

Why Conservatives Are Losing – Part 2

In 1981, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published his magisterial [*After Virtue*](#), in which he advocated that the West return to a more coherent understanding of morality.

In his 2007 prologue to the third edition, MacIntyre acknowledged one important shortcoming of his project:

“I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do.”

MacIntyre’s critique could also be applied to much of conservatism today, which desperately tries to defend values apart from their original metaphysical grounding—that is, apart from deeply-held claims about the nature of reality. In so doing, I wonder if they’re bringing a dull knife to a gunfight.

Take some of the main emphases of the conservative movement today: individual freedom, limited government, and traditional family values. In the West, these emphases have their justification in Judeo-Christian metaphysics (which incorporated the Hellenistic insights in the early centuries of the first millennium). For instance, in the Christian understanding, the value of human freedom is rooted in the divine freedom bestowed on humans through creating them in his image. The value of limited government is derived from the biblical warnings against the state and its leaders detracting

from the obedience due to God alone. And the traditional family was seen as an earthly means of imaging the love between the persons of the Trinity.

For many years after America's founding, there was enough of a general Christian consensus to maintain unity on the above values—which, admittedly, [weren't always consistently upheld](#). This metaphysical consensus could be appealed to when the values needed clarification or when they were challenged.

But with increased [secularization](#), that consensus has gradually eroded.

Apart from that Christian foundation, what are conservatives left with when trying to defend and promote the above values? A utilitarianism that tries to show how living according to them leads to prosperity? A historical nostalgia that glorifies particular moments in the past when these values were upheld? A Kantian ethics that holds these values are true because they are universalizable?

There seems to be an assumption among many conservatives today that they can still garner widespread agreement on these values apart from people's metaphysical convictions and commitments (whether religious or not)... that they can find the magical wording or messaging that will appeal to people irrespective of their diverse beliefs.

I suppose this is one of the underlying weaknesses of the classical liberalism upon which America was founded.

But this is a lowest-common-denominator approach to promoting lofty ideals, and the mismatch between the two won't likely translate into political, or ideological, success in the coming years.

So what's the alternative for American conservatives?

In my mind, they have three options:

One: conservatives could have greater recourse to the Christian metaphysical roots of their values, and hope that the process of secularism in America eventually reverses.

Two: conservatives could promote a massive program of decentralization so that they do not have to attempt to secure widespread metaphysical agreement—this can simply be done through local communities and institutions.

Three: conservatives could take a more Nietzschean approach, and attempt to artificially manufacture agreement on these values through propaganda and political maneuvering.

But the reality is that all three of these options involve long-term solutions for conservatives, and many conservative donors are hungry for short-term victories.

The reality is that America is probably going to get a lot more “liberal” before it gets conservative again.