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The Manifesto of National Conservatism

By MICHAEL WAGNER

Recently, a new variant of political conservatism has emerged in North America known as “national conservatism.” In 2019 an organization called the Edmund Burke Foundation was created to promote this perspective. Since that time, it has been hosting regular National Conservative conferences.

The chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation is Yoram Hazony, an Israeli-American philosopher and political theorist. This year (2022) Hazony released a book providing his comprehensive explanation of national conservatism entitled, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (published by Regnery Gateway).

ANGLO-AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE HISTORY

Hazony traces national conservatism back to 15th century England and the writings of Sir John Fortescue, whose books *In Praise of the Laws of England* and *The Governance of England* encouraged English nationalism and argued in favour of limited government.

But the most important figure in the history of Anglo-American conservatism, according to Hazony, is John Selden. Selden was an influential lawyer and prominent leader in the English Parliament during the mid-17th century. He played a key role in the defence of historic English liberties against King Charles I.

An 18th-century British parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, was also an influential exponent of early Anglo-American national conservatism.

After looking at the British roots of his perspective, Hazony discusses American national conservatives who he identifies with the Federalist Party in the early years of the American republic. Most prominent among this group was George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay.

The main opponents of American national conservatism at that time were Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine. Paine even wrote a book entitled *Rights of Man* to refute Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

The point of this history is to establish that the national conservative principles advocated by Hazony have a clear historical lineage, both in Britain and the United States.

ENLIGHTENMENT LIBERALISM

The Anglo-American democracies were relatively conservative societies before World War Two. Most people identified with Christianity (to one degree or another) and traditional Christian sexual morality was the norm. Indeed, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that war to be a conflict between “God-fearing democracies” and their enemies.

However, the Christian dominance dissolved in the aftermath of the war. The Nazis demonstrated that extreme nationalism could lead to unspeakable persecution of minority ethnic groups and religions. Thus, the Anglo-American countries embraced what Hazony calls “Enlightenment liberalism” after the war as a bulwark to uproot any sort of ethnic or religious tendencies that could put their countries on

a path towards Naziism.

As he explains it, “The intense revulsion against the use of racial and religious categories by the Nazis and their allies was the force that brought large majorities on the U.S. Supreme Court and in Congress to embrace Enlightenment liberalism as the sole legitimate foundation for American government” (p. 269).

On the good side, this led to the civil rights movement in the United States that overturned racist laws and policies that reduced African-Americans to second-class citizens.

However, the influence of Enlightenment liberalism also led to aggressive social, legal, and political attacks against the traditional family and conservative religious institutions and practices.

U.S. SUPREME COURT DECISIONS

Central to these attacks were decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. For example, the 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* decision introduced the idea of a “wall of separation” between church and state. This meant that the Supreme Court had adopted a new way of understanding the relationship between Christianity and government that would have significant consequences.



Michael Wagner lives in Alberta.

In line with its new understanding, the Supreme Court's *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) decisions "overturned centuries of common practice by abolishing organized prayer and Bible reading in public schools across the country. Immediately thereafter, another series of Supreme Court decisions paved the way for the legalization of pornography by overturning traditional Christian standards of public decency" (p. 266).

As Hazony explains, "These and other Supreme Court decisions signaled the end of Christianity as a decisive and legitimate influence on public life in America" (p. 267).

CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRACY

Hazony argues that the best way forward entails adopting an alternative political framework that he calls "conservative democracy" in place of our current so-called "liberal democracy."

Importantly, he recognizes that there is no such thing as a "neutral" government. Contrary to secular liberal thinking, there is always some sort of philosophy or worldview that informs law-making by the government. If it's not a Christian worldview, it will be a non-Christian worldview.

As Hazony explains, "a national government cannot, in fact, be neutral regarding the overarching framework that upholds the political life of the people. We know, too, that every government will uphold traditional religions such as Christianity and Judaism, or else it will substitute for them an atheistic framework such as Marxism or Enlightenment liberalism" (p. 253).

