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The Illusion of a

SECULAR STATE

& The Impotence of

SECULAR CONSERVATISM

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

The Illusion of a Secular State & The Impotence of Secular Conservatism

Two Plenary Addresses Delivered to the
National Conservatism Conference

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.



**THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST
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The Illusion of a Secular State & The Impotence of Secular Conservatism: Two Plenary Addresses Delivered to the National Conservatism Conference © 2024 by R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

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Contents

Introduction	1
The Dangerous Illusion of a Secular State	2
Miami, Florida – September 13, 2022	
The Impotence of Secular Conservatism	21
Washington, D.C. – July 9th, 2024	
Appendix: Britain's Conservative Catastrophe	30
WORLD Opinions – July 8th, 2024	

Introduction

I was honored to be asked to deliver addresses to two meetings of the National Conservatism Conference, first in 2022 and then in 2024. I wanted to share these addresses with you, believing that the issues raised in these addresses are foundational to any genuine recovery of a conservative vision.

The arguments I make in these addresses are signaled by the titles, “The Illusion of a Secular State” and “The Impotence of Secular Conservatism.” I firmly believe that there can be no recovery that takes the shape of a secular conservatism. I also believe that the idea of a secular state – which many take to be foundational for the American experiment – is an illusion. Any lasting state will eventually make ultimate claims, and every society is based upon some claim of ultimate allegiance. A state that fails to acknowledge God will eventually worship a secular deity, demand the ultimate allegiance for itself, or enter a process of inevitable decline and decay.

My hope is that you will find these arguments helpful as you survey the American scene today. I was honored to present these addresses, and I am honored to share them with you.

"YOUR GOD WILL HAVE BEEN SUPPLANTED BY AN IDOL"

The Dangerous Illusion of a 'Secular' State

National Conservatism Conference

Miami, Florida

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

September 13, 2022

As a theologian, one of the academic principles I teach is that the history of the Christian church indicates an ongoing tension between *what may be assumed* and *what must be articulated*. This is why at certain moments the church has had to come together in moments of theological crisis. Those moments of theological crisis are often marked for example, by the emergence of the great creeds of the Christian church throughout its many centuries. Sometimes, those creeds were made necessary, simply because what once could have been assumed as common knowledge, common faith, common confession, even just a matter of a few years before, now requires explicit articulation. The conservative movement also needs at times to articulate what has been assumed. Conservatives throughout history have recognized this and that impulse has often lead to meetings and conferences like this one.

Let me just say that a lot of what is being affirmed here at this meeting—and has been in the other NatCon conferences—is what conservatism understood itself to be: an unashamed appreciation for, and seeking of, the conservation of the nation and its convictions. And that means, first of all, this nation—the United States of America. But also, the idea of nations, and the integrity of nations.

I want to thank the Edmund Burke Foundation for sponsoring this event. I want to thank Yoram Hazony, who has given us so much intellectual content and has helped to substantiate and shape out what such a movement would look like. Friends and fellow conservatives, it is a great joy to be here. But all good things must come to an end, and such it is with this conference tonight. But perhaps some closing thoughts would be helpful.

When you get religious people together, things can get awkward. You may have noticed sometimes the closest of denominational neighbors can find themselves in awkward situations. About a hundred years ago, the great Methodist evangelist, Sam Jones, was preaching in Cartersville, Georgia. This is when the Protestants had long revival service meetings they called protracted meetings, and that's because they protracted them. They went on for days and days, and in the classic protracted meeting, you didn't know when it would end. It ended when the Holy Spirit indicated it should end.

Sam Jones was a famous Methodist evangelist. He was preaching in Cartersville. In the morning, they had the sessions for men to pray very early in the morning. And then later, women gathered together. At one of these meetings, Jones was speaking to a women's gathering in Cartersville, and he asked how many in the room were Methodist. Evidently, all the ladies in the room were Methodist except for one who raised her hand.

Jones said, "Well then, what are you?" And she said, "I'm a Baptist." Sam Jones said, "Why are you a Baptist?" Now, I want to tell you, as a Baptist, she gave a bad Baptist answer. Nonetheless, she said, "Because my mother and father are Baptist, and my grandparents are Baptist, and all my folks are Baptists."

And Sam Jones then turned to her, taking the rhetorical advantage, and said, "Well, what if your parents were fools? And your grandparents were fools? And all your folks were fools?" And she said, "I get it. I would be a Methodist."

It just points to the fact that there's both awkwardness and opportunity in a meeting like this. I want to lean into the opportunity and say that if this is something you find awkward, welcome to the future. Because insofar as conservatism as a movement has a future, it is a future that is going to be increasingly tied to explicit theological claims and confessions.

