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Creed Versus Culture: Alternative Foundations of American Conservatism

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Contemporary American conservatism, which is notorious for its internal factionalism, is held together by a self-evident truth: conservatives' shared antipathy to liberalism. Their main objections are well-known.

Almost to a man or woman, conservatives oppose using government authority to enforce a vision of greater equality labeled by its supporters, with great seduction, as "social justice." Nearly as many conservatives object to the use of government authority—or, alternatively, to the denial of government authority where it is natural, legal, and appropriate—to promote a worldview of individualism, expressivism, and secularism. Finally, most conservatives want nothing to do with an airy internationalism, frequently suspicious of the American nation, that has shown itself so inconstant in its support for the instruments of security that are necessary in the modern world.

No shame attaches, or should, to relying in politics on the adhesive property that comes from the sentiment of common dislike. That sentiment is the heart that beats within the breast of the conservative movement, supplying much of its unity. This heart sustains four heads, known generally as religious conservatives, economic or libertarian-minded conservatives, natural-rights or neoconservatives, and traditionalists or paleoconservatives.

The four heads comprise a coalition of the willing that came together during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The remarkable diversity of this coalition has been both a source of strength and a source of weakness for the conservative movement. Each part came

Talking Points

- The Culture–Creed distinction does not simplify; it distorts. Built into its categories are premises that attempt by fiat to order and arrange the different parts of the conservative coalition.
- Not only does this arrangement favor the Cultural category, but it also attempts to place faith inside of Culture, suggesting a natural grouping of traditionalists and religious conservatives in opposition to natural-rights or neoconservatives.
- Whether this attempt was undertaken consciously or not is of little matter; what counts are its effects, and these could have serious and negative implications for the conservative movement.
- There is no illusion on the part of most of those of faith that the political–cultural agenda will bring complete unity or cohesiveness, but it seeks an America in which the element of faith would have a central place.

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into existence at a different time and under different circumstances, and each has been guided by a different principle by which it measures what is good or right.

- For religious conservatives, that principle is biblical faith.
- For libertarians, it is the idea of “spontaneous order,” the postulate that a tendency is operative in human affairs for things to work out for themselves, provided no artificial effort is made to impose an overall order.
- For neoconservatives, it is a version of “natural right,” meaning a standard of good in political affairs that is discoverable by human reason.
- Finally, for traditionalists, it is “History” or “Culture,” meaning the heritage that has come down to us and that is our own.

There are refinements and subdivisions that could be added to this schema, but it represents, I think, a fairly standard approach to discussing the different intellectual currents inside the conservative coalition. Recently, however, a number of commentators have fallen into the practice—I use this expression advisedly—of replacing this four-part schema by a two-part division based on a distinction between the concepts of “Culture” and “Creed.” The new system of categorization derives from a book published last year by Samuel Huntington, entitled *Who Are We?* in which the author offers these concepts as the two basic modes in any society for establishing national identity.¹ The categories are meant to refer to the whole nation, but conservatives have applied them to discussions of their own movement.

My argument this afternoon will be that introducing this new categorization schema represents a huge error, especially as a way of discussing conservatism. The Culture–Creed distinction does not simplify; it distorts. Built into its categories are premises that attempt by fiat to order and arrange the different parts of the conservative coalition. Not only is this arrangement “partisan,” in the sense of favoring the Cultural category, but it also attempts, with no basis

either in principle or in fact, to place faith inside of Culture, thereby suggesting a natural grouping of traditionalists and religious conservatives in opposition to natural-rights or neoconservatives. Whether this attempt was undertaken consciously or not is of little matter; what counts are its effects, and these could have serious and negative implications for the conservative movement.

Let me now take a step back and describe the concepts of Culture and Creed. Huntington initially provides a social science definition of Culture that is so broad as to be meaningless. Culture consists of “a people’s language, religious beliefs, social and political values, assumptions as to what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, and to the objective institutions and behavioral patterns that reflect these subjective elements.”

Huntington is less interested, however, in social science than in recovering a basis today for patriotism and for securing unity in America. It is *our* Culture that concerns him. He labels that culture “Anglo-Protestantism,” which refers to everything that Huntington elects to emphasize among the first New England settlers. His selection boils down to four main elements: our language (English); our religion (dissenting Protestantism); our basic political beliefs (a commitment to liberty, individualism, and self-government); and our race (white).

