

Secularized Christianity and Contemporary Liberalism  
Paul Gottfried - 05/11/09

*Part 1 of a symposium on James Kalb's The Tyranny of Liberalism.*

Jim Kalb's critique of liberalism is what Hegel would have called a "genetic" approach, that is, one based on the examination of the origin and evolution of a particular idea (in Hegel's case "Idea" would have to be capitalized since it refers to an absolute but also self-transforming entity). From Jim's perspective, "liberalism" did not start as a body of opinions or sentiments the day before yesterday but goes back to what Richard Weaver and the neo-Thomists consider the "Ockhamite challenge" to the medieval Catholic synthesis of faith and reason. Once these two points of reference were pulled apart with the rise of Nominalism in the thirteenth century, a process made possible by William of Ockham and his metaphysically skeptical disciples, the stage was set for the modern enterprise in ethics and politics. Like the Nominalists, the moderns, starting with Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Descartes, and continuing down to such contemporary thinkers as John Rawls, took previously made assumptions about the communal, corporate nature of man as irrelevant. They also increasingly identified the Good with what isolated individuals might desire, as opposed to some ethical end that was common to all humans and which had its basis in our divine origin. Duty, deference, and piety became extraneous to social life, as liberal ideas became more prevalent; and therefore the purpose of government over time became the assisting of individual pleasure-seeker as they try to gratify their appetites.

Kalb is arguing that the creation of a consumer society with disintegrating social roles and relations has developed out of a very specific conception of how humans should relate to each other and to the nature of reality. Such a society is not merely driven by the availability of malls and supermarkets and by the possibility of women being "liberated" from the home. The social and cultural developments that we see reflect fundamental changes in the way people think, and these changes have taken a long time in coming. Kalb does point to certain "conservative" forces that worked against the full unfolding of liberal atomism and acquisitiveness before the present time. Family and monarchical authority continued to operate for centuries after the erosion of classical and medieval metaphysical and ethical teachings. And for centuries Catholic and Protestant churches taught communal responsibilities and religious revelation to their followers, who continued to live in accordance with their precepts.

*Malgré tout* the force of liberal teachings continued to gain ground, up until the present moment. By now the function of government is to make everyone feel comfortable and happy, protecting their right to material pleasure and redistributing funds to those who don't have enough to enjoy. Indeed such a conception of government, argues Kalb, is the only one that now has popular acceptance, no matter how our civic and media leaders may slobber over "human rights" and "human dignity." The now sacred right of women to destroy unborn children who interfere with their "lifestyles" illustrates the current notion of a "human right." So does the right of gays and, at least in Holland, entire groups to marry each other, a right that Christians must accept in some places, under pain of being punished as criminals for not respecting it.

Allow me to note that I find every aspect of contemporary liberal society at least as abhorrent as my friend and debating partner Jim Kalb. And I take second place to none in my revulsion for

everything Jim criticizes. I also profoundly admire his book, which is compulsory reading in my upper-level courses. But as one should be able to tell from his long, thoughtful review of my books in *Political Science Reviewer* last year, we differ in our views about how we got to the present disagreeable moment. I am not as dismissive as he about “bourgeois liberalism,” which is the pre-democratic and still socially traditional form of the philosophy of freedom that developed in the nineteenth century. Unlike him, I also view the end of the Middle Ages as containing the seeds of later positive developments, such as the Reformation, the consolidation of nation states, and the rise of a bourgeois civilization. My own work has focused on the formative roles of mass democracy, public administration, and the egalitarian bacillus in bringing about the kind of society that Jim and I detest equally.

But I’m not convinced that one can understand the dynamics of this society by focusing entirely on self-indulgent pleasure seeking and material consumption. The election of Barack Obama is due in part to the same attitudes that infuse racial set asides, anti-discrimination laws, and the willingness to accept double standards in scholarship, social behavior, and everything else in dealing with aggrieved minorities. White Christian Americans and other Westerners feel guilt, or at least are required to appear so, for failing to have practiced some perfectionist standard of equality in the past, and they are therefore required to engage in permanent atonement and even self-deception in order to begin to remedy this wrong. We now have entire months set aside to reflect on our sins toward blacks and women, in what looks like a Lenten season without end.

In my opinion, Jim underestimates the power of transformed Christian narratives and replacement theologies in trying to explain contemporary social and political behavior. Multiculturalism, together with its disparagement of a specifically white Western civilization, is not so much about pleasure-seeking and material gratification as it is about recognizing and expiating sin. Although my own examination of modern political life started out by looking at the ideologies of public administration and changing power-relations, I was led eventually into noticing the religious dimension of my area of study. Secularized Christianity does not remove the presence of Christian concepts of guilt, sin, and atonement but has the result of turning them into ludicrous PC caricatures. Without necessarily rejecting Jim’s picture of the degeneration of liberalism, I am more struck by the kind of degenerate Christianity that has accompanied this process.

Lest I create a false impression about Jim’s work, let me underline that it is not a rehash of the old neo-Thomist argument that all bad things occurred because of the eclipse of Catholic Aristotelianism. Although Jim reprises some of this, most of his analysis deals with something else, the working out of liberal premises over a long period of time. He approaches this subject as a mathematician and legal scholar, having been trained in both mathematics and law; and he makes his case dispassionately, without the slightest trace of bitterness or sarcasm. While his study of modern liberalism bears comparison to Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, what distinguishes it from MacIntyre’s magisterial investigation of modern moral disintegration are two qualities. One, Jim presents in bolder strokes what MacIntyre devotes reams of pages to explicating. His book is more accessible to the educated general reader than MacIntyre’s denser interpretation of the history of Western ethics. Two, Jim is less inhibited than MacIntyre by the need to appear politically correct. Unlike MacIntyre, who is concerned about guarding his reputation as a leftist and feminist, while arguing for Christian Aristotelian moral concepts, Jim

never hides his hand. He understands that genuine communities necessarily make distinctions among genders and ethnic or religious groups.

Nonetheless, I find myself differing from him and MacIntyre when it comes to solutions. Both believe that the worst effects of liberalism can be undone by organizing communities and even discussion groups to explore the problems raised. In my view, such a major cultural sea change would depend on the replacement of one authority structure by another. Things don't happen macrocosmically because well-meaning intellectuals decide to organize study groups. Such a change may occur if those already in power or wielding enormous influence decide to repackage themselves, the way neoconservatives did with success in the 1980s when they associated themselves with the GOP and conservative movement. But these journalists had a power base that Jim and I don't. Those who are relatively powerless cannot produce significant change in our mass society by playing Socrates among likeminded powerless people. The most one can do in such an unpromising situation is to raise pointed questions, while hoping that a later generation may take them up.

