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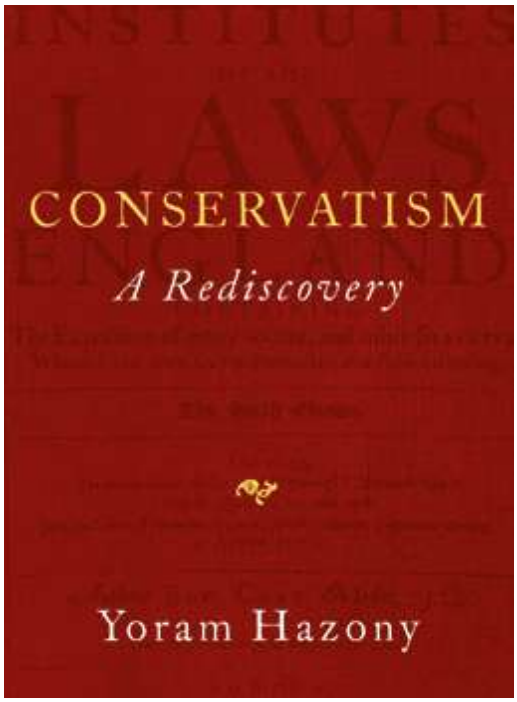
An Ancient Wisdom

Not many recent books on conservatism provide a complex and structured analysis of conservative thought, its development through the centuries, and the roots of its disagreements with liberalism and Marxism. Yoram Hazony's *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* is among their number. It offers deep historical and philosophical context, allowing its conservative readers to sort out their beliefs and everyone else to form an understanding of the principles behind the right-wing slogans they encounter. An accomplished political theorist and author of several books on political philosophy, nationalism, and Judaism, Yoram Hazony demonstrates extensive knowledge of the subject. His book serves as a fine guide to Anglo-American conservatism.

The narrative flows logically through the book's four parts. The first part sets the scene, mentioning the key British and American philosophers and explaining the history of conservatism and the circumstances of its development—one could compare it to a brief version of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. Notably, the chapter on the U.S. is about twice as long as the chapter on Britain and is focused on the struggle between George Washington's Federalists and Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Republicans, rather than the ideas and writings of the Founding Fathers. The second part concerns philosophy, laying out the basic tenets of conservative thought and diving into the theory of the purpose of government. The third part applies those tenets to the modern world, analysing the forced union—or the 'fusion'—brought about by urgent circumstances, between conservatives and the classical liberals during the Cold War. Finally, the fourth part provides insights into Hazony's personal experience and understanding of a conservative life.

From the very beginning, Hazony demonstrates to his readers the important difference between the conservative and liberal worldviews. The latter believes in universal human reason and the natural equality of individuals, viewing them as almost theoretical entities separate from the society that produced them. The former is based on empiricism, recognising that each culture forms a system of values according to its historical experience, passing it from one generation to the next in the form of traditions. This idea is well summarised by an extract from Burke's 1782 parliamentary speech quoted in the first chapter of Hazony's book:



> A nation is not only an idea of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation, but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space. And this is a choice not of one day, or of one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice. It is a deliberate election of ages and of generations. It is a constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice: It is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time.

This may sound close enough to condoning moral relativism, but Hazony never crosses that line.

EDITORIAL NOTE: This is the first of three reviews of Yoram Hazony's 2022 book, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (published by Regnery Gateway), commissioned for this edition from writers in three different regions of the world. It marks our second print symposium on an important new work of conservative scholarship.

In typical Burkean fashion, he avoids such a conclusion by building his philosophy around religion; Christianity and Judaism are mentioned interchangeably throughout the book due to their similarities and their roles in Western societies. God, in his opinion, is the only source of morality and reason—the classic argument of 'if there is no God, then everything is permissible'—as the unaided human mind, drawing only on its own resources, is much too imperfect to grasp the complexity of existence. Therefore, laws and traditions have been developed over the centuries according to divine will.

Given that, Hazony vehemently opposes the separation between church and state. "Indeed," he writes, "one of the chief reasons for the dissolution that is visible everywhere in the Western nations today is the fact that principles such as the public acknowledgment of God, the honour given to parents by their adult children, loyalty within marriage, and observance of the sabbath have been banished from public life and relegated to 'the private sphere.'" The concept of honour is crucial for Hazony's worldview; he understands it primarily as treating something or someone as important and valuable. Honour cements hierarchy, which is necessary for a functioning society.

The book deserves particular praise for putting forward a set of interconnected conservative paradigms and discussing each in detail. Men are not born equal; instead, they are born into families that form tribes and tribes that form nations. Their status within these depends on how honoured they are by those around them; thus, they constantly compete with each other. However, mutual loyalty causes them to unite in the hour of need, as it means more to them than their differences; their obligations result, then, from inherent loyalties rather than choice. Families, tribes, and nations seek to strengthen themselves through shared traditions, beliefs, laws, languages, economic activities, and other means necessary, also competing for a place under the sun. Most of the above seems self-evident to any person familiar with history, but the liberal mindset all too often ignores them in favour of a universalist commitment to 'liberating' the individual from everything that joins him to a larger whole.

Hazony persuasively argues that liberalism gained momentum due to the trauma caused to the West by the Second World War. Indeed, we do not seem to be able to overcome it. Accusations of Nazism begin to fly between both sides at the first sign of trouble, and any even remotely authoritarian leader invites comparison to Hitler, an embodiment of all dictators past and present. However tired, this particular cliché refuses to die. The book points out that such a profound impression caused a paradigm shift toward universalism, with its equality and human rights. But liberalism was not an undisputed leader; Marxism was another contender for people's hearts and minds, and in the form of the Soviet Union, the threat was dangerous enough to push liberals and conservatives into a 'fusionist' alliance that produced Thatcher and Reagan.

Eventually, communism fell, but when the dust settled, it turned out that conservatives were pushed out of power; now, only three decades later, liberals find themselves in a similar position. But, Hazony argues, all is not lost, and there is still hope for a conservative democracy based on historical empiricism, nationalism, religion, limited executive power, and individual freedoms. "[T]here are also countries and regions, cities and towns—both in America and in Europe—where the framework of conservative democracy can be adopted and implemented," Hazony writes, adding: "Conservatives must focus on what is possible in these conservative locales."

The last part of the book is dedicated to outlining, on the basis of Hazony's own personal experiences, what it means to live a conservative life. He believes that change begins in the family and that everyone who wishes the old ways to be restored must begin at home. There is truth to this statement, but he is rather uncompromising with regard to the exact meaning of it.

Overall, the book is worth a read. It offers a systematic approach to conservative paradigms and principles, an explanation of the liberal takeover, a path to restoration, and a few curious anecdotes. It is well-written in terms of clarity and consistency, but also contains several potentially damaging blind spots. Most of them are caused by reliance on religion alone to substantiate essential points. While this line of reasoning is natural and efficient for a person of faith, it will not convince a non-believer, who will view its presuppositions as false at the very outset. Two additional minor flaws are the occasional repetitiveness of the book and the forcefulness of the author—a devotee who may come across as pontificating. If Burke's texts are an elegant rapier, Hazony's are more akin to a poleaxe. Yet this is probably what the modern world needs: a straightforward, unapologetic, passionate argument for conservatism. ■

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