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Between Traditionalists and Libertarians: The Fusionism of Frank S. Meyer

Red Beginnings

Frank Strauss Meyer was born into a wealthy, Reformed Jewish household on 9 May 1909. Although little is known about his early years, Meyer suffered from chronic illness and spent much of his time confined to the indoors. Restricted as he was by his parents and his illnesses, Meyer found solace in intellectual pursuits and read voraciously. As a teenager, Meyer developed an interest in history and politics and apparently saw himself as a progressive; later in his life, Meyer admitted to hanging a poster of Woodrow Wilson on his bedroom door.[1]

Meyer attended private school at Newark Academy and through hard work, gained admission to Princeton University at the age of seventeen. Although intellectually precocious, continued to be dogged by sickness and left Princeton University permanently in 1928. Meyer's parents, unsure of their son's future, kept him at home to recover, but eventually decided in the summer of 1930 to send him to England to further his education, particularly in the disciplines in which he showed most interest: the classics, English literature, and economics.[2]

But the progressive, economically vibrant and hopeful decade of the 1920's gave way to the Great Depression of the 1930s. World War I had transformed many nationalist, idealistic young people into mature skeptics and political activists. They sought to remake the world according to one or another ideology that would prevent another slaughter on a global scale. The most severe economic downturn in the history of the West prepared the way, however, for a global conflict that would dwarf World War I in bloodletting.

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[1] "Frank S. Meyer: RIP" *NR* 24 (April 28,1972):471; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 3.
[2] Ibid; George Nash, *The conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945,* 87-88.

The Great Depression affected the young, impressionable Meyer by taking a toll on family fortunes. His father's business declined rapidly; his father, Jack Meyer, died in 1930. Despite the turmoil at home and in the world around him, Meyer enrolled at Oxford University's Balliol College as planned. While at Oxford, Meyer was exposed to and became fascinated with Marxism. It offered an explanation for the current crisis as well as a way out. He warmed to the idea of class warfare to bring about social justice. Thus, he joined the British Communist Party in 1931. For Meyer, Marxism was more than just a philosophy, it offered a moral vision of the world run by the working class in which each person would contribute to society according to his ability and be rewarded according to his needs. [3]

Meyer's influence and involvement in the Communist Party increased as his schoolwork progressed. He managed to earn his B.A from Balliol College in 1932 while simultaneously leading a small Communist Party group at Oxford known as the "October Club." He quickly acquired a reputation as a fiery and charismatic Communist activist. Upon graduation from Oxford, and at the request of Communist leadership, Meyer enrolled in the London School of Economics. While there, however, his focus moved away from his studies as he spent increasingly more time and resources working for the Soviet-backed British Communist Party.. In 1933, Meyer was elected by his peers as president of the student union at the London School as an avowed communist. After attempting to distribute Communist Party material on campus, even though specifically prohibited from doing so by the school's administration, Meyer was kicked out of school. Before being forced to leave the country, no longer having a student visa, Meyer led groups of Communist Party student delegations to antifascist and anti-war youth conferences around Europe. He then attempted to organize the London proletariat, looking to the

[3] Peter Witonski, "The Political Philosopher," *National Review* 24 (april 28,1972): 467-468; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 3.

London Busmen's Organization and the Railway Workers' Union for support. His tireless efforts paid off in 1934 when Meyer was officially invited to join the upper echelon on the Communist Party as a member of the British Communist Party's Central Committee. Soon thereafter, however, the Communist Party ordered Meyer to return to America to use his organizational skills and leadership to help strengthen the American Communist Party. [4]

In 1934, Meyer found himself in the United States and Canada instructing groups of young Communist supporters until finally, in 1935, he was assigned to Chicago, Illinois where he enrolled as a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago. There, he continued to work with local branches of the young Communist League and the American League Against War and Fascism. Meyer proved again to be an impressive organizer for the Communist Party and quickly rose to the position of "educational director" in the Chicago Communist Party. By 1938, Meyer was the head of educational activities for the Illinois-Indiana district and became the director of the Chicago Workers' School, a known Communist Party training and education facility. [5]

In the early 1940's, as Meyer continued to rise quickly in the ranks of the Chicago Communist Party, he met a young woman and fellow party member, Elsie Brown. Recently divorced and becoming more involved in the Chicago Communist organization, Meyer met Brown during a class that he taught at the Workers' School. After several months of seeing each other to discuss and debate Marxist theory, they married. Elsie Brown became Elsie Meyer. Meyer's involvement with Elsie coincided with the beginning of WWII. Initially, Meyer saw the war as an opportunity to fight with the US against fascism. Although his desire to enlist met

[4] Peter Witonski, "The Political Philosopher," *National Review* 24 (april 28,1972): 467-468; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 5-6; "Frank S. Meyer: RIP" *NR* 24 (April 28,1972):471 .