CHRISTIANITY AS THE BASIS FOR PUBLIC LIFE

This is where it really gets interesting. Hazony proposes that Christianity be restored to its place of influence in government and society: "Conservative democracy regards biblical religion as the only firm foundation for national independence, justice, and public morals in Western nations. In America and other traditionally Christian countries, Christianity should be the basis for public life and strongly reflected in government and other institutions, wherever a majority of the public so desires. Provision should be made for Jews and other minorities to ensure that their particular traditions and way of

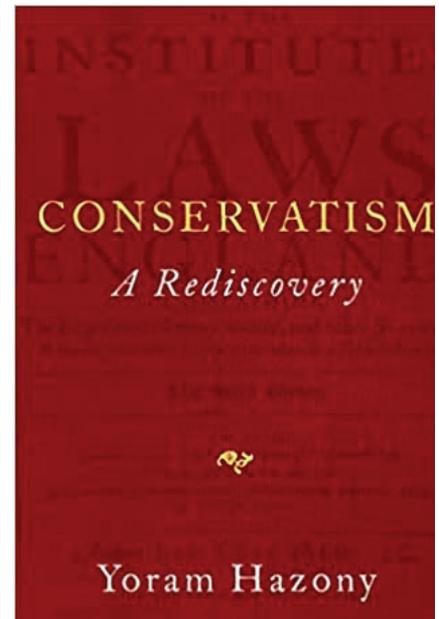
life are not encumbered" (p. 341).

Since there must be a worldview foundation to every political system, Christianity can best be that system again in the U.S. and other Western countries. Canada and the United States never had established churches. However, their political and legal systems were built upon a generally Christian worldview that was inherited from Britain, the "mother country," which was officially Christian and had an established church.

Secular liberalism is the source of many current problems, and a restoration of the Christian worldview as the normative framework and standard for public life would lead to a vast improvement. In Hazony's view, "The key to such a restoration would be overturning the postwar Supreme Court decisions that imposed the principle of 'separation of church and state' in America. More than anything else, these sweeping decisions delegitimized Christianity as the basis for public life in America and other Western countries, and initiated the ongoing cultural revolution with which we are familiar" (pp. 345-346).

Immediately upon reading this, some people may fear that conservative democracy will lead to the persecution of minorities. But this is not the case. Conservative democracy is not about that at all. Indeed, as Hazony writes, "In my proposal, the restoration of Christianity as the normative framework and standard determining public life in any particular locale should include provision for Jews and other minorities to ensure that their traditions and way of life are not encumbered; and that the private life of dissenting individuals or communities should be protected within their own sphere" (p. 346).

There must be a worldview basis to every society, so it should be the true worldview, namely, Chris-



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tianity. Hazony is clear that this does not mean minorities will lose their rights.

CONCLUSION

Yoram Hazony's *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* is an important contribution to modern political thought. Most significantly, he recognizes that there is always a philosophical or worldview basis to any society, and as a result, government is never neutral. Too few people understand this very important point.

Despite being an Orthodox Jew himself, Hazony proposes that Western countries that were formerly based upon Christian foundations need to have those foundations restored. Among the undoubted consequences would be the criminalization of abortion and the restoration of traditional sexual morality. Parental rights in education would be much more secure, and other benefits would result as well.

It's not like any of this is going to happen soon. But Hazony's account is very helpful in explaining how Anglo-American conservatism developed, how it was lost, and how it could potentially be restored. ♦



Just Having Fun

By NORM BOMER

In Canada, “quality control” is a biggie in reference to weeds. Oh, excuse me. I mean “weed.” In fact, it's so “biggie” that it's the only legal requirement for selling or smoking weed (AKA: marijuana; dope) in Canada.

The Canadian government legalized recreational weed with the passage of the federal Cannabis Act in 2018. There are now more than 3500 licensed marijuana stores across the country, the highest number per-capita being in Alberta, my former home (761 weed stores). I couldn't find even one when I lived there in the early 70s.

Legal use of recreational marijuana in the United States isn't quite as widespread. It's currently legal in 22 of the 50 states – and in the District of Columbia. And this past October, President Biden issued an executive order cancelling all federal convictions for marijuana possession.

Proponents of legal marijuana argue that it allows police to spend more time fighting serious crime. Law enforcement officials, however, don't necessarily agree. They point out that legal possession of marijuana makes it too easy for drug dealers to push the stuff – to the detriment of society. Others say it gives youth the idea that it's okay to take drugs.

So, since possession of marijuana is against federal law, how are so many American states able to be artful dodgers?

“The will of the people” is one of America's most honored ideals. Students are often taught that it is the cornerstone of freedom. It is what sets America apart from dictatorships. There is some truth to that. It's wonderful to have the freedom to go where you choose, do what you choose, say what you choose, and pick your own friends.

