Liberalism, Tradition and Faith

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We live in odd times. Rationalized insanity like political correctness ("PC") and "zero tolerance" shows a growing conflict between public standards and normal human understandings that makes common-sense judgments impossible. The same conflict has disordered activities that rely on formal standards, like education and scholarship, practices that express public ideals, like architecture, and institutions that depend on harmony between social standards and natural human tendencies, like the family. As a result, young people are badly instructed, scholarship is disconnected from normal experience, the built environment is ugly and alienating, and family life is chaotic and ill-tempered.

Why these things have to be so still remains unknown, but it is also not clear what to do about them, so people ignore them, deny them, or minimize their importance. The officially-approved approach is to recognize that society and values evolve, and to trust the experts to explain why everything is in order and how to get used to whatever changes come along. It is however doubtful that the experts should be trusted in this matter. When major institutions persistently act in a senseless way while praising themselves for unprecedented rationality, there is something wrong with the public philosophy, on which they rely.

Man the Measure and Liberalism

The contradictions in political and moral thought today are the contradictions of the view that things are as they appear to be — that man is the measure of all things. That view is immediately self-contradictory, since it seems to most that appearance and reality are quite different.

Nonetheless, it has come to pervade the whole of life and thought. An obvious consequence has been a one-sided emphasis on personal feelings and arbitrary freedom at the expense of objectivity and public recognition of qualitative distinctions. A more subtle consequence has been the presumed omniscience of experts. Man-the-measure has become a rigorous and usable principle by the insistence on formal reasoning and close attention to immediate human experience, both of which require special training and expertise. The result is that the trained observer has become the real measure of things, beyond whom no appeal is possible. Man-the-measure has thus come paradoxically to mean that ordinary people, who are not experts, cannot trust their own perceptions and understandings.

The effects of making man the measure in such a way have differed in different settings. In the natural sciences they have mostly been beneficial. The critical tendency and the emphasis on human thought and activity have meant an emphasis on observation, measurement and model-building. Observation and measurement reduce things to simple units that can be completely grasped, while model-building eliminates the need to talk about anything but measured quantities and theories. Such procedures may not expose the whole truth about the world, but in physics and similar fields of study they have often been spectacularly successful.

In social and moral affairs, however, man-the-expert-observer is not usable as a final measure. Formal reasoning cannot tell what goods to pursue, and the complexity and subtlety of human phenomena make measurement, modeling and controlled verification mostly useless. Further, the attempt to reduce human realities to measurable appearances misses the most important things. When dealing with table salt, one does not lose much by ignoring what it may be in itself, and by talking instead about mathematical models and quantitative observations. The case is different when dealing with family and friends. Kantian morality, the social sciences, and the therapeutic approach to human life attempt to substitute formal reasoning, experimental findings, and successful mutual adjustment for concern with human beings as they are in themselves. Such efforts are fundamentally misconceived. Human affairs involve realities that cannot be controlled, experimented on, or reduced to artificial measures; they deal with things as they are, not as they appear.

But what are “things as they are”? The phrase seems to refer to a self-subsistent order of things that is altogether independent of one’s experience. The critically-minded do not see how one could know something altogether independent of one’s experience, since one knows things only

as they become part of one's experience, so they want to restrict the applicability of the phrase as much as possible. If reducing others to one's own experience does not work, the way to go beyond experience, while recognizing as few things as possible that transcend it, is to recognize the experience of others in its otherness and treat it as its own measure. Measuring each by the standard of himself then yields the radically subjective view that a man's good is whatever he thinks good, so that giving each what he wants becomes the highest ethical and political aspiration. Such a view is widely accepted today, even though it has too little content to yield a reasonable ethics or politics, and it gives rise to a modern dilemma: if there are no standards other than how things seem to me and how things seem to you, the choice is between the imperialistic view that one is the measure of others and the utterly empty view that each is his own measure.

If those are the alternatives, the latter seems more humane. Advanced liberal society therefore pins its moral hopes on the view that the good is what seems good to each man. People are attracted to that view, because they believe it leaves the moral and spiritual world wide open for each to develop in his own way.[1] It seems to demystify ethical questions, establish freedom on a firm basis, hold out hope for the greatest possible wealth of human diversity, and make it possible for people to tolerate each other and to concentrate on the practical problems of living together rather than speculations as to ultimate goods.

Nonetheless, the attempt to make each man his own measure leads to tyranny. The need for government remains, but the search for a common standard becomes pointless, so arbitrary rule is the outcome. A free society discusses things, but if each man is the measure there is nothing of substance to discuss. The rule is simple and clear: give each what he wants, and all alternatives, no matter how good their arguments or numerous their adherents, are ruled out in advance as religious dogma or idiosyncratic private opinion with no place in public life. The only legitimate questions are technical issues regarding how to satisfy as many desires as possible while giving equal weight to each. Such technical issues are for experts and not for ordinary people. Besides, very few people are consistently willing to let man be the measure. Most cannot help but import standards that go beyond that into their understanding of life with others. It follows that for "man the measure" to prevail, the small group of those

1. See *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833, 851 (1992): "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."

who truly accept it and are expert in applying it must rule the rest.

"Man the measure," which was intended to bring ethics down to earth and establish tolerance and inclusivity, thus turns out to be a transcendent principle interpreted and forced on the whole of life by a small elite. Further, the principle has too little content to decide particulars, so it becomes the interests of that elite that in fact determine government decisions. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato showed how "man the measure" contradicts itself theoretically. Modern life demonstrates that the contradiction is also practical. When made the highest standard, "man the measure" does not solve but creates and even exacerbates the problem of intolerant public claims of ultimate truth leading to ideological tyranny.

In an attempt to avoid such contradictions, it might be said that man is required to be the measure only for limited public purposes, and that in private life each of us is free to use any measure he chooses. Presumably, something of the sort is involved in the proposal that liberalism — the political manifestation of the view that man is the measure — be viewed as a "political conception" rather than a "comprehensive doctrine."[2] The dodge does not work. An ethical doctrine is not a personal taste. It is a teaching as to what to do and what to avoid. By their nature understandings of what is right and wrong, good and bad, claim to be part of reason and so to be public and authoritative. A purely private evaluation of some ethical point with no public implications is as nonsensical as a purely private understanding of good engineering practice. To say that to the extent it varies from the official "political conception" a "comprehensive doctrine" has no place in public life is to say that comprehensive doctrines cannot be taken seriously except to the extent they repeat public dogma.

As a practical matter, it means that private ethical doctrines must be suppressed. Man-the-measure leaves room for differences in taste but not in ethics. When accepted as a political conception, it becomes authoritative for the whole of public life. Since man is social, and most of the goods, with which he is concerned, depend on complex interactions with other people, man-the-measure greatly limits the legitimate presence of conceptions that reject it even in private life. The activities of the advanced liberal state compel that result. The state today educates the young, confers honor, disgrace and punishment, and intervenes to reform attitudes on things as close to home as relations between the sexes and the rearing of children. It spends a large part of the national income on things

2. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

as value-laden as education and family support. As a state, it demands a loyalty that extends to life and death decisions. How can it act in an orderly and intelligent way with regard to such things without a comprehensive ethical stance?

In fact, everyone in advanced liberal society is pressured into acting as if he accepted unreservedly the official political doctrine and all its implications. What else is possible, when that doctrine is the basis of everything recognized as authoritative? The minuteness and comprehensiveness of the rationalized social controls available today make up for the comparative mildness of the sanctions they impose. If one believes that man is the measure, one can treat that as truth, speak out publicly in its favor, act on it in affairs that affect other people, and attempt to enforce it wherever possible. If one believes something else is more authoritative, one cannot. To reject man as the measure, i.e., to assert the superior authority of some transcendent truth in anything that matters practically, is to be excluded from the mainstream of public life, treated as a threat to social order, viewed as potentially violent,[3] and subjected to social, vocational, and on occasion (especially outside the US) criminal sanctions.[4] And in any case, saying "everyone is free to adopt whatever standard he wants" is just another way of saying "everyone is the measure." The phrasing changes nothing.

It seems paradoxical to claim that liberal society, reputedly so open and pluralistic, is in fact a closed ideological system with an extraordinary ability to disguise its own nature. It should be obvious, however, that there is no such thing as openness or pluralism in the comprehensive sense contemporary liberalism proposes. As a practical matter, to make man the measure is to make human desire, technology, and formal reason the ruling principles of morals and politics. Desire sets the goals, technology tells how to realize them, and formal reason keeps the system rational and coherent. Those principles can also be formulated as tolerance, efficiency, and equal justice. Tolerance is the equal authority of all desires, efficiency the adaptation of means to ends in fulfilling desire, and equal justice the uniform application of the other principles. All these principles can be summarized as "equal freedom": tolerance and efficiency together constitute freedom, i.e., the ability to satisfy one's desires, while equality is

3. The most extensively violent political doctrine has, of course, been Marxism, a view that is insistently man-centered and anti-transcendental.

4. A good example are "hate speech" prosecutions of the mere expression of negative religious judgments on homosexuality or Islam.

the requirement that desires be treated and principles applied consistently.

The recognized means in liberal society for putting equal freedom into effect are free agreement, representative democracy, and rational administration within a universal legal regime that makes equal freedom an overriding enforceable standard. Markets, the contractual arrangements of civil society, parliaments, and state and transnational bureaucracies, all under the supervision of courts armed with human rights charters, are thus today's characteristic institutions. Those institutions accept that man is the measure, and that each man is equally the measure (assuming the Rawlsian requirement that differences in wealth and status benefit the least well off). Therefore family, ethnic ties and religion, which are based on standards other than giving everyone what he wants as equally as possible, are abolished as public institutions, assimilated to contract and personal taste, and, when not suppressed as intrinsically dangerous to equal freedom, made wholly private and voluntary.