## Illiberal Arguments

William English - 05/13/09

### *Part 2 of a symposium on James Kalb's The Tyranny of Liberalism.*

James Kalb's *The Tyranny of Liberalism* is a frustrating book. On the one hand it is filled with many penetrating insights into the paradoxes of liberal thought and action, and some of Kalb's intuitions regarding the general pathologies of liberalism are no doubt right. Yet, on the other hand, Kalb's analysis is much less persuasive than it might be because he paints with such broad brush strokes, and the ultimate "solution" he arrives at contains a number of loose ends. Nonetheless, while the execution leaves much to be desired, Kalb identifies many dangers within contemporary liberal politics that merit our attention now more than ever.

The project does not lack ambition. Kalb aims to show: 1) that we are dominated by a unitary, progressive ideology called liberalism 2) how this tyrannizes us in every aspect of life and will inevitably destroy all that is good, 3) why all challenges to it fail, 4) except for what Kalb calls "traditionalism," 5) which is the only viable alternative, because 6) traditionalism resolves all fundamental questions of ethics, politics, and epistemology by reconciling "faith and reason" and giving meaning and structure to human life.

"Liberalism," according to Kalb is based on the ultimate goals of freedom and equality, which may sound good in the abstract, but become pernicious because their total achievement requires the destruction of other substantial goods. Moreover, the ideal of equality within liberalism masks a serious sleight of hand. Ostensibly, equality ought to entail treating everyone equally. That is, it should mean being tolerant of all and neutral between our specific claims. But, of course, this notion of neutrality can't go all the way down. Your freedom comes to into conflict with my freedom, and government needs to draw a line somewhere to demarcate legitimate boundaries. All laws constrain some parties, and the idea that government can remain neutral with regard to all of our particular claims is chimera. At the end of the day all governments must make decisions about the hierarchy of goods that will be expressed in legal protections and administrative decisions.

So, liberalism, in Kalb's view, wreaks havoc in two ways. First, it promotes a vision of itself as substantially neutral, with the implication that it is illegitimate for citizens to publicly advocate (and in some cases even privately act) on behalf of their own particular ethical convictions. Thus it has the effect of robbing our communal life of recourse to our deepest sources of meaning. Second, liberalism in fact holds and advances its own ethical system, based on what Kalb calls the "equal satisfaction of preferences"—a kind of vulgar, hedonistic utilitarianism that is dismissive of many "traditional" boundaries. Kalb thinks liberalism's intrinsic values are ultimately nihilistic and destructive of "higher" human goods, and that these liberal values find increasingly expression in and power through government bureaucracies, judicial elites, and technological rationality.

So far, so good. Many prominent critiques of liberalism have developed variations on these precise themes. Indeed there is a vast, and sometimes turgid, literature out there debating the nature, limits, and worth of liberalism. Kalb's critique is somewhat refreshing in that it takes

shape outside of these narrowly academic debates. However, there are points at which Kalb might have strengthened his argument by reference to this literature. Moreover, those attuned to these debates will likely think that some of Kalb's claims are exaggerated and lack adequate precision.

The first half of Kalb's book is a somewhat repetitive examination of the evils of liberalism. Kalb divines a fatalistic logic inherent in liberalism, more oppressive and vicious than anything Marx ever saw in Capitalism. Kalb asserts, "The vices of liberalism are intrinsic, progressive, destructive, and irreversible (150)." Moreover, liberalism as Kalb conceives it is not just one of many political orientations in our midst, rather "liberal doctrine is the basis of everything recognized as authoritative today (111)." So we are truly in a bad way. We are ruled exclusively by liberalism, and it inexorably destroys all human goods, which will ultimately lead to the collapse of our civilization.

One wonders, however, if Kalb's account is too "black and white," if it adequately reflects the complex reality of our present situation. For example, consider a typical treatment of one of liberalism vices:

[Liberalism] gives special justification only to equality and self-centered satisfactions that do not require others to give of themselves. Things as basic as love and loyalty lose their sanction and become morally questionable because they impose enduring demands and obligations. Marriage, among other things, *becomes impossible* even though the name may remain. *To the extent society becomes liberal it becomes inhuman*, and as the process approaches completion the society becomes unable to function or survive (141). [emphasis mine]

On the one hand, Kalb has a valid point. Marriage issues enable to him to sustain some of his strongest claims, as "the liberal state" has done much to undermine the institution of marriage and the goods associated with it. On the other hand Kalb claims too much. "Real" marriage today is still very possible, and equating liberalism with inhumanity is premature, if not plainly false.

Moreover, despite the long exegesis Kalb develops of liberalism's vices, which includes numerous comparisons to Soviet tyranny, the limited examples he draws on lead one to think that if a handful of still debated policies were reversed, he wouldn't have much to complain about. Absent affirmative action, abortion, gay marriage, and bureaucratic overregulation liberalism might not look so bad. Their inevitability in a liberal regime needs to be better established, although Kalb is certainly right that these issues won't be resolved to his satisfaction anytime soon. Nonetheless, before lobbing the polemic accusations of liberal tyranny, Kalb might consider the old moral of the "Boy who Cried Wolf." Hyperbole has long been a strategy of many of the leftists Kalb despises, who equate any inequality with racial apartheid and every military action with genocide. Likewise, it is perhaps a stretch to see in every gauche display of political correctness a systematic march towards tyranny.

Much of Kalb's analysis would also benefit from drawing a clearer distinction between liberalism as a state project, and liberalism as a cultural phenomenon. To be sure, both can be oppressive, and widespread liberal cultural convictions are likely to find expression in law. However, it makes a great difference whether expressing one's disapproval of homosexuality

lands one in jail or simply means there are certain social circles in which one can't make friends. The liberalism of Canada is moving towards the former, whereas the liberalism of America is likely to stay with the latter, for reasons that are both cultural and constitutional. Kalb laments the "denial of public respectability to non liberal principles (19)" but public respectability is not something the state manufactures. The distinction between cultural and state liberalism would undoubtedly require Kalb's diagnosis to be more complex, but it has even larger implications for his proposed solution.

