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Rogers Scruton’s eloquent defense of patriotism informs his conservatism, and his conservatism, in turn, informs his patriotism, giving it a remarkable breadth and depth. Scruton became a conservative in the 1970s, after witnessing the 1968 student revolts in France. His first effort to articulate his new outlook was *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980), a book influenced by G.W.F. Hegel. It is full of gems, even if it lacks the accessibility of his later writing, and is more adamantly anti-liberal, rejecting the whole edifice of modern liberal political thought.

His newest book, *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*, is more dialectical, prone to emphasize certain affinities between conservatism and the liberalism it aims to moderate and correct. In wonderfully lucid pages, Scruton reveals the way the liberal order depends on certain enduring conservative insights. Liberalism’s desire to free the individual from undue restraints will culminate in nihilism and moral disorder unless it retains the venerable customs and institutions that allow a regime of liberty to flourish in the first place. Conservatism, as Scruton now understands it, provides a “yes, but...” to classical liberalism’s claims.

Like classical liberalism, this conservatism opposes the petty dictates of a managerial state and the monstrous totalitarianisms of the 20th century. But it goes further, continuing to find a place for religion and high culture. Without sensible limits or conditions, liberalism is prone to follow the logic of liberation and emancipation to its bitter, self-defeating conclusion. Scruton is left ambivalent about the Enlightenment—neither adamantly opposing nor endorsing all its premises and conclusions.

He is also sensitive to modern conservatism’s “classical roots.” More than a defense of tradition, conservatism is an approach to life and politics that appreciates enduring truths about human nature. Its defense of moderation, constitutionalism, and the cardinal virtues (courage, prudence, justice and temperance) owes much to Aristotle, for example. As Scruton puts it, conservatism “calls upon aspects of the human condition that can be witnessed in every civilization and at every period of history.” His conservatism is Aristotelian, too, in its recognition that human beings are social and political animals “who live naturally in communities, bound together by mutual trust.”

As a modern conservative, Scruton defends a form of democracy unknown to Aristotle. Following David Hume and Edmund Burke, however, he opposes the
idea that the "political order is founded on a contract." For Scruton, the state of nature is a chimera—an invention of modern political philosophers who had forgotten the debt and gratitude owed to our predecessors. The fictitious state of nature—so central to philosophical liberalism—obscures the fact that membership in a community, with its requisite duties and obligations, is a precondition for meaningful freedom. "Absolute freedom"—doing whatever one wants—is always an invitation to anarchy or tyranny. In the modern world, the nation is the political form that guarantees membership and self-government.

In all of his political writings, Scruton takes on the Left for scorning existing norms and customs, and for promoting a "culture of repudiation." The Left is "negative." It misapplies "every aspect of our cultural capital" with the language of brutal invective: accusing every defender of human nature and sound tradition of "racism," "xenophobia," "homophobia," and "sexism." Like 1984's two minutes of hate," this language tears down, intimidates, and can never build anything humane or constructive—it is nihilistic to the core. At the same time, Scruton wants to reach out to reasonable liberals who eschew ideology and who still believe in civility and the promise of national belonging. His conservatism can discern the truth in liberalism (another Aristotelian trait) while the partisans of repudiation see half the human race as enemies.

Scruton, too, ably discusses Alexis de Tocqueville's mixture of liberalism and conservatism, as well as a full range of cultural conservatism from T.S. Eliot to Simone Weil and José Ortega y Gasset. At the same time, he emphasizes cultural conservatism's limits as a strictly political guide or philosophy, even if such quasi-nostalgic cultural ruminations speak to the human spirit and helps keep a tradition of high culture alive. Likewise, Scruton appreciates the conservative case against both the managerial, or administrative, state and Soviet Communism, "a tyranny yet more murderous than that of the Jacobins in revolutionary France." He writes respectfully about Friedrich Hayek and Michael Oakeshott while discerning the limits of classical liberalism (and especially libertarianism), as well as the limits of Oakeshott's rather aesthetic and apolitical defense of poetry, conversation, and the arts. Although his account of Leo Strauss is also respectful, emphasizing Strauss's defense of natural right against thorough-going historicism, Scruton remains a conservative political philosopher of the first rank who is in no real sense influenced by Straussian thought on statesmanship and political philosophy.

