

# Escape from the Antiworld

*James Kalb*

*Presented at the Roman Forum conference in Gardone Riviera, Italy,*

*July 6, 2011*

This conference raises a variety of questions. What is the present situation? How should we deal with it? How do Catholics go wrong? How can they go right?

In my talk today I'll discuss those questions in connection with the overall political situation. That's always a necessary perspective, since Catholicism is relevant to all aspects of life, but it's especially necessary today, since politics has absorbed religion. That's what it means to say that the modern world has become secular. The most basic issues are now viewed as secular and therefore discussed from a standpoint that is supposedly purely political.

That's obviously not a sensible situation, so part of what Catholics have to do is understand what it means and how to deal with it.

My talk will be based on the American situation, but I think that with adjustments most of it is applicable to the West generally. Europeans and others will have to decide what adjustments are needed. It's a very large topic I'm covering so I'll use broad strokes to indicate general trends that I think are decisive and need to be understood so that we can see politics from a Catholic perspective.

## **Current conditions**

America and the West now live under legal and institutional arrangements that are based on understandings that seem unbreakable. The past is discredited and almost unimaginable for most people. No one can imagine a future, apart from chaos and tyranny, that's anything but more of the same. People who want to roll back recent developments, or return to a pre-Vatican II Church that thought it could judge secular developments rather than put itself at their service, are treated as extremists who lack mainstream credibility.

People talk about diversity but there isn't any, certainly not politically. During the modern period Western countries have generally lived under a variety of political regimes. There have been republics and monarchies, Catholic and Protestant states, liberal and antiliberal governments, capitalist and socialist economies. There have been city states, principalities, nation states, and multinational empires.

In substance, all that is gone. The West today lives under a single political regime, which I'll call

managerial liberalism, that combines strong democratic claims and an emphasis on individual choice on the one hand with domination of social life by experts, functionaries, and commercial interests on the other.

All mainstream schools of thought, the supposedly religious as well as the supposedly secular, have been transformed into systems of support for that regime's basic principles. If you don't like democracy, diversity, or choice, or you don't trust the experts, there's something wrong with you. And if you think there's an authority outside the regime—outside the voters, experts, administrators, and market—that could call it in question and even at times override it, you're a fanatical extremist.

The managerial liberal regime is thought applicable not just to the West but to the whole world. Institutions working to extend its reach include the EU, NATO, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and organizations promoting what are now called universal human rights. They also include mainstream religious organizations. I attended a wedding not long ago at a very pretty Episcopalian church (what non-Americans would call an Anglican church) in small town America. On the walls, instead of the Stations of the Cross, they had the Stations of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

## **Sources**

What's going on? Why the uniformity, crusading spirit, and insistent perverse orthodoxy in an age that supposedly opposes crusades and believes in diversity?

## ***Historical***

Part of the answer is that upheavals caused by war and other events that seemed to demand a strong unified response have made politics, or at least the administrative machinery of the state, more all-encompassing. Those events have led to destruction of whatever interferes with efficiency or central control: local differences and traditions, the habit of treating most things as essentially nonpolitical, and respect for goals other than uniformity and effectiveness.

Another development has been the narrowing of political choices as one possibility after another has supposedly been discredited. The First World War meant an end to traditional and multinational monarchies, the Second to any serious European Right and any strong conception of national sovereignty.

The two wars were followed by prosperity, TV, cheap jet travel, globalized markets, the contemporary welfare state, and the continued industrial organization of the whole of life at the expense of local and domestic arrangements. People today eat at McDonalds, children grow up in daycare, and local establishments have been replaced by chain stores and the Internet. Those tendencies have combined to turn more and more of us into cogs in organizations and immerse us all in a universal consumer society that combines commercialism and bureaucracy.

The world wars were also followed by the Cold War. As a modern war, the Cold War centralized

social life and increased government power, and as a struggle of ideas, it made Western thought more single-minded and ideological. Western governments became accustomed to social management and grand universal principles. With the collapse of Soviet communism, the last remaining nonliberal form of modern political life, governments with time and energy on their hands were free to follow those tendencies without external check.

### ***Intellectual and spiritual***

So much for historical background. That background is important, but absolute dominance by a single view is not likely to be a matter of particular chance events. In social matters, disturbances like wars mostly accelerate tendencies that already exist. The state of the West today is the outcome of principles that have long been guiding events, principles that have turned out to require official suppression of many things that have always been basic to human society—religion, cultural particularity, even the distinction between the sexes.