We are all familiar with Winston's Churchill quip that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the rest. In order to indict liberalism, Kalb has to suggest what sort of alternative arrangements would be better, alongside the catalogue of goods that liberalism destroys. Throughout the first half of the book, Kalb employs phrases that are rather theoretically loaded to describe why liberalism is so wrong. Liberalism is opposed to "what people find natural, comprehensible, and satisfying (12)," to "popular understandings (102)," and to "settled habits and natural tendencies (132)." An obscure populism runs through this diagnosis, as if liberalism isn't what "the people" really want. But one problem with liberalism, as Kalb describes it, is that it gives the people exactly what they want. In fact, at certain points Kalb suggests that "the people" are on board with liberalism: "all classes favor liberalism (29)." Nonetheless he recurrently returns to the idea that liberalism is at odds with the natural understandings people have. This poses serious theoretical problems that are compounded in his account of "tradition" as the antidote to liberalism.

Despite frequently invoking "the people" as the arbiter of good government, Kalb does not embrace majoritarian democracy as a political solution. Part of the problem as he sees it is the way in which liberal elites control institutions of government and the media. They can insulate themselves from effective popular oversight. However, Kalb has a deeper objection to democracy, namely that the people don't really know what they want. In this respect his criticisms of democracy mirror his criticisms of global capitalism. The problem with each is that they fulfill the unenlightened desires of the masses. Liberalism is in fact the combination of democracy and markets, which have conspired to enable the greatest satisfaction of individual preferences. So Kalb, like many theorists of politics, is pushed towards something like an account of false consciousness, taking as normative not what most people now desire, but what they ought to desire if they were clear headed.

How do we know what the genuine goods are that "the people" would want if they truly understood them? One answer to this question is suggested in Kalb's use of the phrase "natural tendencies." Perhaps nature can be our guide. Kalb, however, is suspicious of grounding too much in reasoning about nature. After all, nature is ostensibly the starting point for John Locke and many other liberal theorists. Kalb cautions that reason is limited; in fact "too much reason destroys reason (194)." This leads him to develop a complicated account of the interrelation of reason, faith, and tradition in the second half of the book. "Tradition" as it comes to be defined in these later chapters is the great alternative to liberalism, as well as the only hopeful moderating force to be found within liberalism.

Kalb's account of the relationship between tradition and reason leaves much to be desired and its loose ends undermine the larger arguments of the book. Moreover, the particular way in which

Kalb proposes “tradition” as the solution, evades the real political challenges that he earlier identifies—ironically, not unlike the high theorists of liberal neutrality.

The ultimate problem with liberalism according to Kalb is its “rejection of moral authorities that transcend human purposes (20).” Now, one way of justifying moral authorities is to show how they support human purposes, but Kalb closes off a direct approach of that sort. Rather, he needs to provide an account of how we come to know the most important, “transcendent” sources of authority, which rightly trump our individual desires, given that there are no demonstrative ways to establish these authorities through reason. The epistemological account is complicated, as these sorts of accounts necessarily are, and at the end Kalb emerges with claim on behalf of the superiority of “tradition,” understood as the “crystallized experience of the society to which we belong (198).” But appeals to tradition are notoriously circular, and Kalb struggles to give some account of how traditions change and in what sense changes (or even alternative traditions) can be better or worse.

Taken in its minimalist form, the claim that all reasoning takes place within a tradition is easily granted, but it does not help us distinguish one set of reasons from another. If all reasoning is inherently traditional, then everyone is a traditionalist. But Kalb wants to say that traditionalism is unique, something like the uniqueness of common law when compared to Roman law. So, sometimes he flirts with an evolutionary account of tradition—“traditions” are constellations of beliefs/institutions that have proved stable over a long period and thus have a presumptive advantage over alternatives. However, the evolutionary analogy is perilous both because it admits of radical progress through experimentation and because it provides little ground from which to attack whatever is presently dominant (in this case liberalism). Finally, Kalb draws an intrinsic connection between tradition and faith, claiming that these are the “natural modes” of meaningful human being in the world. Faith indeed becomes synonymous with tradition in the last section of the book. However, this move seems more like an avoidance of the questions that confront Kalb than an answer to them. In any case, he certainly dodges a whole range of important problems concerning the relationship between rationality and tradition posed by philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre.

It’s not as if the reader hasn’t seen this solution coming. Earlier, Kalb asserts, “The fundamental political question is the nature and purpose of authority, and thus the nature of man, the world, moral obligation, and the human good—in other words, which religion is correct. Liberalism cannot get by without answering that question (93).” Kalb’s specific answer to that question is something like medieval Catholicism, although he never states it plainly. He does, however, lament that “in the absence of a nobility or hierarchical church we have no widespread and well developed tradition of non-liberal thought to provide a counter weight (168).” But there is a disconnect between the specific authority he himself recognizes and his appeals to “tradition and faith” as generic categories for what’s good. The problem is that there are few partisans of tradition in general. Rather we see people attached to particular traditions, and a brief survey of human history shows that these particular traditions frequently disagree with each other about rather profound matters. Setting up the modern political contest as one between liberals devoted to inhuman, abstract reason and traditionalists devoted to humane, sensible faith is not entirely convincing.

First, liberalism itself constitutes something of a tradition, regardless of how Kalb defines the term. More importantly, however, the scope of disagreement between various religious traditions alone makes it implausible that “traditional faith” can serve as the basis of a political consensus. On various cultural policy issues one may indeed find an overlapping consensus between *conservative* Muslims, Catholics, Mormons, Protestants, and Jews. However, when it comes to questions of who will rule and how they will rule, Evangelicals are likely to view Mormons with suspicion, to give but one example. So the question for politics cannot simply be “tradition, yes or no?” but “which tradition?” It is somewhat ironic that the best reason Kalb identifies for recommending Catholicism as a ruling tradition is that it has a clear method of arbitration—a final decision maker as it were. Kalb likes a Pope for the same reasons that Thomas Hobbes liked an all-powerful sovereign. But Kalb recognizes the looming accusation of theocracy and takes pains to avoid it by assuring his reader that no church should have direct political power and that religious influence should come through persuasion. He does believe that there ought to be something like an established “public religion” but that it “should be based on the understandings accepted in society generally (252)” —a minimally doctrinal Protestant Christianity, according to him.

Kalb would like a society unified by a shared understanding of the good. His erudite ruminations illuminate why such a shared understanding would be so valuable for politics. But the precise problem of politics is that the people in our society don’t have a shared understanding of the good. The modern world is characterized by a number of different and in certain respects incompatible conceptions of what is good. Moreover, any genealogy of liberalism would have to acknowledge its roots in the inability of Christians to settle their political-theological disputes in a civilized manner. So, how should we deal with the undeniable fact of ethical pluralism that confronts us today? One answer given by a number of liberals is that that we ought to have a somewhat minimal constitution whose moral substance can be endorsed by a wide range of particular ethical traditions and whose procedural rules should leave further political determinations open to popular persuasion and electoral representation. In the last few centuries people from a diverse range of ethical orientations have come to believe that if their own people can’t rule then this sort of liberalism might not be bad terms for a truce.