Since Huntington wants Culture to work as a source or standard of identity, and identity in a positive sense, he allows it to evolve in order to perform its function. In its evolved form, the Culture to which we should look refers—still—to the English language and to the same commitment to liberty and self-government; the notion of religion is broadened slightly from dissenting Protestantism to Christianity insofar as it has been Protestantized. Race as a criterion of distinction drops out.

As for Creed, Huntington initially defines it in a social science fashion as the taking of bearings from theoretical claims that are offered in principle as universal or applicable to all. Examples of Creed that he identifies are communism and classical liberalism. The use of these broad-based theoretical

1. Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

concepts is what Huntington means by Creedalism as distinguished from Culturalism. As he says at one point:

People are not likely to find in political principles [i.e., a Creed] the deep emotional content and meaning provided by kith and kin, blood and belonging, culture and nationality. These attachments may have little or no basis in fact, but they do satisfy a deep human longing for meaningful community.

Once again, however, Huntington's interest in *Who Are We?* is more in our own Creed than in Creeds in general. Our Creed consists of an idea of nature, specifically of natural rights, as articulated in documents like the Declaration of Independence.

How does the binary distinction between Culture and Creed replace and subsume the four-part division of conservatism? The implication is the following. The category of Culture consists of traditionalists and religious conservatives—the first for the obvious reason of their emphasis on our history and culture and the second because Huntington identifies dissenting Protestantism as first or original. The category of Creed consists of natural-rights or neoconservatives and libertarians—the former because they regularly reference natural rights and the Declaration of Independence and the latter because they think in terms of general principles of economic reasoning.

An example will help to illustrate how this binary mapping of conservatism has entered into contemporary discussion. Lawrence Auster, an outspoken conservative, publishes an instructive blog entitled “View from the Right.” Never one to mince words, he begins a spirited entry of October 25, 2005, with an attack on President George W. Bush (one of his frequent targets) in an article ironically entitled “Under Bush and the American Creed, America Continues Its Bold Progress”:

At President Bush's annual Ramadan dinner at the White House this week—did you know the President has an annual Ramadan dinner?—he announced for the first time in our nation's history we have added a Koran to the White House Library. Yippee.²

Arguing that this recognition serves unwisely to legitimize Islam in America, Auster finds further evidence of this same error in a passage from a speech given the previous week by Senator John McCain at the Al Smith Dinner:

We have a nation of many races, many religious faiths, many points of origin, but our shared faith is the belief in liberty, and we believe this will prove stronger, more enduring and better than any nation ordered to exalt the few at the expense of the many or made from a common race or culture or to preserve traditions that have no greater attribute than longevity.³

In Auster's view, the McCain–Bush position represents the perfect expression of creedal thinking:

According to McCain, the meaning of America is that we have no common culture and no coherent set of traditions but give equal freedom to all cultures, traditions and religions. Such a cultureless society is stronger and more enduring than any other.⁴

Auster may have taken some liberties with the strict claims of Bush and McCain, but his general point could not be more clear: The end result of the Creed is at best indifference, at worst hostility, to Culture.

This application of the Culture–Creed distinction to the conservative movement contains two assumptions. The first is that Creedalists are not true conservatives, but conservatives on their way to becoming liberals, if they are not there already. The other is that religious conservatives—meaning

2. Lawrence Auster, “View from the Right,” October 25, 2005, at <http://amnation.com/vfr/>.

3. *Ibid.* The full speech can be accessed at http://mccain.senate.gov/index.cfm?fuseaction=Newscenter.ViewSpeech&Content_id=1617.

4. Auster, “View from the Right.”

those concerned with biblical faith—fall inside the category of Culturalists. Here would seem to be the main gambit involved in this analysis: to define those of faith as closer to cultural traditionalists than to proponents of natural rights.

In light of this questionable mapping of the conservative movement, it is fair to ask whether Creed and Culture make up helpful categories that assist in understanding reality, or whether they force the analyst to describe reality in a way that satisfies these categories.

