

## ON BEING DEEPLY CONSERVATIVE

By Gabriel Moran

This paper is a reflection on the meaning of **A**onservative. Given current usage, it is inevitable that many people will assume that I am talking about the opposite of **A**beral. While that conclusion is inevitable, it is also unfortunate. A division of thinking into liberal and conservative does damage to almost all institutions, but none more so than religious institutions. The theory and practice of religious education is pulled into this dichotomy which immediately limits our thinking about what religious education is and how it should be practiced.

The use of **A**beral and **A**onservative in the United States today has a double origin: the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century and the progressive movement at the end of the nineteenth century. The split between the left and right side of the French assembly gave us **A**onservative meaning before the revolution and **A**beral meaning freedom from king and priest. Throughout the nineteenth century, liberalism was concerned with the freedom of the individual from government interference. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that in the United States everyone was liberal, that is, skeptical of government intrusion.

Toward the end of the century, however, some people began to recognize that the chief threat to individual freedom was not the government but the unrestrained business corporation. Thus began a crisis that liberalism has never recovered from. People who had thought of themselves as liberal now had to reverse their thinking about the role of government. The transitional term was **A**rogressive which at first was up for grabs; many of the early progressives were Republican business men. However, **A**rogressive soon became the cover for liberalism to reverse its thinking and invite in the government, especially to help those who were most exposed to economic exploitation. After the election of 1912, progressive became equated with liberal. Those who were still suspicious of government and fought progressive reforms came to be called conservative. As is often pointed out, a twentieth-century conservative is what the nineteenth century called liberal.

The result by the late twentieth century was a confusion in the meanings of both terms. Liberalism, having nearly reversed its meaning, is unsure of what it stands for. Conservatism had a fairly consistent meaning until the last forty years when its defense of business interests against government interference overwhelmed a useful skepticism about utopian planning. The bankruptcy of the current usage of **A**onservative is indicated by its separation into **A**ocial conservatives and **A**conomic conservatives. Republican conservatives of 1950 would not recognize much kinship with either category.

It seems likely that what **A**conomic conservatives advocate undermines what **A**ocial conservatives defend, a kind of nineteenth-century morality. The term **A**ocial conservative is rather funny because **A**ocial was always a mantra of the progressive reformers (**A**ocialist got a very bad reputation in the United States). As for conservative standing for something called **A**additional values, the term value has almost no moral history before the nineteenth century. In the 1960s, **A**values was the mantra of those trying to overthrow traditional notions of virtue. **A**value did originate as an economic term before it migrated into ethics so perhaps there is some logic to **A**onservatives attaching on to values.

One of the worst parts of the story is that progressive was set against traditional in the late nineteenth century. That choice still affects us and influences people's use of liberal and conservative. John Dewey had a lot to do with setting progressive against traditional. By the 1930s, Dewey was very critical of progressive schools and tried to reconstruct the meaning of **A**progressive.<sup>i</sup> He failed because he made no serious attempt to rethink his use of **A**additional<sup>o</sup> when applied to schools.<sup>i</sup> To this day much educational writing and many schools of education use **A**additional<sup>o</sup> as a description of what is wrong with education. To reject the authority of king and cleric may be healthily liberating; to reject tradition is suicidal.

It might seem desirable to avoid the terms conservative and liberal but they are not going away. What is needed is a conservative approach to the meaning of conservative, that is, an appreciation of the roots of the term that go back well before the French Revolution. In a longer view of history, the current use of **A**conservative<sup>o</sup> in the United States ought not to go unchallenged. To call Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay or Karl Rove a conservative is a bizarre use of language. Despite current contortions of the term conservative, a more genuine conservative attitude has lived on among people who care for the land, forest and lakes, people who work to preserve or repair urban neighborhoods, people who celebrate ancient religious rituals. We cannot give up on tradition and the task of conserving tradition lest it fall into decay through neglect.

