The Promise and Danger of National Conservatism

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National conservatism provides an opportunity to realign the conservative movement in useful ways, namely by rejecting neoconservatism in favor of something more genuinely conservative. Catholics should applaud this. However, it must be recognized that national conservatism has its own goals and priorities distinct from Catholic social thought. Several pitfalls may impede the success of national conservatism. Most importantly, national conservatism might ultimately undervalue the importance of natural law and social conservatism.

It is a challenge to gauge the character of national conservatism for a couple of reasons. First, “conservatism” in America is difficult to define because it is more of a synthesis of interlocking ideas than a coherent philosophy. The distinctive branches of conservatism seek to conserve different things. Economic conservatism espouses limited government, while social conservatism defends traditional morality. Often these interests overlap, but there is still occasional tension. Since the Second World War, there remains a rigorous debate about whether it is more appropriate for conservative policies to be implemented through state or federal legislation on issues ranging from abortion and guns to taxation and block grants. National conservatism favors a combination of both state and federal legislation, but it is more comfortable with the latter than many of their right-wing critics are.

Second, conservatives disagree about what is the American national character. Some conservatives claim that the uniqueness of America stems from its diverse geographical regions, local nuances, ethnic conclaves, and distinctive state characteristics. Others argue that American culture derives from the Founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence’s affirmation of human equality, natural rights, and the consent of the governed. National conservatism uses the latter interpretation to champion the preservation of sovereignty and the fostering of a coherent national character grounded on the principles of the Founding.¹

Third, there is a temptation to conflate national conservatism with a handful of popular but divisive thinkers, such as Yoram Hazony or Michael Anton.² Currently, there is no canonical work of national conservatism, but if there is a Rosetta Stone of the movement, it is the document, “National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles.”³ When one looks at the signato-
ries of the declaration, one is struck by their notoriety and diversity. The list includes Scott Yenor (a political philosopher who writes on family politics), Peter Thiel (a gay conservative technocrat), Christopher Rufo (an anti-woke activist), Brad Littlejohn (a Protestant covenantalist), Roger Kimball (a literary conservative), and Rod Dreher (the author of *The Benedict Option*). Several of the signatories are Catholic, including the journalist Amber Athey, *National Review* columnist Michael Brendan Dougherty, traditional family advocate Austin Ruse, and *First Things* editor R. R. Reno, among others.

The declaration posits ten core principles: 1) an affirmation of national independence from the undue influence of other countries or non-government organizations; 2) a rejection of imperialism and globalism; 3) support for a strong national government, but one that curtails the administrative state; 4) an acknowledgement of the importance of religion in the public square; 5) fidelity to the rule of law; 6) a vindication of free enterprise, but not *laissez-faire*; 7) support for public-sponsored research; 8) a defense of the traditional family; 9) the demand for more restrictive immigration; 10) a rejection of racism (and any association with “white supremacy”).

In historical context, the declaration is noteworthy because it is a clear rejection of the neoconservatism which undergirded the Republican Party from Ronald Reagan to Mitt Romney’s failed 2012 presidential campaign. Neoconservatism, as demonstrated by the Iraq War, unrestrictive immigration policy, and the failure to understand the threat posed by gay “marriage,” was too cosmopolitan to be truly conservative. Instead, the declaration affirms many ideas championed by Patrick J. Buchanan and other paleoconservatives who were marginalized from the Republican Party, especially during the Bush years. The popularity of the national conservative movement demonstrates that there are millions of like-minded conservatives whose hearts aligned with Buchanan even if they voted for other candidates.

National conservatism also has the potential to realign conservatism. It rejects the libertarian component of the 1960s fusionism. Although national conservatism is not attractive to Republican-leaning libertarians and socially liberal college-educated women, it is gaining traction with the Reagan Democrats, such as union workers in the Midwest. Moreover, it is increasingly attractive to Hispanics in Texas and Florida and urban immigrant communities (like Middle Easterners and Asians) who do not benefit from the identity politics lingo of “people of color” or movements such as Defund the Police or Black Lives Matter.

**CATHOLICISM AND NATIONAL CONSERVATISM**

The purpose of this panel is to provide some Catholic reflections on national conservatism. There are three to be made. First, it is legitimate for
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Catholics to care about the national interest, so long as they are not supporting positions contrary to natural law. Second, national conservatism can be a useful ally over the next few decades, but Catholics should be cognizant that conservatism is not identical to Catholic social thought. Indeed, if there are points of tension, Catholic social thought must be favored over the national interest. Third, although Catholicism affirms a universal natural law, other ideologies have proposed alternative and false moralities. National conservatism is a welcome corrective to “fake universals” which are being propagated by the Left.