Thomas Hobbes, that puckish British philosopher, has a chapter in *Leviathan* in which he reminds us that abstract categories are human constructions, born either of men's efforts to comprehend the world or of the aim of some to dictate how others will think. The result very often is that these terms are imprecise, conflating different things under the same label and producing ever-growing confusions. Hobbes was a very timid man, and as is not infrequent with personalities of this kind, he was also a bit of a sadist. The trait served him well in describing how an individual, when employing a poorly circumscribed category, will soon find himself "entangled in words as a bird in lime twigs, the more he struggles, the more belimed."

Have we become "belimed" by adopting the Culture–Creed distinction?

I bear some slight personal responsibility for popularizing this distinction. Last year I wrote a review essay on Huntington's *Who Are We?* for *The Weekly Standard*.⁵ In contrast to the avalanche of reviews from the Left attacking the book, mine was in many ways very appreciative. I followed the Golden Rule of discussing the work of a major thinker, which is to treat it initially on its own terms. Hence my lengthy discussion of the Culture–Creed distinction, on which I offered two observations.

First, I pointed out that more than 20 years ago, Huntington wrote a previous book on America—a fact he all but hides in this one—in which he

invoked the Culture–Creed dyad.⁶ In both books he argues that forging our national identity requires relying on both Culture and Creed. But whereas in the earlier book he contends that America should emphasize the Creed, in the current one he argues that it should identify more with the Culture.

Second, I asked what reason could account for so fundamental a change. A higher ordering idea of some kind, contained either within one of the two principles or coming from a new one, ought to have been supplied to account for how to regulate the appropriate mix of Culture and Creed. I offered a couple of speculative comments of my own on this issue and suggested that it would be a nice question for others to consider.

In the past year, this theme has been taken up by two well-known political scientists. In a recent issue of *The Claremont Review of Books*, the editor, Charles Kesler, has a fine essay on Huntington's work. He begins with some cogent criticisms of how Huntington allows the concept of Creed to slide from its specific and original American meaning (a support of natural rights) to its more general social scientific meaning (any kind of broad type of theoretical reasoning). The result is a category that encompasses everything offered in the name of rational principles, from the position of limited government and individualism of the Founders to the Big Government position of the Progressives.

Following this clarification of the concept of Creed, Kesler goes on to argue that we need both concepts, but that the standard of regulation must stem from the Creed (properly understood). He concludes his essay:

The American creed is the keystone of American national identity; but it requires a culture to sustain it. The republican task is to recognize the creed's primacy, the culture's indispensability and the challenge which political wisdom alone can answer, to shape a people that can live up to its principles.⁷

5. James W. Ceaser, "O, My America: The Clash of the Huntingtons," *The Weekly Standard*, May 3, 2004.

6. Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Politics of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Another very perceptive article appeared this fall in *Society*, written by Peter Skerry. Skerry takes Huntington to task for much of his treatment of the status of the Hispanic community in America and for his analysis of the process of immigrant integration into an American identity. On the major theoretical distinction of Culture and Creed, however, Skerry embraces Huntington's analysis and shares his Cultural emphasis. America needs both Creed and Culture, but the senior partner today is—and should be—Culture, which Skerry observes is “at the core of Huntington's understanding of American national identity.”⁸

Both of these essays, each critical in its own way of Huntington's work, make use of the Culture–Creed distinction. In doing so, they, along now with many other writings, lend credibility to the view that these categories are adequate to define the terrain of this inquiry. It is this position that now needs to be challenged.

Before turning directly to this question, it is worthwhile to observe that for many “Culturalists,” there appears to be as much politics as social science in the Culture–Creed categorization scheme. No sooner is the distinction introduced than Culturalists put it to work to argue for their positions on two major issues of the day.

The first is the previously mentioned matter of immigration policy. Culturalists are deeply concerned with the current rate and character of immigration. Huntington devotes a large portion of his book to warning of the threat to national unity posed by the influx of Hispanics, largely Mexican. We are in danger of establishing two different cultures in the United States: one English-speaking and Anglo-Protestant, the other Spanish-speaking and, I suppose, Latin Catholic. Not only is it said that a Cultural approach makes us more aware of this problem, but also Creedalists are charged with being incapable of taking this problem seriously. Their reasoning in universal terms about all human beings makes them “a-Cultural” or anti-Cultural, which for practical purposes means, for immigration politics, multi-

cultural. The Culture–Creed distinction is put to use as the proverbial stick with which to beat certain (alleged) foes of immigration restriction.