Liberal rationalism requires that the principles governing public life be derived in a formally correct and publicly verifiable manner, as either *a priori* demands like equality, or facts backed by certifiable expertise. The alternative would be to follow personal biases, which — especially when held by the majority — would oppress those who do not share them. The result is that the officials who determine the facts and principles that count as neutral have the final say on everything. To achieve consistency of principle, liberal institutions are thus arranged hierarchically, with experts at the top and the people at the bottom. Bureaucrats and judges decide matters of principle, develop them into ever more detailed specifications for all aspects of social life, and leave only non-political and ethically indifferent matters (like the specifics of economic initiatives and public and private consumption choices) to popular and participatory institutions.

Liberalism thus leads to a guardian state. The justifications presented for the guardian state are scientism and "tolerance." Scientism is the view that formalized procedures carried out by professionals are the only legitimate source of knowledge. Experts should decide all public issues, and to disagree is simply to take the side of ignorance. The people, whose knowledge is not formalized, have no legitimate role in public life other than to support the established order, and when relevant to make their preferences known. Since there are experts who study everything, even popular preferences, in the end scientism implies that the actual participation of ordinary people should count for nothing in public life. It is window dressing that should not be allowed to affect anything important.

Tolerance, in the PC sense now demanded, requires that since substantive value falls outside neutral expert knowledge, and is therefore simply subjective, every opinion regarding it must be equally respected and none permitted to dominate the others. The effect is that all views regarding substantive value must be kept powerless, and therefore completely private. To allow any of them publicity, and, thus, possible influence, would unjustly burden other equally valid views. The advanced liberal state therefore feels compelled to silence everyone who might speak out about moral issues except experts, committed liberals, and those whose speech undermines traditional understandings of the good that must be suppressed because they pretend to public validity. Indeed, PC tolerance views dissent from the liberal state as oppressive in itself, because simply by existing it creates a social environment unfavorable to some people and ways of life.

The two ideologies complement each other. PC tolerance supports scientism by emphasizing the unreliability of ordinary understandings and the need to rely on neutral expertise. Scientism confirms PC tolerance by debunking tradition and positive religion, and by asserting that all legitimate truth supports PC, bypassing ordinary standards of scientific inquiry if needed to do so. Both support the claim of liberalism to be "transparent" — to eliminate the distortions introduced by irrationality or special pleading into the process, through which desires attain to equal satisfaction by portraying the essence of the liberal state not as power but as neutral expertise and protection of the weak against aggression.[5]

The spheres of social life that scientism and PC leave open to the people at large are careerism and consumerism. Careerism defines individuals in terms of their position in the universal rational system of production, consumption and governance established by managerial liberalism. Career thus becomes an ultimate ethical category. Since recognized social position makes individuals what they are, competing values like love, loyalty and integrity come to seem sentimental fantasies or even pathologies. Discussions of women's roles make the established careerist view particularly clear: to be a housewife and mother is to be self-indulgent or oppressed, to be useless, to be nothing.

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5. In fact, "transparency" is an attempt to deny power its power by making it invisible. Liberalism is therefore unable to recognize political correctness or scientism as substantive ideologies. To do so would admit that liberalism is not the neutral realization of human rights but a substantive engine of power, an admission that would destroy the basis of its claim to rule.

Consumerism treats all choices that the system provides as equally and interchangeably valid. It, too, becomes an ultimate ethical category: I shop, therefore I am. Lack of customary consumer goods becomes a deprivation of personal dignity. Understandings of personal morality, and the basic commitments and personal connections that formerly defined who someone is, become "alternate lifestyle options," and, thus, consumer goods like any other.

To exclude anything from the way of life justified by PC and scientism and fleshed out in personal life by careerism and consumerism would be to violate tolerance and equal freedom by giving some person, status or goal a special position. Even religion, to be legitimate, must accept PC and scientism and reform itself so that it simply restates established consumerist and careerist values. It must therefore understand itself as an optional consumer good. Its public face and authoritative principles must be decided by experts and emphasize tolerance, inclusion and equality. Anything more concrete and particular must remain purely private. In particular, no religion can claim superiority over any other religion or over irreligion.

In concept, the absolutely private falls outside the scope of the demands of liberal neutrality. That exclusion is extremely important because it is central to the claim that liberalism is not an oppressive system of power but a system of mutual social accommodation that is uniquely legitimate precisely because it leaves the self free and untouched. It is unclear, however, why liberal protection of the strictly private is so crucial, when modern government is so pervasive, human life and even meaning have such a strong interpersonal aspect, and no government can touch the absolutely private in any event.

Advanced liberal society can be evaluated from a number of perspectives. It may focus discussion to concentrate on functional aspects. Managerial liberalism has been notably effective as a form of social organization. Its success in establishing a generally peaceful social order, however, is largely built on obfuscation that deprives opposition of any definable target. Advanced liberalism maintains the appearance of complete freedom while deciding all significant questions without regard to public participation. Scientism and political correctness, enforced by the professionalization of knowledge and social life in general, define rationality and fairness in a way that either determines all serious issues in advance, or hands them over to experts and other functionaries. The real freedoms granted are strictly private and relate to career, consumption, and private indulgence. Advanced liberalism can grant those freedoms

generously, and indeed make them almost absolute, because they have been deprived of public significance and support the established system by keeping the people safely occupied.

Liberalism thus succeeds in large part by making conflicts seem to disappear. That is the basis of its success but also its fatal flaw. Conflict that is obfuscated cannot be dealt with rationally, i.e., in an orderly way in accordance with principles intended to be public and of general applicability. Men organize their lives individually and socially by recognizing goods that precede personal desire and to some extent are independent of it. By doing so, they recognize a common moral world within which thought and discussion can bring conflicting impulses into order. Liberalism destroys the possibility of such a common moral world. It cannot recognize goods that precede desire, and so cannot put conflicts in a setting that permits them to be dealt with on their relative merits. It treats them as either absolute or unreal, and attempts to resolve them, when they cannot be bought off, mainly by ruling one side out of order.

That approach cannot often yield definite results without cheating. It is not particularly persuasive to say that protecting unborn babies and prohibiting sodomy violates human dignity, while protecting baby seals and prohibiting smoking promotes it. The basic problem for liberalism is that if every man is the measure, it cannot be right to tell him what to do. The attempt to get around that problem inevitably leads to irrationality and unprincipled conduct. To make things worse, making man the measure rules out any principle of moderation or common sense. Such principles require recognition of human limitations, but if man is the measure then in concept there can be no standard in relation to which limitations might exist. In any event, common sense is a matter of settled popular preconceptions, “prejudices and stereotypes,” that liberalism treats as irrational — and therefore oppressive — because there is no clear rational procedure behind them.

Liberal society tries to minimize the problems, with which it cannot deal, by reducing the conflicts implicit in social life as much as possible. It promotes prosperity, tries to equalize the satisfactions of different people, and insists that goals are illegitimate if they do not give other goals equal respect, in particular, if they involve changing or discrediting the goals of others. Such expedients cannot be relied upon. Prosperity and social protections sometimes fail, because the world does not obey human will. Further, the attempt to maximize aggregate satisfactions runs into insoluble problems because satisfactions of different people cannot be

measured and compared. How can such difficulties of comparison and weighing possibly be resolved except arbitrarily, by imposing the preferences of those in power?

Because man is social, the goals that matter most require the participation of others, and so normally require changing what others want. If John loves Mary, he will want to persuade Mary to love him. More generally, some people will be happier if traditional marriage is given special honor, others — if homosexual connections are approved equally. Both groups proselytize and try to bring social attitudes and institutions into line with their understanding of how things should be. The liberal tendency is to say that proselytizing and even compulsory re-education is right when the goal is to make others more "tolerant" — whatever that ends up meaning — but not otherwise. It is not clear why an attempt to root out anti-PC values is less violent than an attempt to root out anti-Islamic values, for example. However that may be, liberalism allows public legitimacy only to efforts to influence others that favor the liberal conception of tolerance. If those efforts succeeded completely, people would care only about equality and self-centered satisfactions that do not require others to give of themselves. Things as basic as love and loyalty would be ruled out. A fully liberal society would thus be altogether inhuman.

Since liberalism cannot deal with conflicts reasonably, has no principle of moderation or common sense, and points toward a form of society radically at odds with human nature, it is doomed. Its final triumph destroys it by depriving it of any opposing principle that could keep it sane and compensate for what it lacks. When it becomes the sole governing principle, it insists that nothing should limit abstract freedom except other abstractions like equality and public order. Such abstractions cannot be balanced against each other. To avoid incoherence one of them must be made in effect the sole standard and the others reinterpreted so they no longer offer resistance. The result is monomania, either of freedom, of equality, or of bureaucratic control. Liberalism ends in the comprehensive denial of its original stated goals of modesty, restraint and reason based on taking man as the measure.[6]

Tradition and the Good

But if liberalism is inadequate as a basis for social and political life,

6. The self-contradictory nature of advanced liberalism is apparent in the oddities around: rigidly uniform diversity, totally administered freedom, radically elitist equality, bigoted tolerance, discriminatory anti-discrimination, sordid idealism, immoral moralism, mindless expertise, dogmatic agnosticism, compulsory established rebellion, and mainstream extremism.

what is the rational alternative? The question comes down to the problem of the social and political good. To say something is good is to say it is a reasonable goal, one worth choosing after consideration of what it is and the relevant circumstances. Everyone agrees that some goals are better — more reasonable and worth choosing — than others, but they have different opinions what those are. That state of affairs leads to disputes. Liberalism hopes to keep the disputes from disturbing public life, and thus eliminate much of the need for politics and power, by eliminating the question of the good and making government a system for advancing the goals of each man equally.

