

# TRANSATLANTIC CONSERVATISM AND THE DILEMMA OF TRADITION

*The Antimodern Condition: An Argument against Progress* by Peter King  
(Burlington, VT, and Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014)

*The Meaning of Conservatism* by Roger Scruton, 3rd rev. ed.  
(2002; repr. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2014)

*The Clash of Civilizations or Civil War* by Zbigniew Stawrowski  
(Kraków: The Tischner Institute, 2013)

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When I first assumed the editorship of *Modern Age*, a friend, a lady active both in local Republican politics and church affairs, complained that the title was inappropriate for a “conservative magazine.” Mark Henrie provided an appropriate rejoinder. “The modern age,” he quipped, “it’s over, but we’re still against it.” The three books under review here, two recently published along with a reprint of Roger Scruton’s *Meaning of Conservatism*, offer a European perspective on American conservatives’ efforts to come to terms with modernity and validate Russell Kirk’s choice of *Modern Age* as the title of a conservative quarterly review. Conservatism is, in essence, the response of normal human beliefs, attitudes, and expectations

to the phenomenon of modernity, which has emerged over the past three to four centuries and come to dominate the world.

In their various ways, all three of these books are efforts to salvage the traditional goods of life from the whirlwind of modern progress. Each of the authors recognizes that the progressive mentality is pervasive even among those who aspire to be conservatives or traditionalists in the midst of modern cultural institutions and the attendant social arrangements. Progressivism exercises its hegemony not only by means of the dazzling excess of its material enticements, but also by invading and occupying our language and ordinary mental habits and attitudes. It is difficult for a conservative to resist the

encroachments of modernity in every phase of life, physical and spiritual, without resort to the radical or revolutionary activities characteristic of his antagonists. The conservative dilemma is that the political activism apparently required to retard destructive social change and restore traditional mores undermines the harmony and tranquility that are the goal of the enterprise.

As the title of his compact volume suggests, Peter King counsels us to admit forthrightly, nay, to proclaim that modernity is essentially the cultural and institutional embodiment of a commitment to ceaseless “progress”; that is, to the indefinite, relentless pursuit of the perfect human society. He is impatient with a purportedly “conservative” politics that competes with progressivism by offering diluted, half-hearted versions of the same radical policies. Conservatives, he maintains, must renounce the idea that society’s business is to be constantly remaking itself and sacrificing present contentment in the interest of future perfection. In a wry echo of Jean-François Lyotard’s title *The Postmodern Condition*, King urges us to be “antimodern.”

He stresses, however, that to oppose modernity is neither to oppose all change nor even all technological advance: “The target is instead the *ideal* of the modern,” of the “modernity” that “is the belief in progress.” Progress must not be equated with simple improvement of mankind’s material condition: “Progress is that product of Enlightenment thought that sees the pursuit of human perfectibility as the supreme end of politics” (7). In stressing that modernity is an idea rather than a description of the state of our physical world, King preempts the usual smug rejoinder to any skepticism about effects of “progress”: “You don’t want to go back to nineteenth-century dentistry, do you?”

One element in King’s argument recalls Frederick Hayek’s admonition—although he never mentions Hayek—about presumptuous planning in the face of human ignorance. King provides a taxonomy of approaches to modernity that postulates not the familiar “two kinds of people,” but rather three:

At the risk of caricature, we can say that modernists are those who think that they can understand the world and so they act accordingly. They plan and change and call it progress, and ignore the fact that their plans fail or do not work as they predicted. Postmodernists are those who believe it does not matter that they do not understand the world and think this makes them very clever as it seems to allow them to do whatever they like, particularly to ignore those things they make but which do not work. Antimodernists are those who know how much they do not understand, and this frightens them into inaction. If one has no idea how a thing works, then it might be best to leave it alone. (8–9)

Nevertheless, King will not allow the albatross of nineteenth-century dentistry to be hung around his neck: “Being antimodern does not mean that all change will be opposed.” He is perfectly well aware that change is inevitable and can, in some instances, be valuable, but “change will only be supported if it does no harm and if this can be clearly demonstrated” (9).

There is much to commend in King’s blunt challenge to the assumption that we must always be pursuing “progress”: that technology, social arrangements, cultural attitudes, and ethical practices will be perpetually improving and rendering our lives unequivocally better. One may reasonably

ask whether the adolescent girl who spends most of her time between school and soccer practice posting selfies on Instagram and reading tweets on her smart phone is engaged in more enlightened cultural experiences than her predecessor, who was engrossed in *Anne of Green Gables* through a long summer afternoon. Or is it necessarily a sign of an enhanced style of living that the average American male has the opportunity to watch scores of professional athletic contests every day on a fifty-inch flat-screen television and spend a good deal of money playing fantasy football? Is a shopping mall superior to the cathedral in Chartres, and is John Galsworthy's conscientious boot maker simply to be written off as inevitable collateral damage in the blitzkrieg of progress?