The other issue on which Culturalists insist today is foreign policy, where many of them are highly critical of the Bush Administration's position on the war on terrorism. The Administration's policy in launching the Iraq war and in emphasizing democracy is again said to be a consequence of Creedal thinking, which in its universalistic perspective leads to a naïve belief, often labeled “Wilsonianism,” in the possibility of exporting Western democracy to the rest of the world. Creedalism blinds one to the factual primacy of Culture. If the Creedalists who have designed the current foreign policy appreciated the strength and soundness of Culture at home, acknowledging that every other nation or civilization has its Culture just as we have ours, the folly of their grandiose project of nation building would quickly become evident to them.

Culturalists here, incidentally, have their closest allies among those on the Left, including the multiculturalists, who on this issue adopt the Culturalist and realist position. Again, the Culture–Creed distinction becomes the weapon of choice in attacking a policy even though a good number of natural-rights conservatives have expressed reservations about this policy of their own.

II

Huntington's inquiry is concerned with cohesiveness and justification—with what enables Americans to be a people, in the sense of possessing unity, and with what makes this people good or worthy in its own eyes. Creed and Culture are said to provide the categories that cover this terrain and allow for intelligent investigation of these questions. But these categories, I have argued, are neither adequate nor exhaustive. Even as defined, they are hugely asymmetrical. Creed refers to a doctrine or set of principles; Culture is presented as a compilation of existing sociological facts and realities. But as should be obvious by now, Culture is used to

7. Charles Kesler, “The Crisis of American National Identity,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 2005, pp. 24–30, esp. p. 30.

8. Peter Skerry, “What Are We to Make of Samuel Huntington?” *Society*, November–December 2005, pp. 82–91, esp. p. 85.

do far more than reference pure facts. It is itself a doctrine that selects facts and bids us to judge the world in a certain way.

It seems to me that a more rewarding approach to the study of unity would begin by separating the study of pure sociological facts—the analysis of what is (or has been) our language, our customs, beliefs, and the like—from all doctrines meant to supply an idea of unity and of right. It would then be possible to examine these doctrines without built-in presuppositions to see how they conceive of cohesiveness and deal with certain sociological facts.

Given my time limits here, I will restrict myself to three major doctrines that were put forth in the early period of our history and that remain important for contemporary politics and the modern conservative movement: natural rights, traditionalism, and faith.

The question of what set of ideas can create cohesiveness and justification (or right) was naturally addressed at the time of America's founding, when the issue of forging unity was one of the main challenges facing political actors at the time. The first official debate on this question took place at the Continental Congress in 1774 and was recorded by John Adams. The issue before Congress, to use Adams's terms, was what was to be the "foundation of right" for the American people. Every community must have such a foundation or first principle by which to define and justify itself.

Adams asked his colleagues whether Americans should continue to rely, as they had been doing until then, on appeals to tradition in the form of "the charters" or "the common law"—i.e., the traditional rights of Anglos—or whether they should instead shift foundations and recur to "the law of nature."⁹ Adams and John Jay were the two most forceful advocates in this debate for the new doctrine of the law of nature, urging that Congress embrace natural rights as a supplement to, if not a replacement for, the historical claims.

Americans became the first people to take the doctrine of the law of nature from the realm of theory or philosophy and to introduce it into political

life as an active foundation for a new polity. To proponents, such as Adams, Jay, and Jefferson, the doctrine of natural rights could function effectively to help make Americans one people and to justify a new form of politics.

The basic content of this doctrine, of which all are now well aware, teaches that political communities can be formed to satisfy people's legitimate desires to protect their natural rights. Yet beyond its specific content, this position was also meant to imbue the American people with a certain way of thinking about political life. The doctrine rests on the premise that broad rational inquiry into the character of politics can result in the discovery of the principles of how a free society can be put together. This premise encourages openness to theory and to reason.

To be sure, this approach has been qualified in practice in hundreds of ways. To take only the most conspicuous example, even the documents that are most renowned for articulating and putting into motion the law of nature—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—are often celebrated more in a spirit of veneration than as an invitation to exercise reason. Nevertheless, if we take Culturalists as the guide, the natural-rights position at the end of the day does indeed support a posture that is friendly—too friendly, by the Culturalists' account—to rational and theoretical inquiry.