But what are those principles and why are they important enough to sweep away all past forms of society? The answer goes to basic matters. Our current public order claims to separate religion and politics, but that understates its ambitions. What it wants to do is liberate public life—and eventually, since man is social, human life in general—not only from God but from nature and history. Order and purpose are to be treated as free human creations rather than innate features of reality. Until that happens, neither thought nor action will be free.

The intended result is an increase in human freedom and, through modern natural science, an increase in the usefulness and certainty of human knowledge. The actual effect is that our interpretation of the world, and therefore knowledge and the realities we are authorized to take into account, become social constructions. The world becomes what those with social power make of it. Politics becomes everything. Reason, reality, and individual conscience or conviction, which were supposed to be the guiding principles, disappear as independent standards.

The consequence is that liberal modernity becomes totalitarian. Every social order requires an authoritative view on life, death, and other basic matters so it can make decisions that have to be made. Today's secular Western public order claims the right to decide those issues on its own. It thus claims religious authority. If you want to know the meaning and value of life and death, you look at the political order and its authorized interpreters. That is what is behind, for example, the abortion decisions.

That is why I'm talking about specific aspects of supposedly secular politics at a conference on Catholicism. Politics has become religion. Man has made himself God, and politics is the authoritative expression of his mind, will, and spirit. We are living, at least publicly, not in the real world made by God, nature, and history, but in an antiworld created by human will.

### **Liberalism**

Liberals sense on some level that there is a problem. That's why they're obsessed with Naziism. They've noted that modern politics has a natural tendency to slide into unlimited tyranny. That's

also why they're obsessed with pluralism, tolerance, rationality and so on. The modern tendency to reduce everything to power and will threatens those things, so the strongest measures are justified to preserve them. The problem, of course, is that strong measures not limited by transcendent principles themselves become tyrannical. The cure becomes the disease.

The liberal view is quite rational given basic principles characteristic of modernity. People believe that wanting to do something is what makes it worth doing. They view the good as the satisfaction of preferences simply as such. In addition, all preferences, and all actors, are equally preferences and actors, with no higher standard to say one is better than another. It follows that they all deserve equal treatment, so each has an equal right to satisfaction.

On such a view, the uniquely rational approach to social order is to treat it as a sort of machine—a soulless technically-rational arrangement—for maximizing equal satisfaction of preferences. Politics becomes social technology. That view is the basis of the current Western public order. It's what—in effect if not in so many words—is taught in the schools, what respectable mainline religion says, and what social policy and serious public discussion is based on.

The contemporary liberal order claims it is neutral and accommodates a very wide variety of religious and philosophical views. In fact, it is an order like any other, and insists on practical compliance with a particular view of the world. In that view, for all practical purposes, there is no God and no objective moral order, just atoms, the void, and human subjectivity. The only meaning things have is the meaning we give them. As a result, there are no intrinsic natures or goods. Nothing has an essence or natural goal or reason for being, everything's just a resource to be used for someone's purposes.

Under such circumstances, there's no substantive reason apart from personal taste to choose one goal over another. So what we get as a public standard is the abstract logic of liberal morality. In that view good conduct is not about choosing what is good but choosing freely and allowing others to do the same. Morality becomes a formal system that has nothing to say about how to live but only tells us how to keep out of each other's way so we can all pursue whatever goals we prefer.

That sounds like a principle of freedom. In fact, it's an infinitely expansive principle that in the end limits very narrowly what is permissible. In the liberal view, private hobbies and indulgences are OK, since they leave other people alone. So are career and consumption and expressions of support for the liberal order. You can be a liberal yuppie all you want, it maintains the system and falls in line with its goals. What is not OK is harboring—let alone putting forward and acting on—any ideal of how people should understand life and their lives together that's at odds with the liberal one.

Such ideals affect other people, if only by affecting the environment in which they live, and the fact they affect that environment in a non-liberal way makes them intrinsically oppressive. If you say “hooray for the traditional family” or “Islam has some basic problems” you're being oppressive, because you're helping construct an environment that disfavors some people and their goals. In the end, the contemporary liberal state feels compelled to put an end to that kind of oppressiveness.