Many authors raise a passing complaint about the opposition of liberal and conservative but then with a reluctant sigh they go right ahead and describe the world that way. If they try simply to substitute new words, one of two things is likely to happen: either the new contrast will die aborning, or else it will succeed in getting a following but with the result that the original problem is further obscured. As an example, Noah Feldman's recent book, *Divided By God*,<sup>ii</sup> is on liberal vs. conservative regarding **A**church and state issues.<sup>o</sup> The book has a single principle and some good examples for rethinking how the government deals with religion in the United States. (Most people recognize **A**all of separation<sup>o</sup> as a metaphor but miss the fact that **A**church and state<sup>o</sup> is also an unhelpful and fairly recent legal metaphor). For describing the current opposition, Feldman uses **A**secularists<sup>o</sup> versus **A**evangelicals.<sup>o</sup> The latter phrase is clumsy to start with. And as a term that includes Catholics, Jews, Muslims and others it is a disastrous choice. One has to have a tin ear for religious language to choose **A**evangelicals<sup>o</sup> as a replacement for **A**conservative.<sup>o</sup>

If one agrees that the opposition of liberal and conservative is not a help to understanding, then the most effective strategy is not to abandon either term. Instead of replacing both terms, what has to be replaced is their opposition. What so often happens when there is a contentious and murky opposition between A and B is that the way out is the discovery that B can only work by including A. Arguments become most intense when both sides are right - and both sides are wrong. John Dewey regularly used this mode of reasoning: not a middle ground between A and B but a recognition that at a deeper level B must include A. When his attempt at a solution did not work well it left people confused as to which side he was on. Dewey, of course, thought he was on both sides - and neither side. When Dewey did not go deep enough historically (for example, his analysis of **A**religious<sup>o</sup> which is surprisingly shallow) he is unpersuasive.<sup>iii</sup> When he writes to overcome superficial dichotomies of freedom versus discipline, child versus curriculum, or academic versus industrial education he has a

surer footing.

A current example in today's ethics is the opposition between relativism and absolutism. People who are unhappy with this choice offer pluralism as an alternative.<sup>iv</sup> Pluralism, like relativism, admits of a diversity of views but it does not deny that there is a right and a wrong. It is difficult these days to oppose pluralism; isn't that simply the world we live in? Nonetheless, it is legitimate to ask: Is pluralism plural? Or is it an ideology that admits only one view, the pluralists? That's a serious question. Pluralism which claims to be inclusive fails to include either absolutism or relativism. The answer to a conflict between A and B is not found mid-way between them, nor in simply naming a C.

The way to deal with plurality is to have the absolute include the relative. The way to maintain plural views without ending in chaos is to put these views into relation with each other. Instead of condemning relativism, we need to ask what a particular ethical principle is relative to. Every ethical principle is relative to something, starting with the language in which it is expressed. Simply by reason of being a *statement*, that is, words in one language, an ethical statement cannot be absolute or universal. That does not mean it is merely relative; instead, it is nothing less than relative; the richer and deeper its relations, the more closely it can approach universality or the absolute. For a plural outlook to be sustained, it has to include the relative (many views in relation) and accept the absolute (the totality of all relations).

In trying to overcome a split between liberal and conservative, it is important to start with those words rather than conservatism and liberalism. By definition, these latter two words are opposed. But if one starts from conservative or conserve, there is no reason why liberal is the opposite. In fact, the only way to conserve all that is best in the past is to be liberated from elements that are always a threat to our continuity with the past. I don't think it works as well the other way. To see conservative within liberal is a more paradoxical line of thought. In any case, I think it is more important that the intellectual class - authors, scholars, professors - recognize a positive meaning of conservative as the needed context for their liberalizing work.

#### Education

A 1949 document on the teaching of religion had this interesting description of education: It has a two-fold function: to pass *on* tradition and to *pass* on tradition.<sup>v</sup> The two processes are in tension with each other. But it is clear that one cannot do the second - to *pass* upon or critically examine a tradition - unless the tradition is being passed *on*. Even as tradition is accepted, it is helpful to ask what might be an obstacle to a fruitful appreciation of the tradition. The community of today may have to be liberated from some present constraint by discovering deeper in the tradition why an element is there and how best to change it.

Fundamental to education - and especially religious education - is the understanding that one cannot simply step outside one's tradition or simply shuck it off. For example, whatever moral code was absorbed in one's childhood has to be reconstituted in one's adulthood. To suppose that one can simply adopt another way of thinking and acting is the sure road to illusion and self-deception. A critical approach to one's tradition means challenging the truth of one premise and seeing how that move affects the rest. Liberation is almost always to something better within the tradition. If there is any liberation from one's tradition, it is to a deeper, richer tradition that includes some of the

best elements of the former tradition.

