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Severed Flower
Conservatism
Without God

By Rabbi Daniel Lapin



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The Severed Flower: Conservatism Without God

By Rabbi Daniel Lapin

Ladies and gentlemen, I come before you today to propose that the Judeo-Christian tradition lies at the roots of American conservatism and that its extirpation constitutes the crisis of our movement. My title, "The Severed Flower: Conservatism Without God," speaks for itself. Clearly, I believe that conservatism — or any political movement — needs the nourishment of a religious force in order to survive. Let me stress the urgency of the problem beyond the flower analogy. In today's crisis, our severed flower must battle not only the natural forces of entropy, but also an active and diligent enemy. I propose, therefore, to examine first our political opposition and to determine whether and to what extent modern American Liberalism is motivated by its own "religious" convictions.

Please examine your left wrists: How many of you have mechanical watches? You usually find many more mechanical watches at conservative gatherings. I lament the passing of the mechanical watch. I know that electronic timepieces and digital watches probably enhance punctuality, but they lack the moral message of the mechanical clock.

My father, who was also my teacher and my rabbi, used to encourage me as a child to attempt to repair all the broken mechanical timepieces around the house. Inevitably, this involved dismantling the piece and confronting what appeared to be hundreds of little cogs and wheels scattered around the tabletop. Whilst doing this, I would entreat a benevolent Deity to make the dashed thing work again; as it turned out, my prayers were seldom answered.

One day I finally asked my father, "Why do you make me persist in these futile endeavors?" He said, "I'm glad you asked that. I want you to notice something, and I want you always to remember this: whilst there are many ways to put the clock back together, only one way works."

As I eventually made my home in Los Angeles, "that Babylon by the Sea," in Adam Meyerson's phrase, I remembered the moral message of the mechanical clock, and I realized that there are many ways to organize a civilized society, but only one way actually works. To give certain variations in governmental and societal structure their due, we should express that thought more precisely. I do not claim, for example, that a nation whose head of government is a prime minister, rather than a president, is on that account worse than, say, the United States. I do maintain, however, that certain fundamental principles of social organization are universal.

Now, a word of caution. In asserting that there is only one possible set of principles for organizing society, I do not guarantee that the many and various people, who all believe in that set of principles, will in practice be able to cooperate harmoniously. Let me illustrate this with an analogy.

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Suppose we sought out an urban gang (conceding, just for the moment, that such a thing could be found in our capital city), and we presented to this gang the task of destroying this building, with whatever resources they required. How long do you suppose it might take them to reduce 214 Massachusetts Avenue to rubble? I doubt it would take very long at all.

But suppose we then brought in a team of architects, contractors, and construction engineers, provided them the resources, and asked them to reconstruct the building? It is very much more difficult to construct than it is to destroy. Furthermore, unlike the complex task of construction, the single-minded pursuit of destruction produces an easy, unquestioned, inevitable unity. Our urban gang will find themselves unifying in a delirious frenzy of destruction; it will be a delightful, mutual experience.

But when we bring in our reconstruction team, the majestic moment of birth gets deferred during a lengthy gestation, as they debate the countless permutations, the different ways of constructing the building, the materials, the layout, all the countless possibilities. This will occur despite the fact that they agree on fundamental principles: that the building should be attractive, the structure stable, and the cost reasonable. What is more, during the decision-making process, the team members will appear to outsiders (and even to themselves) to be at odds with one another.

To see more clearly why this is so, let me offer you another analogy. Suppose I challenge you to a contest of strength: to move a 300-pound weight a distance of twenty feet. However, I get to choose the course over which we must move this weight. You will transport it from the ground to the top of a two-story building, and I will transport it from atop the building to the ground. We'll both move it twenty feet, a fair test of strength, surely. But you protest the terms of the engagement, because I have an invisible ally: gravity. Gravity is being partial: it's helping me and hindering you.