Liberalism fails because its goals are unattainable. First, to treat all intentions equally is in effect to decide how good each is — each is as good as every other. A decision to favor things equally still implies a view on how far each is worth favoring. Further, it is not possible to favor everything equally, if only because goals conflict and exclude each other. A scheme of action that affects life as comprehensively as modern government can hardly avoid preferring some goals to others and judging that the ones preferred make more sense and are thus better. To claim that government should avoid taking a position on such things is either to embrace political irrationalism — the view that people should live together socially in certain ways with no idea why — or to impose the authority of certain goods while denying doing so.

Government inevitably makes decisions as to good and bad, and its decisions condition and influence private life. While public and private differ, they cannot be strictly separated. To say that a standard of what is reasonable and hence good is a public standard amounts to saying that it pre-empts private standards and in case of conflict suppresses them. That effect spills over into every aspect of life, even the most private. Since man is social, his connections to others touch every part of what he is and what he does in complex and pervasive ways. The extent to which public standards emphasize hierarchy or equality, for example, affects the principles, to which one can appeal in daily dealings with others, and thus determines much of the order of private life and what goods can be realized within it.

It follows that public standards of right and wrong should be accepted only if they make sense in their general application. The effect of the attempt to avoid the question of the good is that liberalism treats the satisfaction of preferences simply as such as the ultimate good. Such a position does not make sense as a moral standard, because in an important sense it makes every consciously-chosen action equally reasonable. Simply by

being consciously chosen the action brings about a preference and therefore a good. If the choice is equally a choice, the preference and good are equally a preference and good. Since it is choice itself that makes something good, one does not choose things for their goodness but simply because one chooses them. Choices thus become arbitrary, and human actions essentially non-rational. On such a view, the rational component of morality is reduced to the therapeutic task of clarifying choices and the technical task of securing their satisfaction efficiently and equally. Such a result is deeply inconsistent with the way people actually deliberate about action. It is the outlook of a psychopath and not a normal human being.

But if that is so, how can a standard that is better than man-the-measure be determined? The intellectual presuppositions of liberal society make that a very difficult question. Those presuppositions lead men to consider propositions rational if they are purely formal, like mathematical truths, immediately obvious, like elementary logical principles and reports of sense perception, or verifiable in accordance with settled public procedures that have been found reliable, like the results of the natural sciences. In such cases people think they have a reliable grasp of the proposition and its basis, and so feel justified in recognizing its authority. Nothing of the sort seems possible in the case of ultimate standards of evaluation. People disagree on them, so it seems they are not immediately obvious. Further, there is no well-defined procedure for determining what they are. Standards precede judgment, so any procedure for judging has to be based on an understanding of the good already accepted, at least implicitly. Ultimate goods are recognized rather than determined through a procedure.

It is understandable that liberals want to avoid reliance on ultimate goods. Liberals like to define, discuss and demonstrate, and that is very difficult in this connection. It has always been recognized that there is something elusive about ultimate goods.[7] That elusiveness is essential to what they are. To state a good fully or demonstrate it subordinates it to the thing that defines or proves it, and so shows it to be secondary. But a secondary good can always be pre-empted by some other good and cannot serve as a final measure of conduct. Ultimate goods are thus paradoxical. We need to resolve conflicts and decide questions rationally but we cannot fully know them. To choose anything over them would betray them, but to attempt to demonstrate them or define too comprehensively what

7. See Plato on the Good (e.g., *Analects*, Bk. V, ch. 18, and the myth of the cave, *Republic*, Bk. VII), Confucius' *Tao Te Ching*, and Paul's "through a glass darkly" (I Corinthians 13:12).

they are would compromise their ultimacy.

To approach the matter from another direction, recognition of the highest goods is a pre-political and in a sense pre-rational act, because it is part of what constitutes politics, rationality, and even personal identity. We cannot stand aside from something so basic, grasp it from outside, and bring it in line with our preconceptions and goals. The independent liberal ego that chooses its values is a misleading fiction. The necessity of ultimate goods, and their transcendence of all understandings, show once again that man cannot be understood as the measure. The measure is something necessary but which cannot be completely known, if only because it measures one's knowledge along with everything else. It is that situation that makes humility, faith, and consciousness of sin lasting aspects of human life.

The impossibility of defining ultimate goods is in fact the most impressive argument for the liberal belief that freedom should be the goal of social order. Any goal that can be fully stated seems limiting, oppressive and mindless when treated as ultimate. A society that believes in human dignity and rationality, and insists on defining all goals explicitly and comprehensively, is therefore likely to adopt liberalism as its governing philosophy.

It is mistaken if it does so. The attempt to make ultimate principles of government fully explicit always ends in bullying and obscurantism, because it soon becomes obvious that stated principles can conflict with what is ultimately good. Fascist and communist societies, which explicitly make some definite this-worldly thing the ultimate measure, are obvious examples. Theocracies also become tyrannical by attempting to reduce the transcendent too much to a specific set of prescriptions applicable here and now. And in the end liberal societies become tyrannical as well, because to define freedom as the ultimate standard is still to define a final standard that is concrete, this-worldly and capable of being fully specified. A state based on a final standard with those qualities will eventually feel compelled to force the standard on everyone and silence objectors: since the standard is perfectly clear, why do otherwise? The resulting collapse into tyranny is slower than in the case of fascism or theocracy, because the goal is stated in a negative and formal way and the oppressive consequences of taking something fully articulable and therefore limited as a final standard take longer to develop. The collapse is nonetheless certain.

Liberalism, therefore, is not self-supporting. Even to secure legitimate liberal goals like political and personal freedom government must recognize standards that transcend such goals, because without such standards government and its goals become absolutes and even freedom is

interpreted in such a way as to become tyrannical. The natural way in which transcendent standards become concrete and usable is the development of tradition. Although ultimate principles cannot be clearly stated, people can recognize them in part and in specific cases, act on them, and come to know them better through experience. The goods people recognize then become encoded in habits and attitudes that seem good, to which they attach themselves, and which shape their life. The intangible and ultimate thus becomes concrete and usable.

Traditions are of course of many kinds. Family dinner at 6 is a tradition; so are representative government and Christianity. It might also be a tradition for a family to combine the three by saying grace before dinner and then arguing politics over the meatloaf. Each tradition matters, but in a different way and to a different degree. The deeper, stronger, more widespread and durable the recognition of the goodness of some practice, attitude or belief the more settled it becomes as a tradition. The practical demands of life and conflicts among particular traditions force us to bring them, and thus the goods to which they relate, into a system that distinguishes greater and lesser and enables each to contribute to the others. The overall tradition that people follow, i.e., the crystallized experience of the society to which they belong thus comes to embody the ordered understanding of the highest good that is at the base of the common life.

That process depends, of course, to the extent of the attachment to the reasonable and the good. Since discussing ethics is pointless without such an attachment, it is assumed in such discussions, and it is reasonable to expect that it will grow up the normal way, by the accumulation of good habits through experience. A society without such an attachment will not last long in any event. Acceptance of tradition is a counsel of moral realism growing out of experience of life: good and evil are real; one cannot get by without knowing something about them; there is more to them than one can easily understand; some may see them more clearly than others do; if a habit or perspective is enduringly found good, it is most likely because of the truth in it; and one is unlikely to become good unless one absorb good habits from those around him.

Tradition is comprehensively intertwined with most basic concerns. It has an intimate connection to religion because it is the natural way to know the transcendent and ineffable. Tradition and religion depend on each other. Tradition depends on a fundamentally religious trust in something outside human control, while religion depends on a willingness to accept what is passed down, even though it is not fully comprehensible.

Attempts to rationalize religion, to make it a matter of expertise, bureaucracy, formalized training and this-worldly concerns, destroy it.

Politics also have a necessary and close connection to tradition. The traditions of a community form the general order of its life, and politics are the interplay between that order and public decisions backed by force. Government acceptance of social tradition, including religious and ethical tradition, is necessary for political freedom and self-government. To be capable of self-government, a community must have a common mind adequate to its common life. The common mind of a community is constituted by its tradition, and to ignore that common mind is to deny self-government. Government is thus popular only to the extent it accepts as authoritative the traditions of the people and the goods, with which they are concerned.

Politics and religion are thus necessarily connected. The dream of a rationalized politics purified of all particular traditions and goods is chimerical. Man, social life and government are so entangled that it is difficult to think of any human good the actions of government do not affect. Both government and religion deal with fundamental human concerns in far-reaching ways, and each must take into account the goods for which the other is chiefly responsible. The traditions that government must heed thus include religious traditions. Institutional separation of Church and State is possible and often beneficial, but a "wall of separation" between government and religion is not, any more than between government and physics or government and morality. Where one is claimed, it should be recognized as a screen for the imposition by those in power of a scheme of attitudes, loyalties and beliefs functioning as a religion that they are reluctant to defend explicitly.