The twofold function of education requires distinct forms or settings in which the emphasis is on one of the two functions. The primary role in the passing *on* of tradition is the family and its extension to tribal, ethnic, national, and religious loyalties. Mostly through story and ritual, a person absorbs a way of being in the world and looking at the world. Tradition is mainly the *passing on*, only secondarily what is *passed on*. As often happens in the English language, the verb disappears into the noun, and we confuse tradition with the residue left by tradition.

The function of *passing on* tradition, critically exploring a process not separate from ourselves, is the role of the school, or more precisely, the classroom. Schools themselves can be part of the traditioning process and an extension of the family. Schools, especially when the students are young children, cannot get very far from the family. But as students get older (beginning in elementary school and continuing to all forms of adult and university education) the tradition is conserved and kept healthy only by asking tough questions of it.

University faculties are often criticized for being too liberal. I think there is a criticism to be made here but that formula puts it badly. A college professor's job is liberal and liberalizing thought. The question is whether there is a conservative context for liberal thinking. In the area of religion, many professors are dismissive or contemptuous of religion but without much knowledge of the area. A teacher in the United States is awash in religious traditions that are part of the fabric of the nation. An historian or a sociologist who is ignorant of religion will be hampered within his or her own field of scholarship. The classroom is not a place for proselytizing but the traditions of the students deserve respect and the tradition of the teacher needs acknowledgment. The problem of some college professors is that they assume they are removed from any tradition except science, rational inquiry and the search for truth.

Those who think of teaching as enlightening the mind usually have Socrates as their hero and model. Socrates plays that part in modern educational theory, though philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche struggled with an ambivalent attitude toward Socrates. Since Nietzsche, there has been a resurgence of interest in Socrates's opponents, the Sophists.<sup>vi</sup> Like the Pharisees in the New Testament, the picture of the Sophists is drawn by their opponent. One could not deduce from the New Testament that the Pharisees were the reformers of the tradition, those who emphasized love as the basis of law, those whose views were very similar to the reformer, Jesus of Nazareth. So also we could not get from Socrates that the Sophists (meaning wise men) saw education as a function of community and teaching as the provision of good example. What is called Socratic questioning presupposes a passing *on* of the tradition in family and civic community.

The chief lesson that Socrates left us (one not always remembered by those who invoke his name) is that a teacher cannot transmit knowledge to the student. Some people who do accept this principle conclude that **N**o one can teach anyone anything. **B**ut they are considering **T**eaching **I**n too narrow a context. If they would go back to the pre-socratics in Greek thought, to the prophets in Israel or to Buddhist tradition in India, they would find that teaching is about showing a way of life to those being initiated into a community, and providing good example to participants in the community, whatever their age.

A recent poll of professors in schools of education asked **Should teachers be conveyors of knowledge who enlighten their students with what they know or should teachers see themselves as facilitators of learning who enable their students to learn on their own.** The vote was 92%-8% in favor of the second description. What I find depressing is that apparently 100% of the professors answered. Why would someone think that those two descriptions are logical alternatives? Most experienced classroom instructors understandably shy away from the metaphor of **conveyor of knowledge.** They know there is no way to guarantee enlightenment of students by assuming one can pass knowledge from the head of the teacher to the head of the student. But the alternative that is offered by the poll's question is loaded with the therapeutic language that either avoids asking what teaching is or assumes teaching is an oppression to be avoided. Presumably teachers want to make learning easier (facilitators) although learning is sometimes hard work. They might want to **enable learning** but whether that can be done and how it can be done are questions about the nature of teaching. Why students are better **learning on their own** rather than in dialogue with the human race and with their physical environment puzzles me.

What is **transmitted (traditioned)** in education are the human use of physical objects, including writing, and community practices. Most religious traditioning is done through community rituals. Knowledge in the form of religious beliefs is secondary, beliefs being the least inadequate expression of the life of the community. Many practices of a community are meaningful precisely because they are meaningless to outsiders. Dietary laws are the most obvious case for reminding members several times daily that they belong to this community and not to the outside world. Reformers often miss this point. In the 1960s the Catholic church abolished the rule of meatless Fridays. Anthropologist Mary Douglas said of the Catholic church's attempt to substitute love of neighbor for not eating meat on Friday: the color signals are being manned by color blind people.<sup>vii</sup>