In the same way, a kind of spiritual gravity hinders those who struggle for positive results and assists the destructive side. Interestingly, both the Bible and modern physics agree on this point. The book of Genesis tells us that before God created heaven and earth, the universe was "unformed and void." In other words, nothingness is the natural state of affairs; creation requires the positive action of an intelligent being. Likewise, the second law of thermodynamics says that everything tends toward a state of disorder; we call it entropy. The universe is inevitably moving toward an end which, if we could see it, would eerily resemble the pre-creation state described in Genesis—even including "darkness across the face of the deep."

To summarize my conclusions up to this point: I believe that there is only one fundamental set of principles on which to base a functioning society, that the forces which accept these principles will often be tragically divided with regard to methods, priorities, etc., and that the forces which reject the fundamental principles will be united by their rejection. In practical terms, we might say that there are two types of faith: a constructive or positive faith, which accepts universal truths, and what we might call an anti-faith, whose defining characteristic is the rejection of those truths. The positive faith often produces conflict among its adherents, who disagree with one another for the very best of reasons. The anti-faith produces the unanimity of the lowest common denominator.

I now hypothesize that the Left does in fact represent such an anti-faith and that the ultimate principle being rejected is none other than God Himself. Of course, the scientific standard for the acceptance of any hypothesis is: how well does it explain certain phenomena? I believe my hypothesis does this very well, and in a particularly difficult case. The congruence of opinion on the Left is so remarkable, it resembles the rising of the sun: that is to say, were it not so regular and so common, it would cause men to prostrate themselves at the sight. Consider: why on earth

should those people who support radical environmentalism, in all its bizarre manifestations, be exactly the same people who endorse the agenda of radical homosexuality? But they are! Why should the same group who enthusiastically advocate widespread abortion also embrace gun control? But they do! And so on, down the line of leftist causes.

This is too remarkable to be a mere set of coincidences; we must strip away the black magic and find the cause and effect. My hypothesis does just that. Restated simply, there are many, many ways to worship God, but only one way to reject Him. This, I think, best accounts both for the divisiveness of the conservative movement and for the congruence of the Left.

Some of you would readily agree with me that the Left is rejectionist but might hesitate over my assertion that it is God they oppose. Let me, then, further test my hypothesis in a more specific way: I'll ask how the basic doctrines of the Left compare with their Scriptural counterparts. Scientifically, you would agree that if this were a random matter, if there were no anti-God theme to liberalism, then we ought to find that liberals sometimes agree with Biblical social policy and sometimes do not—perhaps we should see a fifty/fifty distribution. Let us examine a few of them with this purpose in mind.

Now the Bible has some interesting prohibitions; one of them you will notice on me right away. Strangely enough, I possess on my body no tattooing at all, in spite of the artistic themes that from time to time have occurred to me to place across my chest. It happens to be one of the Biblical injunctions that I find easier to obey than others—right up there with not sleeping with one's grandmother. Nonetheless, the objection to tattooing is very significant. It ties in to a prohibition in the Bible against any self-mutilation of body. Let us see what drives this prohibition.

The fundamental idea here is stewardship and tenancy. The Bible tells me that my body doesn't belong to me. I have the use of it, and I must look after it. The tenant has much less freedom to paint the walls or change the plumbing than the landlord. Biblical law, therefore, severely restricts not just tattooing, but also such practices as abortion and euthanasia. The message is consistent: control over the body, including life and death, must be left with God. Man should not interfere.

Of course, the position of the Left on these issues helps confirm our hypothesis. Liberals reject the notion that God gives life, yet God still seems to retain some control over death. So they would seize that power and make matters of life and death into questions of human choice. We now understand why abortion and euthanasia have to be such major themes on the Left's political landscape.