The beginning of King's book poses a potent challenge to modernity simply by questioning its fundamental assumption that we must always be changing the way we live in the interest of material improvement: "A key part of antimodernism is that it sees no real need to justify itself. The elements upon which it is based are merely accepted as self-evident: we feel them to be right and seek no further justification" (19). In other words, the burden of proof is shifted; King demands that the progressive justify the disruption of what seems to be a reasonably satisfactory way of life for many of his fellow men and women.

While King thus raises a compelling practical and philosophical objection to the project of modernity in the opening chapters of *The Antimodern Condition*, the remainder of the short volume seems longer than it is, as a result of repetitious style and rambling discourse, and does not succeed in driving the argument home. Another problem is King's choice of antimodern exemplars. He concedes that some of them are "obscure," but in some instances *eccentric*, even *pecu-*

*liar*, may be more accurate designations. While an effective writer can make use of any number of varied sources, it is unsettling for a conservative to invoke Epicurus instead of Plato or Aristotle, John Irving instead of Flannery O'Connor, and Martha Nussbaum instead of Russell Kirk.

What becomes evident in the course of the book is that "antimodern," at least as King conceives it, overlaps with the concept of conservatism but is by no means identical or always compatible with it. He correctly perceives that progressive modernity is a cultural phenomenon of the Western world, but he does not seem to realize that conservatism, properly speaking, is also a Western development and not so much a wholesale rejection of the modern as a measured response to it.

The discrepancy may be best observed in King's account of his most unusual hero of antimodernism, René Guénon (1886–1951), a Frenchman who "spent the final 20 years of his life in Egypt living the life of a traditional Muslim." Unsurprisingly, "His criticism was of Western civilization itself, not merely particular political structures" (31). King also ascribes to Guénon a view of "tradition" that resembles a Platonic ideal rather than a concrete historical reality emerging in a particular time and place:

For Guénon, there is not a multiplicity of traditions, and nor [sic] does tradition merely refer to cultural practices. Instead tradition is a set of universal principles that underpin all modern religions and systems of thought. Tradition is the primordial basis of all ancient thought. (33)

Such syncretism is hardly compatible with conservatism (or, for that matter, with the thought of "a traditional Muslim"); it is basically a form of Gnosticism. In King's summary of Guénon, "Modern religions . . . have

almost entirely lost their esoteric core with its emphasis on initiation into a secret wisdom gained by following a required path and by accepting the disciplines of the esoteric order.” Of course, “This element is only available to an elite minority and can only be understood through an appreciation of the symbols that are hidden within exoteric religion” (37).

In the preface to his book, King defends his “idiosyncratic” choice of writers like Guénon, who may be incompatible with one another as well as individually odd, in order to piece together his own “coherent argument.” Coherence, however, is precisely what the argument lacks, insofar as it fails to take into account too many of the inconsistencies and ambiguities of its components. The insufficiencies of the case are also apparent in another aspect of his discourse (which he also defends in the preface): his recourse to “examples from literature and film,” which he deems “unconventional” in a book on politics (viii–ix).

The practice is not, in fact, especially unconventional, but King’s choices are again puzzling. It may well be my loss never to have seen Hiroshi Teshigahara’s film *Woman in the Dunes* (1964) or Peter Hammond’s *Spring and Port Wine* (1969), but neither is regarded as a classic. One might reasonably expect a liberally educated reader to have a sufficient acquaintance with the *Odyssey* or *King Lear* or *The Brothers Karamazov* to grasp their relevance as examples in an argument about the clash between traditional culture and modernity. But two movies from the sixties? Their appropriateness for the task is hardly self-evident, and King’s detailed and laborious plot summaries blur the focus of his discourse.

There is more to this than a lapse in rhetorical strategy. King has attempted to construct an antimodern tradition from a

congeries of thinkers and artists, selected seemingly at random from around the globe and across the span of cultural histories. Such eclecticism is the antithesis of valid traditionalism; indeed it is only really possible for someone with a thoroughly modern and wholly subjective vision of the world.

