

CONSERVATISM IN EUROPE AND AMERICA

by

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For many Americans, a conservative is one who believes in free enterprise, the market economy, limited government, the sanctity of private property, and last, but by no means least, the importance of religion as the foundation of social order. To a great extent, the contemporary image of the conservative is the same in Western Europe, and the West European parties who call themselves conservative or are known as such are generally in favor of these same principles (with the partial exception of religion), although with less fervor than the Reagan administration. Nevertheless, there are profound differences between the main strands of conservative thought and politics on the two shores of the Atlantic. Today's superficial similarities should not blind us to the fundamental differences in temperament and outlook that are incarnated in the main conservative traditions in America and Europe respectively.

The most important reason for these differences is the origin of the United States as a political society deliberately created by human action in the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War, and the Constitution. The Founders acted in the name of liberty, prosperity, tolerance, and the consent of the governed to acts of government. These principles sprang from two intellectual and political traditions, namely the English tradition of rights and liberties that began with the Magna Carta of 1215 and reached a high point in the Glorious Revolution of 1689, and the republican ideals of ancient Greece and Rome as mediated by the Enlightenment culture of the eighteenth century. In the course of the struggle against James II, who wished to introduce absolute monarchy, English political thinkers produced a bill of rights, parts of which were taken over word for word in the American Bill of Rights. The American revolutionaries based their case for independence on the «rights of

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Englishmen» that the King was unfairly denying them. They based their hopes for a lasting political order on the notion that the new world, with its open frontier and sound agrarian base, was the ideal breeding ground for civic virtue and for the habits of mind and social behavior needed if the republic was to endure¹.

At the time of the Founding, the American conservatives were those who believed in the authority of the King of Great Britain and in the Church of England. Because America was from the beginning settled largely by Nonconformists—that is, dissenters from the Anglican Church—these conservatives were few in number except in some parts of the South. During the Revolutionary War, they were known as Tories, and after the defeat of Britain in 1783 some of them moved to Canada, which remained in British control, and there began the tradition of Canadian conservatism that in some respects resembles its British counterpart far more than it resembles American conservatism.

Apart from the Tories, there were no conservatives in the United States in 1776, only various kinds of revolutionaries. During the following years and decades the conservative temperament reasserted itself. Lacking a feudal hierarchy or an established Church as tangible objects of care and devotion, the American conservatives fell back on the American Founding itself as the source of their political beliefs. From the roots of that Founding—English individualism and classical republicanism—grew an American conservatism that looked back to a deliberate, and therefore highly un-conservative, political act, the Founding, and to the beliefs in virtue of which that Founding endured. Nothing could be more different from Old World conservatism. Even when, as in the present, conservatism in Europe and America seems to share many attitudes and convictions regarding what should be done about the economy and world politics, the differences remain radical. And the differences within European conservatism, between various national forms and between various traditions within each nation, are likewise striking and profound.

American conservatives identify with what they see as the true meaning of American and seek to rescue that meaning and its associated promise from the tinkering of shortsighted politicians and the destructive effects of special interests and pressure groups. Most European conservatives agree that special interests are harmful, but there the resemblance ends. There can be no doubt that the promise of America is a promise of personal liberty, of free-

1. J.G.A. Pocock, [The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition] (Princeton University Press, 1975), and Forrest Mc Donald, [Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution] (University Press of Kansas, 1985).

dom of contract, movement, and belief. The corollary of that personal liberty is limited government. If there is anything on which all European conservatives have always agreed, however, it is the value and importance of a strong state. They are correspondingly skeptical about the virtues of personal liberty. Nor has Continental as opposed to British conservatism been much concerned with property rights but rather with inherited privilege and social distinctions. Finally, whereas American conservatives, with the exception of Ayn Rand and her followers, are generally religious and indeed believe that religious faith is an essential element of a conservative outlook, this is not the case in European conservatism, which has a strong atheistic or even nihilistic component. This fact directly contradicts Stephen Tonsor's typically American statement that «unbelief is incompatible with Conservatism»².

