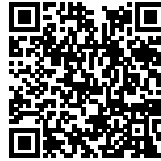




CONSERVATISM AND THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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From among the various ideological and political movements, the conservative movement is widely considered as a natural ally of the Catholic Church. This claim is made not only by its opponents, who for more than two centuries have been presenting the Church as the most backward of institutions, hostile to the spirit of progress, but also by those, who see in the Church the last defender of natural social bonds.

However, this thesis cannot be applied to all of Christianity. When we take other Christian communities into consideration, especially those which have their beginning in the Reformation, it is difficult to assign them *en bloc* conservative sympathies. On the contrary, some of them exhibit features of almost revolutionary radicalism. But this is not surprising, as the Evangelical message has always brought, and still continues to bring, a breath of refreshing "revolution."

Therefore, is not the simplified identification of Christianity with an attitude that only preserves and strengthens the existing tradition, as inappropriate a simplification as the statement that, in reality, only "new things" are important? Even if the alliance between the Church and conservatism has been a relatively constant occurrence since the French Revolution, it is worth considering whether this is a result of actual similarities between the Christian (or broader, religious) and the conservative perspectives of the world, or whether it is a result of random historical circumstances.

In this necessarily short analysis, I would like to consider the sources of the conservative attitude and its similarities to the religious view of reality, to show the characteristics of conservatism as political phenomena, and to have a closer look at the relation between conservatism and Christianity.

1. The Natural Character Of The Conservative Attitude

While conservatism as a political movement is a relatively recent phenomenon, the conservative attitude seems to be timeless. The problem it faces, namely the problem of our attitude towards continuity and change, is connected not only with the social or political dimensions of life, but remains directly rooted in the human condition itself, as well as in our metaphysical understanding of the world. As is known, already at the dawn of European civilization, in the philosophical dispute on what really exists, beside Heraclitus' vision—which above all noticed the constant struggle and movement in the world (which takes place, however, in an order strictly imposed by *logos*)—the vision of the most radical "conservative" of all times appeared—that of Parmenides, who managed to preserve reality in a state of

perfect unity and stability at the price of ignoring and repudiating as non-existent all diversity and change.

However, it certainly is not the speculations on the first principle which constitute the origin of the conservative attitude, but rather this attitude finds its initial source in the internal structure of the human being itself. This is because the conservative attitude is deeply rooted in the very essence of being human. It is natural and spontaneous. Although human life consists of a series of changes and ever new experiences, a constant concern is ineradicably present; a concern for the preservation of everything that is considered as one's unquestionable good, starting from the most basic values, such as physical existence, and ending on the highest values—a concern, which is simultaneously a concern for the preservation of one's own identity and for the preservation of one's own self in the fullness of one's own personal and communal existence.

An important philosophical standpoint, which emphasises this concern for the preservation of one's own self while also making it the central anthropological theme, is that of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas, who, in his concept, refers to Aristotle, brings our attention to the fact that every living creature without exception has a natural inclination towards the protection of its own existence. Furthermore, the behaviour of animals is determined by an equally natural disposition, which drives them to protect their offspring—it is precisely in this disposition that it is possible to find the source of the most elementary social behaviour. On the other hand, more developed forms of such behaviour and the uniquely human tendency to social life, [have their source](#) in rational human nature. These three natural inclinations not only influence humans directly (that is, they define one's spontaneous reactions even when one is unaware of them), but also through reason, when one is aware of them as their "natural laws," as one's obvious objective, which one should always strive for. The classical standpoint on natural law presented by St. Thomas is based on just this natural human tendency to care for the preservation of all, which constitutes one's unquestionable, natural good: for one's self, one's family and for the broader community with which one permanently identifies one's self.

This powerful charge of conservatism, deeply rooted in metaphysics and in the concept of being human, has left us by a thinker, whose influence on the development of the Christian, especially the Catholic, outlook on the world cannot be overstated, undoubtedly had a considerable influence on the affability with which, since the nineteenth century, the Church has looked upon conservative groups. However, it is worth mentioning, when recalling St. Thomas' thoughts, that he noticed, apart from these natural conservative inclinations which operate in humans, a powerful dynamizing tendency—the

infinite drive for the truth, as “[man has a natural inclination to know the truth about God](#),” which, besides the tendency to social life, determines the way of existence typical of rational beings.