This apparently arbitrary cultural diversity is also inevitably estranged from Western culture, which is firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Modernity, the target of King’s diatribe, is undeniably a product of the eschatological element in this Western religious tradition—a “heresy,” so to speak, insofar as the modern commitment to earthly progress attempts to relocate heavenly eternity within the temporal world (“immanentizing the eschaton” in Eric Voegelin’s inelegant phrase). Conservatism, likewise an altogether Western development, cannot simply renounce modernity and the modern world, but must instead deal with them as wayward children.

Jews and Christians are required to make *progress*—not in the direction of utopian social arrangements—but rather in personal virtue, in communal charity, and in communion with God. Something not unlike this is also embodied in the Greco-Roman pursuit of truth and virtue. *Conserving* Western civilization is, therefore, incompatible with the “blandness,” “complacency,” and “self-absorption” commended by King, howbeit in a qualified way (73–80). Western culture is, in fact, on the whole more dynamic and also more restless than the traditional civilizations of the East, and this is, no doubt, in some measure the result of the dissatisfaction with this world inspired by distinctively Western religion. Conservatives cannot be merely “antimodern” or against progress. From the perspective of Western conservatism, the problem with progressive modernism is that it sets out to change the

external world rather than the interior self. Conservatives do not have the luxury of simply rejecting modernity; we must rather attempt to come to terms with it and find ways to reconcile it to the philosophical and religious foundation of Western civilization.

Like Peter King, Zbigniew Stawrowski is highly critical of the triumphalism of the Western democracies with their smug assurance that modern progressivism necessarily represents the future of the world. His title, *The Clash of Civilizations or Civil War*, suggests, however, that he sees the crisis before us less as a conflict between modernist Western civilization and external enemies or an alternative Eastern tradition than as a struggle within the Western tradition itself.

As a Pole, he is deeply concerned about efforts of his country to recover from decades of Soviet domination and restore its Western and traditional Christian heritage without being wholly absorbed into the progressive secularism that increasingly dominates Western Europe and America. Given the current situation of Poland, it is no surprise that Stawrowski's book is more explicitly and practically political than King's and offers us a different perspective from which to reflect upon the issues that bedevil conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic.

Stawrowski finds the crucial source of conflict in the contemporary world in the tension between two characteristic features of modern Western society: religious freedom and liberal democracy. Specifically, he is preoccupied with the threat posed by the latter to the former. The succession of his chapter titles yield a general idea of our present condition as he sees it: "Brave New World," "Democracy as a Confessional State," "Is Democracy Moral?" "Sleek Barbarians," "An Apology for Christian Europe," and, finally, "Let Us Convert Each Other Mutually!

Religious freedom as the foundation of a community of communities."

The "civil war" that Stawrowski identifies amounts to a subversion of the Western tradition that takes certain of its principles out of their context in order to magnify their importance disproportionately and thus change their meaning. Most notable in this process is the establishment of the regime of "Human Rights":

A distinctive feature of this approach is the continuous reference to basic values of the Western world, accompanied by a radical reinterpretation of them. For example, Human Rights—the list is getting so long, that the most important and truly inviolable rights lose their specific significance and dissolve in the flood of ever new, apparently valid laws.

The author does not denounce "progressive elites" for imposing political correctness upon an innocent "silent majority," since "these changes are being carried out with the consent of the citizens themselves and the authorities chosen by them in a democratic way." This "internal enslavement and hypocrisy" is "deeper" and more morally debilitating than the imposition of tyranny by force during the communist years (11).

Stawrowski's main examples of the new "rights" are abortion, euthanasia, and same-sex "marriage." Their common characteristic "is an obvious tendency to legally protect [sic] only those who have enough strength to protect themselves" (21). Government approved, not to say sponsored, euthanasia, for instance, puts tremendous pressure on the physically or mentally fragile to acquiesce in their own deaths: "The attempt to legalize mercy...turns out to actually be [sic] the deprivation of an ailing and weakening person from his elementary feeling

of safety, sentencing him to the grace and mercy of others” (19). Similarly, with the recognition of “marriage” between individuals of the same sex and their concomitant right to adopt, “it is not the child that has a right to have a family, but a pair of adults (declaring themselves a married couple) that have a right to have children” (20).

These developments mark such a radical departure from two millennia of Western civilization that Stawrowski is led to question the extent to which it is maintaining its essential identity. Most conservatives will have at least some sympathy for his judgment that democracy, with its undeniable virtues, is also inherently problematic. In “Democracy as a Confessional State,” he begins by arguing that modern nation-states contrast with the Roman Empire and the medieval kingdoms that succeeded it, because the later political arrangement does not impose a unifying “political religion” on all its subjects with concomitant “ethical obligations”—emperor worship, for example. The modern state, at least in theory, restricts itself to guaranteeing *political* unity and peace while leaving religion to the individual conscience: “The modern state of law is, therefore, a state of recognized rights, and not a state of ethical obligations” (31).