Respect for tradition does not, of course, require government to pursue directly all the goods to which tradition points. The functions of the organized force that is government are limited, and there are many goods that it cannot do much directly to promote. Nonetheless, in its actions government should take into account all available sources of understanding. Government acceptance of religious tradition, when religious concerns are relevant to its activities — as, for example, in connection with education and standards of morality and public order — does not oppress people spiritually any more than acceptance of a particular understanding of economics oppresses them financially. Issues relevant to action must be settled somehow, and the alternative to accepting tradition is accepting some other source of guidance. What other source of guidance in ultimate matters is so much less oppressive than tradition? Neutral expertise, on a

subject regarding which expertise as conceived today can decide very little? The pretense of an impossible neutrality that finds itself forced to smuggle in, without discussion, answers to ultimate questions?

Tradition, in fact, is a decentralizing and anti-tyrannical principle. It demands substantial local and individual freedom, and recognizes that not everything can be decided explicitly or controlled hierarchically. It tells officials to look to something other than personal and party views. In any case, tradition is at least as able as other sources of guidance to value human dignity and take into account prudential restrictions on government power. Indeed, how is institutional prudence possible without the accumulated experience and sense of things difficult to articulate that is socially available only through tradition?

A common objection to accepting the authority of tradition is that traditions are sometimes wrong. That of course is so, but the same is true of other possible authorities, including personal judgment and expert consensus. Another is that assertions of traditional authority often mask self-interest. That objection applies equally to any assertion of authority, or for that matter of freedom and equal rights. Tradition no doubt favors traditional elites, but other possible social authorities — money, government regulators, revolutionary vanguards, TV personalities, therapists, diversity consultants, the sovereign consumer — also favor particular persons and classes and present their own dangers of abuse. Compared with other authorities tradition has obvious advantages, especially with regard to the risk of tyranny, corruption and general mindlessness. It is independent of particular persons. It exists through the enduring tacit consent of those involved. And it takes into account all considerations people feel to be relevant, even those difficult or impossible to articulate. It may not be perfect, but it has peculiar strengths that make it rightfully indispensable and authoritative.

A consequence of this need for tradition to make goods that exceed understanding available is a need for particularity. Because tradition has to do with what cannot be stated, it is concrete and therefore particular. It grows up and is passed on mostly through personal contacts. For that reason moral life has a necessary element of loyalty to the particular society, and to the community and the connections within it. It is normally in the first instance through accepting the traditions and institutions that one goes beyond self-centered desires, learns to be social, and participates in the common goods that shape the individual. The loyalty to such things rightfully becomes part of what one understands oneself to be.

Such loyalties are not fully universalizable. One knows what one is in

part by contrast with what one is not. While one owes something to all men simply because of one's humanity, pure generalized solidarity is too vague in its demands to establish moral order. A "universal nation" could exist if liberal universalism were an adequate social philosophy, or if there were a *Shari'ah* that could adequately capture the transcendent. Neither condition holds. Nor are particularistic loyalties absolute. The universal element in them cannot be fully grasped, but must somehow in the end take precedence. When our loyalty to Brooklyn conflicts with our loyalty to truth or the human race, it is the former that on the whole should give way, even though when and how it does so cannot be stated categorically but must be left to tradition and a judgment of the particular case.

The particularity of tradition gives concrete form to the principle that tradition is binding but not in general absolute. To give substance to a final orientation toward something beyond our society and thus beyond its traditions, our loyalty to society must have at least a residual element of contingency and choice. The social order should reflect the absolute, but not be mistaken for it. Our grasp of the good and true is social and traditional, but also rational and personal. The need for an element of voluntary personal commitment to something partly arbitrary is an enduring element of truth in such notions as the social contract and religious freedom. It is also the reason why tradition must be complex. To avoid national self-worship, a national tradition must have local and class variations and rivalries. Similarly, a religious tradition should not have the appearance of something altogether complete, self-contained and universal. It should have local cults, rites and devotions, a choice of personal observances, and a history of development to make it evident that there is no single form that fully captures the reality toward which it points.

Traditionalism — the recognition that tradition has its own authority and is not just a set of suggestions to be judged rationally on other grounds — thus has a somewhat incomplete and pluralistic aspect. It is more concerned with truth, however attained and however expressed, than with formal justification, and so gives up on the modern dream of a purified scientific procedure applicable to everything and giving rise to universal formulae for all knowable truth. It accepts that knowledge is possible with regard to things that do not lend themselves to the methods of the modern natural sciences, if not through orderly observation and deduction then through something like Pascal's *esprit de finesse* or Newman's illative sense, through the coming into focus of intangible realities through the concurrence of innumerable considerations that cannot be individually

picked out and may be known directly only to the previous generations.

Both tradition and reason are necessary authorities in any activity that is at all complex and comprehensive. Neither is adequate by itself to human life. Nor can either be subordinated to the other, if only because they help constitute each other. Reason requires the aid of concepts, connections and judgments provided by tradition, while the development and comprehension of tradition make use of rational ordering and insight. A rational traditionalist therefore accepts both tradition and reason as basic to what he is, knows and does. What distinguishes his position from that of the irrationalist or anti-traditionalist is that he is willing to criticize and adjust his beliefs, loyalties and way of life as necessary so his acceptance of both makes sense. An intelligent commitment to a life ordered by reference to what is good, reasonable and true demands that willingness. The commitment of a liberal modernist to human will and formal reason as sole authorities, for example, makes it impossible for him consistently to accept the authority of tradition. Nonetheless, even to be a liberal or a modernist, he must accept certain traditions as authoritative. If he sees the conflict and wants to make his outlook more coherent, he will reorient himself toward an understanding of reason broad enough to justify reliance on tradition. He will, in short, become a traditionalist.

Some obvious alternatives to rational traditionalism help, in fact, explain it: simple rationalism, simple conservatism, and postmodern irony.

1. Simple rationalism is the view that tradition is extrinsic to the individual's grasp of the good and the true, because those things, to the extent that they can be known at all, can be known by purely rational means. The simple rationalist therefore believes it possible, at least in principle, to dispense with tradition. The traditionalist objection, of course, is that human reason is not a self-contained system. Reason must be traditionalist to be reasonable, or indeed useful. More specifically, reason depends on tradition for the concepts it applies and for basic understandings and orientations that cannot be demonstrated or even articulated. It cannot stand by itself.

2. The intellectual failure of simple rationalism has become widely recognized in recent years, so that today it is less a theory than a widespread habitual attitude. The simple conservative response to its failure is to accept whatever practices and attitudes have grown up and become authoritative in one's environment. Simple conservatism thus rejects reason as a standard in favor of pure social fact — of tradition treated as something self-contained and absolute.

While rational traditionalists of course join in the preference for what

has grown up and become accepted, they believe that tradition and reason must come into mutual relations and so support and limit each other. In particular, they reject traditions that are radically incoherent or at odds with observable truth and the permanent needs of human thought. The difference is illustrated by attitudes toward liberalism. Once liberalism has become socially authoritative simple conservatism cannot help but accept it, simply because it is established, while rational traditionalism continues to reject it, because it is incoherent and at odds with the needs of thought.

3. The postmodern ironist realizes — like the conservative — the importance of tradition, but hangs on to the rationalist view that total transparency and certainty are necessary for knowledge. He therefore rejects tradition as a road to truth, because it is contingent and bound up in particular perspectives. At bottom, he believes that none of the shared beliefs are justifiable, and attempts to hold his own beliefs "ironically," i.e., at arm's length.

While traditionalists agree that absolute explicit proof is not available, they nonetheless accept that we necessarily accept our own beliefs, and find it pointless to deny that we are justified in doing so. They therefore try to understand how what we necessarily understand as justified and true can rationally be seen as such, in spite of its dependence on particular tradition. All traditions, like all languages, have a great deal in common, but they do differ. What distinguishes the rational traditionalist is the effort to understand how he is justified in doing what he necessarily does — accept his own tradition and understandings as true.

Faith and the Church

Tradition always points to something beyond itself and beyond all evidence. It follows that acceptance of one's own tradition, indispensable for knowledge, involves faith. Just as institutions, and even reason, depend on the complex of memories, understandings and habits that constitutes tradition, tradition depends on its connection to a larger order of which it is part and to which it responds. Since man does not make himself, and is only a small part of the world in which he lives, that order cannot be reduced to human things.

Man is not the measure collectively any more than individually. To say that man is not the measure is to say that the things with which he is concerned are not fully captured by his experience and logic. By themselves, the latter cannot tell us that the experience of other people is qualitatively like our own, or even that anything exists independently of us

and our thoughts. In order to understand basic features of the world, we have to trust things that go beyond what we can perceive or demonstrate. None of us can abandon that trust without abandoning thought and life. In the end there are no sceptics.

That everyday kind of faith is not foreign to reason, experience or tradition, because those things depend on it. Reason cannot demonstrate the conditions of its functioning: the validity of first principles, the trustworthiness of perception, the coherence of memory, the reliability of the linguistic and cultural setting, which reason needs to operate. To trust reason is to trust those things, and to trust experience is to trust both our perceptions and the reasoning that enables us to sort them out and come to grips with them. Nor is tradition simply something constructed. Because it is necessary, it comes with an authority that goes beyond anything we can fully explain. Our confidence in it is based on faith that it is not random or arbitrary but revelatory, that through it the bits, pieces and glimmerings that are immediately available to us have grown into attitudes, practices and symbols that show how things are and make truths available to us that we cannot attain directly.

To some extent our trust in knowledge that cannot be demonstrated — which in the long run includes all knowledge because of the mutual dependence of things — is justified by the assumption that our species, society and traditions of knowledge would not have lasted as long as they have unless they were in touch with reality. However, not all our knowledge can be justified by the Darwinian standard of past promotion of reproduction and survival. Our knowledge is not limited to survival needs. It reflects our orientation and interests, which are not limited to reproduction and survival, and are sometimes at odds with them. Furthermore it is discontinuous with the knowledge of the lower animals, and thus with evolutionary history.