Modern European conservatism began as a reaction to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution that followed it. The philosophers of the Enlightenment proposed the rule of human reason in society, economy, and culture, and ridiculed all institutions, habits, and rules that could not be immediately justified by reason. In particular, they attacked the church and the inherited ranks and privileges by which political society was ordered. The Revolution of 1789-1794 put much of this program into practice. All ranks and legal privileges were abolished, and some revolutionaries had hopes of expunging Christianity itself.

It is largely, if not wholly, true that European conservatism is defined by its attitude to the Enlightenment. This is one important reason why it differs from American conservatism. The latter refers always to the American Founding, but that Founding was itself largely a product of the Enlightenment. It is difficult to identify more characteristic achievements of the human political reason glorified by the Enlightenment thinkers than the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. One might even say that traditional American conservatism seeks to preserve the Enlightenment while discarding the unpleasant radicalism of the French Revolution.

In Europe, this option—of preserving the best of the Enlightenment—was not available, for at least two reasons. First, the French Revolution and the subsequent rule of the Emperor Napoleon promoted, and were themselves powerfully promoted by, the new social force of nationalism. Nationalism is the belief that one's own ethnic group or nation is special and superior. It thus goes beyond simple patriotism, which asserts an obligation to defend one's country. America was spared the turmoil of the Revolutionary and

2. National Review, June 20, 1986, p. 55.

Napoleonic Wars of 1792-1815. In this country, patriotism became an element of conservatism and indeed of the broader American political tradition in general. In Europe, the French bid for hegemony relied on French nationalism that in turn provoked nationalist reactions in the countries attacked or threatened by France, especially Germany, Italy, and Russia. Nationalism was a powerful social force that swept away the Enlightenment faith in reason. After the Revolutionary Wars, there was hardly a constituency in Europe for a political doctrine based fully on Enlightenment ideals.

Second, the credibility of the Enlightenment view depended on the agrarian, pre-industrial society of the eighteenth century. As that view was gaining ground, the society from which it sprang was already changing rapidly. Industrialization and the accompanying growth of population changed the face of Europe as much as did the political events of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era. New masses appeared, new types and patterns of work arose, and there appeared what became known as «the social question»—the question of what to do with the new masses, how to feed them, whether—and how—to give them political rights and privileges. The people who took the side of the new masses became known as socialists. They took over the Enlightenment faith in political reason and the contempt for inherited privilege and organized religion, but they added to it the powerful promise of economic and social revolution to complete the political revolution that began in France in 1789.

The political doctrine that came closest to preserving the Enlightenment ideals was known as liberalism. There were liberals in all European countries, and they differed widely. But their common ground was belief in economic freedom, free trade, religious and political toleration, and the importance of the non-aristocratic and non-proletarian middle class as the bulwark of social, economic, and political strength. In Germany and Italy, which had no national governments and were divided into numerous independent states, the liberals were also strong nationalists. They hoped to bring about national unity on the basis of the middle classes and thus to capture the emotions and fervor of nationalism without risking revolution.

In the face of these movements and doctrines, conservatism took on a number of different forms. Common to them all was a rejection of the liberal belief in the middle class, what became known as the bourgeoisie, and an insistence on the inherent importance and value of tradition, social distinctions, and the alleged organic bonds of society. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there were three types of conservatism: British, Latin European, and Germanic European. Toward the end of the century, a new set of conservative movements developed, particularly in France and Germany. These new movements in turn spawned the radical Rights of the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, Ger-

many, and France but also fed back into the conservative mainstream. The defeat of Nazism and Fascism in World War II discredited the radical Right, but some of its ideas continued to recur in literature and political debate. Mainstream conservatism, on the other hand, abandoned many of its historical tenets and drew close to European liberalism in a common rejection of socialism, economic collectivism, and egalitarianism.