Nevertheless, Stawrowski recognizes the tension between the “liberal” and the “democratic” facets of *liberal democracy*:

An obvious dilemma arises: what will happen if, while fully respecting democratic procedures, a majority of the citizens agree to suspend the principles of the state of law and replace them with the logic of a fundamentalist state which imposes a system of values held by the majority, and so the minority faces the alternative: conversion or elimination? (34)

Following Eric Voegelin, Stawrowski endorses the description of “totalitarian systems as a particular type of fundamentalist state” and draws the lesson that “respect for elementary rights of man as a necessary condition for autonomy is much more important than the right to participate in power,” and that “the principle of the state of law is more fundamental than the principle of democracy and must restrict it” (35).

In the next chapter, “Is Democracy Moral?,” the author attempts to come to terms with the apparent contradiction that arises from the tension between the *ethical* and the *moral*. The former, Stawrowski maintains, refers to the norms of conduct and common expectations of a particular group: “In its essence, ethical behaviour constitutes the expression of identification with one’s own community and is a testimony of being rooted within that community, in what is commonly recognized as correct behaviour” (49–50). “Morality,” in its distinctively modern guise, with Kant as its paradigmatic exemplar, is associated with the displacement of traditional communities by the nation-state: “A ‘moral’ deed, therefore, means that it is recognized by the conscious, autonomous individual as being right” (51).

This “autonomous individual” is man as envisioned by Hobbes in the state of nature, who has emerged since the time of the Reformation. Such men are, to a greater or lesser extent, alienated from the traditional ethical community, to which they feel no obligation and against which they invoke the power of the state “to support the *full* panoply of values with which they identify and which they accept.” Stawrowski regards the predominance of these “rootless individuals” in modern society with alarm:

Hence, although the model of the democratic state of law is undoubtedly the



most moral of all models of the state, because it is built from beginning to end on the axiological foundation of the moral autonomy of man, such a claim could arouse deep concern, since it is at the same time a project not only closed to the ethical dimension, but clearly hostile to it. (64)

Hence the “civil war” of the book’s title.

In the closing three chapters of the book, Stawrowski lays out the dangers to Western civilization posed by the “sleek barbarians” who have arisen within it and suggests a means of peaceful resolution to the “civil war.” He maintains that an attack upon the fundamental authoritative institutions of Western Christendom, above all the family, will result in undoing the freedom so prized by the modern world, since those very institutions are guarantees of the freedom that arose “within the ethical paradigm of Christianity” (70). Freedom of religion, in the author’s telling, is the culmination of Christian freedom. The effort to free the autonomous individual from all constraints, however, has resulted in a demand for freedom *from* religion—the banning of religious activity, above all evangelization, from the public square. This denial of the freedom of religious men and women is rightly seen as an attack on *their* freedom and overturns the basis of freedom itself.

The penultimate chapter, “An Apology for Christian Europe,” argues the legitimacy of Christian proselytizing and its compatibility within a pluralist society, and the final chapter calls for a restoration in Western Europe of freedom *to* religion and a culture of diverse, unfettered religious activity betokened by the slogan “Let us all convert one another mutually.” “We... often forget that the freedom to display our own religion is the quintessence and culmination of free-

dom understood in this way, and calling it into question is an attack on freedom as a whole” (108). Regrettably, Stawrowski offers no clear strategy for persuading the champions of individual autonomy and militant secularism to let themselves be persuaded.

The problem may be that he has allowed the liberal discourse of human rights—despite his wariness of unfettered democracy—to control the terms of the argument and distort the concept of freedom. At this juncture the pertinence of Roger Scruton’s *The Meaning of Conservatism* becomes apparent:

One major difference between conservatism and liberalism consists, therefore, in the fact that, for the conservative, the value of individual liberty is not absolute, but stands subject to another and higher value, the authority of established government. And history could be taken to suggest that what satisfies people politically—even if they always use words like “freedom” to articulate the first impulse towards it—is not freedom, but congenial government. (8)

From Scruton’s perspective, attempts by conservatives to compete with liberals on the grounds of freedom are not only doomed to failure; they also amount to an abandonment of the essence of conservatism.