[5] Peter Witonski, "The Political Philosopher," *National Review* 24 (april 28,1972): 467-468; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 8-10

significant opposition from the Communist Party because of the valuable work he continued to provide it, Meyer was allowed to leave the party. In October 1942, he entered Officer's Training School as a volunteer officer candidate with the intention of returning to the Communist Party upon the completion of his service.[6]

Yet, no sooner had Meyer entered the service then he was discharged. He had severe problems with his feet, and as such could not complete basic training, a prerequisite for all active members of the military. During his training and his attempts to overcome the problems with his feet, Meyer spent much of his time in the library where he began his intellectual odyssey away from Marxism. While confined to the military barracks, Meyer became especially enthralled with American history; The *Federalist,* especially, led to Meyer's new understanding and appreciation for the American system of limited government and separation of powers. After being discharged Meyer underwent foot surgery which left him largely immobilized for over a year. This physical setback would prove to be a transformative period for Meyer. Largely incapacitated, he had time to reflect on America's heritage and continue to think about his involvement with the Communist Party.[7]

In late 1943, Meyer wrote a letter to Earl Browder, then the leader of the American Communist Party, in which he stressed the need for Communism in America to adapt to American heritage. Over the next few years, Meyer continued to work for the Communist Party, all the while struggling to accept the rigid commands of its Soviet overlords. His thinking of adapting Communism with American characters actually made him less wedded to Communism. In the summer of 1945, Meyer attended a meeting led by a Stalinist ideologist, Jacob Stachel, who condemned American "exceptionalism" outright. In disagreement, Meyer spoke out against

[6] Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 11
[7] Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 13-14

the Communist's current course of action that was leading inevitably to war between the United States and the Soviet Union. This disagreement continued to divide Meyer from his comrades, until 1945 when Meyer officially split from the Communist Party. [8]

From Communism to Libertarianism

Following his gradual split with Communism, the organization that had defined him for well over a decade, Meyer found himself with a wife, relatively isolated in a secluded home in Woodstock, New York. His break with the party caused him to fear for his life. His family ties had unraveled over the years because of his incompatible Communist sympathies and rejection of his Jewish faith. Those friends he had made at school in Europe and while in Chicago working for the Communist Party were now hostile towards him as a traitor to the cause. At this point in his life, Meyer was in limbo, both physically and intellectually. He had been on the move for his entire life working for an organization that now wanted him dead. In an effort to examine his past life and look towards the future, Meyer settled down with Elsie in their Woodstock home. During this period, the Meyers had two sons, John and Eugene. With two extra mouths to feed and no real job to speak of, however, Meyer needed a job. Elsie managed to bring in small sums selling home-grown vegetables. A family inheritance— $600 dollars a month from a family owned apartment in Newark —supplemented her efforts. Once he left the party, nearly everything changed for the Meyers. Life in Woodstock for Frank began a long period of reading and thinking. [9]

Two books stand out in reshaping Meyer's politics and worldview: Friedrich Hayek's

[8] "Frank S. Meyer: RIP" *NR* 24 (April 28,1972):475; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 18.
[9]George Nash, *The conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945,* 60; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 21-26.

The Road to Serfdom (1944) and Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948). *Road to Serfdom*, a fundamental challenge to the Keynesian economics that dominated the academy, offered a fundamental critique of collectivism in its various forms: Fascism, Communism, and welfare-state capitalism. At a time when Communists charged Fascism with being a variety of capitalism, Hayek, an Austrian refugee, brilliant in multiple fields, demonstrated the similarities between Communism and fascism. State planning, Hayek argued, not only led to gross market distortions and inefficiencies, it concentrated power in a way that threatened individual freedom and encouraged totalitarianism. Hayek's book demolished the stereotype that defenders of the free market were exploiters of the working-class. The free market led to countless acts of mutually beneficial exchanges that sustained economic growth to the benefit of everyone in the society. Thanks in large measure to Hayek, libertarianism and capitalism had become "intellectually defensible again, and Meyer clung to it." Though Meyer could hardly be called a conservative at this point, Hayek's forceful argument forced Meyer to think of the importance of human freedom. At bottom, socialistic redistributions of material wealth must involve coercion, and coercion, as would later become a key component of Meyer's political theory, was incompatible with a free society as well as a virtuous society**.** Only competition, Hayek argued, could produce a rational and stable economic system, and avoid the utopian promises and mass terror of Fascism and Soviet communism.[10]

Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* examined another issue that would become central to Meyer's thinking, the rise of relativist thought and the erosion of standards of morality and truth inherent in it. Hayek's analysis helped to solidify Meyer's new-found realization that communism, and other such totalitarian ideologies, must necessarily lead to planning; the result

[10] George Nash, *The conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945,* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2008), 48; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 21.

of state planning now embedded in Meyers' mind was coercion and unavoidable infringement of individual rights. Hayek's synthesis came at "a crucial moment" in his life and "played a decisive part in helping [him] free [himself] from Marxist ideology." With the combination of Hayek's insight and time to think while cloistered in his secluded, woodland home, Meyer began to form his own political philosophy and entered new, important friendships that would span the remainder of his life.[11]

By 1950, Meyer had reversed his hitherto unwillingness to testify against known communists that he had worked with for years. With the aggressive expansion of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, and the apparent aim of the Soviets to continue their dominance until world communism had been achieved, Meyer increasingly supported the anticommunist policies of the Truman administration. This political shift towards Truman was emblematic of his continuing intellectual struggle, and led to Meyer's involvement in a new circle of friends, many of whom were dubbed the "new conservatives " They included Ralph de Toledano, Whittaker Chambers, Russell Kirk, and Richard Weaver. With the help of his new contacts, Meyer began writing occasionally for two libertarian journals, the *Freeman* and *American Mercury***.** His involvement in these publications was the first of many signs that Meyer was had broken decisively with the left and had moved sharply right. Having been a Communist leader and organizer, he could speak with force about what he had learned in the belly of the beast. The right in the United States at this time consisted of a number of disparate, loosely organized groups. Meyer would embrace the libertarian strain of right-of-center thinking. Anti-Communism would eventually bring various right-of-center groups into a coalition. As the gifted impresario William F. Buckley began turning disparate groups into a conservative