The British form of conservatism was both the mildest and most successful. Unlike the nations of the Continent, Britain has not undergone cataclysmic changes of a political order since the civil war of the midseventeenth century. Nor has British conservatism been associated with discredited and brutal political ideologies like National Socialism. Instead, for over a century after the time of Edmund Burke, who died in 1797, British conservatives upheld a seemingly incompatible mix of ideas and doctrines, the most important of which were belief in the nation beyond class and social distinctions and the maintenance of those same distinctions in the name of tradition and hierarchy. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli's famous warning that Britain was becoming two nations—namely, the possessing classes and the proletariat—appealed immediately to fellow conservatives who simultaneously in their cultural and social attitudes rejected any attempt at leveling distinctions or undermining what they conceived as the natural hierarchy of society. The tension between a broad paternalism and fear of egalitarianism has persisted in the British Conservative Party and among British conservatives generally to this day. The argument was often effective that the Conservative Party was the natural party of government because, unlike the Labor Party, it represented the entire nation and not only a certain class. In this historical context, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's hopes for economic growth and free enterprise were not at all typical of her party. Far more typical was the denunciation of her policies as socially divisive by Lord Stockton, the former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, who chose the moment of his elevation to the peerage in 1985 to deliver his attack. The paternalistic consensus sought by British conservatives at once explains their enduring strength and their complete failure to reverse the relative decline of British power.

British conservatism, then, has always been pragmatic rather than ideological, consensus-seeking rather than confrontational. The situation was different on the Continent. Although there are profound differences between conservatism in German and Latin Lands, both evolved and changed in political settings more prone to conflict and with less tolerance or expectation of pragmatic solutions than the British.

The political, philosophical, and cultural variants of German conservatism are the most important and interesting, both for their substance and their

history. The role of conservative thought and movements in the rise of Hitler and Nazism, and the relationship of conservatives to the Third Reich, is, or ought to be, as central a subject of intellectual and political history as the role of socialist thought in the evolution of communist totalitarianism. Since 1945, liberal and socialist historians have often reduced German conservative thought to no more than a series of apologias for power politics and at worst a direct precursor and ally of Nazism. According to this view, German conservatism inculcated belief in the legitimacy of all authority, excessive deference to the established distribution of power and influence, worship of cultural traditions for their own sake, and contempt for ideals of solidarity, social justice, democracy, and the rule of law. These ideals and attitudes predisposed vital segments of the German elite to accept Hitler's rhetoric of national restoration and grandeur and caused them to ignore or even secretly welcome his anti-Semitism and aggressive foreign policy.

The story is in fact somewhat more complicated. It begins in the last years of the eighteenth century when German political thinkers faced the dual impact of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution³. Both originated in France, which was not only the hereditary enemy of Germany, but also, much to the despair of the Germans, an organized and centralized state. Germany, by contrast, consisted of hundreds of small principalities and city-states and a few large states, all jealously guarding their political independence under the loose and shadowy overall authority of the Holy Roman Empire. Long in the past, the empire had been a significant and important ordering force in German and European affairs, but it had now sunk to little more than an honorific appendix to the Austrian crown of the Hapsburg dynasty. In 1806, the Hapsburg emperor Francis I announced that, as a consequence of Napoleon's victories, he no longer felt able to carry out his duties as such and must «therefore regard the bond which has bound us to the body politic of the German Empire as dissolved». By the act, which strictly speaking was unconstitutional because the empire was a contract that the emperor could not unilaterally revoke, an entity that had existed since the coronation of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III in A.D. 800 came to an end. Francis I declared that he would continue to function as «emperor of Austria», a title never before heard of in Europe.

The response to the victories of Napoleon and the final dissolution of the old empire took the form of a nationalist revival that endured beyond the defeat of Napoleon in 1813-1814 to form the basis of German national libera-

3. Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton University Press, 1966).

lism as well as German conservatism. The conservatives fell roughly into two camps, associated with Prussia and Austria respectively. The Prussians upheld the original values and principles of Lutheranism and loyalty to the Prussian king. They believed in absolute devotion to duty, obedience to civil authority, strict personal and family morals, and freedom of conscience based on the total separation of religion and politics. They acknowledged no right of resistance to tyrannical authority but conversely recognized no right of authority to dictate belief.