In its extreme forms Darwinian thought purports to give a simple and self-contained explanation of everything: what exists is what has arisen by chance and thereafter survived. Whatever seems to fall outside the closed circle of mechanistic explanation, like consciousness, it denies, tries to explain away, or simply refuses to discuss. It would show a lack of good sense to accept, at least without better arguments than seem to be available, a view that combines such extreme ambition with such conceptual and ontological minimalism. And in any event, to say that something has been helpful to survival is not to explain what it is, why it works, or how it can be justified.

While knowledge has its uses, and usefulness is a sign of truth, the true and the useful are not the same. Knowledge needs to go beyond usefulness, if only because we can understand things by reference to their use only within a world we already know. Accepting tradition is not simply accepting what has endured in the absence of better grounds for making practical decisions. It is adopting an understanding of the world that is useful because it is true, not true because it is useful. Some have suggested that modern natural science, which for many sets the standard of knowledge, is simply a collection of models and methods of prediction that have been found helpful. The suggestion does not survive questioning. Is it true that scientific models and predictions have been found useful, and that our experience of their usefulness is a good guide to the future? If so, science gets its importance because it is part of a larger system of knowledge. If not, we have no reason to bother with it.

Men build their lives in relation to settled points of reference that cannot be reduced to their own thoughts and experiences. Otherwise, they could not be rational, since it is part of rationality to connect our thought, experience and action to an order of things that is stable and comprehensive enough to give them a unity justifiable by reference to something beyond themselves. That connection to a larger and more permanent world always draws on reason, experience, tradition and the sort of every-day faith discussed. Nonetheless, it sometimes happens that the latter are not enough for an adequately stable orientation to an enduring order of things. The collapse of liberal modernity into nihilism, dogmatism and manipulative rhetoric, and of classical philosophy into scepticism, superstition and wandering speculation, demonstrate that human reason and experience are not enough to fix truth or meaning.

Nor is tradition always enough, since without something more concrete and authoritative than it can supply through its own resources it can easily lose focus and direction. A tradition is a composite of symbols, practices and beliefs, the meanings of which are largely unstated and understandings of which differ. To the extent it is necessary it is concerned with things that cannot be articulated clearly. Also, tradition is the way of life of a people as it actually is, and, as such, it is likely to incorporate conflict, confusion, abuse, vagueness and a great deal of simple arbitrariness. It must be passed down to exist at all, a necessity that introduces additional uncertainty. Both the weakness of tradition as a human thing and its concern with the inarticulable make it easy for it to lose coherence. Under stress and uncertainty the unspoken faith implicit in it may not be enough to give

human thought and action a stable reference and orientation. Divisive questions can arise, and the result will be disruption, confusion and dissolution.

While perfect unity is neither possible nor desirable, a tradition must have features that keep it oriented toward a stable understanding of the good and true. Otherwise it will lose the coherent direction and identity without which it is useless, and loyalty to it makes no sense. The importance of features within tradition capable of maintaining its coherence is difficult to overstate. Language is necessary to express and develop our thoughts, and it takes on a distinct meaning by reference to a tradition that fixes common truths, references and understandings. Rational thought would not be possible if we did not have principles we are entitled to rely on as true, and without a coherent tradition such principles cannot be distinct or coherent themselves.

A tradition can lose the ability to maintain such coherence. If there is no way to resolve basic conflicts within a tradition then its accepted principles lose their grip, its language eventually loses meaning, and the possibility of productive thought and discussion disappears. For tradition to remain rational, and in the long run for us to understand and assert anything at all general or complex, there must be an authoritative way within the tradition to resolve conflicts. The growing nihilism and manipulativeness of modernity results from its lack of such a thing, especially with regard to good and evil.

Externals can aid the stability and coherence of tradition. For example, social and political boundaries can provide it with a stable setting in which to exist, and so help protect it from disruption. Also, government and other social authorities can avoid undermining it by recognizing and cooperating with it, and restricting the range of their own activities to avoid disrupting it. Nonetheless, the main safeguard of tradition must be internal. Since we need tradition to make sense of our world, we cannot stand outside it to force it to be something other than what it wants to be. To manipulate it is to destroy it as tradition.

Like language, tradition has an innate tendency toward system. The greater substantive content of moral and religious tradition compared with language, its implicit orientation toward enduring principles that transcend it, and its necessity to any tolerable system of human life lends an additional element of self-restoring stability. The more coherent the tradition and the more adequate it is to human life and the world, the stronger that element will be. Whether it is sufficient for the requirements of life and thought depends on circumstances. In the comparatively undifferentiated societies

that preceded the rise of cosmopolitan civilization such implicit self-regulating influences were enough to maintain the stability and coherence of tradition. The order of human affairs could be identified with that of the cosmos, and the world assumed without argument to be as tradition said it was.

As society became more complex, communications improved, and political and social relations extended over the borders of particular cultures, questions multiplied, all things became debatable, and tradition had to develop additional features to maintain stability and coherence. Those features forced the manner of dealing with the transcendent — with things that precede and condition the everyday, and are authoritative but difficult to identify and discuss — to become more explicit and formal, and so forced tradition to rely overtly on things that are not purely traditional and customary. Those changes became part of both tradition and reason, in the sense that they became necessary for the continuous and reliable ability to understand oneself and the world.

One such change was the increasing formalization as religion of the aspects of tradition that relate to the transcendent, and their identification as a specialized field of doctrine and discipline. Every society not in dissolution has some shared unspoken sense of the world and our place in it, and corresponding beliefs and habits that order the society in accordance with stable common understandings. Organized religion gives those things a form and structure that makes them able to defend and assert themselves and insist on their irreplaceable role in human life. When human society is no longer simply identified with cosmic order but becomes ever more a collection of specialized and relatively autonomous pursuits, the transcendent must also become a specialty so that it can assert itself and avoid displacement by this-worldly interests and techniques.

The need for formalization has differed in different times and places. Until not long ago, the situation was less acute in India and China than the West. The former are comparatively compact land masses of sub-continental scale, separated from other major civilizations by natural barriers. They lack the complexity of internal obstacles, such as seas and mountains, that across Europe, the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East made it possible for an enduring diversity of political, cultural and religious centers to establish themselves and contend. Outsiders could more often be held at arm’s length and fought off or absorbed, so that cultural imports could be dealt with from a position of superiority and either rejected or informally reinterpreted and integrated with the established system. As a result, cultural cohesion and even cosmological understandings were challenged

less than in the West. Fewer threats to the unity of culture and tradition meant less need for explicit rational unity of thought and less emphasis on the specific authority of revelation. The Chinese emperor could remain the Son of Heaven until 1912, the Confucians could put cultural heritage where the West put philosophy and religion, and "Hinduism" could simply be acceptance of any somewhat mainstream form of Indian religious tradition. Further, a common tendency in the East to view ultimate reality as impersonal, and so to view human goals and the world around us as indifferent and illusory, led men to downplay the possibility of ordering human life by reference to substantive truths and goods. The practical consequence was a tendency away from public life and free inquiry, and toward dynastic despotism in which the greater part of social life is carried on in inward turning groups such as Indian castes and Chinese extended families.

In contrast, the Eastern Mediterranean was a crossroads, marketplace and arena that favored philosophical argument aimed at universal truth, the ideal of scientific rigor, and monotheism. Multiple enduring centers of social life and culture meant continuing confrontation of opposing understandings of human life and the world. To survive in such a setting a way of life had to be able to put its case in a much more explicit, focused and universalizable form. When ancient Israel settled, urbanized and became part of that cosmopolitan world the Israelites preserved the integrity of their way of life by adding to their informal, domestic and tribal pre-Mosaic traditions sacred scriptures, a comprehensive code of sacred law, purity rules that required ethnic separation, a legal system, a temple and its priesthood. Scripture, law, scholarship and purity rules have been sufficient to maintain the coherence of Jewish identity and tradition, at least among observant Jews, down to the present. Islam, a movement of reform and simplification that arose on the fringe of the civilized world and spread itself by force, has had similar ordering principles, although it emphasizes political domination rather than ethnic separation as a means of maintaining the practical authority of the faith among those who have accepted it. Judaism and Islam have therefore survived in the heartland of ancient civilization, while pagan communities and religious or philosophical sects lacking principles and institutions sufficient to define and enforce practice and belief disappeared or were absorbed long ago.

From the outside, the departure induced by authority based on explicit revelation from the anonymity and informality of tradition can look like an artifice that functions to maintain the coherence and apparent intelligibility of life and the world. From within, however, it can only appear as

the result of an intervention from above. Rejecting such revelations has the usual advantages of scepticism: it seems to risk nothing and to avoid all possibility of a false move. Trying to avoid all risk can itself be a false move, however. Man is social and reason is enduring and common to all, so we cannot live reasonably unless we can view the principles by which we live as public and stable. To make sense in the long run rejection of a revelation must, like any other complex decision, be part of a stable and coherent tradition of thought that constitutes the public truth of a lasting community. Otherwise it becomes a personal gesture without definite or lasting significance.

Once cosmopolitan civilization has arisen the truth implicit in culture can no longer be self-supporting, and its public stability and coherence require common acceptance of some revelation. To reject all revelation is to be left with nothing that bears the marks of truth, outside natural sciences that themselves must depend on broader traditions of knowledge. Under such circumstances we are left to choose among narrow specialization, cynical rhetoric, radical privatization of reality, bullying dogma that tries to create truth by force, and the decline of discourse into an increasingly incoherent association of words. None of those things offers hope of a reasonable way of life.