[11] Frank Meyer, "Champion of Freedom," *NR* 8 (May 7,1960): 304-305.

movement. Meyer in 1955, the year of *National Review's* creation, stood well-positioned to aid Buckley in his work.[12]

Frank S. Meyer and *National Review*

While Meyer was establishing himself as a valuable writer for *Freeman* and *American Mercury*, William F. Buckley Jr. was in the process of founding a new conservative intellectual magazine. In November 1955, the first issue was published with Frank Meyer on the masthead listed as an "associate and contributor." Although he was involved with the *National Review* from the beginning, his presence grew steadily over the years. [13]

Initially, Meyer served as a somewhat detached contributor to the journal, exposing the liberal slant of scholarly journals and publishing regular book reviews. Meyer was content to have a regular paycheck from the *Review* while continuing to read, write, and extend his continually growing list of conservative friends from his home in Woodstock. Meyer's presence and importance grew in 1956 when he published his first "Principles and Heresies" column, a recurring feature of the magazine. "Principles and Heresies" discussed principles, ideas, and philosophies relevant to the issues of the day that would become Meyer's hallmark achievement. Following the credo set forth by Buckley in 1955, Meyer used his column to address the fundamental issues of post- New Deal America; communism, philosophical relativism, the increasing role of the Leviathan state, and political realities of conservative election.

[12] Frank Meyer "Collectivism Rebaptized," *Freeman* 5 (July 1955): 559-561; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 29-31.
[13] William F. Buckley Jr. "Our Mission Statement" *NR* 1 (November 19 1955): 4; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 36.

Fusionism

From the beginning, the modern conservative movement in the United States represented no unified or homogenous ideology, but rather a coalition of groups largely united under the banner of anti-Communism. From the beginning, Buckley's *National Review* represented principled differences between the views of various self-proclaimed conservative intellectuals: James Burnham, Russell Kirk, L. Brent Bozell, Willmoore Kendall, among them. At this time, two major strands of thinking predominated on the right: libertarian and traditionalist. In the early 1960's, Frank Meyer sought to expand upon his earlier writings and show that traditionalist and libertarian strains of conservatism were not just able to coexist with one another – they were "complementary interdependent." In his struggle to unite conservatives, Meyer devoted many of his columns in *National Review* to laying the groundwork for fusionism.

First, it is important to note why, other than for his own amusement, Meyer took the trouble to formulate his theory and then to painstakingly explain it, and defend it against his opponents. Fundamental to Meyer's thought, indeed, the reason he worked relentlessly to formulate his philosophy, was to "vindicate the freedom of the person as the central and primary end of *political* society.[14] However, this vindication is only necessary in light of the state of affairs facing America in the 1950's and 1960's. Meyer's emphasis on freedom is an attempt to explain, and perhaps curb, the overwhelming presence of Liberalism, and why twentieth-century liberalism had little in common with its nineteenth-century namesake. Whereas a nineteenth-century liberal had extolled the free-market and individual liberty, the twentieth-century liberal had embraced statism, the redistribution of wealth, and moral relativism. Meyer charged that New Deal Democrats had betrayed the values and principles of the founding.[15]

[14] The stress here on political will become apparent later in this discussion
[15] Frank Meyer "In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo" (Chicago, 1962): 2-3.

Frank Meyer saw in the nineteenth-century a conflict which in many ways resembled the conservative factions of the mid-twentieth-century. Through examining the past, Meyer hoped to shed light on the present situation. Nineteenth-century liberalism was once the proponent and defender of freedom, but because of a fatal flaw in its philosophical underpinnings based in utilitarianism, it "denied the validity of moral ends firmly based on the constitution of being." Utilitarians like Fascists and Communists rejected natural law and the very idea of a transcendent moral order that provided guiding principle through our nature. In other words, though nineteenth-century liberalism rightly defended the freedom of the individual, its faulty philosophical basis denied an ultimate sanction for a virtuous person and in so doing, it "destroyed the very foundations of its defense of the person as primary in political and social matters." The counterpart of nineteenth-century liberalism is nineteenth-century conservatism whose followers stood in opposition to the liberal defenders of freedom, choosing instead to uphold "the objective existence of values based upon the unchanging constitution of being as the criterion for moral thought and action." By nineteenth-century conservative, Meyer had something like the British Tory Party in mind, with its sharpened sense of noblesse oblige. The conservatives rightly defended against utilitarianism, relativism, and scientism, but their philosophy too was faulty, said Meyer, because it failed to understand the nature of man. Belief in an objective, transcendent moral order "must be voluntary if it is to have meaning; if it coerced by human force, it is meaningless."[16]

Meyer used the term "New Conservatism" to refer to modern-day liberals whose legacy is derived mainly from nineteenth-century conservatism.[17] New Conservatives, according to Meyer, are "characterized by an organic view of society, by the subordination of the individual

[16] Ibid.
[17] New Conservatism is modern-day Liberalism

person to society, and, therefore, by a denial that the freedom of the person is the decisive criterion of a good polity." Meyer's argument is that since the time of the founding, as evidenced by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, America has stood for a simultaneous belief in "objectively existing moral value *and* in the freedom of the individual person." New Conservatism exists as an antiquated form of conservatism whose collectivist, relativist, and scientistic tendencies stands in opposition to America's founding documents. The conservatism that Meyer espouses and that he believes is "an accurate representation of…the widespread and developing American conservative movement," is a fusion of nineteenth-century liberalism and conservatism, which are, by themselves, flawed, but when synthesized, form a coherent and sound philosophy.[18]