Austrian conservatives, by contrast, were Catholics and looked for a restoration of the Holy Roman Empire. Failing that, they were content to accept the alliance of «throne and altar» and the balance of power restored by the Austrian chancellor Prince Metternich at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815. The Hapsburgs remained hereditary rulers of Austria, Hungary, and adjacent lands, a vast multiethnic and multicultural conglomeration extending from Polish Krakow in the north to Serbian Belgrade in the south and from Prague, Vienna, and Trieste in the west to the Transylvanian cities of Kronstadt and Klausenberg in the east. The Hapsburg Empire collapsed under the strain of defeat in World War I but fostered an enduring image of roomy tolerance and casual coexistence of incompatible interests and goals that contrasted sharply with the new nationalism and narrow ethnic conflicts of the period after 1918. The Hapsburg legacy has meant that Austrian, unlike Prussian, conservatism has not generally been nationalistic. Until 1918 there was no such thing as an Austrian nation: Austrians were simply Germans who lived in the region known as Austria. In 1920, the rump Austrian state that remained after the victorious Western Allies had decreed the independence of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia and applied for annexation to Germany but was refused by the Allies. Austria remained unwillingly independent but also desperately poor. In the inter-war years, some Austrian conservatives hoped for the unification of all Germans in a «Greater» Germany that would escape the domination by Prussia, which was the fate of the «Lesser» Germany established in 1871 and that excluded Austria. A leading figure of this Greater German movement was the historian Heinrich von Srbik, who wrote a four-volume life of Metternich. Other conservatives called for a society organized according to «estates» rather than classes. This so-called corporatist doctrine was common to many Latin conservatives as well. In Austria, its chief spokesmen were Ignaz Seipel and Engelbert Dollfuss, who became chancellor of Austria and was murdered by fascists in 1934.

The French Right, like all European conservatism, owes its origins to the Enlightenment and even more to the French Revolution and to Napoleon. It was legitimist, royalist, and Catholic, which meant that it believed fully in

the alliance of throne and altar in the world restored by Metternich and the Congress of Vienna. After the July Revolution of 1830, which brought into power a constitutional monarchy under Louis Philippe, known as «the citizen king», another type of conservatism emerged, committed like the first to social hierarchy and tradition but willing to grant liberal reforms in the name of national unity and cohesion. Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America*, shared many attitudes with this group. In 1848, revolution broke out again throughout Europe. In Germany, nationalist democrats proclaimed a liberal constitution that guaranteed civil rights, free male suffrage as well as the abolition of feudal privileges, and called on Frederick William IV, the king of Prussia, to allow himself to be elected German Emperor. The German revolution failed, mainly because the Prussian king, who was the most powerful political figure in Germany, and his conservative advisers could not accept the principle of popular sovereignty announced in the liberal constitution. In France, Louis Napoleon, a political adventurer distantly related to Napoleon I, seized power in stages and by 1852 had himself proclaimed emperor as Napoleon III. During his rule, which lasted until the defeat of France by Prussia in 1870, a third type of conservatism developed in support of the new empire and its hierarchy. Unlike the two others, it was not particularly friendly to the Roman Catholic Church, because the church was potentially an anti-national factor⁴.

During the last decades before World War I, European conservatism felt the impact of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who was by no means himself a conservative. Before Nietzsche, most Continental conservatives would have agreed with the brilliant Spanish writer Juan Donoso Cortés the marquis of Valdegamas, that the great evils of the age were liberalism and democracy because these doctrines held that man can and should create the conditions of his own life, specifically his political life. Donoso warned, in terms stronger than but similar to those of Tocqueville, that the consequences of liberalism and democracy would be egalitarian mediocrity, the rule of envy, and irremediable social and cultural conflict. For Donoso, as for other Catholic conservatives, the natural order of society required a political hierarchy controlled in its turn by the church. The church's rejection of liberalism and democracy was confirmed by the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX in 1864, a list of ideas defined as false and damnable and including such things as democratic mass suffrage, religious toleration, and popular sovereignty.