2. The Communal Significance Of The Conservative Attitude

Let us take a moment to look at the communal dimension of human existence, where the conservative attitude finds its specific, political significance. What does it mean that a human is a social being? As [Aristotle had already noticed](#), in contrast to animals, which instinctively group into flocks and herds, humans, as beings endowed in speech and reason, are bound together by a common belief in that which is good and that which is evil. The human community is, therefore, an ethical community in the deepest sense. Caring for one's own ethical community, for its ethos (the system of values, customs and behaviour accepted within its framework) to be upheld and to remain unquestioned, is equally obvious to every person, just like his concern for his own self—in fact, they are one and the same. This is because who we are—how we understand ourselves, our objectives, our tasks, our calling—remains closely bound to our sense of belonging to an ethical community.

Of course, people may also group together based on short-term and instrumental objectives, and in this way create a social network of various communities, groups and associations. However, given human nature, there is always a community which constitutes the final point of ethical reference—as easy or difficult it may be to define. It is precisely the ethos of this community, that is, the set of values professed within it, which constitutes the unquestionable, absolute good for the individual who identifies himself with this community. Absolute, in the sense that, when looking from within the community through the eyes of its members, apart from the specific contents of the given ethos, there is nothing else, which could constitute a measure of good and evil.

Such communities that, for the individual, constitute the final point of ethical reference, could just as well be called religious communities, if it were not for the fact that some of them, by definition, are un- or antireligious, as in the case of many contemporary ideologies. Their antireligious—which in our cultural circle simply means anti-Judeo-Christian—nature should not conceal from us the fact that they are also communities built on absolute (in the sense described above) values. They are, to their members, the final point of ethical orientation; hence, also shown to be quasi-religious communities.

This is because, religion, in its deepest sense, is the bond between people. It must be stressed that this is the strongest possible bond, based on a common belief in that which constitutes our absolute good.

Religion is the formation and nurturing of such deepest ties, and is, therefore, also the continuous concern for sustaining the community and for the preservation of its ethical foundations. If we look at religion through the prism of its binding function, perceiving it primarily as the adhesive (based on absolute values), which holds human communities together, then in every religion or quasi-religion without exception, its essential and necessary element turns out to be an attitude that preserves its ethos, irrelevant of the religion itself and of the ethos that binds its followers.

3. The Paradoxes Of Political Conservatism

Without the conservative attitude, there can be no talk of identity, either individual or communal. Without it, we could neither be ourselves, nor would there be any strong ties connecting us to others; ties, which constitute the basis of our closeness to, and responsibility for, others and for the whole community. The conservative attitude is so natural to humans, so obvious and spontaneous, that it normally is not noticed or even thought of. In order for it to become something that people are aware of and which is consciously chosen as a political program, certain exceptional circumstances must occur, which openly question its obvious and natural character. Conservatism, now understood as an ideological and political movement, is by no means natural, but rather, it is reactive—it is the reaction to certain phenomena and events, in the face of which ethical communities recognize that their way of being and the values which they wish to preserve are direly threatened.

Revolution proved to be such an event-catalyst, which somehow forced the birth of the ideological conservative movement and which still sustains it in existence. Although the revolution broke out in late eighteenth century France, it was not a one-off event; but rather, it continues—constantly undergoing metamorphoses—to this very day. Before the Revolution there was no place for conservatism as a political ideology. It was not only unnecessary, but even unthinkable in a situation where any breach of the ethical foundations of a community (which nowadays occurs always and everywhere) was generally regarded as shameful and as a violation. This ideology could only emerge once the public opinion was dominated by ethically uprooted people, who in the name of a projected, abstract community, were prepared to destroy the previously existing community and its ethical foundations—everything, which up until then, had been considered sacred, permanent and inviolable. Even if, therefore,

conservatism as an ideological formation is presently still an intellectually and politically attractive movement, and even if it is currently undergoing its renaissance, this does not as such prove the

strength of its ideas—the conservative attitude is, after all, always alive—but rather the strength with which the idea of revolutionary destruction is attacking the world of values in which we feel at home. The assertion of conservative ideas only makes sense, and can count on support there, where the ideas of revolution are widespread and where the threat of annihilating the existing ethical order still exists.

