

***Conscience and Its Enemies:
Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism***

by Robert P. George

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Do moral or political arguments ever change anyone's mind? Occasionally they do, I suppose. But usually they fall on deaf ears. Our opponents must be ignorant, wicked, or both.

Robert George's *Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism* does not ask why moral and political arguments rarely change people's minds, but it does an excellent job of proposing reasons to reject the "liberal" rewriting of America's moral code. If reasonable arguments did sway people more often, then *Conscience and Its Enemies* would be a major contribution toward a national moral conversion.

What George offers in this volume is a series of closely related essays on our current American political and moral decay, and particularly on our public disputes about religious freedom, the rights and dignity of human life, the nature of marriage, and (at least implicitly) the accessibility of natural law reasoning as a basis for civil cohesion. His positions will not be uncontroversial even among serious Catholic and other traditional thinkers, but for clarity, sobriety, timeliness, and intellectual punch, this latest volume is hard to beat. The book is a great pleasure to read—or at least it is a pleasure if the dogmas of liberal secularism are not your own!

The chapters of *Conscience* are grouped under four headings: Fundamentals, Morality and the Public Square, Life and Death, and "Good Guys . . . and Not-So-Good Guys." Each chapter is a freestanding essay that can be read by itself, but the separate parts do flow into each other and cohere into an illuminating and elegant whole. The range of concrete moral issues that George covers is wide: here we have a critique of Peter Singer on infanticide, there a discussion of the Obama administration's appalling position on religious liberty and conscience, over yonder are treatments of the frauds of

"marriage equality" and innovations in the philosophy of law. Nonetheless, George brings all these topics and a dozen more neatly together with a consistent voice and unity of purpose: to show not simply that the dominant moral claims of American politics are those of reason, but rather that these claims invite scrutiny and that there is—as he shows—every reason to find them wanting.

(In fact, George does all this in the first three parts of the book. The remaining part, "Good Guys . . . and Not-So-Good Guys," is a collection of mostly tributary and obituary essays about notable people in contemporary moral debates. These personal essays are fine, but they are only incidentally tied to the project uniting the body of the book. This review, accordingly, concentrates on parts 1, 2, and 3.)

As befits a McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, George begins by considering some ways in which the United States has departed from its ethical and legal origins. Thus the essays in part 1 of *Conscience and Its Enemies* are about different points of constitutional law, human rights, and social order. Here we have, for example, accounts of the natural alliance of social and economic conservatism, of the despotism of the judiciary over our legislative and executive authorities, of the nature of authentic liberty, and of the root questions of truth and culture that shape our debates about things like affirmative action and immigration. Some more conservative readers will dislike George's enthusiasm for Lincoln and for Lincoln's reading of the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, and liberals will have a rash of objections, but this first section of the book is probably the strongest and the most important. It is essential to the arguments on specific issues—abortion, marriage, human embryo experimentation—that follow, and offers valuable instruction on our

legal and political history to the ethicist who is not trained in law.

Part 2 of *Conscience and Its Enemies* addresses the hottest present-day moral arguments. George is an exponent of the new natural law theory, an approach amply criticized by Catholic moralists (see the Spring 2013 issue of this journal), yet in the context of American political and legal division, his accounts of the sanctity of life and of marriage are broadly accessible and helpful to anyone trying to think through the contested issues. One crucial point George makes repeatedly and clearly is that the traditional (and, incidentally, Catholic) moral positions, and therefore political positions, do not depend on faith: they stem from rational and factual considerations—and indeed do so more than do the “dogmas of liberal secularism.” Some people, of course, will take traditional insights on faith; the point George makes is that we cannot afford to let these rational positions be forced out of the public arena by the assertion that they are essentially matters of faith, unsuitable for consideration in the politics of a free society. That human life begins at conception, for example, or that marriage is more than “sexual-romantic companionship or domestic partnership” (143) is something intelligible to ordinary human reason and capable (in principle) of demonstration.

The third part of *Conscience and Its Enemies*, “Life and Death,” takes us into the thick of current biomedical and political controversy, searching into the arguments and sensibilities that are at work in the moral revolution. Here George’s aim is twofold: he is going to expose fallacious reasoning (most enjoyably the fatuities of Joe Biden and Mario Cuomo), but more importantly he will begin to expose the sheer nihilistic barbarism of the modern American Left. The issues of human experimentation, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, sodomy, marriage, and the rights of conscience and religion are, George indicates, all of a piece, and it is no accident that people coming down on the progressive or conservative side of one of these issues will usually come down on the same side of

the others. Our principles, whether examined or not, yield consistent results.

Given his purpose of exposing the Left’s moral dogmas to critical scrutiny, George offers a conclusion that is challenging if relatively tame: the American Right, and especially the Republican party, needs to rediscover the moral courage that marked it in the days of Lincoln. The reader is reminded that the GOP began by opposing the twin evils of slavery and polygamy, and is urged to act boldly, not only on the belief that its moral judgments are sound, but also on the belief that it can effectively fight and prevail in the public forum. Because this last claim is a little thin, as it seems to me, George comes across here as more idealistic than Augustinian. But perhaps Augustinians are defeatist in politics, having seen the barbarians triumph over Rome already.

Conscience and Its Enemies is an important book for any American ethicist or political thinker, though it will no doubt frustrate liberal readers and leave some conservatives cold. Some will join this reviewer in wishing George had said more about what will happen if the barbarians keep winning, and about how—in the most practical terms—we can hope to renew our society’s conscience. George is too smart to be an uncritical optimist, but in this particular book he does seem happily optimistic about the American political system. We more pessimistic readers would like to know the reason for this hope.

Because it deals so much with current controversies, and even current personalities, *Conscience and Its Enemies* is not going to age very well. Nevertheless, the urgency of the issues and the perennial, or at least longer-term, questions George treats in these essays make this volume appropriate for college and seminary libraries, ethics libraries, law libraries (of course), and collections on political morality and religion. It is recommended to all who are involved in the anti-barbarian resistance.

REV. BERNARD MULCAHY, OP

Bernard Mulcahy, OP, PhD, is on the faculty of St. Mary’s Seminary in Houston, Texas.