Nietzsche destroyed the credibility of a c o n s e r v a t i s m based on the vision of a religious society as the guarantor of social, political, and cultural

4. René Rémond, *Les droites en France*, 4th ed. (Aubier. 1982).

order. When he announced, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that «God is dead», he was not saying that he had killed God or that he hoped that God was dead. He was not announcing that he was an atheist or that to be an atheist was good. Rather he believed that atheism was a fact of life. As Werner Dannhauser writes:

The primary meaning of that statement is that religion has lost its power over human life, its social force. Thus a proof of God's existence would not refute Nietzsche, and a proof of God's non-existence would not corroborate him. What Nietzsche meant to teach us was that the *utility* of religion was at an end because the belief in its truth was at an end⁵.

This, to repeat, was not a theological but a sociological and political fact. Enlightenment rationalism and liberal Protestantism had undermined the credibility of revealed dogma. Large parts of Christendom had voluntarily transformed Christianity from a religion to a program for social and moral betterment. The chief remaining part, the Catholic Church, fought a vigorous rear-guard action to underpin its dogmatic claims and retain its social viability. Catholic conservatism was by no means dead; in fact it only took off after (and partly in reaction to) Nietzsche's thought. The point, however, is that all credible conservatism after Nietzsche had to take him into account. This occurred in Europe, with both good and bad results. The emergence, during the twentieth century, of various kinds of skeptical and pessimistic yet intellectually coherent political and cultural conservatism was a positive development. The bad result was the emergence of a series of «damn-the-torpedoes» variants of radical-right ideology, some of which led directly to Nazism and fascism.

The earliest, and in many ways the most coherent, radical-right movement was the *Action Française* founded by the Provençal writer Charles Maurras and others in 1899. Maurras proposed a blend of traditional royalism and legitimism, modern nationalism, and corporatism, that is the belief that society should be divided according to inherited ranks, roles, and privileges. The *Action Française* also welcomed the *Syllabus of Errors* and gained many adherents among militantly anti-modern Catholics, a policy that might appear incompatible with its nationalism. Nevertheless, the threat from liberalism and socialism and their alleged subversive and corrosive effects was so great that Catholic integralists—who believed that Catholic norms and dogmas should di-

5. «Religion and the Conservatives», *Commentary*, December 1985.

rectly govern society—found common cause with the royalist-nationalists of the Action Française.

Maurras found a temporary ally in one of the strangest figures of European political theory, Georges Sorel. In 1908, Sorel published his *Reflections on Violence*, which presented a unique but effective blend of revolutionary socialism, nationalism, and fragments of Nietzschean atheism. Sorel announced two principles that remained basic to all subsequent radical-right movements and to much of the radical Left as well: the need for elites as natural rulers of any society or political order, and the notion of a political myth, an irrational, emotional focus of allegiance, by which the elites control and guide the masses in their struggle against liberal democracy. Sorel influenced both Lenin and Mussolini as well as the academic theoreticians of authoritarian elitism in inter-war Europe such as Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto.

The inter-war years were bad years for democracy in Europe. Few believed in it with much fervor, and the best arguments seemed to come from those who denounced it as inefficient, outdated, useless, or even dangerous. Capitalism was even more exposed to ridicule and denigration, particularly after the onset of the Depression in 1930-1931. In the 1920s, there arose a movement in Germany that became known as the «conservative revolution». It was a mixture of elite theory, antidemocratic and anti-capitalist corporatism, and a cultural conservatism that managed at the same time to be vehemently anti-middle class and even in some cases bohemian in the attitudes and behavior it encouraged. Although the conservative revolution and its key figures, like the writer Ernst Jünger or the literary philosopher Friedrich Gundolf, were shunted aside or ignored by the Nazis, it played an underground role in the Third Reich. Many of the officers who plotted, in vain, to kill Hitler on July 20, 1944, had come out of the conservative revolution though others were loyal to old-style Prussian conservatism.