However, it is difficult not to notice that conservatism as a political formation remains entangled in deep paradoxes. The first of them is its above-mentioned reactive, and, therefore, negative or even defensive, nature. Conservatism, although asserting the positive idea of protecting the ethical foundations of the community, in fact—just like every political movement, which must win its identity in the struggle for power with its opponents—builds its program and its identity on the negation and rejection of the program proposed by the advocates of radical changes. Meanwhile, the ethical foundations of the community are protected and strengthened, not merely through political activities, but by living “in accordance with values,” through the daily cultivation of all, which, for the community, constitutes its essential ethical core.

Moreover, conservatism as the conservative attitude is something formal, empty in content; therefore, something which is dependant and incomplete. Not only does this make it different to Christian and non-Christian religious communities, but also to other political movements, such as socialism, liberalism or nationalism, which build their identity around a particular leading idea that is based on some defined system of values. Conservatism as such does not in itself contain any particular leading idea. It always exists in symbiosis with an “ethical feeder,” by which it can develop and which, at the same time, it strengthens. It always assumes the previous existence of some particular community, which possesses a defined ethos, that is, a set of values which constitute it, and, therefore, something, which in itself is not conservative, but rather something which can and should be preserved. However, this means that depending on the circumstances, diametrically different programs may be concealed behind the slogans of political conservatism. We can find an example of this already at the beginning of conservative political groupings: on the one hand, the movement initiated in England by Edmund Burke, who aimed to protect social life based on liberal (in the classical understanding of this term) values, on the other hand—French conservatism, a traditionalist movement, which refers to the pre-Revolutionary order, for which, many of the values advocated by British conservatives would be unacceptable.

Reaching back in our memories to more recent times, it is worth remembering that the label “conservative” was also used—and not without reason—in reference to members of the PZPR [Polish

United Worker's Party], who were called the "party's hard hats," because they were hard to influence, resistant to any changes. Although such an interpretation of the term "conservatism" may, understandably, seem distasteful to advocates of conservative ideas, the meaning of the term "conservatism" in itself does not exclude it.

Moreover, it is easy to imagine that even that, which seems to be the exact opposite of conservatism, may also undergo preservation—that is, the idea of revolution itself, thus taking on the form of permanent revolution. When this idea becomes the common element that binds a group of revolutionaries, it immediately takes on the role of the ethical basis of their community, which, within the framework of this community, must be protected and preserved as a permanent constituent of it. This is very well illustrated by one of the most influential mechanisms that preserves a certain type of social behaviour—a mechanism, which is contemporarily called *fashion*. Fashion, based on the natural reaction to adjust to the prevailing customs, acquires a conservative function within a community. When it reaches the point that the violation of the prevailing principles and the breaking of taboos in all dimensions of life cease to be considered excessive and become *fashionable*, we are dealing with an obvious case of preserving the revolutionary attitude in the form of a custom.

Yet another paradox of conservative thinking is revealed when we consider the ambiguous situation that the advocates of conservative ideas find themselves in, in a world ploughed up by revolution. When a new order emerges after a sudden political change, and if this order continues for a longer period of time, both new institutions, as well as new attitudes among the people, are perpetuated. Finally, the moment comes when the conservative supporters of the old order, no longer have anything left to preserve—that, which was old, has irrevocably gone, and that, which is new, has been perpetuated. At a certain point, a conservative must, if he wants the return of the old world, become that, which he hates the most—he must become a revolutionary. This is the paradox that French conservatives experienced in the nineteenth century. Many of them came to the conclusion that it was necessary to destroy the prevailing new order, which had emerged many years before and which had been accepted, in large, by society, and, with the use of force, to reinstate the old order—they called for a conservative counterrevolution, which would not in so much be a program of action directed against the revolution, but rather a new revolution directed against the new, already implemented, order.