At times it seems as if Kalb’s fundamental criticism of liberalism is precisely that it doesn’t let people like him rule. Among many of his fellow citizens, however, liberalism could hardly ask for a better defense. But in the final chapters of the book, Kalb disavows any desire to rule through force, advocating instead a strategy of persuasion in terms that would comfort even Habermas. Kalb puts forth a basic outline of the sort of institutions he thinks would be decent and politically feasible and emphasizes that “the institutional approach suggested here is procedural and does not guarantee any particular outcome (271).” I read that sentence twice just to make sure Kalb was characterizing his own proposal and not liberalism. The institutional vision Kalb lays out is basically a blend of two positions he had earlier criticized, namely libertarianism and Roger Scruton–style conservatism. These focus on reducing the scope of the national government’s management of society and giving widespread deference to local customs, along with a wish list of more “conservative” arrangements, desirable if people can be persuaded to sign on.



That is all to say that by the end Kalb sounds like something of a liberal himself. He would like the state to be more tolerant towards people like him, accepts that there needs to be a political compromise that prevents any group from seeking perfection through politics, and believes in persuasion. It just happens that a state in which relative freedom exists for people to meaningfully practice any number of doubtful traditional religions (they can't all be right) will also provide freedoms that enable (at least in the current configuration of culture) what Kalb loathes, namely a "field of impersonal technical rationality oriented towards the satisfaction of arbitrary individual desire (18)." Of course, there is nothing wrong with defending the political institutions of liberalism, while at the same time despising and criticizing those who embrace "freedom and equality" as ethical absolutes.

Even if Kalb's ultimate relationship to liberalism remains ambiguous and his grand project less coherent than he had hoped, he does make a number of valuable points. His greatest concern is to be heard, and he is critical of high liberals who won't let him into the conversation. He illuminates the poverty of one sort of comprehensive conception of liberal ethics. He calls our attention to the reality that many citizens endorse the liberal state out of concern for goods that exist prior to and separate from it; and he cautions comprehensive liberals that they neglect concern for such goods at their own peril. Finally, his insights into the dehumanizing effects of technological rationality are extremely perceptive.

Ultimately, the idea that animates this book remains profoundly important. So-called liberals increasingly employ state power to realize particular, radical visions of equality and liberation. Moreover, they advance these agendas under the false guise of neutrality, moderation, and bipartisanship through elites who are ignorant of the virtues of and fragility of existing social practices. In reality, these are dangerous political developments and they are also, arguably, a betrayal of the only form of liberalism worth defending. This book raises the question of how to diagnose and mitigate these and other totalitarian temptations latent in liberal culture that increasingly undermine institutions of free government and personal responsibility. These are challenges to which we should all be better attuned.

The weakest part of the project is undoubtedly its attempt to reconcile reason, faith, and tradition into a unified epistemological account, a task which would have benefited greatly from more exchange with academic literature. Despite this and the sometimes polemic tone of the book, it will profitably frustrate both liberals and non-liberals alike.

Equal Freedom and the Terror of the Past  
James Matthew Wilson - 05/15/09

*Part 3 of a symposium on James Kalb's The Tyranny of Liberalism.*

James Kalb's *The Tyranny of Liberalism* offers us far more than its just, but polemical, title seems to promise. In its pages, Kalb has diagnosed the present state and the longstanding trends of the West in a thorough and abstract manner. I do not mean by this that Kalb's study of modern liberalism and guide to our overcoming it is thoroughly abstract.

Rather, Kalb has succeeded in providing as thorough a survey of the errant assumptions and destructive policies of the modern liberal "managerial" state as I have yet encountered. While he evidently stands on the shoulders of Paul Gottfried and other important minds who have helped us think through our ruination and to conceive how we might recover a more humane, modest, enriching, and flourishing society, Kalb has provided in one kaleidoscopic book something new.

But it is the abstraction of his volume that may make it most enduring. The sheer variety and immensity of problems infecting advanced liberal society can easily overwhelm even the most penetrating of its critics. As Kalb ably demonstrates, this is a paradoxical phenomenon, because liberalism operates on a tyrannically simple, obtusely reductive, set of principles. Nonetheless, the malevolence of those principles often obscures the principles themselves, and many critics of this-or-that aspect of liberal modernity fail to penetrate to its cause. While Kalb's book is not entirely lacking in the hard-hitting and concrete fisticuffs one expects in a work so fiercely and desperately opposed to the spirit of our age, these are few in number. He displays instead a lawyerly caution as he tries to furnish the definitive diagnosis of the irrationality and self-destructive course preponderant in a society made to surrender everything it once had in the quest for "equal freedom."

While I have a few small reservations and queries I would like to take up elsewhere, here I should like only to amplify the central historical claim of Kalb's thesis, that the liberal state and its ideology bear intrinsic contradictions within themselves and that this intellectual incoherence ultimately will result in the destruction of the liberal society that classical liberals once hoped to bring into being. The state-mandated, state-managed quest for freedom and equality may be gradual and cautious in its movements, but this only serves to abet its work in dissolving all "illiberal" or "pre-liberal" traditions and institutions that make a society something more than a zoo of isolated individuals whose only common attribute is a legal obligation not to "oppress" one another.

This trend ultimately results in three features that already shape the lives of most Americans—indeed, most western persons: a grotesque redefinition of the Good as "equal freedom"; an increasing dependence on technocracy to secure equality; and a terror of the past and everything it tried to bequeath us in the name of a sadly solipsistic version of freedom.

Kalb's historical account of the rise of liberal society runs along incontrovertible lines. At the dawn of classical liberalism, the assumption of its advocates was that public inquiry into the nature of the good life for man, and into the attributes of the flourishing society that help make

such a life possible, is a nonstarter. Debates over competing understandings of the Good are insolvable in the political realm, and therefore must be thoroughly confined to the private realm of the individual conscience and personal preference. Society, politics, and government all inevitably remain, however, and so the liberal redefines the political as a strictly procedural body of institutions that are increasingly absorbed into and dominated by a central, bureaucratic state. That state's merely procedural responsibility is to provide for and protect the freedom of its citizens as well as their legal "equality." Any ambition beyond this would patently require the state to make substantive claims about what constitutes the good and bad in human life; it would therefore violate the appearance of strict neutrality proper to a government claiming only to shield its citizens from those actions of their fellows that would trample upon individual freedom or "individual" equality.