What's not allowed in liberalism is taking seriously the things people take most seriously. You're allowed to accept various theoretical beliefs and spiritual practices, you can say you're a Catholic or Muslim or Odinist or whatever, but whatever you mean by that has to be practically consistent with the liberal view. In effect, that means that you have to accept that such views are a matter of personal taste.

The problem with that limitation is that man is a social and a truth-seeking animal. What matters most to him is what orders human relations and what is most real. So requiring him to treat something like Catholicism as a matter of personal taste means insisting he accept that at bottom it doesn't matter much. It becomes an optional self-help system that's legitimate to the extent it makes him a happier cog in the machine but has no substantive content of its own that can be allowed to matter.

Those who reject liberal limitations on permissible belief are treated as dangerous cranks and excluded from public discussion. The arguments are obvious. The established system is based on equal freedom and technical rationality. People who oppose it must be against equality, freedom, or both, so they're oppressors. Or maybe they're against technical rationality, so they're anti-science. They're irrational in any case, since the dominant view is based so directly on reason. So why should anyone listen to them? Why shouldn't they be shut up as a public nuisance and possible danger?

We're all immersed in such attitudes, simply by living in the world today. It's very hard to avoid being affected by them and even accepting them to some degree. We need to understand them and keep in mind how they work so that we can overcome them.

## **Internal conflicts**

Not surprisingly, there are problems with the outlook I'm describing.

For starters, there are conflicts built into the idea of making equal freedom—which, in a managerial liberal state, is the same as equal satisfaction of preferences—the highest goal. If individual preference is supreme, whose preferences win when there are differences that can't be reconciled? Also, how does freedom relate to equality? How does either relate to efficiency—which is what maximum preference satisfaction amounts to—or to managerialism—that is, to the view that expert functionaries ought to tell everybody what to do? Those things are all supposed to go together, but some of us have doubts.

## ***Opposing parties***

How such questions are answered depends on who you ask. For people who like action, the obvious implication of making maximum preference satisfaction the supreme good is unlimited pursuit of career, power, and money in a sort of competitive free-for-all. Individual choice is good, we're all equally actors, and every desire has a right to satisfaction, so let everyone do his own thing and go for everything he can get!

As stated, the view's more purely individualistic than people like. To be salable it has to take the social aspect of life into account. The way it does that is by extending the preference for outward-turning action to the action of the community as a whole. Just as each of us “goes for it” in everyday life, our country should “go for it” in international relations. The result is mainstream American conservatism, which favors markets, entrepreneurs, and minimal regulation at home, and cheers on the American team abroad in its attempt to spread the American way of doing things everywhere.

That view is egalitarian in its way, in the way competitive sports are egalitarian. We are all equally free to enter the competition, and the rules are supposed to be neutral and reward those who compete best. It encourages economic activity, and it's consistent with the project of extending the liberal order globally. Nonetheless, it doesn't please everybody, even among the people who run things. In particular, it doesn't please experts, officials, and explainers, who are enormously influential in a complex, bureaucratic and highly technological society like our own.

This second group of people is less interested in action and acquisition than in comprehension and control. The latter two go together today, since modern thought is anti-contemplative: as we said, it views order not as intrinsic to the world but as something we put into the world. That view makes knowledge a kind of control. The experimental method and the technological outlook tell us, after all, that to understand something is to put it in an order that enables us to make things happen.

The result of that understanding of knowledge is that those who pursue knowledge merge with those who pursue power. The two get together and try to put the world into an order that can be controlled, the simpler and more effective and manageable the better. The ideal is a universal system of social management run by expert functionaries that secures and fine tunes maximum equal preference satisfaction. Think of the EU writ large.

To create such a system, human society must be simplified and centralized. That means, among other things, limits on enterprise and competition. If everyone “goes for it” and we leave it at that, some people will be left behind and chance will play a very large role. So everything must be controlled so wins and losses can be limited and distributed rationally. A managed system also rules out unilateral foreign interventions, which don't fit into a world run by experts and legal procedures.

For those reasons this second group is at odds with the first. So within the present political system there are two parties: right liberals, who in America are called conservatives and like the competitive free market and a venturesome foreign policy, and left liberals, who in America are called liberals and like international law and the politically correct redistributive welfare state.

Political disputes today mostly have to do with the struggle between those two parties. The first favors actors and doers, the second experts and officials. With that contrast in mind, the first party often gets its way in practice—the big bucks often end up going to the big guys—even though the second is stronger in the world of theory and public discussion.