POINT #1: CONCERN FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST IS LEGITIMATE

Some Catholics may be suspicious of national conservatism because of the mistaken belief that love of country is contrary to love of God. They assume that attention to the national interest is selfish, tribal, dangerous, and/or unnecessary because the Gospel teaches a universal truth, while the state deals with only a particular people. Yet, the corpus of Catholic political thought has a clear response to this argument: there are two powers—one spiritual, one temporal. The Church has spiritual power, and the state has political or temporal power. The spiritual power is greater than the temporal power. Therefore, temporal power cannot justly make laws contrary to the Church. Yet, the Church and the state still have different ends, and these ends must be held by different offices and institutions. It is not possible for there to be only one political regime. Thus, justice demands the creation of several different states. These states reflect different political and social communities with their own interests and needs. They are free to arrange their governments, institutions, and cultures as they see fit, if they do not violate natural law. It is natural for men to love their family, friends, neighbors, and citizens especially. The national interest is directed to justice, insofar as it gives to family, friends, neighbors, and citizens what is due to them. As Heinrich Rommen points out in his classic work, The State in Catholic Thought, the importance of the state (i.e., the country) has always been a cornerstone of Catholic political thought. National conservatism is, in some ways, a reiteration of this classical argument.

POINT #2: NATIONAL CONSERVATISM IS A (TEMPORARY) ALLY

National conservatism is not contrary to Catholic social thought. Indeed, it can aid Catholicism in a variety of ways. At the very least, Catholicism and national conservatism have the same enemies: progressives who push
militant secularism, feminism, transgenderism, and occasional lawlessness. National conservatives are allies who can protect the independence and integrity of Catholic schools, Christian businesses, family rights, homeschooling, and conscientious objection. National conservatism even affirms many tenets of Catholic social teaching. It defends the importance of family, religious institutions, and good manners. It also appears open to other aspects of Catholic social thought that other forms of conservatism did not champion, such as the preferential option for the poor, a moderate welfare state, and reasonable environmental protections.

Yet, Catholics need to be cognizant that national conservatism and Catholicism support the same policies but for different reasons. For example, in the aforementioned “National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles,” affirmation of God is listed fourth and the defense of the family is listed eighth (while funding for public research ranked seventh). Catholicism teaches, however, that God and the family are the two most important issues. The placement of God and family in the declaration demonstrates that national conservatism is not primarily concerned with metaphysical or ontological ordering (as Catholics are). Rather, it views God and family through a utilitarian lens about what is best for the country. On the one hand, the declaration proves that national conservatism is not sufficiently concerned with natural law. On the other hand, in this day and age, it is a victory for Catholics that national conservatism acknowledges some importance to God and family.

POINT #3: NATIONAL CONSERVATISM IS A WELCOME CORRECTIVE TO “FAKE UNIVERSALS”

The Catholic Church affirms the existence of objective truth known through natural law. As Thomas Aquinas teaches, men are to do good and avoid evil, seek self-preservation, procreate and educate the species, and live in community and love God. There is nothing in national conservatism that intrinsically goes against these principles. Put another way, national conservatism does not doubt some form of universal morality. Yet, national conservatism is suspicious and, at times, hostile to “fake universals”—principles that wrongly claim to be universally true. Since the French Revolution, the Left has propagated a variety of fake universals: Saint-Simon’s free love, Marx’s dialectical materialism, Spencer’s Social Darwinism, Freud’s psychology, and Judith Butler’s belief in gender-as-performance, among a variety of others. These ideas were proposed to destroy the underlying Christian assumptions of Western Civilization. They were designed to create concepts and methodologies to replace Christian teaching.
National conservatism is largely opposed to these “fake universals.” Because of the particularism embedded within itself, national conservatism does not oppose these fake universals as comprehensively as Catholic social thought does, but it is aware that these universals are threats to American civil society and the public order. It recognizes that these fake universals are alien to authentic American culture, in part, because many of these national conservatives draw upon the Declaration of Independence as their lodestar for what America teaches about universal truth.

Thus, national conservatism has a significant amount of promise, so long as it remains rooted in a synthesis of Judeo-Christian culture and the teachings of the American Founding. Yet, the teachings of the American Founding are not enough; they need to be supported by the traditional morality of the Bible and the natural law. If national conservatism uses traditional morality only to broaden its base, it will fail since it would skew first principles. If, however, national conservatism is truly wedded to the social conservatism it currently espouses, it is a welcome ally in the restoration of the public square.

Notes


4. Ibid.

5. See his *magnum opus*: Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002).


8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II Q. 94 a.2