For a long time, then, to live a life of reason has been, in the Western world, to orient oneself by reference to the authority of some revelation. Nothing has happened to change that situation. To the contrary, it appears from the spread of Christianity in China and Korea, Christianity and Islam in Africa, and the false gods of ideology everywhere, that the need for public, systematic, and comprehensive thought that comes to stable and reliable conclusions has spread well beyond the West. The choice today is not between faith and reason, or between reason and chaos (by whatever name), since chaos is not an option that lasts, but among faiths anchored in some sort of revelation.

The postmodern tendency is to assert that truth — and therefore revelation — is no longer needed for an adequate degree of social stability and coherence. Thus, some might argue that a sort of universal non-metaphysical liberalism has replaced the confrontation of gods and cultures, and the authority of revelation can therefore be replaced by the culture and institutions of liberalism and whatever social arrangements are needed to keep them on top. Multiculturalism, for example, tends to destroy the coherence and authority of every particular culture, leaving only the market and managerial state — and their theoretical expression, which is liberalism — as

possible principles of order. The suggestion is unpersuasive. Liberal culture and its authority are not self-sustaining. Liberalism is insistently critical, individualistic, rationalizing and anti-traditional. It bases its claim to authority on the confrontation of cultures it says is a necessary feature of modern life, and on its supposed special fitness to deal with that situation because it stands for no particular culture but respects them all and lets them all thrive. If it gives up those arguments it loses its principle of definition and thus its ability to coordinate thought and action, and indeed stops being liberalism. But to keep those arguments, it must be able to explain itself to everyone. To maintain itself as public truth, it must appeal, in the manner of Descartes, to perspicuously true basic principles.

The development of revelation as a response to an increasingly cosmopolitan, rationalized and differentiated social world did not stop with Judaism. Both Judaism and Islam are valid only for a single people — Islam intends to be universal, but its universality consists in the merging of all humanity into a single nation — and their very detailed codes of law maintain coherence and stability by resisting change even on very minor points. Their textual basis makes them appear to possess the divine word fully here and now, and so tends to deprive them of adaptability. Those who fall away from strict legalism have difficulty finding a place to draw the line and tend toward either mysticism that soon becomes unorthodox or this-worldly radicalism. They lack the comprehensive and flexible rationality needed to support public order in a post-Hellenistic world that encompasses large populations with diverse national and local traditions and accepts the advantages of free public life, including free inquiry on a broad range of issues. For a religious tradition to deal authoritatively with ultimate issues in such a setting without engaging in wholesale suppression of valuable aspects of human life, something at once more focused and more supple than textual, scholarly, ritual and prophetic, authority is needed.

Neither pure tradition, nor pure rationality, nor a purely textual revelation is enough, as a practical matter, to settle all issues that must be settled for life to go on. If conflicts among habits, understandings and interpretations cannot be resolved, and inquiry and discussion concluded, free public life will eventually fall apart. In the end the traditions sustaining it will either disintegrate, split into warring factions, freeze and forbid discussion, or become a specialized pursuit and lose the ability to order life as a whole. What will set in is either rigidity and sectarian narrowness, as in Islam, orthodox Judaism and fundamentalist Protestantism, restriction to particular social classes and aspects of life, as in Confucianism, a lack of

the usable common understandings necessary for public life and objective inquiry, as in much of the non-Western world, or triviality, manipulation and dissolution, as in the West generally today.

A tradition that accepts inquiry and free public life must therefore have a flexible and authoritative way, on crucial points that could put things decisively on the wrong track, to bring inquiry to a conclusion and draw a reliable line between truth and error. The more cosmopolitan and diverse the society the more necessary such an authority becomes. Otherwise, a proposed resolution of the fundamental conflicts that will inevitably arise can only be the opinion of one man or faction that anyone can rationally accept or reject at will. Modern natural science, an institution supremely representative of a world of free public discussion, views theories that do not allow for public confirmation or refutation as empty speculation. The diversity and contentiousness of cosmopolitan civilization creates somewhat the same view of ethical and religious belief. For a belief to seem worth taking seriously, it must be possible to test it at least indirectly, through the testing of beliefs, with which it bears a necessary connection.

It is therefore reasonable to have confidence in a social tradition that provides for rational standards and free public life and inquiry in a cosmopolitan setting only if it includes an authorized method of interpreting its most fundamental principles. Since human reason and experience are not enough to resolve all unavoidable issues, the method must be understood as embodying an intelligence greater than our own, and thus as equivalent to continuing divine guidance. Otherwise, the tradition suffers from an inner weakness that will predictably lead to irrationality and collapse. But if we know in advance that a tradition of life and thought is doomed to incoherence, what it tells us can no longer be viewed as a tolerable approximation to the truth but only as a practical stopgap, something we do not believe but find useful in pursuing particular ends not justified on grounds other than arbitrary desire. It loses its authority, and therefore its ability to define reality. It is then no longer our tradition.

Tradition is necessary because realities that concern us cannot be known in a fully explicit and propositional way. Truth that cannot be unambiguously formulated has a necessary personal element. Impartial expertise can develop possibilities and cast light on details, but it cannot settle much of practical importance, especially outside the hard sciences. Events and propositions can be construed to mean very different things without violating formal criteria. The possibility of knowledge thus depends on personal orientation and commitment.

Tradition, the common mind of a community, is also personal. To believe as a member of a community — as one must, if one's beliefs are to be stable and coherent — is to put one's trust in its common mind, and be formed by it. I.e., to accept the authority of a tradition. For that acceptance to be rational, and to maintain commitment to truth, we must believe that our community of belief has a relationship to ultimate things that makes it capable of knowing them truly. The Christian account of God become man and still present in his Church makes comprehensible, in the most direct and complete way, how a community can have such a quality. It makes the love, loyalty and trust toward one's community and tradition reasonable. Since God is understood as a living presence in the community here and now, it becomes comprehensible that the decision of the community on disputed matters should rightly constitute our understanding of how those things stand.

When a specific question is to be resolved, the mind of the community must be brought down to earth and made concrete through a human authority that is its guardian. Secular life provides useful analogies. Where public life is ordered by principles intended to be final, comprehensive, and flexible enough to respond to new circumstances, responsibility for construing them normally falls to a hierarchical college appointed for life. Most often such a college is headed by a panel, like the US Supreme Court. However, when the system is not a branch of government but is itself an independent society not subject to external control, as in the case of the dominant party in a one-party state, it is normal, for the sake of unity, personal responsibility, and the possibility of decisive action, for it to be headed by a single man. If the public principles are to be understood as stable, objectively valid, and independent of human will, the other members of the hierarchical college should nonetheless retain a certain independent status so that there remains an element of distributed judgment and voluntary personal adherence. A traditional European monarchy, with its hereditary nobility, provides somewhat of an analogy.

The natural guardian of basic principles is thus a hierarchical college appointed for life, headed by a single man, and relying on precedent, tradition and reason, along with its own authority, as ultimate reference points and justifications. Some object to such an arrangement as necessarily obscurantist because it is "authoritarian." They claim it would be more fitting to have experts, community consensus, or broad and representative groups make the most important determinations, because experts know better, and consensus and democracy draw in a more disinterested way on

wider knowledge. However, the point of tradition is that it relates to matters beyond the competence of expertise, and the necessity of revelation is that consensus breaks down. Further, a college appointed for life seems most likely to deal with doctrine intelligently and coherently. The authority of a hierarchical college rests on its claim to stand for correct doctrine, while a council, unless it has been called to deal with a crisis that trumps particular interests, tends to draw authority from the groups and interests its members represent. Its actions often reflect faction, politicking, and — since permanent personal responsibility is lacking — the shamelessness of anonymity. And if a large and diverse body dealing with something as specialized and difficult as doctrine is to act at all coherently, it will always be dominated by some small and cohesive group in any event. To insist on the appearance of democracy in such a situation is to encourage obfuscation and manipulation. In fact, it is normally more consistent with freedom to give a single man the ultimate responsibility for doctrine than institutions that claim to be representative. A single man cannot do as much as a larger group, he is more dependent on voluntary cooperation, and as a practical matter he must point to tradition as a whole and understandings he cannot create by himself to justify his actions. Democracy has strong claims in the case of contingent decisions that reflect relative personal interests, but in doctrinal determinations such things are irrelevant.

The arrangement of belief and authority described is that of the Catholic Church. It is the one most consistent with the genius of tradition, because it is universal as well as personal, flexible as well as concrete, and therefore bears more than any other the appearance truth must have for us. Only Christianity understands the community as the earthly body of an incarnate divine person. Only Roman Catholicism, through its hierarchy headed by the Pope, enables the visible Church to speak and act in a personal and authoritative way. Roman Catholicism thus displays, in the most clear and consistent way possible, the natural form for truth to take in a world of free public life. It is therefore in character that Catholicism fostered learning, philosophy and the arts, that Western culture was so fruitful for so long, and that distinctive institutions of Catholic Christendom have included universities, modern natural science and free political institutions. The decisive rejection of Christianity, which even in its Protestant and liberalizing forms has depended on the Roman Church and Pope for its memory, coherence and force, in Western society has been accompanied by irrationalism, radical decline in non-technological culture, and the attempt to reduce politics and public life to purely technical

functions and so abolish them.