We also find that the exception proves the rule. The Bible does give society one measure of control over life: it authorizes capital punishment for certain crimes. If human control over life and death, generically understood, were the underlying principle in the Left's position on abortion and euthanasia, then wouldn't liberals fight for capital punishment as a logical extension of their principle? But instead they oppose it at every turn. And this moral repugnance for imposing capital punishment is best explained by our hypothesis. This resembles the peculiar ferocity that devotees of the Left reserve for the cigarette smoker in the face of their placid acceptance of the AIDS carrier. They fuel a national movement to prohibit smoking in any public building but resist the suggestion that known AIDS carriers should be excluded from food preparation occupations. The only possible explanation I can find is that cigarette smoking is not Biblically proscribed. Since homosexuality is Biblically forbidden, any sanctions applied in that direction might look suspiciously like an endorsement of God so must be scrupulously avoided. Likewise, since capital punishment is Biblically mandated, the modernist must oppose it.

Let's look at another example. The Bible gives us a limited number of commandments, and Deuteronomy specifically prohibits adding to or modifying this relatively short list. Likewise, Aristotle said that laws should be few in number and seldom changed. Compare that with the Niagara-like cascade of legislation that pours out incessantly from a governing bureaucracy that has become dominated by an anti-Godly vision.

Yet another example illustrates the Left's war on fundamental Biblical themes. Notice that the beginning of all beginnings, the opening chapters of Genesis, shows us a hierarchical universe. God puts Mineral at the bottom of the pyramid and proceeds, day by day, to add Vegetable. When Vegetable is created, we move one level up, to Animal. And when Animal is created, we go one level above that, to Man. And when Man has been created, we go one level above that to —Woman.

Ladies and gentlemen, our tradition tells us that it is right for a man to dedicate himself to providing for a woman, just as there is nothing at all wrong with an animal, as it were, seeking its ultimate fulfillment by being of service to the human race. For a man to see his fulfillment as an escape from selfishness, and the ability to start providing for a woman, is only recognizing a fundamental concept of hierarchy that God has imparted to the world.

Well, naturally, if God said "Yes" to hierarchy, then modern liberalism has to say "No" to hierarchy. And one of the very first victims of the war on hierarchy is education. Because what education used to mean was that someone who knew more than I would tell me what he knew. He would teach me how to relate to the world, and he would initiate me into my culture, into my people, into civilization. He could do this only because he occupied a niche above mine. What did the war on hierarchy accomplish? That, for the first time in the American experience, students grade teachers! What's more, students tell teachers what to teach! What on earth can account for this? It makes sense only in one context: the overthrowing of hierarchy.

Of course, hatred of hierarchy also explains, better than any other notion, the unarguable enmity that the Left has for the military. Because if there is one thing upon which military success rests, it is the concept of hierarchy. Just in case we didn't understand that, the Book of Exodus explicitly calls God a Man of War. War is admissible, the Bible tells us; there are certain things which can only be resolved by war. When war does come, you'd better have a hierarchy in place, because nothing else will work.

There is still more evidence for our hypothesis. Whether one considers the Bible as light bedtime reading or regards it as the Word of God, nobody, but nobody, can miss this fundamental rule: every single human being has been granted the power of moral choice. Every single one of us has been given the ability to make his own decisions. Abel's murderer, Cain, is not gently excused on account of traumatic potty training. The population of Sodom is not the victim of its environment. Everyone is accountable for his actions. Not, perhaps for his thoughts and motivations — only God can know these — but certainly for his behavior.

Well, what is the position of the opposition? Absolutely predictable! They give us an unbelievable proliferation of mental and social disorders, because they want reasons other than free moral choice to account for why people behave the way they do. If God said "Personal accountability," the Left has to say "No personal accountability." Look at the social disorder that inevitably results from such a seemingly small decision.

Let's look at a final, and most significant, conflict between the Bible and the Left. The Mishna, a part of the Jewish Oral Tradition, which was put in writing just before the time Augustus ruled Rome, says that there are only two answers to a grouping of three fundamental questions of life. The questions are: Where did we come from, where are we going, and what are we supposed to be doing in between?