Meyer premises his fusionist philosophy on several important assumptions. For Meyer, innate freedom is the essence of man's being. To understand man, Meyer argues, one must understand the differentiation between the political and the moral realms, and the "use of reason operating within tradition." Tradition contains time tested deposits of wisdom that guide human being to what is the good life in ever changing circumstances. Reason operating within tradition encourages prudence, the mediation of the abstract with the historical and experiential. Virtue and freedom, for Meyer, complement each other. People cannot be coerced into doing the good and the just; to attain the "ought" requires freedom to choose. Meyer contends that the political realm exists only to perform three limited functions: national defense, preservation of domestic order, and the administration of justice between man and man. Outside of the political realm exists the *moral* realm in which virtue is the end of man; "freedom is only a means whereby men can pursue their proper end, which is virtue." Indeed, Meyer regarded moral and spiritual virtues as "demonstrably the true end of man." Therefore, if freedom is elevated to an end in the moral

[18] Frank Meyer "In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo" (Chicago, 1962): 2-3.

realm "without the acceptance of an absolute ground of value (transcendent moral order), the preeminence of the person as criterion of political thought and action has no philosophical foundation." In other words, without values freedom is anarchic. If freedom is viewed as an end in and of itself, then the freedom of the person in the political sphere would be only a meaningless excitation and could never become a serious goal. In other words, liberty becomes licentiousness. [19]

From this perspective, Meyer emphasized the quintessence of Man's being as individual rather than social and attacked the claims of Liberals, "new conservatives," who assume the existence of the organ 'society' as the being to which, and to the good of which, all moral (and political) problems finally refer." In contradistinction to the prevailing conservative opinion of the day, which Meyer was attempting to synthesize, New Conservatives "insist upon the differentiated virtue of tradition, not merely as a guide and governor of reason, but over against reason." Traditionalists saw unbridled Reason as producing heaven-on-earth schemes that ended up as totalitarian nightmares. New Conservatives disparaged the individual and his reason in the name of the state or society.[20] Meyer drew a sharp distinction between state and society. In essence, Meyer argued that "society and the state were made for individual men, not men for them." Meyer advocated freedom as an end in the political sphere, but freedom as a means to virtue in the social sphere. In this view, he separated himself from radical libertarians who looked to Meyer like anarchists. Virtue was not a *political* question; it was "none of the State's business." But Meyer laid great emphasis on the best of Western, Christian culture in providing moral restraint in the social sphere. "Unless men are free to be vicious they cannot be virtuous. No community can make them virtuous." That being said, establishing virtue as the end of man's

[19] Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* 4 (Fall 1960): 355-363; Frank Meyer "In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo" (Chicago, 1962): 11.
[20] New Conservatives refer to modern-day traditionalists

being "implicitly recognizes the necessity of freedom to choose that end; otherwise, virtue would be no more than a conditioned tropism." Freedom – uncoerced choice – was an absolutely necessary condition of the pursuit of virtue. To recognize that there is a need to distinguish between traditions, to choose between good and evil, requires recognition of the use of reason as the ability to distinguish among the possibilities which have "been open to men since the serpent tempted Eve." One must have the freedom to choose right from wrong, good from evil, in order to be truly virtuous; a person who is forced by the state or society to be virtuous cannot truly be virtuous because his actions were not freely chosen." For Meyer, freedom was "recalcitrant," it is the condition of virtue, but it is also the condition of vice. [21]

Each extreme, an exclusive dependence on either freedom or virtue, is self-defeating. "Truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and free individualism uniformed by moral value rots and soon paves the way for surrender to tyranny." The history of the West "has been a history of reason operating within tradition," and as such, modern conservatives must embrace this tradition and seek to conserve it. As history has shown and as the tension between Liberals and conservatives epitomizes, reason operating within tradition is a "tenuous" circumstance, but out of that tension, the "glory of the West has been created." Conservatism without reason leads to "uncritical acceptance, uncomplicated reverence" of tradition, but reason functioning without tradition can, as history has shown us, give birth to "an arid and distorting ideology."[22]

Thus, what Meyer terms the "Conscious Conservative," is that conservative who accepts reason, history, and experience in tension with each other. Key in the thinking of the Conscious Conservative must be prudence. "Only the exercise of prudence," Meyer insisted, "can bridge the

[21] Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* 4 (Fall 1960): 355-363.
[22] Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* 4 (Fall 1960): 355-363; Frank Meyer "In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo" (Chicago, 1962): 5-9.

gap between the absolute claims of metaphysical values and the contradictory demands to which they give rise in the concrete world in which we live." Prudence limits the irresponsibility of "untrammeled" tradition, and allows the Conscious Conservative to view their heritage critically, using the lessons of history to distinguish right from wrong. One must use prudence in deciding the heritage to conserve, because not all heritages are worth preserving, as reason can tell us. In Meyer's words, "we cannot simply revere; we cannot uncritically follow tradition, for the tradition now being presented is "the tradition of a positivism scornful of truth and virtue, the tradition of the collective, the tradition of the untrammeled state" and should be deemed unworthy of conservation.[23]