Religion has never fared very well in the classroom. I think one has to acknowledge that religious education in a classroom is a near impossibility. On one side, the rationally trained teacher is impatient to cut through the seeming irrationality of much in the tradition. On the other side, the classroom instruction is under the watchful eye of the guardians of orthodoxy. Frequently, the classroom is forced into trying to be an extension of the community's effort to pass on the tradition. The madrasas of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan today are doing something not so different from what many Christian church schools have done. Ultimately, it will be futile but in the short run it can be dangerous. The tragedy is that the classroom, while indeed a threat to elements in the tradition, is nonetheless the only effective way to conserve the tradition for anyone exposed to the tools of modern technology and secular culture.

What the classroom can do is open up a dialogue with other religions but first of all there is needed a dialogue within the tradition. That means an appreciation of the deep past. The problem with many self-described conservatives today is that they are not that much interested in the past - the whole past. They have favorite **propositions** that are supposed to embody eternal truths, but that attitude shows little respect for the past or for key monuments of tradition, including literature said to be sacred. As George Lindbeck has noted, fundamentalism is a product of modernity; people called fundamentalists **are** likely to be suffering from vulgarized forms of rationalism

descended from Greek philosophy by way of Cartesian and post-Cartesian rationalism reinforced by Newtonian science.<sup>iii</sup>

### Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is a twentieth-century phenomenon. The name comes from a series of twelve paperbacks published between 1910 and 1915. A defense of the fundamentals of Christianity might be a worthy project. But a fundamentalist movement, dated from 1920, was a defense of the bible seen as a series of divine pronouncements. Since a defense of every statement in the bible would be an impossibly complicated undertaking, the actual defense is a highly selective one. Defending the idea of creation makes sense, although getting into a scientific fight with biologists seems an ill-advised way to go about it.

The emotional center of the movement has usually been moral questions that so upset the nineteenth century. Much of the language of sexual morality was born in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Terms such as sodomy, masturbation, sado-masochism are no help to thinking about the sexual life of human beings. Abortion, for example, has obvious moral implications. But it was in the late nineteenth century that it became the enormous crisis that is still with us. Evangelical Protestants supported the physicians in their successful quest to control the health profession of medicine. (Roman Catholics had little to say on the matter).<sup>ix</sup> Roe versus Wade at a later date can be seen simply as a power shift between physicians and women. There is no obvious proposition in the bible for condemning abortion so it is simply lumped with murder.

The most curious example of finding divine pronouncements in the bible concerns homosexuality. It should be recalled that **h**omo-sexual is a peculiar word, half Greek and half Latin, invented in 1870. It was coined as the name of a crime or a disease, a way to stamp some human beings as a deviant form of the human species. Amazingly, in the course of a little over a century, the word became, for the most part, a morally neutral term for the sexual orientation of those people who are inclined toward same-sex love. The bible has no such word and no such idea; the bible literally has nothing to say about homosexuality. That fact has not prevented the growth of a widespread belief that the bible condemns homosexuality. The usual texts cited include Leviticus 18:22: **Y**ou shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination and Leviticus 20:13: **W**hen a man lies with a man as with a woman it is an abomination; they shall be put to death. (Advocacy of the second part of this verse seems neglected in today's preaching). The assumption that Christians regulate their moral lives by the Book of Leviticus is intriguing. If that is going to be done, perhaps Leviticus, chapter 19, on love of one's neighbor, is more relevant to the question of homosexuality than chapters 18 and 20.

The New Testament text usually cited is Romans 1:26-27, where Paul is shocked at encountering sex between men. **T**he men giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Would Paul condemn homosexuality if he knew about it? What would he think of sex between men being **n**atural? I think if he could look at today's urban scene he would see examples of sexual love between men or between women that are models of love of God/love of neighbor. He would probably still be shaken up by some of today's cultural trappings. Where I feel certain he would still condemn sex between men is in our prisons. A recent poll estimates that 60 % of the two million people in U.S. prisons are sexually active. No one thinks that

most of that sex is homosexual; the proper name for most of it is (heterosexual) rape. That's an abomination worth getting agitated about and invoking Leviticus and St. Paul.