There is something capacious and even cosmopolitan about his defense of home and a sense of political and social membership. Scruton is at home in France, loves the Czech people (whom he helped during their Communist captivity), and is a friend of the United States. This British patriot knows America well, and has astute things to say about Thomas Jefferson's conservative side (his defense of agrarian virtue and classical architecture) even if he prefers to remain silent about Jefferson's...
embarrassing indulgence of the French Revolution. Scruton is less sure-footed when writing about The Federalist. Like many today, he understates its defense of a vigorous national government and reads it more as a defense of federalism than is probably warranted.

But these are minor complaints. He is marvelous on Whittaker Chambers’s penetrating account of Communism’s assault on the human soul and on William F. Buckley’s defense of the humane virtues against Ayn Rand’s radical individualism, vulgarized Nietzscheanism, and implacable dogmatism. Rand, Scruton astutely observes, was completely alien to what Buckley saw as “the essential kindness of the American inheritance.” Such lucid formulations and insights make this book a particularly delightful guide to things conservative.

“Modern conservatism began as a defense of tradition against the calls for popular sovereignty; it became an appeal on behalf of religion and high culture against the materialist doctrine of progress, before joining forces with the classical liberals in the fight against socialism.” He maintains that conservatism today is best seen as the defender of Western civilization against its cultured despisers—those avatars of “political correctness” who see the West as uniquely culpable among all peoples and civilizations—and against religious extremism, especially in the form of militant Islam.

Still, there is an ambiguity in Scruton’s book. Sometimes he presents himself as a defender of the Christian inheritance, sometimes as a defender of the secular state. The two are of course not necessarily incompatible. Occasionally, and only occasionally, he seems to suggest that Islam reveals something essential about the nature of religion simply. One is tempted to say that Scruton’s legitimate revulsion against Islamist fanaticism has led him to accentuate his emphasis on secularism as the crucial ingredient in modern liberty. But can a liberal order worthy of the name persist if it relies exclusively on secular resources and treats the Christian sense of fellowship and charity as at best a “residue” (as Scruton puts it elsewhere) of an older Western civilization? Happily, he repudiates dogmatic secularism in his closing discussion of contemporary French political philosopher Pierre Manent.

Scruton readily appreciates his many affinities with Manent (although one is eminently French and the other is inescapably British). That is how it ought to be among conservatives who value tradition and a sense of home and belonging. Scruton writes with intelligence and sensitivity about Manent’s book on the contemporary situation of France, translated into English as Beyond Radical Secularism (2016). He agrees with Manent that the principal object of shared loyalty in the contemporary world is the self-governing nation. The transnational alternatives to it—the European Union in its post-political form; the United Nations; a dogmatic conception of universal human rights; and the Islamic ummah itself—are either unappealing or run counter to the immediate and urgent need to integrate the Muslim minority into Western societies. Like Manent, Scruton opposes the “deliberate enfeeblement of the nation” by political and cultural elites in the name of globalization and a transnational conception of Europe (this, among other reasons, is why he was one of the most articulate and persistent advocates for Brexit). Nor does he think that Frenchmen, or any Europeans, can live primarily as “radical individuals” affirming ever more indiscriminate rights in a secular state that has lost any sense of its Christian inheritance.

In his reading of Manent, Scruton reaffirms the indispensability of Christianity’s spiritual inheritance to liberty rightly understood. Christianity taught the West the importance of love of neighbor, not a watery, globalized humanitarianism. Neighborhood and territory have a special place in Christianity (Manent has expressed similar ideas about the relationship between the Christian religion and the sovereign European nation). In light of all this, my question for Scruton is whether the nation, or a conservatism worthy of the name, can survive without some kind of self-conscious renewal of the Christian proposition.

This may seem far-fetched in an aggressively secular Britain, but as Manent has repeatedly emphasized, it is not too late to take a chance on “the old religion” and “the old nations.” Sometimes Scruton’s conservatism is excessively elegiac, emphasizing (rightly) “that good things are more easily destroyed than created.” But if we have the requisite faith in the powers of the human soul and the endurance of human nature, then a renewal of practical reason and the cardinal virtues ought to be possible even in our late modern dispensation. The Gospel story will speak with ever greater conviction to those confronted by the abyss of meaninglessness.

Roger Scruton clearly has not given up completely on the possibility of such a civilizational renewal or he would not write such a worthy and evocative book. Torn between lament and hope for a revitalized nation, recognizing the limits of both religious extremism and radical secularism, he points the way beyond the culture of repudiation.

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