One figure associated peripherally with both the conservative revolution and Catholic conservatism was the German constitutional lawyer Carl Schmitt, who died, aged 97, in 1985. Schmitt is important in the history of conservatism because, although he was removed from teaching in 1945 because of his collaboration with the Nazi regime, his ideas have continued to enjoy broad diffusion among European conservatives. Those ideas are a unique blend of radical-right ideas, uncompromising realism, and Catholic integralism—all of them elements wholly foreign to American conservatives. Schmitt argued that the task of political authority is to prevent ideological confrontations from erupting into civil war. Therefore procedural norms—how authority is established and how it maintains itself—are less important than its ability to impose itself and enforce its commands. «The sovereign is he who controls the state

of emergency», Schmitt wrote, meaning that only an authority strong enough to seize and use dictatorial powers is a genuine authority. He also declared that any political entity only survives on two conditions: that the ruler, or sovereign authority, can define and defeat internal challenges to its power, and that he can distinguish friend from enemy on the international level. The distinction between friend and enemy, said Schmitt, is to politics what the distinction between beauty and ugliness is to aesthetics and between health and sickness to medicine. A state that cannot determine who its enemies are will not survive, nor will a state whose rulers or citizens believe that there are no enemies and that conflicts are due to misunderstanding.

The defeat of Hitler's Germany in 1945 included a wholesale discrediting of all conservative ideas, such as Schmitt's, that could plausibly (or implausibly) be associated with Nazi ideology. After 1945, democracy enjoyed an unexpected renaissance in Western Europe, and conservative parties and thinkers adapted themselves. Specifically conservative ideas became few and far between, and most conservatives were content to advocate political and economic liberty, perhaps tempered in some cases with a residual attraction for the strong state.

Serious conservative thought in Europe today is found mainly in two camps, neither of which is regarded with much sympathy by conservative parties of the countries in question. In Britain, there are Roger Scruton, Maurice Cowling, and the Salisbury Review circle, who are influenced largely by Burke. They seek to discover and describe the «natural bases of social life», rejecting both state interference with private property and the free market as a goal of social organization⁶. In the German-speaking lands, the economic and geographical basis of Prussian conservatism, the land of Prussia itself, no longer exists. After 1945, the very name «Prussia» was a curse. A change in this attitude began in the early 1980s, at first hesitantly, but now more confidently. Publishers like Wolf Jobst Siedler in Berlin and writers like the recently deceased historian Walter Hubatsch—both with deep family roots in Prussia—have resurrected the devotion to duty, stringent morality, and high political ethics of the best Prussians as models worthy only of ridicule today. Further south, the tradition of Austrian or Greater German conservatism had never suffered as much of an eclipse as Prussian conservatism, even though the Austrian Right had far closer links to Nazism than the Prussian. An important spokesman for South German conservatism today is Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, known to many American readers for his column in Na-

6. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 24 ed. (Penguin Books, 1984).

tional Review. Kuehnelt-Leddihn is also the author of substantial volumes of cultural criticism and analyses of the history of Europe over the past two centuries.

None of these thinkers, whether contemporary or older, have very much in common with American conservatism. To illustrate just how deep the differences are, let me conclude this essay by some comments on a speech by a leading American conservative, Stephen J. Tonsor, that I think well reflects some basic presuppositions of American conservatism⁷.

These presuppositions, as Tonsor expresses them, differ from the assumptions and outlook of European conservatives not so much in their overt content as in the consequences he appears to draw and how he interprets cultural evidence. To anticipate my conclusion, Tonsor remains a moralist and a reformer, whereas European conservatives properly so called are neither moralists nor reformers but ironic realists.

