality of men and thus ceased to shape and influence the public life of the West. This helps to explain why, with a mass electorate, you have lost every public contest to the secular liberals. They have addressed themselves, far more persuasively than you, to that dimension of life which contemporary politics do indeed help to fill. Their miscalculation was to suppose that nourishment of the material dimension could long sustain any life.

However, it would only fuel an unprofitable delusion to suggest that materialism is a secular-liberal monopoly. The fact is that the main thrust of your quarrel with the

secular liberals over the years has been felt in the area of economics. This is hardly surprising, given the parent ideal of self-fulfillment. For the idea of self-fulfillment, however defensible it may be in the abstract, appeared in the nineteenth century laden with certain historical baggage. It emerged as a modern, essentially un-Christian notion, from the Renaissance—which was concerned with the fulfillment of the natural self; and any way you slice it, concentration on the natural self, at the expense of the supernatural self, tends to concentration on the physical self: on the appetites of matter. This is because man's fallen nature, unsupported by grace, tends to animalhood. Thus it was that the Puritan idea of a visible elite, despite all the nonsense propagated since, became the perfect ally of Renaissance Man. Measuring goodness by the acquisition of material riches, it encouraged him to do what comes naturally. It has also encouraged you to continue to promote what comes naturally. As a result, the ghastly infrastructure of the secular city bears your lineaments, even more visibly than the liberals'. Your economics has not fared as well as theirs at the ballot box: Nixon is in the White House. But they have fared well enough to shape the physical surroundings, the social organization and the lifestyle of the country: Reagan says that the oil-drilling on the California shelf must go on to insure "progress," and Nixon is in the White House.

It may be easier now to meet the fatal flaw which I have said is shared by both branches of liberalism. If the

nineteenth-century version of self-fulfillment is a modern idea traceable to the Renaissance, it is also a pre-Christian idea, as Miss Madden remarks in this issue, illustrated by the Sophists; in fact, the lineage does not stop until it reaches Adam. And the whole meaning of this historical current is to assert, and reassert, man's ability to fulfill himself, by himself: to assert, and reassert, his self-sufficiency. Which is denied by Christ who says: without Me you can do nothing.

I do not doubt that those of you who are Christians accept this teaching of Christ's. But I do question whether most of you, as public men, take it seriously. I can believe that it seriously affects your private lives, but I deny that it has deeply invaded your politics. This is curious because you would have curious private lives if they were not profoundly influenced by the public thing around you. You get all of the support you need from direct approaches by God to your interior life, from private prayer, from the Sacraments? If you do, the huge generality of men, including me for one, does not. The public life, as it now exists, is an enormous obstacle to virtue, if not to salvation. It is a fierce agent of Satan. Yet it is meant to provide inducements to virtue and occasions of grace. It is meant to be a place where God is signified in His things.

Many secular liberals are hostile or indifferent to religion, and most conservatives are friendly to it. But over the

years their leaders, and you, have developed a common political approach: you have agreed to assign it to the private sphere. Like everything else in modernity, religion has been given a compartment. True, you resisted the recent exclusion of prayer from public schools. But you did so, understandably, without much zest. For you recognized (the constitutional issue aside) that these pre-class recitals were a pathetic expression of the idea that religion belongs in education.

There is the point: at most, liberalism allows that religion belongs in education. It is never admitted that education belongs to religion. The Christian idea of education as a unity designed to impart Truth is emphatically rejected by liberalism, and it has never figured prominently in your program. Thus your criticism of the liberal education system, while usually valid as far as it has gone, has not cut the mustard. It has not proposed a helpful reform of the system because it has not proposed to make going to school an occasion of grace.

To elaborate this argument by further examples is hardly necessary. The argument is that in every field your politics have expressed a relatively unimportant dispute over what the public life should be; they have not acknowledged the Christian teaching that the proper goal of the orderers of the public life is to help open men to Christ. In a word, your politics have been unreal. And they are now suffering the fate which all unrealities must one day suffer.

IV.

So what will you do with yourselves? As long as the illusions keep their hold, three avenues are open to you. They are already in use. You will find a place in the establishment as Nixon has, offering commonsense criticisms and suggestions which may be proximately useful. You will retire, perhaps to care for one of those moribund ideological projects like keeping America a republic because it is not a democracy. Or you will be driven (whether wittingly or no, I do not predict) to swell the ranks of a proto-fascist reaction to the collapse of secular liberalism. This last may have a political future of sorts.

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But you will not, along any of those routes, have a permanent impact on the post-modern world. The future belongs only to those who keep in touch with reality—that is, those who manage to keep open to Christ, who is Reality. You are certainly entitled to observe that the old Christian forms for sanctifying the public life have themselves become obsolete, and thus do not provide a sufficient guide for the future. But that is only to say that the quest for new forms will be difficult, and will require all the energy and imagination and grace that are now in us and whatever more time will provide. This is why I am writing to yourselves.