Extra ecclesiam nulla salus is not a contingent feature added on to an arbitrary doctrinal system for self-interested purposes. It expresses a necessity of the post-Hellenistic situation that makes coherent thought and meaning with regard to the world as a whole impossible in the long run, at least in a cosmopolitan society with Western traditions of public life and rational inquiry, without regard to something very much like the authoritative universal Church headed by the Pope. Other religions cannot fill the gap. Islam is unbending and tyrannical, Judaism lacks universality, and Eastern religions have too little to say about the things of this world. Orthodoxy, with an authoritative church but no pope, has tended toward mysticism, stasis, national divisions, political tyranny, and domination of church by state. Free public life has been weak in Eastern Europe and Eastern Orthodox universities have been lacking. Protestantism, which rejected an authoritative church while maintaining and even exaggerating beyond sustainability Catholic traditions of self-government and free inquiry, has had difficulty maintaining coherence and relevance, and has ended either in fundamentalist rigidity or liberal dissolution.

A guardian is not a tyrant. Exercise of ultimate authority must in practice be restrained to respect the vitality of tradition, which by nature is decentralized, non-administered, and reluctant to define things abstractly or comprehensively. Overly-active authority would place truth too decisively in formal institutions rather than God and the believer, and destroy the responsibility of each one to assimilate and live by reason, tradition and revelation.[8] Nor should the Church have direct political power. For the highest good to be seen as superior to worldly affairs, it must be relatively independent of them. The single most important political function of the Church is to relativize the state and place it in a larger setting. It can only carry out that function if there is substantial mutual independence.[9]

Nonetheless, explicit limitations on ecclesiastical authority are difficult to create, because the authority relates to the highest things and so has to be greater and more comprehensive than any other authority. It was the claim of modern thought and the modern state to the right to reconstruct the whole of reality that made necessary the declaration of papal infallibility. If limitations were defined on the authority of the Pope someone

8. The problem is incomparably worse in a society governed by experts. In such a society it is not legitimate for anyone to form his own conclusions about anything.

9. The necessary independence of the state does not, of course, do away with its obligation to act by reference to the public good, which includes goods that are of concern to religion.

would have to interpret and enforce them, and a second pope added to the first. If Church and State are institutionally separate, however, the theoretical problem is likely to solve itself in practice, since there will be practical limits on the Church's ability to enforce anything it cannot persuade people to accept voluntarily.

To say that something looks like what a system of truth would have to look like for us does not, of course, prove that it really is a system of truth. Not every point can be established at once. To argue that people in the West today must accept Catholic Christianity in order to understand themselves as reasonable and retain good things is not precisely to prove the truth of Catholic Christianity, but only to argue the impossibility of rationally rejecting it. Those who reject it for the sake of enlightenment should offer an alternative way to make a life of superior reason possible. Totalitarianism and perpetually dividing sectarianism show us one type of alternative, Samuel Beckett and the superstition, esotericism, wandering speculations and radical scepticism of late antiquity show us another.

Historical and Practical Considerations

Many people deny particular traditions and revelations, and reject Catholicism as the most reasonable of revelations. The most forceful objection is the argument from success: if radical problems are implicit in liberalism, why has it been as successful as it has for so long? Is it realistic to think liberal modernity will go away and be replaced by something more like what preceded it? Advanced liberalism, after all, is the culmination of the centuries-old attempt to replace custom and religion by man-the-measure and this-worldly reason as the basis for life and thought. That effort has been strikingly successful in many ways. Liberalism has overthrown every tradition that has stood against it and outlasted every competing wave of the future. No competitor has general appeal as a way of organizing social life. Its triumph has led to implicit and sometimes explicit belief in the end of history, now understood as the story of struggle against the oppression that preceded the coming of advanced liberalism, the form of human association whose universal unconditional validity, symbolized by international human rights conventions, makes culture and memory irrelevant. The strengths of advanced liberalism seem overwhelming. Understandings of man and the world, the good, true, just and reasonable, are the basic principles of social cooperation. They make common action possible by determining how situations should be understood, what should be questioned or accepted, and how to go about

resolving disputes. They are especially important in liberalism, which strives toward explicit rational coherence and demands that power justify itself. Liberalism exists and rules through coordinated action, without central direction, based on concepts and principles. When basic understandings are as well established as those of liberalism, and those at odds with them seem so thoroughly discredited, who can think of opposing them?

Still, neither established philosophical understandings nor practical success last forever. Liberal theory does not by itself explain its own practical success. Liberalism would not have arisen and taken hold as it has unless it grew out of earlier states of affairs, or triumphed without being closely related to things that reliably confer power in the modern world. If it depends on particular conditions and practicalities, however, it will disappear when those things change.

There are, of course, particular interests that benefit from the triumph of advanced liberalism. Technocrats benefit from technocracy, bureaucrats from bureaucracy, financial interests from rule by money. Those interests would not be nearly so successful in pursuing their goals, however, if general ways of thinking did not support them so strongly. There are interests that would benefit from every possible turn of events, so *cui bono* is not normally a sufficient explanation for major trends. More general considerations are likely to matter more.

The view that man is the measure goes back to the Sophists, and came to dominate philosophical thought in the 17th century, a period marked by Descartes' decision to accept as true only what was clear and distinct to him, Bacon's reconstruction of science on experimental principles for "the relief of man's estate," and Hobbes' and Locke's view of society as a contract among individuals for their material security and benefit. Such views are a natural development of a characteristic Western outlook that emphasizes observation, logic, and critical thought. In social affairs, this outlook favors individual rights and initiatives, contractual ordering, government by consent, and law. It has been traced variously to Greek philosophy, Roman law, classical civic life, Germanic love of freedom, and the Christian emphasis on the individual soul and the world as a rational creation. Whatever the particulars, it is evident that the tendencies leading to our current condition are very long-standing Western distinctives.[10]

10. See Victor Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) on Western distinctives in general, and the Introduction to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Vol. I, on the long-term tendency toward freedom and equality in particular.

They have been immensely strengthened by the success of modern natural science, industrialism, and rational bureaucratic social organization.

Nonetheless, the tendencies that point most obviously toward liberalism are not the whole explanation of its success. Western liberal institutions needed additional things to function: trust based on common beliefs, habits and attachments; loyalties that attach the people to the public order and elites to the public good; domestic and social relationships that promote moderation, self-control and mutual respect; and legitimate particularity that allows a variety of relatively independent perspectives to supplement and correct each other. England could be liberal because Englishmen just did not do certain things, and because on the whole they were loyal, even in opposition and in spite of all their differences. Such qualities are not the automatic outcome of freedom, self-interest, and universalizable reasoning. For them to exist, European society had to be based on loyalty and faith, as well as law and reason. Abstract standards and rational functions had to be balanced by inherited ties of locality, class, ethnicity, religion and nationality.

Liberal societies have an increasingly tenuous sense of their connection to such historical and cultural particularities. As they forget the value of such things, the particularities come to seem irrational. They seem to stand in the way of physical and social power, and the liberation of the individual from demands not justified by a rational system of general applicability. Further, the rise of the West to world dominance has required (on universalizing Western principles) justification on principles that have no special connection to the West. All Western ways have come to aspire to the condition of Western science and technology, which are viewed as rightfully universal.

The difficulty is that if liberal tendencies are given free rein, consciousness is raised, the illiberal aspects of the social order become plain, and liberals, in order to be liberal, must attempt to eradicate them. The dream of a totally rational, self-contained and equal system of human life leads to an intense dynamism. Attempts to get rid of particular inequalities bring to the fore other inequalities and so force liberalism continually to radicalize itself. Elimination of hereditary nobility and the like was purchased by acceptance of inequalities based on formal qualifications and money that at first seemed more acceptable because of their impersonality. Then they too came to seem like arbitrary impositions, and ever wider schemes of reform were needed to mitigate their effects in more and more complex and comprehensive ways.

The ultimate outcome has been a pervasive system of control — necessarily hierarchical and irresponsible — that passes itself off as a neutral system of freedom and equality. Such an outcome is catastrophic for liberal society because it destroys preconditions like local diversity and autonomy and the pre-rational ethnic and religious ties that make a common civilization possible. Without local diversity and autonomy there are no distinctive views backed by settled interests to motivate discussion and give it form and substance, and without pre-rational ties there is no limit how far disputes can go once they get started. The destruction of such features of the inherited Western order means the disappearance of a public order based on discussion and cooperation, and with it the ideals of rationality and objective truth that have made liberalism itself possible. In the end liberal government is driven to maintain itself by dogmatism and unprincipled use of force, and so to stop being liberal. The fundamental irrationality of liberal modernity, foreshadowed by Emerson and obfuscated by Dewey, is plain today in PC and postmodernism.

Liberalism thus ends in a crisis that is both practical and theoretical. Some deny that the crisis has any very important implications, on the grounds that liberalism and modernity have already dissolved and been replaced by postmodernity. Others deny that advanced contemporary liberalism reflects an attempt to purify Western rationality, pointing out aspects of it, like feminism and ecological consciousness, that often claim to be non-logocentric and anti-Western. Postmodernity, however, is only a radicalization of Western modernity and adds nothing substantive to what preceded it. Its practical consequence is a more demanding rationalism. Doing away with "master narratives" is doing away with myths, only more so. "Celebrating diversity" is making ethnic and sexual categories irrelevant to social and economic function, and so is identical to imposition of rationalized uniformity. To be anti-Western is to demand that the West be purified from all particularity, and thus to further the radical side of the Western heritage.