Similarly, the Conscious Conservative must use prudence to reject "untrammeled" reason, which, in its disregard of tradition, tends to embrace utopian constructions. While reason is necessary for an understanding of virtue and value, the Conscious Conservative must use the lesson of the nineteenth-century liberal which shows us that reason without tradition is "far too ready to subordinate the individual person to the authority of the state and society." The only possible basis of respect for the overriding value of the individual person is belief in an organic moral order. Without such a belief, "no doctrine of economic and political liberty can stand." In essence, there is wisdom embodied in the millennia of tradition of the West and to ignore that tradition will lead first to the coercion of virtue by the state, and finally to anarchy and tyranny. Freedom unmediated by tradition leads to a state in which men "forget that they are fully men only to the degree that they are free to choose their own destiny."[24]

Using reason operating within tradition, the Conscious Conservative takes from his heritage those aspects which, mediated by prudence, are best suited to provide him with a means

[23] Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* 4 (Fall 1960): 355-363.
[24] Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* 4 (Fall 1960): 355-363; Frank Meyer "In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo" (Chicago, 1962): 14-20.

to a virtuous end. In a nutshell, prudence means doing the right thing by applying principles derived from transcendent truths to a given set of circumstances. Prudence is the key, because Reason must be tempered by history and experience.. In its acceptance and "fusion" of nineteenth-century conservatism and nineteenth-century liberalism, Meyer argued that "conservatism has no monolithic party line;" it is not ideological in nature. [OK, but you must then explain how Meyer understood ideology so that conservatism does not qualify as ideology]. "While truth and virtue are metaphysical and moral ends, the freedom to seek them is the political condition of those ends – and a social structure which keeps power divided is the indispensible means to this political end."[25]

Fusionism Applied

It is instructive in the understanding of Meyer's fusionism to see how, after his philosophy had been published and reviewed, it withstood the criticism of his peers, and applied at the time of its formulation. One such criticism came from the so-called "sage of Mecosta," Russell Kirk, a prominent traditionalist and fellow writer for the *National Review*. The debate centered on John Stuart Mill, an icon for libertarians, a bogeyman for traditionalists. In 1956, Russell Kirk savaged Mill's philosophy in *National Review* in an article "*On Liberty,* Reconsidered." The topic of discussion was John Stuart Mill, the great defender of individual liberty. Kirk argued that conservatives overrated Mill's work; the utilitarian premise of Mill's philosophy was insufficiently historical, too abstract, too oversimplified, too optimistic about human nature and concerns over the use of utility rather than truth to establish morality in

[25] Frank S. Meyer, "Freedom, Tradition, Conservatism," *Modern Age* 4 (Fall 1960): 355-363

society.[26] In attacking Mill, Kirk elevated Burke; in attacking Mill, Kirk criticized modern libertarians.

Meyer used this opportunity to defend his own position against the traditionalists. In the very next issue of *NR*, Meyer published "In Defense of John Stuart Mill." In this article Meyer lays the blueprints for what would become his "fusionist" philosophy. He began by reminding his readers that while it was important for the right to band together in their principled battle against the Liberal Establishment in the first place, conservatives "have tended to gloss over differences, clarification of which can only strengthen our common purpose and enrich the tradition for which we stand." Thus, to avoid becoming complacent in their unification against Liberals, Meyer attempted to clear up those differences. Despite the title of the article, Meyer admitted that there were "confusion and errors in his [Mill's] philosophical position." What Meyer focuses on, however, are those "qualities from which we have the most to learn…and which we must cherish against the blank conformity of our day." While his mode of arriving at his conclusions may have been flawed, Mill's defense of liberty against "the collective instruments of state and society…state centralism" was a vindication of "the first principle of morality that no man can act morally unless he is free to choose good from evil." For Meyer, freedom is "no more nor less than the possibility and responsibility to choose" and is part of the essence of the being of man. Endowed with this unique ability to choose, man is able (free) to fulfill his destiny in the choices he makes. Meyer sought to explain to traditionalists that freedom, tradition, and a belief in a transcendent moral order are all shared components of the same conservatism. Traditionalists had forgotten a key aspect of the tradition that they were

[26] Russell Kirk, "Mill's'On Liberty' Reconsidered," *NR* 1 (January 25,1956): 23-24; George Nash, *Reappraising the Right* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2009): 68.

trying to conserve – that value and virtue cannot be compelled, each individual must have the freedom to choose his own destiny in order to become virtuous. [27]

But Meyer did not limit his critique to the traditionalist camp. Meyer criticized both the libertarian and the traditionalist points of view; traditionalism's stress on heritage and order was too often dismissive of freedom, man's essential nature, and libertarians too often sacrificed their heritage and tradition for the advancement of freedom as an absolute end. Meyer saw in the traditionalists closet statists who would use state power to impose virtue. While insisting upon the limitation of the state to its essential functions, libertarians concentrated too much on the safeguards of freedom itself and in doing so they forget that "reason is well-grounded only when it operates within tradition." Libertarians

> can lose sight of the philosophical values which are…the ends which freedom serves and the very foundation of that respect for the innate dignity of the individual person upon which the defense of freedom rests.