The struggle between the parties is real, because it is based on opposing interests and points of

view regarding life and the world, but it is also limited. From the standpoint of ultimate standards, the two parties are not very different. Both are secular, and accept equality and preference satisfaction as ultimate standards. The difference is one of emphasis: left liberals emphasize equality and security, right liberals opportunity and effectiveness.

I'd add that the two are mostly the same kinds of people. Their personal and professional interests are similar. They are ambitious professionals who go to the same schools and identify with their peers and superiors rather than the people generally. Left liberals claim to be disinterested egalitarians, but they are as much concerned as right liberals with making their way in the world. Right liberals talk about economic freedom, but like the left they are mostly experts and managers who are happiest with a controlled overall system.

The result is that in the end the two are not far apart on policy. Left liberals accept the market, right liberals accept extensive government intervention in economic and social life, and both accept American empire. Hence present-day political stagnation. We're ruled by two parties that don't differ that much and aren't likely to change, since they correspond to basic complementary aspects of the regime.

### ***The people***

So much for the people who run things. What about the rank-and-file, the workers, voters, consumers, and housewives who aren't high level managers, experts, entrepreneurs, officials, or explainers? They have serious disadvantages. As the rank-and-file, they are not particularly rich, qualified, competitive, or well-placed. That gives them limited political influence in an extensive, dynamic, and technically complex society that aspires to a general system of social management. Their numbers carry some weight, but it's hard for a disorganized mass of people with a sporadic interest in public affairs to compete with pros who are always on top of the situation.

Under left liberalism, which is especially strong in Europe, such people are managed and looked after, but nobody who counts takes their views seriously. In America, where right liberalism has more influence, they mostly tend to drop out of sight as a separate class. Americans think of their country as a free, democratic, and classless society in which individuals make a difference, the actions of the government are actions of the people, and everyone can be whatever he wants to be. Such views make it difficult to see rulers and ruled as distinct and opposed. That is why people who complain about "elites" or "the system" are considered a little crazy, and if the people in general feel estranged from government the accepted conclusion is that there's something wrong with the people in general.

A further disadvantage the people have is that their way of life has been disrupted by commercialism, industrial organization, the welfare state, and political correctness—that is, by the various efforts to replace traditional institutions and abolish traditional distinctions. People who run things don't like social conservatism. Family, religion, particular culture, and local autonomy resist external supervision and control. They go their own way on principles that have nothing much to do with maximum equal preference satisfaction, so they get in the way of the project of constructing a rational system of justice, freedom, and prosperity. So they have to go,

except where they can be converted into consumer goods and lifestyle accessories, or—in the case of religion—into self-help systems or ways of spiritualizing liberalism.

The effect of such tendencies is that ordinary people become more and more like a proletariat without significant part in public life or effective institutions of their own. The way they live goes downhill. Family life disintegrates. Religion turns into mush. Neighborhoods become less neighborly. Electronic entertainment propagates ever cruder habits and attitudes. Employment ties loosen as globalization puts jobs constantly in play and multiculturalism weakens common loyalties and understandings in the workplace.

In spite of it all the people mostly support the two parties, although with less and less enthusiasm. Those who like action support right liberalism, those who like looking after people and keeping everything tidy support left liberalism. The alternatives, after all, are cynicism, resentment, indifference, and apolitical self-indulgence. Some people protest at Tea Parties or pursue conspiracy theories, but they rarely get anywhere, and when they do their victories get reversed. Most people go along with what's going on, pursue their private interests, or sit on the sofa and watch TV.

The people who run things don't object to that state of affairs. An inert and ineffectual people won't get together and cause trouble, and they provide consumers for business, clients for government, and a compliant workforce. If their way of life is getting cruddier, that shows there are lifestyle liberties. If family life falls apart, that means men will be less demanding and women more available to employers. It also means that children won't pick up backward ideas at home because they will be brought up by TV, the government, commercial enterprises, and each other. And if women don't have children, men drop out or become anti-social, and young people grow up self-centered and nonfunctional, that just shows that bureaucratic controls are needed or market incentives have to be fine tuned. Yuppies don't have most of those problems to the same extent, their career aspirations keep them disciplined, so if the people have personal issues why don't they all become yuppies?