The irrationalist Left does serve a psychological need. People need a stand-in for non-rationalized aspects of the Western tradition that have been destroyed. If the stand-in lacks stable concrete content and thus authority, it is harmless to technocracy and helps stabilize liberalism. The more soft-headed forms of contemporary left-liberalism serve that function. Thus, feminism is concerned with the body and human connectedness, and ecology with man's setting in the universe, but neither in a way that can give rise to any non-technocratic social institution. Instead, they undermine more substantive alternatives by obfuscating the issues and

supplying imaginary palliatives.

The bottom line is that the ostensibly anti-rationalistic aspects of contemporary liberalism are attempts further to radicalize equality and the concept of everything its own measure. They extend "every man his own measure" to "every man, woman, homosexual, witch-doctor and tree his, her or its own measure." As such, they cannot help but support universal rule by money and rationalizing bureaucracies, since no other arrangements can plausibly present themselves as neutral methods of arbitrating hopelessly inconsistent preferences and understandings. They strengthen the dominance of the liberal order, while undermining its justification and ability to function, by making rational discussion and criticism impossible.

The pragmatic success of liberalism is such that dissolution from within is the only thing that can seriously threaten it in the foreseeable future. The threat, however, is far from speculative. The owl of Minerva notoriously flies at dusk. The possibility of rigorously formulating advanced liberalism, first realized by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice,*[11] and the difficulty of imagining anything beyond it, suggest both its overwhelming present strength and the likelihood that the history within which it has developed has reached conclusion. Signs liberal modernity has reached the end of its possibilities include the collapsing birthrate in the West, the end of youthful hope and idealism, the growing ignorance and hatred of what the West has been, and the absorption of art, literature and philosophy into ideology, careerism, publicity, sensation and perversion.

Can the degeneration and eventual collapse of liberalism be avoided by reforms within liberalism itself? Open-ended aspirations like those of liberalism have normally been chastened in the West by recognition of limits. We are sinful mortals, and must avoid pride and overreaching. Liberalism lacks a true principle of moderation, but for a long time its tendency to emphasize specific reforms substituted for one. That tendency slowed the development of the implications of liberal principles and so gave liberal society relative stability. However, it could not prevent eventual radicalization, because the limits it recognized were not principled but pragmatic and therefore transitory.

Conservatism and constitutionalism attempted to limit the development of liberal absolutism by legal contrivances and retention of a residue of tradition. Neither has held up. Liberalism constantly calls particular traditions into question, and if a tradition cannot defend itself rationally by liberal standards, it eventually disappears. The consequence is that conservatism

11. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

always retreats and in the end loses. As to written constitutions, they have to be interpreted in a way that seems sensible to those who govern through them, so they cannot stand against general trends in political life and thought. In any event, interpretive agencies eventually adopt whatever views are dominant, so a written constitution ends by making the implications of general trends more absolute.

The failure of constitutionalism and traditional conservatism have led to somewhat more principled proposals for moderating liberalism and establishing a generally liberal public order without liberalism's tendency eventually to go to extremes. None of the proposals seem promising. They look for stabilization and renewal through revisions that still accept fundamental liberal principle. However, such changes are not enough in the case of an outlook that follows such a clear logic as liberalism.

Classicizing versions of liberalism, like libertarianism, try to base public order on contract. Contract makes no sense, however, except as part of a larger order of things that is fundamentally non-contractual. Its final standard is individual will, so it cannot of itself provide a standard for the will. Why not cheat unless there is a principle superior to the will that forbids cheating? Nor is it clear why a legal order based on the supremacy of contract and thus on will as the standard of value should not develop into one based on a more comprehensive approach to maximizing the satisfaction of preferences. In other words, why should a classicizing version of liberalism not lead once again to the advanced PC welfare state?

A neoconservative strategy has been to try to ground social order on habits of enterprise, restraint and reasoned loyalty that successful families and groups develop and pass on to their children. The approach supplements libertarianism by emphasizing ways in which the market supports morality and restraint. The supplement is not enough. To establish themselves socially, such habits have to be attached to pre-rational concepts of identity, e.g., "people like us" and "those other people," that are decisively illiberal and so unacceptable to neo-conservatives, who after all are philosophical moderns who reject particularistic essentialism. But if such distinctions go, how can the ethical standards of a family or group define themselves and endure?

A final suggestion has been to attach concepts like universal equality to concrete conceptions of identity by identifying them with America and its institutions. Liberal universalism would thus become a tangible object of loyalty in particular institutions that embody it. It seems unlikely that such an arrangement would be enough to maintain political attachment.

How rewarding can it be to say "*civis Americanus sum*," when everyone who wants is equally an American citizen and "America" is a universal order continually redefined by experts? Previous universal empires, like Rome and China, relied essentially on a divine emperor, on genuine local particularities like family, class and local patriotism, and on the threat of outer barbarians. Why should future universal empires not depend on truly particular identities, loyalties and antipathies? There is also, of course, the difficulty that not everyone may want to be a citizen of a universal American empire, while more truly international institutions such as the UN or EU seem incapable of generating much loyalty and so seem destined to disable themselves through inefficiency and corruption.

Adam Smith said that there is a great deal of ruin in a nation. The same principle has notably applied to liberalism, which has more than once bounced back from apparent decadence. Today it seems more prosperous, dominant and stable than ever. Still, nothing lasts forever, and flexible systems eventually petrify. The Soviet experience demonstrates that as society becomes more and more bureaucratized, the ability to muddle through based on common sense, luck and the possibility of a turn for the better disappears. Liberal modernity is too rationalized to change course. Its conceptions of justice and rationality strive for ever greater clarity, consistency, and independence of cultural preconceptions. Such things are very difficult to put in reverse. Once an inequality has come to seem illegitimate and the attempt to abolish it has begun, a proposal to accept it once again seems an embrace of oppression as such and thus utterly intolerable.

The crisis outlined in the first part of this essay means serious problems for America. America was based on a compromise between liberalism and tradition.[12] Before the final collapse of that compromise in the 1960s, American government neither defined ultimate goods nor ignored them categorically. Government functions were limited, especially at the national level, but they took ultimate goods into account. America in fact had an unspoken established religion, a sort of moralistic but otherwise minimalist Protestantism that knit together the public order and popular understandings of ultimate things. As the Supreme Court observed as late as 1952, "We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."[13] With the final breakdown of the American compromise, the link was broken between government and American tradition as a whole, and

12. See James Kalb, "Traditionalism and the American Order," published as "Traditionalismen och den amerikanska ordningen," in *Contextus* 4 (1998).

13. *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 US 306, 313 (1952).

thus between government and the people. Politics became definitively an affair of interest groups and ideologized elites, and their relationship to popular interests and concerns became decisively manipulative rather than organic. In the absence of an adequate understanding of human life and the common good the American public order entered a state of permanent crisis that features a combination of anarchy and soft totalitarianism.

The balance of tradition, faith and reason has also been slipping in the day-to-day organizational existence of the Church. The decline of tradition and faith as principles that add something substantive to reason and experience can be seen in the primacy of ecumenism, the growth of bureaucracy, the emphasis on expertise and professionalized training, scholarship that turns scripture and doctrine into an all-purpose inkblot, the reinterpretation of religion as liberal social concern, the disdain for traditional popular devotions, and the top-down liturgical and other "renewal" movements that leave nothing untouched in their attempt to eradicate memory.

Exhaustion does not mean that radical change and rebirth are near. Indeed, the liberal order is imposing the practical implications of its principles more comprehensively and radically than ever, maintaining itself not by its rational or popular appeal but by abolition of the social base for new growth so that no alternative seems possible. Prosperity, the world market, and electronic communications loosen personal and cultural ties. The welfare state deprives the informal personal connections on which non-state structures are based of their functions, and imposes high levels of taxation and regulation that weaken them further. The blurring of sexual distinctions and restrictions dissolves the family. Multiculturalism abolishes the functions of ethnicity and culture and turns them into pure principles of opposition that must be mediated by the state to avoid communal violence. And the centralization and professionalization of intellectual and cultural life makes it very difficult to raise questions about fundamentals and have them taken seriously.

It seems that until something unpredictable happens we are stuck within liberal modernity, except to the extent individuals and small groups can make their way on their own to something more hopeful. How long the present situation will last is unclear. Liberal democracy cannot last forever, because it increasingly tends to defeat its own goals of public rationality and private satisfaction, to the extent of preventing its own social and even physical reproduction. One possible outcome is a Soviet-style implosion. If everything becomes dependent on the administrative state, when that becomes terminally corrupt and nonfunctional everything

goes. Another is the growth of inward-turning religious communities, leading either to a new Constantinism or to a neo-Levantine form of society made up of a loose assemblage of ethno-religious groups. The growth of religious communities seems likely since people have to get their lives organized somehow, and secular Western society does not reproduce itself. Whether such communities will lead to a rebirth of public life or to its final collapse cannot, however, be predicted.

A crisis eventually resolves itself one way or another. Faith is necessary to knowledge, tradition is the natural way for human life to order itself, and what is fundamental is resilient and eventually attains public acceptance. It follows that in important ways the future will resemble the past more than the present. Fundamental things come and go as they wish, however, and one cannot cure a sick tradition by defining and enforcing health and normality. Nonetheless, there is a role for public and political action in the interests of large causes. As an immediate and practical matter, traditionalists need to do what they can to maintain the possibility of a life in accordance with what is reasonable for those attached to such a thing. For example, they need to defend family and institutional autonomy against PC imperialism. More generally, they should do what they can to maintain a presence in politics and public discussion, no matter how small numerically, so that their principles remain a public possibility that can exert whatever influence events permit. At a minimum, the presence of those principles will extend the range of what is thought politically conceivable, and so relativize modernist absolutism and help limit its overreaching.