Tonsor's thesis is that true conservatives reject modernity and are Christians, «Roman or Anglo-Catholic». Modernity is «that revolutionary movement in culture which derived from a belief in man's radical alienation, in God's unknowability or non-existence, and in man's capacity to transform or remake the conditions of his existence». Conservatives, on the contrary, «believe that human institutions and human culture are subject to the judgment of God, and they hold that the most effective political instrument is prayer and a commitment to try to understand and do the will of God».

I am afraid that most European conservatives would smile condescendingly at this description of their agenda. Tonsor himself notes, without understanding its implications, that Nietzsche's critique made it impossible—not undesirable, *impossible*—to have religion «serve to provide a unified horizon» for society. To go about talking as though society can or should be governed by some form of Christianity is, therefore, to indulge in utopian illusions, which are precisely, and rightly, rejected by conservatives.

Modernity is not a set of attitudes to be taken up or rejected according to political or cultural preference. It is a fact—an objective stage of Western civilization. That is why the greatest modern conservatives are those who faced the challenge of modernity and surpassed it, not those who, in the manner of American fundamentalists, pretend that it does not exist. One of those who faced the challenge was the German writer Thomas Mann. Despite occasional pronouncements late in his life in which he tried to sound like a socialist,

7. A condensed version of the speech will be found in *National Review*, June 20, 1986, 54-56.

Mann was by temperament, personal style, and outlook almost as perfect a conservative as one is likely to find⁸. Now Mann's most prominent characteristic as a man and a writer was his irony, his manner of saying many things at once, of using ambiguity, deliberate circumlocution, and multiple layers of meaning to describe a certain reality. That is why Tonsor's attempt to prove that modernity is evil by using an example from Mann's writing fails ludicrously.

During World War II, Mann was in exile in California. While there, he wrote the great novel *Doktor Faustus*. I agree with Tonsor that it may well be «the greatest novel of the twentieth century» but for reasons entirely different from those he alleges. The novel is the life history of Adrian Leverkühn, a composer, whose active life spans the years 1914-1929. Mann wanted to do many things with this novel, and three are relevant here. First, he wanted to show the character of German intellectual life in the pre-1914 era, its extraordinary concentration on the life of the spirit, its obsession with convoluted and abstract argument, its fatally apolitical distance from the ordinary world. Second, he wanted to show the relation of this type of intellectuality and the sensibility that accompanied it to the surrender of so many Germans to the brutal ideology of Nazism, which so many of them misunderstood—because of their cultural heritage—as an ideology of national revival. Third, he wanted to describe the fate of German culture in the person of his protagonist Leverkühn. This is a man who by virtue both of his disposition and his cultural environment is incapable of other than highly neurotic or even psychotic personal relations. Leverkühn, who is psychologically unable to approach women, visits a brothel for the first and only time in his life and becomes infected with syphilis. He encounters the Devil, who «prefers good German, my best language», and who promises Leverkühn a certain time of creativity before exacting his inevitable penalty. Somewhat later, Leverkühn casts his pathetic affections on a young nephew. When the child dies from meningitis, Leverkühn regards the death as a sign that he cannot and must not love. He withdraws to a country home to compose a work that will «call back the Ninth Symphony». Beethoven's message of joy and brotherhood is an illusion; it must be undone. On a certain day in 1929, Leverkühn summons a circle of friends to hear his work and collapses, insane, at the piano. After eleven years of insanity, like Nietzsche, he dies, while war rages in Europe. His only friend, the narrator Serenus Zeitblom («the serene one, flower of time»), tells his story as the bombs rain on Germany.