Although the two divergent groups of conservatives stress different things, it is precisely because they mutually possess the same heritage that their division is not "irreconcilable." Unlike some libertarians, Meyer believed in the existence of a transcendent moral order that guided human beings to the good. In such a world, freedom would not allow libertarians to do anything they wanted to do. Time-tested traditions, reinforced in churches, families, and private associations promoted needed restraint on freedom so that individuals could lead virtuous lives. For Meyer, virtue meant nothing if not freely chosen. While this revelatory exchange between Kirk and Meyer by no means ended the debate between traditionalists and the libertarians, it did serve as the beginning of Meyer's criticism of those who placed too much emphasis on either freedom or tradition, and the reasoning for his attempt to "fuse" freedom and tradition. [28]

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[27] Frank Meyer, "In Defense of John Stewart Mill," *NR* 1 (March 28,1956): 23-24.
[28] Frank Meyer "Conservatives in Pursuit of Truth," *NR* 2 (June 6,1956):16.

In 1962, Meyer again felt that he needed to defend his ideas, this time against fellow *National Review* editor L. Brent Bozell. Like many other conservatives at the time, Bozell came from a deeply religious, Catholic background and, as such, he drew his political beliefs from his religious tradition. As a result, Bozell argued that man's primary goal was not freedom, but virtue. Man's ultimate "purpose," to be judged in the end by God, was to cultivate one's own virtue and to try to spread that virtue to others – to create a "Christian civilization." Bozell insisted that the primary purpose of politics must be to aid in the quest for virtue, and that freedom was merely an idea that a virtuous community would "accept in such measure as they were conducive to the virtue of its citizens." Because free will was inherent in man's nature, it would exist no matter what policies the state adopted. The urge for freedom for its own sake, Bozell argued, "is a rebellion against nature."[29]

Meyer agreed with Bozell that every society "must be grounded in an objective moral order based on ontological foundations" and that every society "ought to adhere to fundamental truths," but in the political realm, man's essence dictated that freedom was the *primary* goal. If virtue is coerced, free will is abandoned and thus the virtue of one's actions cannot necessarily be described as truly virtuous. When man is "unfree to reject virtue, he is unfree to choose it." Arguing for the limitation of the state to its three limited functions, Meyer criticized Bozell's view of the State, which "if endowed with the power to enforce virtue" will lead to "men who hold that power enforcing their own concepts as virtuous." The conservative consensus, Meyer's synthesis of traditionalism and libertarianism, conceived virtue "not merely in the negative terms of subduing evil inclinations, but also…in terms of achievement of positive potentialities." In the midst of his crusade against Bozell's crude reverence of tradition and virtue, Meyer brings out

[29] L. Brent Bozell, "Freedom or Virtue?" *NR* 13 (September 11, 1962): 181; Kevin Smant, *Principles and Herasies* (Wilmington, Deleware: ISI Books, 2002), 98-99.

his larger argument, which is that the "denial of the claims of virtue leads not to conservatism, but to spiritual aridity and social anarchy; the denial of the claims of freedom leads not to conservatism, but to authoritarianism and theocracy." The fall of Western Civilization to collectivism and relativism was not occurring because there was too much freedom, but rather because "freedom has declined as virtue has declined. The recovery of the one demands the recovery of the other." Meyer finished his response to Bozell by expressing the mission of the Conscious Conservatives, which is to "find virtue in freedom – that is the goal of our endeavor." For Meyer, despite the fact that his philosophy had been coined by Bozell as "fusionism," the principles inherent in fusionism were, to him, not revolutionary. Meyer contended that this was the conservative consensus and his writings which have been termed "fusionism" were merely an embodiment of the general agreement among conservatives. [30]

Fusionism Applied: Politics

A central component of Meyer's thinking was the increasing power of the Liberal-controlled Leviathan state as a result of the collectivist system. Begun by FDR's New Deal in the 1930's, collectivism in the United States had been gaining momentum ever since. For Meyer, ideas were only the beginning. If conservatives were going to change the country in their image, they would have to elect a conservative president. In 1964, conservatives found themselves in a position to elect a conservative president and challenge the thirty-year tenure of the statist regime. Barry Goldwater, an Arizona senator on the Republican ticket, gave hope to conservatives like Meyer. Meyer hoped Goldwater would act as a vehicle through which conservative principles could thrive, and followed Goldwater's campaign closely within the pages of the *National Review*. He used his articles to downplay the Liberal media, which he

[30] Frank Meyer, "Why Freedom," *NR* 13 (September 25, 1962): 223-225.

described as being "frenetic", "worried," and in "disarray", its first major lapse in thirty years. As a result of their worries about the future of Big Government, Meyer wrote, the mass media have deteriorated into a "cabal," a secret group with an agenda. Meyer interpreted this frenzied breakdown of the established media as a hysterical reaction to Goldwater's candidacy as a new political phenomenon. Mass media had depreciated, Meyer wrote, into a "stop-Goldwater coalition" whose nature was so one-sided as to detract from their arguments. The American people, Meyer hoped, could see through the hysteria of the organized, liberal-dominated media and look to Goldwater to save the country.[31]

Driven by their fear of Goldwater as a potential presidential contender, the Liberal Establishment was forced to use thin arguments about Goldwater and the Republican Party. The mass media was forced to become, as Meyers facetiously put it, "sophisticated." Only a truly "sophisticated" news source could "find Lodge impressive with one-tenth of the vote in Texas… and Goldwater completely flopped with one-half of Nebraska, and three-quarters of Indiana, Illinois and Texas." But, when you have to prove that Goldwater, despite his number of delegates, couldn't win the votes of the people and couldn't possibly defeat Johnson, "you have to be very sophisticated indeed." The tone that Meyer uses in describing the media is emblematic of his own principles. Meyer, "relentless in his pursuit of truth," found the arguments used by the mass media to be divisive and more importantly, a threat to freedom. As a conservative intellectual who believed strongly that the freedom of the person was the central and primary end of political society, he naturally concluded that any threat to freedom in the form of coercion and conspiracy on the part of the media was detrimental to society.[32]

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[31] Frank Meyer, "When the Chips are Down" *NR* (April 21, 1964): 319.
[32] Frank Meyer, "Goldwater the Home Stretch," *NR* (June 2, 1964): 442.