Problems arise for the liberal as time and experience force reflection on this self-understanding. Classical liberals shared a great number of assumptions about the nature of the Good and the general shape civil society ought to take—they did, after all, share the idea of a "civil society." They felt comfortable advocating a strictly procedural form of liberal government precisely because most of the morals (or "values," as moderns say) they shared could be relied upon to limit, inform, and give rational substance to disputes within the procedural-political realm. Typically, such classical liberals presumed (without feeling called upon explicitly to endorse) a mode of civil religion that, at minimum, supported basic Christian moral tenets and affirmed that a divine law, created by a just God, obtained even where positive law did not, and that all persons would ultimately be answerable for their earthly conduct when they were judged at the gates of Heaven. They were mistaken from the beginning, however, in believing that the state or the political realm could somehow remain "value-neutral," and consequently most liberal societies retained the sanction of the state for goods far more particular and substantive than the mere policing of freedom and equality; civil religion, minimal, tacit, and fragile though it was, remained of necessity the prerequisite for full participation in political and social life.

As members of liberal society became gradually more conscious of those sanctions, their bureaucratic and legal elites did not hesitate to strike them down. In the name of a strictly procedural, value-neutral political realm, judges and legislators worked to root out those apparent inconsistencies in a political system that, again, promised to abstain from decisions regarding what is good, but only to clear space for such decisions to be made in private by securing the freedom and equality of citizens. Such was the contradictory legacy of classical liberalism: it was committed to destroying the conditions of its own possibility.

In the midst of this liberalizing trend, substantive liberalism (and liberals) came more fully into being. As generations passed, the sureties of civil religion and its mild state sanctions were pushed from the public sphere. Classical liberals claimed only to wish to clear the political sphere of debates about the Good so that they could more fruitfully be resolved in the vast areas of life beyond the purview of the State. But those same "vast areas" shrank as modern liberal states became more assertive in clearing life for "equal freedom." Consequently, the pre-political assumptions that served as a foundation for liberal society became fewer and fewer—and more tenuously held with each passing year. If classical liberals were merely procedural liberals, then we rightly understand them to have relied on a significant number of assumptions about a good life and a good society, and to have sought those things while treating freedom and equality only

as instruments. They cherished freedom and equality, in other words, only to the extent that these principles facilitated the achievement of goods that were much more important.

When those more important assumptions and beliefs began to dissolve under the feet of our society, freedom and equality began to look less like means to an end and more like totalizing ends in themselves. Thus, contemporary advocates of liberal society tend to be substantive liberals, whose sense of freedom and equality as the first principles of reality demands that an increasingly thorough, powerful, and centralized state must scour the surface of its territory to secure freedom and equality in every last nook. The expression or even explicit holding of moral beliefs that condemn such things as sexual perversions, libertine “lifestyles,” and violent or superficial religions as evil must be forbidden; such beliefs, the liberal believes, deny full equality (i.e. whole-hearted acceptance) to those who are legally free to do whatever they like.

Substantive liberalism therefore begins to impinge on some kinds of liberty and equality in order to preserve others. Racial discrimination in schools and the workplace—such as that carried out under the banner of “affirmative action”—exemplify this practice. As such, what should have been merely obvious becomes painful: freedom and equality cannot be first principles of a society, because they are merely relative terms. Freedom can only be had in relation to specific actions (the freedom to do something), and equality can only be a particular outcome of justice, where one person is judged “equal” in some concrete respect to another person. When they become abstract governing principles, no amount of state-activism can render everyone free, and no state can remain “value-neutral” in enforcing equality. Most differences that define individual persons will lose the freedom to exist in the name of elevating other persons to full equality. In the process, some forms of equality (equality before the law, for instance) will be sacrificed for others (quantifiable equality of outcome). To name just two such forms: equality of college admissions outcomes among different races, or equality of social prestige and economic benefits pertaining to radically different forms of conjugal relationships.

As Kalb argues, the decline of procedural liberalism into substantive liberalism is no narrative of grand ambitions spoiled by ignoble ones. Liberalism from the beginning bore within itself the principled seeds of its own destruction. Classical liberals were able to offer a compelling vision of liberal society only because they took for granted visions of the Good they thought to be pre-political and nonnegotiable. They simply failed to understand the implications their political principles of freedom and equality had, ultimately, for their pre-political givens of morality, manners, and “values.” Because such things can seldom justify their worth on rational grounds as directly abetting either freedom or equality, the rationalizing, bureaucratic state insists they must give way. Substantive liberalism was the inevitable outcome. With freedom and equality as the new first principles not merely of political but of human life, all attachments, traditions, institutions, customs, and laws that stand in the way of their absolute reign had to be chipped-away by an ever more rationalizing, managerial state.

In liberal society, the state has to play an increasingly managerial role over persons’ lives, because the natural attachments, traditions, institutions, communities, and associations that form over the course of a people’s life together generally have implications for the purported freedom and equality of the individual. Most activities people perform in common, most institutions of which they become a part, do not allow the individual full autonomy; indeed, the benefits of such

things are closely tied to the restrictions they put upon the behavior of their members. Marriage without fidelity is just fornication; a Church without morality and doctrine can be little more than a kind of intoxicated self-flattery; a trade-association without standards of practice and initiation can be little more than an excuse to drink cocktails. One cannot belong to anything and simultaneously belong entirely to oneself. As such, the quest for administered freedom tends to dissolve the texture of life and to render the modern person listless, meaningless, alone, and without resources besides those the state deems efficient and rational.

So also do these and other such institutions present intrinsic obstacles to the equality of persons. Every day, with every interaction we have with other persons, no matter how casual, we are reminded not of the uniform equality of all human beings, but of the fact that nobody—absolutely nobody—is equal. Inequalities become apparent through our natural and inevitable interactions, and so the state is forced continuously to interfere in them in order to bring equality about by bureaucratic contrivance. Black and white children generally do not live together or send their children to the same schools; so, cross-town bussing must force them at least to sit in the same classrooms. Homosexual conjugal relationships do not bear significant resemblance either in appearance or essential function to traditional marriage, and so the state must step in to equalize the situation; traditional marriage is gradually robbed of the natural privileges it acquires in social esteem and in the eyes of the law as a pre-political institution, while homosexual indulgences are granted welfare benefits that further erode the apparent distinctiveness of real marriage. Functional families tend to divide responsibility and authority unevenly between the members, and so the state actively seeks to drive women into careers and away from motherhood so that there will be at least the quantifiable appearance of “equality.” The added “perk” is that such a careerist culture produces divorce in large numbers, all but eliminating marriage’s interference in the rational organization of liberal society. When the appearance of workplace equality is nonetheless exposed as just that—a charade—the state must further enact statutes to create and enforce equality still more actively, until some men are denied a position in a company or on a university’s faculty simply because the sex-numbers need to be “equalized” further. These are, of course, just the easy and obvious examples; gifted with a black sense of humor, I should be pleased to continue.