## **Fundamental weaknesses**

That seems to be where we are. Things have taken a basically wrong turn. Liberal modernity tries to turn the world into a machine for manufacturing satisfactions, but we aren't satisfied. Whatever its defects, we'd rather live in a world than an antiworld, especially when the defects of the antiworld are even worse.

So what do we do about it? Luckily, the system has weaknesses that go deeper than the conflict between liberals who like enterprise and liberals who like experts and administrators.

When liberal modernity insists that the good is the preferred, and the world—at least for practical purposes—is atoms, the void, and human subjectivity, it leaves out some basic things. It leaves out Catholicism, of course, but it also leaves out tradition, common sense, and any reasonable understanding of natural law—that is, any reasonable understanding of the innate nature and tendency of things.



Liberal and modern opposition to Catholicism is open and obvious. Tradition gets some praise, at least in America, but the praise is for liberal traditions that eradicate more substantive ones like understandings of the family. Common sense hardly gets mentioned. It has to do with customary ways of thinking that have no authority or even legitimacy in a world that rejects “prejudices,” “stereotypes,” “deeply rooted social expectations,” and other legacies of a discredited past. As for natural law, the liberal and modern view is that men, actions, and things don't have an innate nature, they're just raw materials that we can use for whatever purposes we want. To think otherwise is narrowminded and even bigoted.

From the standpoint of liberal modernity, a basic problem with Catholicism, common sense, and so on is that they take into account everything man has ever thought and experienced. That means they provide a reality check that threatens the sole authority of economic and bureaucratic rationality and the will as the supreme standard of value. That makes them intolerable. The conflict can only get worse, since liberal modernity is progressive and therefore increasingly intolerant. Whatever it can't remake in its own image it excludes as oppressive and irrational and eventually tries to destroy.

## **What to do?**

So how do you deal with a society that declares itself exempt from judgment by any standard but its own, and denies not only Catholicism but tradition, common sense, and natural law—that is, the idea that things have their own nature and meaning apart from political decisions?

It's tempting, but we can't just try to ignore it. We're immersed in it, and it affects us, so we have to understand it for our own preservation.

Also, we are concerned with other people, and people start with what they've been told. If something seems wrong they look for something better, but they want the changes to be as minimal as possible. So to deal with modern people we have to understand the problems within the modern world that they can recognize as problems—as moderns, as liberals, or simply as human beings—and be able to show what the implications are.

It's a difficult process. People don't want to deal with basic issues. They drag their feet and try everything they can before making a radical break from what they already accept. There's no magic way to change that, so we need to understand what things people accept that contain the seeds of something better, and keep trying to push the argument to the next level.

## ***Seeds of the logos***

But where do we find something to start with in the modern world? In antiquity the seeds of the logos, as apologists called them, were everywhere, from popular beliefs to the central doctrines of the most-admired thinkers. When Paul addressed the Athenians he was able to appeal to Greek religion and the Greek poets.

Modern times are less innocent. The views taught in the schools and presented on TV reject

Christianity, tradition, common sense, and nature, because it's thought that doing away with those things is liberating. The seeds of the logos are nonetheless present all around us, since they are present in everything that exists, but hidden in features of everyday life that are denied, ignored, or misunderstood, and in rebellions against liberal modernity.

### ***Everyday life***

Let's start with everyday life.

Liberalism modernity is parasitic. It emphasizes reason and freedom, but is basically at odds with them and with the coherence of personal and public life. It can exist only because it is incomplete.

In particular, it needs common sense, natural law, and the Christian and cultural heritage of the past, all of which it rejects, to function at all. Reason requires belief in a world that has order and meaning independent of our purposes. Applying reason to concrete situations requires a commonsensical grasp of the nature of things that tells us what they are and what they are for. Public and private life require restraint and loyalty, and therefore willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of higher goods in which we all participate and that make us what we are.

Aggressively radical forms of modernity like fascism and communism crashed and burned because they pushed their principles too hard. Liberalism feels its way step by step. In the long run it too will destroy itself, because it puts the will first, so that reality eventually comes to seem an intolerable restriction. People understand that on some level. Our job as Catholics is to develop that understanding, make it more explicit, and push it farther.