Some Culturalists, as noted, assert that the natural-rights doctrine (labeled the Creed) leads to an obliviousness or even hostility to the sociological factors that sustain unity. While this criticism applies to certain rationalist positions, it did not hold for the Founders in their own understanding of natural rights. The same person who championed the adoption of the new principle of natural rights at the Continental Congress—John Jay—wrote the classic essay (*Federalist 2*) specifying the factors that constitute Culture and their significance in contributing to unity. He invited statesmen to keep these considerations in mind when judging the general interests of society. One of the nation's

9. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), II, 137.

leading Creedalists, Thomas Jefferson, sought to discourage rapid immigration on the grounds that the foreigners would bring with them “the principles of government they leave, imbibed in their early youth” and infuse these into our legislation so as to “bias its direction, and render it a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass...”¹⁰

The core of the Founders’ position was hardly “a-Cultural”: Beyond what was demanded for the protection of rights, there was no impediment to promoting cultural factors. The protection of natural rights is a floor of politics, even an absolute floor, but it is not its ceiling.

The further Culturalist argument—that Creedal thinking in general, as distinct from adherence to the *specific* Creed of the Founders, slides inevitably into a-Culturalism—has a response from the Founders other than that the clear use of reason is the best antidote to its abuse. It should be added as well that if this Culturalist criticism is to be employed against Creedal thinking, its analogue should be applied to Cultural thinking as well. What is good for the goose is good for the gander. Culturalism must be viewed not only in its benign form of “Anglo-Protestantism,” but also in its more virulent forms known for excesses of their own.

A second doctrine of cohesiveness and right is “traditionalism.” Parts of what are involved in this position were signaled in two of the objections that were raised in the 1770s to invoking the law of nature.

One argument was that recurring to general principles about nature, whatever their theoretical merit, would simply not work; they lacked sufficient binding force to hold society together. A society is not the same thing as a group of philosophers. People need something that appeals to the heart more than to the head. An historical narrative and shared sentiments, not abstract principles, are the substances that form cohesiveness.

The second objection, in some way contradictory, conceded that theoretical doctrines were indeed capable of mobilizing people and holding them together (at least temporarily), but they would do

so in a way that would prove dangerous and destabilizing. Once society is open to reason, doctrine will succeed doctrine, unsettling authority and tending inevitably to ever more radical positions. Appeals to settled historical facts and existing commonalities were a safer way to proceed.

These two objections represented only a prelude, however, to the full doctrine of traditionalism, which was introduced in America in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Both Charles Kesler and Peter Skerry rightly identify Samuel Huntington’s “Culturalist” position as the epitome of a traditionalist or “Burkean” approach. The mention of Edmund Burke, the great 18th century British thinker and statesman, should make clear that traditionalism did not spring forth on its own as the mere representation of existing sociological facts. It would hardly have required a thinker of the caliber of Burke to “discover” what was already known to all. Rather, traditionalism is itself a theoretical doctrine designed to cultivate a disposition toward the facts. For rhetorical reasons, its proponents choose to present it as anti-theoretical or purely descriptive, but this is pure stratagem.

Edmund Burke was a close student of Montesquieu, who was the first to spell out the general premises of the traditionalist doctrine. (Like almost everything else with this complex thinker, it is best to consider his promotion of this doctrine as a part of a larger scheme, with conflicting and countervailing elements.) Its original form is less familiar to us because it applied to conditions before the French Revolution, but the underlying elements and aims are the same in both cases.

The specific problem on which Montesquieu focused was absolutism—i.e., absolutist or unchecked monarchy. Absolutist monarchy to him was the very opposite of the old or traditional form of monarchy, which was characterized by checks and limitations. Absolutism was widely supported by philosophers and theorists, among them many who spoke of nature and of natural rights. Especially those theorists who thought in abstractions encouraged “enlightened despotism” or “legal des-

10. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, query VIII.

potism” as the way to make society conform to their principles of reason. For Montesquieu, then, modern rationalist thinking posed a grave threat to free government and to liberty.