Such state intervention to enforce equality and freedom is facilitated by an ideological promotion of its values through narratives of terror. The most obvious and tragi-comic are those taught to women from their earliest years in our public schools, on television, and, increasingly, from our supposedly “privatized” pulpits. Unlike racial “equality,” which can be enforced at least in the workplace by outcome-measured hiring quotas, sex equality has proven more difficult to enforce. To circumvent this difficulty, we live in an age where most girls are instructed by the time they arrive at adulthood in the salvific function of the birth-control pill and elective abortion. These two features of “feminism” exemplify modern liberalism’s dependence on techno-equality. Because pregnancy, maternal emotions, and the immeasurable biological and psychological penumbra of these goods, contribute to a vulnerability on the part of the woman if she is to be a “strong” and “liberated” mid-level sales rep for a large corporation, they must be stopped. Hence, the pill has become the front-line grunt in the battle for technologically contrived equality. The ideological mania of abortion advocates testifies even more so *not* to their concern for poor, single mothers, but to a fear that the natural and fruitful functioning of the female body

according to the end for which it was designed might stand in the way of full career parity with men.

According to such a vision of womanhood and equality, the entirety of history before the pill and abortion was a Dark Age of slavery, oppression, and captivity. The mere suggestion that the technology to control reproduction might not be good strikes many feminists with horror. It is *the* Good. No pill, no equality; no abortion, no freedom. The fear of an age without these things—phantasmal though the representations of such ages certainly are—precludes even the most speculative discussion as to whether such technologies are good in themselves, whether they serve a good end beyond themselves. And, of course, it is inconceivable that the quantifiable appearance of absolute sexual equality might be questioned as anything less as the New Jerusalem at which our age can aim, now that the ages of Christendom have been consigned to the dustbin.

The liberation of women from the natural fruitfulness of their bodies offers itself as just one instance of the claustrophobic form liberal “freedom” has taken. We are sometimes told that the world was itself a darkness until the liberal reign of the United States came into being. We are always being reminded in a society that equates the right to buy and consume with freedom that any other age but ours must have been a nightmare. The free exercise of the will has been reduced from a rational, moral faculty, as it was in all previous ages, to an emotional, consumer-preference one. Because everything that matters in the shared life of a people is forbidden from the political realm, and because even the discussion of questions like the meaning of life and the form it should take is increasingly proscribed on grounds of equality, the freedom liberalism promises extends little beyond the right to buy, fornicate, sodomize, and buy some more in the private cell of one’s domicile. Kalb rightly questions the value of such an order: a private freedom to glut oneself is for several reasons a worthless one.

In the age of substantive liberalism, however, most persons cannot imagine life being otherwise. Although modern freedom and equality offer us very little and ask of us a dehumanizing docility, we are ever reminded that the past was haunted by kings and aristocrats, patriarchies and priests. Liberals are, of course, practically correct to fear such beings—for they could only emerge in a society that values human connections, that embraces the soft chains of interdependence, obligation, and privilege, in the pursuit of the good of this world and the Good who is God. When a society is stable and when its members can see each other as they are, persons of authority naturally arise at the head of the always existent hierarchy of persons. Why this should be so terrifying, I do not know. Such authoritative figures speak well of past ages, just as the roles of our present day—the legalistic bureaucrat, the body-spray besotted leech with the assurance of a “Bradford millionaire,” the materialistic hippie, the beer-bellied fake-n’-baked bar trollop, the cardboard, short-haired feminist with a lip-service-love for poetry, the audience of *The View*, the sexless shoulder-pad-wearing junior executive, the over-sexed, single and gray-haired managing director, the suburban narcissist who poses as an Evangelical mega-church “worshipper,” the asocial techno-geek with dandruff and dreams of world domination (and sex), and the hapless underling whose only social recognition is found at home with his two dogs—speak terribly of ours.

Kalb's historical scheme shows how inevitable our present state was from the inception of liberalism. He thus explains why so-called "conservatism" has facilitated rather than reversed this social transformation: conservatives are classical liberals who, often literally, give birth to substantive ones (Meet the McCains!). To speak of a liberal order is oxymoronic. Therefore, Kalb calls us to recover the pre-liberal traditions of the Good that may help us in re-cultivating ourselves and our society. We might become more free and equal in many ways by heeding his prescriptions—we will certainly be more happy, and so will rely less on the terror of the past and the sterile joys of technocracy to buoy our spirits and reassure us that our lasting happiness lies in the domination of our bodies.

Beyond Liberalism, Discovering Tradition  
James Kalb - 05/18/09

*Part 4 of a symposium on James Kalb's The Tyranny of Liberalism.*

I thank Paul Gottfried, James Matthew Wilson, and William English for their reviews. Each has devoted thought to the issues my book considers, and each has tied his comments on the book to his own views on its subject matter. The result has been to illuminate the book by bringing out its relation to other present-day discussions of our political order in general and liberalism and its future in particular. How could an author ask for more?

*Response to Gottfried*

In his very generous review Paul Gottfried mentions some points of difference that are themselves worth comment.

He points out that contemporary liberalism is not all hedonism, and notes that it has specifically religious aspects that emphasize self-denial, for example the transformation of the Christian drama of sin and redemption into a drama involving sins of historical oppression and their atonement through confession and penance.

I agree that liberalism is not primarily hedonism. I mostly treat it as conceptual: man is a rational animal, so how he understands himself and the world is extremely important for how he ends up living. Conceptually speaking, the liberalism we see around us is mostly based on an understanding of what it is to be rational and human that ends by making preference satisfaction the highest good and equality the highest morality.

Preference satisfaction is hedonistic, but equality is demanding. In particular, it requires us to support the eradication of inconsistent attitudes and loyalties—for example, attachment to whatever particular culture it was that traditionally ordered our society. Those brought up in that culture and still more those traditionally advantaged by it therefore carry a special burden under liberalism. The transformed Christianity Gottfried mentions is, I think, the form in which cultural Protestants tend to understand that burden. It can take other forms as well, such as principled transgressiveness.

It is an interesting question whether liberalism could have grown up in a non-Christian society. I am inclined to think it could not have. But then I would say the same about secular modernity in general. To say that a general Christian background is essential to liberalism, and that Christians are likely to express their liberalism in Christian terms, is not to say that the liberal aspects of the secular modern world have a special connection to specifically Christian residues within that world. If they did, then the weakening of those residues would mean the weakening of liberalism. That does not seem to be the case.