Following Goldwater's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate, Meyer was given more ammunition with which to disarm and discard the liberal media. The media's "wild predictions" and "emotional red herrings" had caught up with them. For the third time, Meyer writes, Goldwater had been declared dead by the Liberal establishment, and for the third time he had "risen from the ashes" to confound the "wishful prophets of doom." One would think that they had learned their lesson with three failed prognostications but "death is still the prognosis"; the date had just been advanced to November 3rd, Election Day. Not only had the Liberal Media's predictions been "beneath serious consideration," but every time they are proven wrong they remain "unabashed by their abysmal failure." The American people were being prescribed by the Liberal Establishment to believe an ill-conceived smear campaign against Goldwater and his followers. And despite the efforts by the media, Meyer maintained that "there has been no tangible undermining of his [Goldwater's] position." For Meyer, the mass media had become a laughable representation of Big Government whose illogical arguments and manifestly wrong predictions had rendered them a non-factor.[33]

In essence, the mass media had a fundamental disconnect with reality. The people had shown time and time again through the electoral process that Goldwater was their candidate of choice, and the media simply ignored these truths. After the New Hampshire primaries, Goldwater was declared a dead candidate, yet "a Gallup poll of Republican County Chairmen the country over, taken *after* the New Hampshire Primary, gave Goldwater 878 votes" of the 655 necessary to clinch the Republican nomination. In their desperation, the Liberal Establishment

[33] Frank Meyer, "Why Goldwater Can Defeat Johnson." *NR* (July 14, 1964): 581; Frank Meyer, "When the Chips are Down" *NR* (April 21, 1964): 319.

fell back on "tactics of confusion," a campaign of propaganda. The myth that their propaganda strove to establish was simply "that Goldwater cannot win votes." By distorting the primary results as we have seen, the stop-Goldwater coalition made it their objective to advance the causes of Rockefeller and Lodge, Goldwater's fellow Republican presidential candidates. The goal of this "mirror trick" was not to help the cause of Lodge or Rockefeller; rather, it was to take away from Goldwater as many delegates as possible. Goldwater was the Republican favorite and his strength was greater than any opponent of the Liberal establishment yet, so, Meyer shows, the Liberal media was forced to take action to secure their candidate from defeat.[34]

The results of the 1964 presidential election, in which Johnson became president, proved that Meyer's thoughts on the Liberal media were true. The cabal had effectively shut down a conservative candidate who, in the months before the election, was poised to win. Meyer mused that "the mass communication network, solidly in Liberal hands, is more formidable an opponent than conservatives had thought." By the end of the 1964 election, it seemed the Liberal media was largely responsible for Johnson's victory over Goldwater. Yet the experience gained by Meyer and his fellow conservatives would prove to be invaluable. Conservatives had not yet learned how to "translate" the principles for which they stood into concrete issues, and therefore stood no chance against the thirty-year "indoctrination" of the American people by the Liberals. Following the conservative loss, Meyer pledged to "spell out" the conservative principles in order to make them "concrete."[35]

Fusionism Applied: Communism

[34] Frank Meyer, "When the Chips are Down" *NR* (April 21, 1964): 319; Frank Meyer, "When the Chips are Down" *NR* (April 21, 1964): 319.
[35] Frank Meyer, "What Next for Conservatism?" *NR* (December 1, 1964): 1057.

Meyer had a visceral dislike for Richard Nixon, whom he rightly regarded as too much of a statist and a Machiavellian. In the 1960 presidential election, Meyer endorsed neither Nixon nor Kennedy, saying that "Nixon disagreed…only on the tempo of achieving Liberal ends," Meyer used much of his space in the *National Review* to react to the Liberal mishandling of the Soviet advancement. Meyer kept his readers well informed on the latest Communist happenings, including the Second Congress of Communists, and the spread of Communism to Asia and Africa. Meyer review several books on tactical measures to be taken against the communist aggressors which stressed a need for "active and passive defense." For Meyer, however, even tacticians who had written great volumes on how to defeat the communists were wrong, because they relied too greatly on governmental actions. While Meyer's fusionism maintained that there is a use for the limited state to defend the nation from foreign attack, he criticized plans that failed to recognize that "the genius of America lies in the free action of free individuals." Plans to vastly increase governmental power and spending "endangers the principles for which war should be waged." It is senseless, in Meyer's view, to "fight communism while we distort our society towards socialism."[36]

Meyer' insisted that American's must "assert the truths of our heritage" in defeating the communists. That heritage had at its core a fundamental fear of concentrated power; the Constitution stood as a great document designed to protect negative liberties, that is "freedom from" the use of arbitrary and despotic power. Liberals, however, are incapable of understanding that some things have greater values than others; in reality, "sharp extremes do exist", as evidenced by the struggle of good versus evil between America and the Soviet Union. "God," Meyer writes, "has enlisted us through our heritage to resist the evil" of communism. The

[36] Frank Meyer, "Only Four Years to 1964," *NR* (December 3, 1960): 344; Frank Meyer, "Policy for Victory," *NR* (March 25, 1961): 189.