Montesquieu accordingly proposed an alternative: “tradition,” actually *a* tradition, since an appeal to tradition in the abstract is without meaning. The tradition he discovered was rooted in what he called the “Gothic constitution.” The germ of this constitution could be traced to the German barbarians. It was among these people, who knew nothing of theory or philosophy (or Christianity), that modern liberty was born. The first governments of the German tribes were republican systems, although later, after their conquest of much of Europe and the need to form larger units, modifications grew up that produced the limited, traditional monarchies. Montesquieu labeled these systems, which still reflected the basic spirit of barbarian rule, as the “best form of government that men can imagine.” From this analysis came the famous theme, repeated by so many others, that the origins of modern liberty lay “in the forests of Germany.”¹¹

The doctrine of traditionalism had three advantages.

First, it based everything on something that was old and, for all intents and purposes, original. In so doing, it appealed to the historical rather than the theoretical, and therefore to what many thought spoke to people’s hearts or sentiments. The appeal to the old also accorded with a deeply ingrained human tendency to identify what is our own and ancestral with the good.

Second, the ancestral in this case was good. It was the fetus of the hardy spirit that supported independence and liberty. Liberty was the constant theme stressed by all who spoke of the “Gothic constitution,” in whatever specific form they had in mind.

Third, traditionalism favored a certain set of mental habits. If the source of liberty did not inhere in philosophy or rational thought, then where did it come from? The short answer was that it was just there—in the mores (or culture) of the barbarians,

passed down to their successors and to those whom they influenced. The longer answer is that liberty is the gift of a pure historical accident and is our good fortune. It is therefore not universal or perhaps transferable. Man did not make free government by his own wits; it was not a human construction. Traditionalist thinkers discovered “tradition” or “culture” for a very specific purpose: to provide an alternative to rationalist thinking.

Burke adapted this basic idea to a different context, when the immediate threat to liberty came not from absolutist monarchy, but from radical democracy and the natural-rights doctrines in France. The main point was still that abstract or metaphysical thinking in politics leads inevitably to excess and absolutism. History or “prescription”—one might call it evolving Culture—was the basis of the alternative to abstract principle. Burke appealed to Britain’s old and Gothic constitution, although he gave it more of an English color to make it Britain’s “own.”

It was in this Burkean form that traditionalist doctrine was brought into the United States beginning in the 1790s, where it had to be amended to fit the republican conditions here. In the full American argument, it was the pure republican spirit of the Goths that was passed from the Germans to the Anglo-Saxons and then to the Puritan settlers, who one writer aptly called the “The Goths of New England.” An abbreviated version was simply to dispense with the Goths and start with our first settlers or Puritans. “Anglo-Protestantism” is but the latest iteration in this old and venerable formula of defining “who we are” by an account of who we were.

The American case has been a special one for traditionalism. In contrast to the examples of the application of reason to politics in Europe, the American case, in the form of the doctrine of natural rights, represented the one instance that was favorable to liberty. Furthermore, the facts of our history include a Revolution that was made in part by those who insisted on natural rights and a Constitution produced by Founders who exercised

11. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* 11:8; 11:6; 30:18.

“reflection and choice.” All of this has made it difficult to reject reason completely, as is the case in some Continental forms of traditionalism, and to rely entirely on accident.

Burke, a prudent man, would almost certainly never have been a full-blown Culturalist in America. Most Culturalists are not either, but call for a combination of tradition and reason, or Culture and Creed. Look just beneath the surface, however, and all of the elements of the noble doctrine of traditionalism remain. Culture is “at the core of their understanding of American national identity.”

III

The doctrines of natural rights and traditionalism are not exhaustive. I would like to note a third and very different kind of doctrine, which relies on faith. Efforts to subsume it under Culture or tradition have a superficial appeal. If Culture is conceived as referring to all that is not Creed, then of course faith is by definition Cultural. Furthermore, in America, not only is Protestantism very old, but, at least in the case of New England, faith was the reason why the settlers first came to these shores.

Furthermore, there is an understanding of religion, which fits in large measure the traditionalist argument. Burke’s defense of the status of the Church of England within the British constitution, and current sociological descriptions of the numbers of Christians in America, are all consistent with vague appeals to religion being a familiar element of kith and kin and of “who we are.” But when one examines the cases of those who are moved by faith, whether the Puritans long ago or those who are organizing today in politics on the basis of faith, it becomes evident how different is this doctrine from that of traditionalism. The movement of faith does not justify itself because it is old or first or ancestral, but because it is a living idea. Faith does not begin by extolling accident, nor is its main purpose to curb the use of rationalism in politics.