As to solutions, I do make a point of the extreme pragmatic difficulty of our situation. My basic point though is that nothing lasts forever, and liberalism combines rational insufficiency with a



slow but cumulative tendency toward logical rigor, so we know that this too shall pass. In the mean time we do what we can to avert the worst, live well today, and build toward the future.

So I do not see a necessary difference between my “discussion groups to explore the problems raised” and Gottfried's proposal to “raise pointed questions, while hoping that a later generation may take them up.”

Maybe the difference is that I see more long-term hope. I would add that there is an evident difference in emphasis. I am more concerned with what people can do to live well here and now, so I am more concerned with the establishment and defense of non-liberal communities. I am more impressed by the ultimate instability of liberalism and the possibility of radical unforeseeable change. And I have a more vivid sense of the limitations on what can be done through money and influence with movers and shakers (assuming such things should become available to us). If there is a problem with basic social understandings of reason and reality, which I think is the case, then it is not the movers and shakers who are going to turn things around.

As an aside, it is worth noting that I do not discuss Ockham or the medieval synthesis, and mention the medieval period only very briefly. Those things are no doubt lurking in the background, but they play no explicit role in my discussion.

#### *Response to Wilson*

I thank James Matthew Wilson for his presentation and development of basic themes and theses of my book. I look forward to the more critical comments he promises.

#### *Response to English*

William English's review is useful because it provides an occasion to highlight differences between the views presented in my book and common academic views on politics and liberalism. It also pays attention to the book's second half, which deals with the issues that at present are of most interest to me.

English, of course, finds the book frustrating. The frustration may be due in part to the kind of book it is. As he notes, it is not an academic work. It is an attempt to understand where we are today in Western society, socially and morally speaking, and where we should go. As such, it is practical rather than theoretical in orientation.

In accordance with that orientation it tries to give a comprehensive view that at least sketches answers to basic questions. Broad strokes are a necessary consequence. English finds that feature of the book frustrating, but it is hard to avoid when exploring a general perspective that covers the issues that seem pressing.

Such explorations are important. Each of us—at least implicitly in the way he acts—has some general view of life that provides him with a system of answers. The same is true of society as a whole. A society that deals collectively with a wide range of human concerns through a network

of enduring, complex, and authoritative institutions of necessity adopts some comprehensive view of man's nature and good. That necessity applies all the more when the institutions are supervised, rationalized, and brought in line with each other by the state.

English contrasts liberal society to my desired society, “unified by a shared understanding of the good.” The contrast makes little sense. The “good” is simply whatever it is that makes something worth doing. Western liberal society believes there is something definite that makes things worth doing: preference satisfaction, at least with respect to tolerant and therefore legitimate preferences. It thus has a specific theory of the good, one that it views as authoritative. That theory recognizes the equal validity of a variety of preferences, but not a variety of beliefs about the good. (Its apologists, of course, try their best to erase the distinction.)

As I discuss in the book, the central beliefs of Western liberal society constitute a religion—a system of ultimate beliefs about man and the world—that is backed by what amounts to a system of religious authority. In a perverse way, that system represents a reversion of Western society to type. After a post-Reformation period in which authoritative religious principles were determined by the prince, and a bourgeois liberal period in which they were mostly unspoken and determined by inherited convention, the West is falling back into an older pattern in which dogmatic and disciplinary requirements are determined for everyone everywhere by transnational institutions. Instead of pope and catechism we have human rights tribunals and treaties.

In Europe and Canada there are now even heresy and blasphemy trials that impose criminal penalties for finding fault with homosexuality or Islam or downgrading the importance of the Holocaust. Penalties are of course much milder than in the medieval and early modern periods, but that is true of penalties generally. If everyone is an isolated individual who lives by large institutions subject to a comprehensive web of regulation then the state does not need to burn heretics, chop the heads off troublesome noblemen, or hang those who steal goods worth more than twelve pence.

In an age that claims enlightenment, and insists on bringing social practices in line with the principles considered authoritative, it is important to discuss the accepted principles and think them through. If on reflection they seem wrong, it is necessary to propose something better. My book tries to do both.

The alternative to comprehensive discussion, it seems to me, is dogmatism and irrationality on a grand scale. And that, I think, is what we see around us. What the book attacks is an understanding of rational social organization that pretends to be neutral because it pretends to avoid the largest issues. In fact, it does nothing of the kind but rather imposes its own mindless answers as supposedly neutral default positions. Academic discussions of politics typically facilitate that process through their specialization and their presuppositions.

Beyond the nature of the book, I think the big reason for English's frustration is a basic difference of perspective. He is evidently at home in liberal academia (no doubt in his own critical and nuanced way). He therefore views liberal thought and institutions from the inside. I view them from the outside. He sees our dominant social and political understandings as normal and adequately functional, with perhaps some problems and difficulties. I see them as the

contrary. With such a difference in perspective, it is hard to avoid talking at cross purposes or seeing the other's views as simpleminded or distorted.

Perhaps for that reason, English greatly oversimplifies my treatment of liberalism. I do not say that it is a “unitary, progressive ideology.” I present it as a complex that evolves over time and takes different forms. That complex involves various practices and institutions, a consensus regarding the ends and means of government, and the abstract understandings that make all the rest seem to make sense.

The argument of the first part of the book is that the abstract understandings are basically an understanding of rationality. (I say it is a scientific understanding.) As such, it is able over the centuries to drive the rest, with the current public social and moral order the natural outcome.

So it is not liberal ideology that is unitary and progressive so much as the understanding of reason and reality that motivates it. In a functional society the accepted understanding of reason tends strongly toward unity, just as the grammar of a language does, because it is the general form of how people make sense of things. If it were not coherent the people who run things could not talk to each other or even think consecutively. And it is progressive, if it differs from the understanding that preceded it, because a change in what are thought the abstract demands of reason takes a very long time to permeate and transform social understandings and practices.

To the extent my argument is correct, and the destructive features of liberalism come out of limitations of the dominant understanding of reason, then it is likely we have big problems right now that are hard for those who have been educated into the dominant understanding to see and assess properly.

It seems to me we do have such problems, and I mention sex and family as an obvious and topical example. In America, I would say, marriage has basically disappeared as an authoritative social institution. I would add that its destruction as such is inhuman, because it is radically at odds with basic necessities of a tolerable social order. Liberals, in contrast, view the developments that have destroyed the institutional authority of marriage as a matter of basic human rights. And in any event, many would say, we can all have a “real marriage” if we want simply by taking thought and willing it.