Have you noticed that any innocent little child always asks you these questions if you have the good fortune to be seated next to one on an airplane? “Where did you come from? Where are you going?” And, “What’s your name, and how old are you?” In other words, tell me about what you are; what are you doing? Adults say, “What do you do?” It doesn’t just mean, “How do you put bread on your table?” They are trying to relate to the spiritual reality of you.

As to where we came from, again, there are only two possibilities. I characterize them as: we came from the apes or we came from the angels. That’s it. Pay your money and take your choice. You want to wait for proof? I’m afraid that life calls upon you to make a commitment before the proof is in. Just as it always does. We marry before we know every last knowable detail of the intended. We invest often before knowing every possible knowable fact about the fiscal outcome of our decision. In exactly the same way, we must decide, where are we going? The choices, again, only two: the Godly choice and the anti-Godly choice. Either there is something after death or not.

To clarify the practical implications of this dilemma, let me tell you what happened to one of my teachers, a great rabbi. On a trip to Israel, he found himself seated next to the head of the Israeli socialist movement. As the plane took off, my teacher’s son, sitting several rows behind, came forward and said, “Father, let me take your shoes; I have your slippers here. You know how your feet swell on the airplane.” A few minutes later, he came and said, “Here are the sandwiches Mother sent; I know you don’t like the airline food.”

This went on in similar fashion for some time, and finally, the head of Israel’s socialist movement turned to my teacher and said, “I don’t get this. I have four sons. They’re grown now. But in all my life I don’t recall them ever offering to do anything at all for me. Why is your son doing all of this?” And the rabbi said, “You have to understand. You mustn’t blame yourself. Your sons are faithful to your teachings, and my sons are faithful to my teachings. It’s simple, you see. You made the decision to teach your sons that you are descended from apes. That means that you are one generation closer to the ape than they. And that means that it is only proper and appropriate that you acknowledge their status and that you serve them. But, you see, I chose to teach my sons that we came from God Himself. And that puts me one generation closer to the ultimate truth, and that means it’s only appropriate that they treat me accordingly.”

On the other hand, with respect to the question of where we are going, we shouldn’t be surprised that the Left tells us we are hopelessly doomed, whether because of environmental catastrophe, nuclear war, overpopulation, or what-have-you. Tell the Left that man’s God-given ingenuity creates solutions, and what is the answer? Only apocalyptic measures will save us: from elimination of aerosols to banning human beings entirely from the open wastes—we’ve got to save the planet, which is in imminent peril of destruction.

Well, I think we’ve amassed more than enough evidence to prove our hypothesis. To summarize: it’s quite clear that the power and unity of the Left come not from any intrinsic merit of their policy ideas or from any well-considered public philosophy. That power and unity could come only from a religious faith: what I call Anti-Godism. And this truth brings us face to face with an even more terrifying fact: that the Left’s goal in the current culture war is not a negotiated peace, but unconditional surrender. This enemy is intent on capturing our capital city, nothing less.

It follows that only a similar effort on our side can possibly succeed. Conservatives cannot fight this powerful and all-encompassing religious faith with a few good policy ideas; we must reach back to God’s word, the ultimate source of our convictions, if we are to prevail.

You are familiar with the theory of the hive; it is a handy metaphor for understanding how the countless minions of Socialism the world over march in such lock step — and this, mind you, before any information highway. Examining a beehive or an ants nest allows us to easily mistake such a colony for a gathering of tens of thousands of separate bees or ants. The problem with this view is that they behave as if they are heirs to the most sophisticated constitution. They conduct themselves as if they all subscribe to a complex code that governs almost every facet of their extended order of social cooperation. The only drawback to this explanation is that their nervous systems manifestly lack the sophistication and, indeed, the capacity to store and act upon such a complex body of instinct. How does a bee know how to construct perfect hexagonal cells, and how does each ant know where to place his grain of sand when building the anthill? The answer is that this view of bees and ants is as mistaken as watching various blood cells repair a gash on a man's finger and praising the individual cells for "knowing" how to reconstruct his fingerprint. Just as the blood cells are really elements of a larger and more complex creature, so are the bees and the ants. The larger creature, in their case, is the hive and the nest, whose "brain" is seen to be the queen bee or queen ant.