8. On Mann as a conservative I recommend highly Erich Heller, *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German* (Henry Regnery, 1959, reissued by Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Tonsor regards *Doktor Faustus* as a condemnation of modernity and particularly notes that the narrator Zeitblom is evidently a «religious and pious Conservative—one, I take it, who had missed the Enlightenment». But who told Tonsor that Zeitblom speaks for Mann or that Mann supports Zeitblom's outlook? The evidence is to the contrary. In his earlier cycle of novels, *Joseph and His Brothers*, Mann told a biblical story in Freudian and psychological terms, specifically rejecting its religious truth. While writing *Doktor Faustus*, Mann made it abundantly clear in his diary-essay, *Novel of a Novel*, that Christianity was not for him. He refuted it as a cultural norm for exactly the reasons given originally by Nietzsche. Zeitblom, in fact, is a typical illustration of Mann's irony, which he here intended to be particularly poignant. The old man, a teacher of classical languages and an apolitical intellectual of the best German tradition, writes a story that clearly is beyond his understanding. His faith and the pathetic prayers for his country with which he ends his account are inadequate to cope with the horror and tragedy of Leverkühn's fate. What Mann shows in *Doktor Faustus* is therefore not that we should follow Zeitblom. That course is closed to us. Rather, he shows us that the spiritual abysses and self-destructing paths and temptations of modernity are inevitable. The only possible attitude that we can adopt in the face of them is the ironic distance that he himself cultivated.

Regarding religion as normative for society, Tonsor shows signs of another trait foreign to Continental conservatives, namely moralism. Talking about former Leftists and Marxists who style themselves conservative and try to lay conservative strategy, he comments: «It is splendid when the town whore gets religion and joins the church... but when she begins to tell the minister what he ought to say in his Sunday sermons, matters have been carried too far» Now a realistic and ironic conservative, to retain the metaphor, does not give a hoot whether the town whore gets religion or not. In fact, I rather suspect that he hopes she won't, and he certainly has no intention of trying to convert her. I may be reading too much into a metaphor but to me it indicates that even serious American conservatives like Tonsor are unable to shake off the moralizing reformism that is so characteristic of American culture from its Puritan roots to the present. This reformism has its counterpart in Europe not in conservatism but in liberalism and socialism. Temperance movements and the care of «fallen women» were, in the nineteenth century, activities of bourgeois philanthropists and working-class organizations not conservatives. The real, and to Tonsor probably shocking, approach of continental conservatives to these matters can be found above all in Austrian and South German literature, for example in Gregor von Rezzori's novel *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*.

What, finally, do the transatlantic differences in conservative outlook and attitudes amount to? Americans associate conservatism with free enterprise, limited government, private property, and religion. Historically and temperamentally, conservatives in Europe (with the partial exception of Britain) are profoundly suspicious of capitalism, believe in the need for a strong state and decisive political authority, care less for private property than inherited privilege, and are not uniformly religious. In fact, most European conservatives before 1945 did not like Americans at all precisely because America represented values and accomplishments they regarded as threatening, disruptive, and alien, and because Americans appeared to them as politically and socially naive. Since World War II, conservative parties in Europe, as opposed to conservative thinkers, have accepted democracy, pluralism, and the market economy. Their residual collectivism manifests itself as a tendency to support the welfare state far more than their liberal colleagues, which occasionally leads to curious alliances between conservatives and socialists. Conservative thinkers on the Continent, however, have not given up all the old principles. In the late 1970s, a group appeared in France calling itself the «New Right». It was concerned more with cultural than with state or government policy, but its position was remarkable enough for all that: a wholesale rejection of political democracy, pluralism, capitalism, and Christianity, and advocacy of supposedly superior pagan, Celtic, or even Indo-European principles of culture and society (whatever that may mean). In French terms, the New Right was an anomaly. It was Germanophilic and northern whereas the Action Française had been Mediterranean, Latin, and southern; it was pagan whereas the Action Française, again, was primarily political. Still, the New Right, which now appears on the wane, should teach us not to take conservatism for granted and much less to misread such a wide and disparate body of traditions, ideas, attitudes, and feelings by interpreting, it in American terms. If conservatism in this country means identifying with the basic principles of the Enlightenment, on which the United States was founded, we should recall that such principles are just about the last thing any true European conservative would ever be caught defending.