Taking the basic liberal outlook for granted makes the issues less visible. As an example, English asserts that “liberalism is in fact the combination of democracy and markets.” I would say rather that it uses democracy and markets when they make the world more rational from a liberal standpoint but not otherwise. People, especially people with serious responsibilities, accept what they think makes sense. If popular sentiment wants to restrict abortion, limit immigration, put prayer in schools, or shut down “affirmative action,” responsible liberal people in positions of authority make sure it does not happen. If markets result in discriminations or even differential outcomes that seem irrational from the standpoint of liberal individualism and equality, liberal governments intervene as needed to suppress them.

English sees dangers but no overriding general tendencies in our present situation. He believes, for example, that our star-spangled exceptionalism will keep the penalties for expressing bad

thoughts in America non-criminal and merely “cultural.” Jurists and legal thinkers who want to internationalize human rights law, Blue Staters who think America should become Europe, anti-nativists who believe in radical demographic cosmopolitanism, and academics who define hate speech broadly and see no legitimate place for it do little to support that belief.

Even today and even in America, Carrie Prejean or my friend Maureen Mullarkey, not to mention employees subject to compulsory diversity training, parents concerned about the propaganda to which their children are subjected, people who provide services to couples, organizations and wedding parties, and those wanting to make a career in English's own profession, have sometimes found that opposition to the normalization of homosexuality can lead to problems that go beyond the existence of “certain social circles in which one cannot make friends.”

A strong public/private distinction tends to break down in any society. Man, after all, is a social animal. Such a distinction makes no sense at all in an advanced liberal society in which state activities account for a large part of the national income and workforce, the state is responsible for individual well-being and the social and psychological formation of the young, and reform or abolition of deeply-rooted social customs, attitudes and relationships is a basic government responsibility. The world is changing all around us. Why not mull over its basic tendencies?

So if (as I say) things are bad and getting worse, and the accepted view is that it is all progress, what can we do about it? In accordance with his fundamental outlook, English looks for a constructivist solution. He assumes that politics can be basically procedural and agnostic as to human goods, and that “the precise problem of politics” is the problem of working through and reconciling the varying goals people have in as civilized a way as possible. If a writer thinks something is amiss in the social order he expects the writer to show just what should replace it and how to bring the change about given existing resources.

For that reason he is shocked by the minimalism of my practical political suggestions. He should not be. There is no technocratic cure for technocracy. If “social policy” is the problem the solution cannot be point-by-point realization of a preferred design for society through intelligent application of available resources.

What is needed is a better—less liberal, less technocratic, more natural, more traditional, more transcendently-oriented—outlook and way of life. In the book I sketch out how something better could come about, what we could do to promote it, and why Christianity (and more specifically Christendom) is the way to go.

Such discussions relate mainly to pre-political aspects of life. The specifically political contribution to the process is necessarily limited. On that front what is needed are changes that make it possible for non-liberal ways and standards to survive, develop, and take hold. If we are stuck going the wrong direction and heading toward a cliff, the immediate practical necessity is to unlock the steering so we can start turning around.

Once that is done we need, of course, to decide where specifically we should head. So we must discuss how a tradition becomes adequate to human life and sufficiently authoritative to order society.

That is a complex process, which may be why English sees so many loose ends in the second half of the book. The basic issue in politics, though, is not procedure but the good. There is no completely orderly way of determining the good, but a man or society cannot be functional without having, at least implicitly, a well-developed view on what it is. For that reason, we, and society in general, get past the procedural and epistemological problems that bother English and others so much. Liberalism claims chastity in that regard, that is its stock in trade, but the book debunks the claim.

It seems safe to assume, then, that if liberalism is going to self-destruct, as I say, then something coherent and non-liberal will eventually follow. But what and how? The good that would motivate a different social order would, like all goods, be discovered rather than constructed. You do not need a theory of “false consciousness” to say that what people choose is not always what it makes most sense for them to choose. The distinction is troublesome only to a liberal or leftist who denies transcendent truths or their relevance to social and political life. Without it, moral deliberation loses its point, though, so we all routinely make the distinction at least unofficially. So why not drop the pretence that a rational politics and morality could be constructed out of actual goals without reference to anything transcending them? Why not say what we think best and most sensible and why?

Since demonstrative proof of the nature of the good is not available, we must rely on other indications. With their aid some particular understanding comes into focus—for us individually and for our society as a whole—as to how the world is and how we and others should act. The point of Pascal's *esprit de finesse*, Newman's illative sense, and even Rawls's reflective equilibrium is that such non-demonstrative conclusions are not merely subjective preferences. They even give us knowledge. Certainly, we often treat what they tell us as such and cannot do otherwise.

The indications that support them include the untutored reactions of ordinary people, the habits and attitudes that have been enduringly useful in ordinary life, and more generally whatever has become traditional. To appeal to such things is not to endorse populist majoritarianism or treat tradition as a mysterious black box that churns out correct answers to every possible question. It is to draw on what is available to deal with questions we inevitably face and answer.

My discussion of populism is mostly a discussion of its defects. My appeals to untutored reactions are mostly a sort of reality check, a way of putting liberalism in question by bringing out its oddity and artificiality. I put much more stress on traditionalism, by which I simply mean recognition that tradition has authority as such.

Tradition is an accumulation of results from all our ways of knowing things brought into a living system. The book emphasizes its necessity for understanding ourselves and the world as well as its limitations.

Its necessity means that our answers to “all fundamental questions of ethics, politics, and epistemology”—which, as a practical matter, we all have—must accept it as authority if they are to form a useably functional system. For that reason our more theoretical understanding of the world will be adequate only if it tells us why tradition should have irreducible authority. Liberalism fails to do so, and thus is not a tradition that can rationally be accepted.

Whatever choice we have is then among the non-liberal traditions. The limitations of traditionalism mean that we must deal with conflicts among and within them, and reflect on how one can be better than another. The book treats the problem of dealings between traditions as a basically practical matter that calls for different measures in different situations. It refuses to join liberalism in the utopian and therefore implicitly tyrannical quest for a permanent general solution to the age-old problem of differing views on basic issues.

As to choice of tradition in the event of doubt and dispute, the book argues, necessarily rather sketchily, that tradition needs to recognize revelation and an authoritative method of interpretation if it is to form a functional, coherent, and stable whole. Those and other features of the Christian tradition, especially its Catholic form, make it the presumptive choice and give it long-term strengths that may yet enable it to prevail.

Much more could and should be said on these topics, but a single book cannot do everything. Nor can a response to a review. A number of readers no doubt share English's general perspective, so I thank him for laying it out and hope my response is useful to them.