An obvious example, which is generally recognized within the Church, is issues related to family life. Family life is based on nature, it's molded by history, and it's oriented toward God, if only because man is oriented toward God, and family life is basic to how he lives. Liberal modernity doesn't want to hear about any of that, so it can't make sense of family life. So it tries to minimize it or turn it into something else like contract or personal fulfillment. That's why it's such a point of contention today. The liberals seem to win all the arguments, because the appeal to freedom and equality always wins, but there's obviously something wrong somewhere. Our job is to make it clearer where that is. So far Catholics have failed to do so. The reason, I think, is that we have treated the issues too much in isolation, without tying them to a general vision of social life and the world generally. That will have to change.

### ***Rebellion***

The radical defects of the modern world make rebellion against it inevitable.

The liberal world or antiworld is defined by rebellion against God, nature, and history. Thieves fall out, rebels even more so, so every part of the liberal world is in rebellion against every other part. People know that the present setup doesn't make a lot of sense. That's why there's no such thing as the party of order today, and the great political slogan is "change."

All present-day political movements are rebellions of one sort or another. Left and right liberals define themselves by rebellion against each other and against the system as a whole as it actually exists. Left liberals rebel against the greed and love of dominion unleashed by the liberation of the will, right liberals against the smothering system of petty restrictions created by the cult of equality and the expert. What keeps the two together is their common interest in maintaining a system that gives them both a place and enables them to advance their goals.

The people rebel against both parties. They know there's something amiss, and don't see why they should take what they're told at face value. They're told they're in charge but they're not, and that they're free, equal, and happy but that's not so. What keeps them mostly on board as a practical matter is their natural tendency toward loyalty, their lack of definite leadership, organization, and vision, and the advantages of sticking with a going system.

All these rebellions make some sense because they're all aimed at illegitimate authority, and they're all based on recognition that something essential is lacking. They fall short though because they don't know what the right standard would be and what legitimate authority would look like. They are partial rebellions that can't succeed because they accept the basic assumptions of liberal modernity.

## **Anarchism**

Popular rebellion against the ruling parties takes a variety of forms.

The left is traditionally the party of rebellion. It's hard for them to keep that up today, because principles that fundamentally oppose those of the left have mostly been purged from the public order, but some still make the attempt.

Modernity has turned out to mean liberation through compulsion. That doesn't make a lot of sense, so there has always been a faction of the left that wants a more absolute form of liberation. So rebellious leftists sometimes oppose government simply as such, because by definition it's unequal and unfree, and take up anarchism.

Anarchism doesn't have a coherent theory, structure, or goal, so the attempt can't go anywhere. It leads to funny costumes at anti-globalization protests but not a lot else. Its main effect is to strengthen left liberalism, because it demands a more absolute form of freedom and equality, and the political demand to realize the absolute always strengthens the party of bigger government. So it works against its own goals.

## **Populism**

Somewhat more coherent forms of rebellion are found on the right, the side that's defined by resistance to the progress of liberal modernity.

In spite of general political inertia ordinary people sometimes get fed up and rebel. The usual standard they adopt is how things look to them or what they remember from years gone by. For that reason populism—the pure form of popular rebellion—is normally conservative. The basic

idea is that everything will be OK if we just get rid of the weird stuff so things can go forward in a normal way.

At bottom, populism is rejection by the people of their rulers' outlook and authority to the extent it's at odds with their own sense of things. It's a popular vote of no confidence. People who run things of course don't like that. Their response is that the complainers are ignorant, irrational, and bigoted, and their demands should be ignored. They can't really be the people, because if they were they would want what the experts say they should want.

The Tea Parties are a case in point. People didn't like the big expansion of government activities and spending so they complained. The reaction was shock, incomprehension, and obscene mockery on major national TV networks. The response might have been more colorable if it hadn't been so abusive and extreme. Rejection isn't policy. The people are non-theoretical, so their views are usually poorly articulated and their goals shifting and inconsistent. Populism is a sign that something has gone wrong with the relation between the governing classes and the people, and when that happens something more developed than popular outrage is needed.

That's why populism never succeeds. It lacks organization, leadership, and vision, and can't develop them because once it does it's no longer populism. So it loses focus and gets distracted, and any victories it wins get reversed. Courts or legislatures reverse them or administrators find way to ignore them. Referenda on social issues—affirmative action, gay rights, and so on—provide examples.

## **Libertarianism**

So if something more coherent is needed, what do we do? The usual answer today is libertarianism. Libertarians try to satisfy the need for a definite focus and program with something clear and simple: leave us alone. If everyone looks after himself and his own, what happens will at least make sense to those involved. Why wouldn't that be better than what we have now?