It is hard not to notice that, to some degree, the countries, which, after 1989, broke free from the shackles of totalitarianism, also found themselves in a similar situation. Decades of the "new totalitarian order" left their mark and advocates, who, attempting to operate under the banner of conservatism,

should ask themselves what can and should be preserved, and what it would be necessary to abolish and uproot as quickly as possible, in order to ensure that the construction of a new society and a new state does not prove to be merely a slightly modified version of the previous one. Also, the years following the fall of communism was a time where the new (old?) behaviour had already taken the form of habits and social customs, defining, whether we liked it or not, the ethical identity of our country [Poland].

4. Is Christianity Conservative?

The Church as a religious community, the members of which are bound by a specific, defined set of values, and which is, moreover, the most numerous community of this type in our cultural circle, has obviously become the main subject of attack by advocates of the revolution. It is, therefore, not surprising that the political conservative movement, which formed as a reaction to the revolution, emerged as its natural ally. However, an ally, which declares its alliance on the political level, when faced by an obvious common threat, does not necessarily prove the existence of a deeper unity of ideas or identity. As already mentioned above, there is a fundamental disparity between the conservative and the Christian perspective of the world: on the one hand, we have the conservative attitude, empty in terms of contents, on the other—a particular religious community founded on a defined system of values. This disparity does not prevent the symbiosis between political conservatism and Christianity in our cultural circle, and, furthermore, already as "Christian conservatism" protects the sustainability of a community based on "Christian values."

Conservatism, although not necessarily, may certainly be Christian, but the key question is: in how much is Christianity essentially conservative? Of course, as in every ethical and religious tradition, the conservative element is ineradicable; hence Christianity must also be, to some degree, conservative, as must every community—including a community of radical revolutionaries—which wishes to maintain its identity. However, it is worth asking whether, in the Christian community, this conservative element does not undergo substantial modification because of its particular Christian contents? The essential content of the Christian message is, after all, not based on the possibility to, once and for all, reduce its principles to an established code of proper conduct, the observance of which makes us members of the Christian community. While it is inconceivable for a Christian not to observe the Ten Commandments, in this case, their conservative attitude concerns respecting basic values, which, as necessary conditions for the existence of any community, bind all people of good will, regardless of their ethical or religious origins.

What is specifically Christian is not a closed system of norms, requiring continuous protection, but an openness to an infinitely rich reality, with an excess of meaning, inviting one to plunge into it, even if they will never be able to fully penetrate it in this world. A Christian's ethos is dynamic; it is something that has not been defined once and for all, but is rather given as a path for one to take, along which new challenges constantly await. God, in which Christians' put their trust, wants us to give Him praise, not in any fixed location, but in Spirit and in Truth.

Among the many places of the Gospels, revealing this extraordinary identity of the Christian community, which aims to maintain old proven values, but also, to be open to new things, Jesus' conversation with the rich young man seems especially significant—the man asks Jesus what he should do to achieve eternal life. He receives a twofold reply: above all protect and care for that, which you have been given within the framework of the community in which you live—keep the Commandments: you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother and love your neighbour as yourself. But this is only the first step, the bare minimum; the observance of which seems to be essential in order for the community to be able to continue to exist safely and in peace.

On the other hand, whoever really aspires to perfection, is called to something more. He is called to sell everything he has and give it to the poor, and having freed himself of all which bound him, to then follow Jesus, wherever this path is to take him. This radical call to perfection, the call to follow the path of Christ, seems to protect Christians against the absolutization of the conservative attitude, from the excessive attachment to all that, although making up our evident good, belongs to a world in which we are only passers-by.

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***Featured image:** The three orders (the clergy, the nobility, and the Third Estate), in Honoré Bonet's L'arbre*

des batailles, *ca. 15th century.*