The “doctrine” of faith, in brief, does not fit into the category of traditionalism (or Culture) any more than fits into the category of natural right (or Creed). It is its own category. If proof of separateness of faith from tradition were needed, one has

only to consider where those of faith stand on certain of the issues of today.

Those on the religious right must make prudent judgments on practical issues, but they certainly do not, for example, weigh the problem of immigration under the same calculus as traditionalists. Maintaining the English language is important, but so too is increasing the number of those who are apt to end up as practicing members of religious communities. Being one in faith is a culture of its own. As for the war on terrorism and the prudence of attempting to spread democracy, it is by no means clear what faith, if anything, has to say, but it is certainly not aligned in principle, like traditionalism, against a policy that may consider universalistic assumptions about human nature.

Faith today is an active force that has its own project. It is a project different in kind from the other doctrines insofar as it is not concerned in the first instance with politics, but with another realm altogether: our relation to the transcendent. It is therefore not surprising that many who took their bearings from faith were for much of the last century apolitical, or at any rate they never thought it correct to organize collectively on the basis of a concern emanating from faith.

Involvement in politics on grounds relating to faith was therefore sporadic and arose on specific issues. But about 30 years ago or so, in response to an assessment of a new situation characterized by a growing political and cultural threat to faith, a conviction grew that the two realms—the political-cultural and the religious—intersect, not just sporadically on particular issues, but on an ongoing basis and systematically. Not all, but some, of faith concluded that there was a need to organize and engage more directly in collective action in political and cultural affairs. This decision was the basis of what became known by the 1980s as the religious right.

Faith as a doctrine in the political realm does not aim to supply a complete standard of political right. It supports a second-order political-cultural project related to the interests or concerns of faith. Stated defensively, that project includes action designed to create and protect havens conducive to fostering a life committed to faith. In practice, this

has meant undertaking efforts to counterbalance forces working in politics and culture that are indifferent or hostile to faith.

But the project is misunderstood if only its defensive aspect is considered. There is a positive element as well. Recall here the older idea, one originally of Puritan roots, of America's role as an instrument in the service of the transcendent. As one minister, speaking at almost the same time as the issuance of the Declaration of Independence, reminded Americans:

The providences of God in first planting his church in this, then howling wilderness, and in delivering and preserving it to this day...are reckoned among the most glorious events that are to be found in history, in these later ages of the world. And there are yet more glorious events in the womb of providence.¹²

With the waning of biblical faith in so many other Western nations, the idea that America might serve to keep the lamp of faith burning until the tide perhaps turns elsewhere has a renewed urgency to many of the religious.

For those of faith, the adoption of the legal Constitution in no way abrogated this understanding. America was assigned a special place in serving a higher cause. There was a second and unwritten constitution meant to operate alongside the legal one. Because these two constitutions deal with largely distinct matters, there was no need to combine them into a single document—indeed, it would be harmful to the purposes of both realms ever to attempt to do so. The two constitutions were meant to exist together in the hearts and thoughts of many Americans and to be complementary in practice. For those of this view, America is not fully America—and cannot be fully loved and cherished—if this unwritten constitution is

renounced and if faith is left to survive here, at best, as merely one belief among many.

One of the major activities occurring within the religious right today is the reformulation of this project in a form that speaks to our times. Conditions have changed, and the specific character of the positive project must change as well. Once conceived as a mission of the “reformed” church only, in opposition to Rome and Judaism, it is today being reconceived—I am not speaking of the fine points of theology—as a common enterprise among those devoted to biblical faith to cope with a culture that increasingly considers itself as “post-religious.” There is no illusion on the part of most of those of faith that this political-cultural agenda will bring complete unity or cohesiveness, but it seeks an America in which the element of faith would have a central place.

Faith faces new challenges inside the contemporary world. Whether it will find its ally more often with those who support natural rights or those who support tradition is the central issue that will shape the character of conservatism, and thereby the character of our politics, in the period to come. The decisions on the arrangement of the conservative movement have not been made. It is a matter far too consequential to be made subject to influence by the hazards or contrivances of a scholarly distinction pursuing what looks to be its own agenda.

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12. Samuel Sherwood, “The Church's Flight Into the Wilderness” (1776), in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era 1730–1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990), p. 503.