If an ordinary person doesn't like the way he's governed, and wants a simple way to get rid of a mass of problems, that sounds good. A government that does very little won't do many bad things. It sounds especially good in America, where there's always been an emphasis on limited government. Even if it's too simple to be altogether believable, it still makes sense that how we're governed and the theory behind it would matter less if we were governed less.

In many ways libertarianism is a less compromising form of right liberalism. Right liberalism claims to free the human spirit from bureaucratic interference, but ends by accepting big active government. It's the view of a faction of the ruling class, and big active government increases ruling class control. How serious is right liberal opposition going to be?

Libertarianism cuts short the leftward slide by dogmatically limiting government to enforcement of property rights. That may be an effective way to curb suffocating bureaucracy, but it does nothing about other burdens on the human spirit, like commercialism and careerism. Libertarians want to free us, but the free spirit isn't the spirit that can do whatever it wants, which is an

impossible goal in any event. It's the spirit that has an opportunity to do something that makes sense and that matters.

That depends at least partly on setting, and libertarianism means an impoverished setting for human life. It emphasizes law, and makes it the basis of social order, but allows it no role other than protecting property. That implies a setting in which only economic issues are taken seriously. If something threatens property public authority is available to deal with the problem. If something threatens other interests it isn't. Everything else is a private concern that from the standpoint of basic social interests can go either way. That's not a setting in which the human spirit is likely to soar.

There are of course other problems for libertarians. Their theory assumes that everyone can look after himself, but none of us is able to do that at all stages of life. And they have no sense of a social order, so they're unlikely social reformers. They want to deal with political problems by getting rid of politics, and the way they propose to do that is by persuading people that internet entrepreneurs and science fiction fans have the right slant on things. That's not likely to happen.

## **Social conservatism**

A problem with all the people I've discussed so far—right and left liberals, anarchists, populists and libertarians—is that they try to get rid of the defects of the liberal order by adjusting the power of its components rather than changing basic institutions and understandings. They try to deal with the antiworld created by liberal modernity from within that same antiworld.

Left liberals want to enhance the power of experts, professionals, and administrators. Right liberals want to give more scope to people who run particular institutions, from startup businesses to nation states. Anarchists want to get rid of power altogether, populists want to put the people in the driver's seat, and libertarians want to leave everything up to the independent individual. In each case the favored class is expected to follow its own habits, inclinations, and interests, and that, given the correct distribution of power, is supposed to lead to better things.

Social conservatives bring in an additional element. They have something in common with each of the other groups. Like left liberals, they think people sometimes need to be watched over and taken care of. Like right liberals, they believe in institutional independence. Like populists, they want to give popular ways and understandings more play. And like anarchists and libertarians, they want to get rid of the all-pervasive administrative state.

They differ, though, in favoring institutions and principles that are not part of liberal modernity. Official liberalism wants to channel all social life through institutions—expert bureaucracies, large businesses, global markets and the like—that our governing classes understand and control and that claim to be neutral facilitators of human purposes. Populists, libertarians, and anarchists want to cut back on the dominance of those institutions, but have no other institutions or standards to propose. The result is that they mostly just want to be left alone so they can do what they feel like doing.

Social conservatives in contrast emphasize informal, local, and traditional institutions—family,

church, local community, particular culture—that aren't part of the order defined by liberal modernity, and they want them to be guided by the standards and understandings that have traditionally informed them. So they add something quite different to the mix. From a general human standpoint social conservatives are normal human beings who accept normal aspects of social life. From the liberal standpoint now established, they're crazed radicals obsessed with the desire to impose arbitrary structures of oppression.

As that description suggests, social conservatives get a bad press, everyone in power hates them, and they always lose. Worse, they have a hard time explaining their position even to their own satisfaction because public discussion is so purely modernist and liberal. The result is that institutions like family, local community, and religion, and the distinctions that enable them to function, are viewed as irrational and hateful. Responsible people treat getting rid of distinctions like sex, religion, and cultural community as one of the basic responsibilities of government and all decent people. That's what's taught in the schools, that's what everyone says on TV, and no contrary arguments are publicly available. So it's hard to fight.

## **Neoconservatism**

Neoconservatives try in their way to deal with that situation, but again they try to do so within the limits of liberal modernity.