We have to see that those who march in the vanguard of modern American Liberalism are guided toward their destinies by the same invisible threads as the bee and the ant. Those foes of conservatism do not need to confer with party headquarters when asked for opinions on abortion, the free market, private education, or any other issue of the day. They subconsciously consult Scripture — then turn it about 180 degrees. They are as tied into this culture as bees or ants — or, for that matter, human blood cells. This has always been the romance and attraction of Socialism. Similarly, we on the conservative side need to feel the same organic attachment to a complete and integrated system of values that will reliably identify where we stand on major issues. We too need to be able to bind together the vast unlinked conservative brotherhood across the land by psychically hooking up every one of us to the fountainhead of our system of values.

Ladies and gentlemen, I do not believe that a superior system can be developed than that which we have inherited, and to which our founding fathers so faithfully subscribed. I refer to the Judeo-Christian value system, and I believe that we have no choice but to adopt it as the unifying theory of existence for our side of the great American culture war. To some extent, we have little choice, because the other side has already chosen Scripture as the battlefield. They have made the abolition of transcendent value the centerpiece of their struggle. For us to ignore Judeo-Christian thought is to abandon the main battleground of this war to the political enemy.

As rejection of the Judeo-Christian value system fuels and unifies Liberalism, so can the embrace of the system do the same for us.

Not sure of your position on private property? Take a look at the Bible. You see each man sitting under his fig tree, outside his house. You see three times the number of laws guiding the private ownership and transfer of property than governing ritual issues. You see each individual giving charity of his own money and possessions, rather than a centralized redistribution machine masquerading as compassion.

Not sure of where you stand on education? No problem; your psychic data link to Scripture reminds you that the commandment to educate rests upon parents. It is their obligation and their privilege, and when they employ teachers, those teachers must teach the values of their employers, not hated anti-values beamed at them from the Beltway.

How about abortion, public endorsement of homosexuality, the military, the criminal justice system? All of these, and others too, are illuminated with a laser-like clarity when seen through the first principles of the Pentateuch. Perhaps it is not too much to say that trying to avoid this runs the risk of turning us into our own brand of liberals. We become equally desperate to escape

the awful necessity of confronting a Divine system that robs us of a little of our license. Paradoxically, embracing that Divine system confers upon us the ultimate in moral freedom.

We have enjoyed several decades of a brand of conservatism seemingly immune to religious influence. For a while, it looked as if we had conjured up a new system, one that owed nothing to any earlier doctrine. It was as if we had synthesized a bastardized conservatism, one with no parentage. We'd removed any parentage that could offend the dominant cultural elite, wrinkling its collectivized nose at the faintest whiff of God. All of a sudden, a funny thing has happened. The beautiful flower sitting in a vase upon our dining room table, entrancing resident and visitor alike, wilted before our eyes. Our current brand of conservatism has lost its vigor. Some visitors to our house, mainly religious conservatives, smell the flower and become enthusiastic whenever they detect the faint, lingering aroma of the flower's origins. Then the scent evaporates and so do those visitors. All that is left is a plant that is only a shadow of its former vitality. Not surprisingly, nobody comes to visit anymore.

Fortunately there is a cure. The gardeners need only graft the flower back onto its plant and it will once again bloom, flourish, and attract visitors from miles around. Today's pragmatic conservatism need only be rejoined to the ideas that originally gave it life for it to regain all the virility it once possessed. The Judeo-Christian tradition is the very fountainhead of the ideas and policies that we know lie at the heart of our attempt to rejuvenate our republic.

I know that as America's conservatives look toward 214 Massachusetts Avenue for the spiritual leadership that is going to capture our moral imagination during the next few years, we will not look in vain.