First published in 1980, with new editions in 1984 and 2002, *The Meaning of Conservatism* has attained the status of a contemporary classic (if the oxymoron may be pardoned) and merits this new reprinting by St. Augustine’s Press. Much of its value for those of us on this side of the Atlantic is the distinctive viewpoint offered by the author’s self-conscious disavowal of too close a parallel between British and American versions of conservatism: “The freedom that

British people esteem is not, and cannot be, a special case of that freedom advocated by the American Republican Party, the freedom of pioneering dissenters struggling for community in a place without history, the freedom which is connected in some mysterious way with free enterprise and the market economy" (8). The name of Russell Kirk does not appear in this book, and Kirk would probably have little sympathy with Scruton's effort "to express the root ideas of a conservative ideology" (vii)—at least not with the term "ideology."

Scruton's distance from a very important strain of American conservatism is signaled by his account of what prompted him to write the book in the first place: "I sought to distinguish conservatism from economic liberalism and also to counter the Conservative Party's emphasis on free markets and economic growth" (vii). The tensions are even more pronounced in the contemporary United States, with our conflicts between "neo-conservatives" and "paleo-conservatives," between "social conservatives" and "economic conservatives," between the "Tea Party" and the "Establishment." The difference is that it is easier to see where the fault line runs in Britain, easier to identify as an agrarian Tory from the Country or a neo-liberal Tory from the City.

This clearer British distinction perhaps furnishes American conservatives, confused by an equivocal tangle of alliances and rivalries, adherences and oppositions, an opportunity to gain a clearer perspective on where the truly crucial distinctions lie. Without revisiting all the particulars of a book that has been before the world for thirty-five years, we may direct our attention to Scruton's chapter "Alienated Labour," a Marxist concept, which the conservative author takes quite seriously as a real problem in modern industrial and postindustrial societies. He

notes that while Marx identified the issue, the solution he devised and those of governments across the political spectrum have failed egregiously: "This ghost [of alienation] is not the worst of our modern horrors; but it reminds us that not every society is governable, and that there are political problems which cannot be solved by economic policy" (114).

Scruton does not, however, offer an alternative policy: "Not that conservatives can propose a remedy. Not all human ills have a cure, and in this case there is none that has been proposed which retains much credibility after a century of material progress and spiritual decline" (114). Although there is no cure for this malaise, we cannot ignore it: "Nevertheless, conservatives must continue to look for a remedy, since the possibility of a conservative politics depends on it. An alienated society is by its nature not a society that can be governed in a conservative way" (114–115).

It may be that of all the disputes among conservatives, indeed among political thinkers generally, this is the one that cuts deepest: does one acknowledge *that not every society is governable*? Are the worst and ultimate problems of governance not amenable to government solution? Recall George Washington's "Farewell Address": "'Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. This rule extends with more or less force to every species of free Government." Now go to the beach and observe the holiday-makers wearing more tattoo than bathing suit. Go to the mall and watch them shop. Spend an evening watching the most popular television shows. Betake thyself to Facebook or Twitter and read the postings. Do you suppose this people can be amenable to *any* "species of free Government"?



In *The Antimodern Condition*, Peter King counsels what amounts to a kind of withdrawal into a nostalgic comfort zone. Ignore “progress” and perhaps it will go away. Despite his shrewd analysis of the follies of progressive modernity, King’s prescriptions suggest futility. It is difficult, on the other hand, not to be sympathetic to Zbigniew Stawrowski’s call for fair treatment of Poland’s traditional Catholic culture in terms of the modern rights regime’s nod to “religious freedom.” After all, Poland has gone in a decade or so from communist tyranny to a lethal combination of capitalist “creative destruction” and the European Union’s imposition of political correctness. But can one realistically expect a governmental solution to that nation’s social catastrophe? Roger Scruton’s grim assessment of the prospects of conservative government is thus a salutary reminder that we must face realistically the situation in which we find ourselves.

Perhaps the chief lesson of these three books, notwithstanding the varied aims of their authors, is that in the frenzied decadence of American society as well as in Great Britain and Poland, there is a rapidly diminishing stock of cultural capital for conservatives to conserve. Supposedly a conservative pundit quipped (I have heard the remark attributed to more than one figure), “Whatever the culture war was, we lost,” with the implication that we need to stop worrying about inessentials and get on with the serious business of enacting sound government policy. Regrettably, it is difficult to imagine an effective government in a world where we find nothing but T. S. Eliot’s “heap of broken images, where . . . the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief.” The only blessing is that, as Eliot also reminds us, no cause is finally lost, because none is finally won. †

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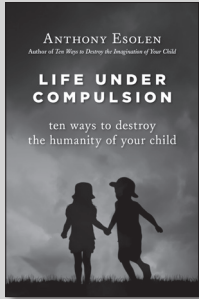
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