The term includes a variety of people who want to strengthen and preserve liberalism by retaining some ties to the past and somewhat nonliberal values. Minimal neoconservatives are simply right liberals who push militant patriotism and who like the free market because it makes people disciplined and energetic. Others have broader interests and favor a more general social conservatism that sometimes involves a tailored version of Catholicism, natural law, or whatever.

Either way, the idea is to argue for social conservatism or at least greater social discipline as a way of propping up the liberal regime. The basic argument is that nonliberal elements—family, religion, prerational loyalties, and so on—are necessary for liberal institutions to survive, and since they're necessary they must be consistent with liberalism.

The argument never gets anywhere.

The problem is that liberalism is not necessarily consistent and stable long term. Liberal principles are progressive, so they get more and more demanding as time goes by. In the long run they suppress every nonliberal value and institution. So neoconservatism always gives ground and eventually concedes every point at issue. Its goal is to maintain the presence of nonliberal concerns in social life and public discussion, and the price it pays is subordinating them to liberal principles. The practical effect is to make those concerns ineffectual.

## **Catholicism**

To summarize: we've seen that liberal modernity, which claims to be a modest, tolerant, and rational outlook that lets everyone follow his own best understanding of how to live, is actually an

increasingly aggressive and imperialistic system that ultimately insists on regimenting and transforming the whole of life.

When it's as dominant as it is today, the natural response is to try to deal with the problems it creates without contesting basic principles. That's what right liberals, left liberals, anarchists, populists, libertarians, and neoconservatives all try to do.

It's what Catholics try to do when they join those movements.

It can't work, because the logic of freedom and equality as ultimate standards is too exacting. They eventually eat up all limitations. That, unfortunately, is likely to make liberal modernity an extremely stable system—what I've been calling an antiworld—until it becomes altogether unworkable. So the struggle for a social order consistent with Catholicism or even some version of common sense and natural law may well be a long one and suffer a lot of reverses.

So we should hope for the best but prepare for the worst. The future is in God's hands, and we can only do our best. What we need more than anything else in our situation is a point of view that is intellectually and institutionally independent of liberal modernity. The problems all mainstream movements of resistance run into show that you're not going to get anywhere unless you can appeal to an intellectual tradition and structure of authority that's different from the one now in control. I have no idea where such a thing could be found other than in the Church and its teaching. Above all, we have to stick with Peter.

The basic point to remember in all this is that truth must come first. The way you get out of an antiworld is by remembering the real world and making it the standard. You don't give up basic points that admit the legitimacy of what you detest for the sake of apparent practical advantage. And putting truth first especially means that God—the truth that transcends and orders all other truth—comes first.

Re-establishing truth let alone God as the most basic principle of social order sounds alarming to most people today because we're all liberals at least in part. We need to step back and think what making God the standard means and what the alternatives are. It doesn't mean establishing a theocracy that looks like Iran only with Grand Inquisitors instead of Ayatollahs. It means accepting the obvious final standard for any complex of discussions that deal with basic issues: what is true. That can be done without violent revolution or throwing people in jail or immediate radical change of particular institutions. All that's needed to turn the corner is changing how things are discussed.

Any coherent discussion is always going to have some final standard. Whether that standard becomes tyrannical depends mostly on how it's applied. If you apply the standard “let's all be happy” by shooting everyone who doesn't seem happy, that would be tyrannical. If you apply the standard “man needs God” by doubting human virtue and wisdom, including your own, that wouldn't be tyrannical.

I've explained how equal freedom as a final standard becomes tyrannical because its demands eventually become unlimited, and because it's secular, which most often means it's something we can know all about and achieve through straightforward practical means like force.

It seems to me truth as a final standard is better than that, even from the standpoint of freedom and equality. If God comes first then principles of freedom, equality, compromise, moderation, local autonomy, common sense, overall rationality and everything else can all get due credit without one tyrannizing over the others, because they can all be ordered by the proper master principle. If you put anything else first then you're turning something into a highest principle that can't function as such, and that automatically means oppression.

Every actual system of life is mostly based on truth anyway. Error can't sustain itself, so the wholly rationalized managerial liberal regime is an illusion. It doesn't really work the way it says it works. What allows it to function is features like loyalty and sacrifice that it can't explain or justify. Catholic social teaching is mostly just a matter of facing up to reality. A Catholic social order would restore the West and the world to itself. That has to be non-oppressive. So why not go for it?