My point is that anyone deserving the name conservative ought to treat the biblical literature with respect rather than as a grab bag full of divine propositions to be ransacked in support of a moral position. Jim Wallis regularly points out to his fellow evangelicals that there are hundreds of biblical texts about caring for the poor; Christians who are enthusiastic about the book of Leviticus might start with Leviticus, chapter 25, on forgiving debts.<sup>x</sup> The clearest criterion in the New Testament for the judgment of one's life is in Matthew 25:31-46. "I was hungry and you gave me food....As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." And those Christians who seem obsessed with hitting people over the head with their version of the so called ten commandments might try occasionally reading the Sermon on the Mount. A few years back when the Clintons were in the White House the Southern Baptist Convention decided that the New Testament text "wives obey your husbands" had preeminent importance. Their decision was the lead story on all four network news programs. I was asked by a CBS talk show if I would participate in a discussion of this momentous event. I said I would be happy to discuss how one might be morally inspired by reading the bible, but discussing a divine mandate that Hilary should obey Bill was about the last thing in the world I would like to do.

#### Conservative Reform

In all religions, though most obviously Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions, which are mortgaged to the past, the great reforms are conservative ones. Reform means forming anew but one cannot do that without a return to origins and a wide knowledge about subsequent tradition. A patchwork of biblical and patristic statements will not be conservative enough.

In the great reformation of Western Christianity, Martin Luther returned to the origins of the Christian church, proclaiming *sola scriptura* as the criterion of belief. He was not opposed to tradition but he saw the need to challenge numerous accretions within the tradition. In a legitimate concern that tradition be defended, the Roman Catholic officials insisted on a second source of divine revelation: tradition as well as scripture. Thus began a controversy that lasted into the twentieth century: Is revelation contained in scripture alone or is it contained in both scripture and tradition? The problem with the question was the word "contained." A rethinking of the relation between scripture and tradition first required a recognition that revelation is not contained anywhere. The scripture is not a deposit of revelation but testimonies of faith in a revealing God. And tradition is not a supplementary list of beliefs but the life of the church that is in constant need of reformation.

The present pope, Benedict XVI, is an interesting test case. The young Joseph Ratzinger rebelled against the deadening neo-scholasticism in the seminary of the 1950s. That was a healthy and intelligent reaction. Ratzinger became a keen student of Augustine which was no doubt helpful. And in his reading of Bonaventure, Ratzinger played with some radical ideas of reform around the idea of revelation.<sup>xi</sup> Unfortunately, he does not seem to have developed a deep appreciation of Aquinas, a source which has fueled much of the best Catholic church reform of the past century. In recent decades Ratzinger fell back on formulas that emerged out of sixteenth-century polemics. He constantly uses "the Christian faith" when in fact he is referring to Roman

Catholic doctrine. He refers to ~~A~~he Christian revelation, ~~@~~as a source of absolute truth.<sup>xii</sup> Aquinas would have found the phrase ~~A~~he Christian revelation ~~@~~unintelligible as would every other prominent Christian writer until the sixteenth century.

My hope for the pope, therefore, is that he becomes more conservative: some Aquinas with the Augustine, a bit of Meister Eckhart with the Bonaventure, less reliance on sixteenth century polemical phrases; a use of the word faith more in line with the bible and a use of ~~A~~evelation ~~@~~hat connects with his own younger self in the 1950s. Perhaps being pope will be liberating; at the least one does not have to worry about career advancement.

The old have a good chance to be liberal conservatives, an opportunity to recover some of the rebelliousness of their youth but now chastened by a wider experience of what life brings: the good and the bad, joy and sorrow, fear of death and the quiet acceptance of one's mortality. If there is a conflict of generations in the world, it is not usually between the young and the old, but it is rather a clash of the young and the old against the middle. The most radically subversive teachers in the world are probably grandparents who, despite the approach of death, are a sign to the very young that life and death are not mutually exclusive nor are liberal thinking and a conservative respect for the past.

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  2. Noah Feldman, *Divided by God* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).
  3. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 23.
  4. Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
  5. American Council on Education, *Religion and Public Education* (Washington: ACE, 1949).
  6. G.B. Kerfeld, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
  7. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 42, 51.
  8. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 51.
  9. Robert Burt, *Death Is That Man Taking Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
  10. Jim Wallis, *God ~~s~~ Politics* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).
  11. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1984).
  12. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Jesus*: [www.Ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFUNICI.htm](http://www.Ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFUNICI.htm).