Liberal Establishment is blinded by relativism, insisting that Soviet society is no better or worse than American society, it is just "different." They see "war as the enemy, not soviets," and as a result, Liberals reduce the Soviet threat to that of a dangerous military nationalism, not reality which is "an armed force that will be contented with no less than world domination." Meyer's fusionist belief in a transcendent moral order leads to his argument that there is validity in the ancient beliefs "which elevate truth and honor far above ignoble death." For Meyer, communism was not a lurking enemy; it was a very real threat to the American way of life. "If freedom and truth are to survive," communism must be defeated. Only the US has the physical strength to defeat the Soviets, and "morality and patriotism dictate we do something." [37]

Fusionism and Today

In 1950, no serious conservative challenge to liberalism existed in the United States. In the 1960's, conservatism had grown sufficiently to take control of the Republican Party. Conservatism sought to defeat Liberals at home and the Communists abroad. Today, the term "conservative" has become mainstream in no small part because of the coalition that Buckley and Meyer had built after 1955. In 2010, the dangers associated with the growth of the Leviathan state acted to bring together, once again, right-of-center elements that had grown apart after the fall of the Soviet Union. While highly vocal conservatives, like those members of the Tea Party Movement, do exists, the Republican Party has increased the federal budget, expanded the role of the executive, and increased social welfare programs in recent years; the course of the Republican Party contradicts many of Meyer's principles.

[37] Frank Meyer, "Enough of This Nonsense," *NR* (August 26, 1961): 123; Frank Meyer, "Commonweal puts the West in its Place," *NR* (October 7,1961): 234; Frank Meyer, "Paths Toward Surrender," (November 4, 1961): 300,318.

Many of the problems and discourses that Meyer addressed in the 50's and 60's persist today. One such topic is Social Security, which began as a program under FDR's New Deal, and was meant as a welfare program for the elderly during the Great Depression. Like all New Deal programs, Meyer was opposed to the enlargement of the state, and the subsequent socialization of America. For Meyer, the issue was not about Social Security *per se*, it was "whether the over-all massive weight of government action and the concomitant growth of government power are compatible with the continued existence of a free society." Meyer saw the power of government as being directly correlated with its monetary gain by taxation and other means. Ever focused on the differentiation between the political and moral sphere, Meyer accepted tax-increases in order to fight communism and to protect the American way of life, but the government today, just as in 1965, must look to the "heritage of the American Constitutional system…from which government was excluded and in which the energies of individual citizens…were to be free to express themselves without political control." Today, Social Security accounts for a tremendous twenty percent, or around $800 billion, of the federal budget. Following Meyer's philosophy, Americans today must look to their heritage and use their reason to determine whether or not the government allocation of $800 billion dollars annually is worth the restriction of liberty that follows. [38]

Another pressing issue of today which can be viewed from Meyer's fusionist standpoint, is gun control. For Meyer, gun control comes down to moral authority. The difference between potential violence and actual violence in a civilization, Meyer writes, "has been the power of moral authority …to inspire the members of society." The Liberal stance on violence does not see man's inherently violent nature; rather it looks to utopia as a solution. "Guns kill people? Put

[38] Frank Meyer, "Is Social Security a Sacred Cow?" *NR* (June 1, 1965): 463; "Policy Basics: Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go?." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* 14 Apr. 2010: 1-2. Web. 27 Aug 2010.

government control on guns: domestic peace in our time." This Liberal outlook on gun control is just as flawed today as it was then. The first fallacy is that violence, though sometimes evil, is not always evil. After all, government's authority comes from its monopoly of violence. "In the public sphere, violence is "morally legitimate when employed to resist or overthrow tyranny…In the private sphere it is equally legitimate when employed against criminal insurrection upon life or property." As long as there are humans, there will be violent humans, and it is, therefore, the right of all men "to use violence when necessary in his own defense and the defense of his family." [39]

The second fallacy of the Liberal rationale for gun control is their belief that "weapons or the accessibility to weapons create violence." Gun control would have no more effect on domestic violence than "disarmament agreements have had upon the prevalence of war." Indeed, the logical effect of gun control is only to strengthen evil and weaken the good. An unarmed citizenry, Meyer writes, "is potentially the victim, first of anarchy, then of tyranny and totalitarianism." As his fusionist philosophy contends, we must use reason prudentially mediated by tradition. By looking to the Founding Fathers, and at the inherent nature of man, as well as the values of American society, those who hope to conserve the tradition of the West cannot deny men the right to bear arms, for the protection of themselves and their family. [40]

In light of Meyer's fusionism, and with an ongoing conflict within conservatism today between neoconservatives, traditionalists and libertarians, it seems that the conservative movement could stand to learn from the philosophy of Frank S. Meyer. His determined focus to vindicate the freedom of the individual person, as well as to build society in the shadow of

[39] Frank Meyer, "The Right of the People to Bear Arms," *NR* (July, 2 1968): 657.
[40] Frank Meyer, "The Right of the People to Bear Arms," *NR* (July, 2 1968): 657.

Christian, Western civilization, was what the conservative movement needed before the rise of Ronald Reagan, and in many ways, it is what we need now.