It is not an accident that as we gather here, there are those who represent conservative principles, just in terms of visible identity and commitment, those who represent clear theistic conviction, especially the orthodox strain of Judaism, and both Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Better get used to being in the room together. And this is where, as a Baptist, I just have to remind myself, and all of us, that we do have differing theological convictions, and we have social cultural rooms. We have different theological convictions and doctrines, and we respect that. Amazingly, the secular world wonders how in the world this can happen. We actually respect one another more. I respect a genuinely Catholic Catholic when I'm in conversation. I respect a genuinely Protestant Protestant, and I am one. I'm glad to say I've enjoyed the honor to have many of those conversations through the years. This conference

is one of those ongoing conversations, another down payment for the future.

Just a few years ago I decided to teach a class for both undergraduate and graduate students at Boyce College and Southern Seminary. I wanted to get the attention of students and underline the importance of ideas. I entitled the class: “The Most Dangerous Ideas of the Modern Age.” Now, the modern age itself is in many ways, the age of dangerous ideas, so there was much material to be pulled from. Because of that, the class turned out—in terms of the curriculum—much easier to start than to finish. But nonetheless, I was astounded when hundreds of students signed up. Hundreds of students, all the way from doctoral students in the graduate school, down to homeschooled students who were 14, 15 years old who heard about it, and whose parents signed them up.

People of conservative conviction alive and aware today understand that we are surrounded by a battle of ideas. It is a particularly dangerous battle of ideas, because so many of the ideas themselves are dangerous. But that battle is one that man is called to. To be human is to be uniquely capable of perceiving intellectual and ideological threats. Animals can perceive physical threats, otherwise they don’t survive. But we alone can recognize ideological and intellectual threats. In an age of toxic ideas, it is a part of our responsibility to recognize and refute these ideas.

Let us consider then one of the most dangerous ideas of our age, the very dangerous illusion of the secular state. In my class on the most dangerous ideas of the modern age, I discussed Marxism, materialism, fascism, scientism, pragmatism, postmodernism, critical theory, deconstructionism, and a host of other dangerous ideologies and ideas. I want now to speak about secularism, and in particular as it is represented in the secular state. In order to do so, I first want to share with you a fairy tale, an interesting way to begin, but I trust it will prove helpful to our understanding.

The fairy tale of the secular life goes something like this:

There once was a day when people were religious. They believed in strange gods and strong doctrines. They engaged in bizarre rituals that represented tribal identities and supernatural superstitions that took on totalistic significance. These beliefs were passed on through

intergenerational transmission. Such supernaturalistic systems of belief were representative of ancient humanity's attempt to explain the world around them, the consciousness within them, and the cosmos above them. They were astounded by the realities of the world.

They found emotional refuge and meaning in their mythopoetic systems. They developed ethical systems that reflected their backwardness, and often argued with rival belief systems, and even fought wars over their beliefs. All of these belief systems, to greater or lesser degrees of explicitness, reflected the faulty moral beliefs of the old of the tribes including patriarchy, sexual repression, mandates concerning marriage and the family, and human reproduction and the raising of children. They were also committed to beliefs about spiritual and ethical superiority, the assumption that absolute truth exists, and that their deepest convictions should be projected into the political sphere.

Now, according to this fairytale—and certainly in its earliest forms—there was the insistence that the purpose and end of human existence should be some form of emancipation. In short, the fairytale came with a tale of emancipation. It came in the form of the modern project. As humanity came of age, the Enlightenment would bring emancipation from ancient creeds, religions, and worldviews to allow humanity to finally come of age. Emancipatory liberalism would free all humanity of the shackles of tyranny, despotism, superstition, dogma, prejudice, and ignorance. The suggestion was that this emancipation would retain some form of religious morality, while deconstructing religious doctrine in its authority.

When I teach the history of theology, one of the things I point out is that Protestant liberalism—especially in the first half of the 20th century—was largely driven by the modernist argument, “We'll, ditch the theology and keep the morality.” How did that work out? The rainbow flags outside those churches tell you where such a commitment leads. You can't have the morality without the theology. Take it from a theologian.

According to this fairytale, humanity would finally come of age with a truly rational, cosmopolitan, and consensual moral ethic—both personal and social. But they could not yet imagine what such an ethic might be, and they could not escape these religious tentacles of the

moral expressions they found inevitable. And yet, they were sure that such a secular option would eventually emerge. The early versions of this fairytale also assumed to rather restrain the assault upon the ultimate citadels of truth and knowledge and morality. They reassured the public that enlightenment would make sense to all, or at least the major pillars of Enlightenment thought. As we know, later versions of this constantly updated fairytale would repudiate their earlier version, arguing that even they were hopelessly mired in the mud of traditional moral judgment in metaphysics and biological reality. All that would have to change.

According to the fairytale, along came four friendly giants to emancipate the elves. I’m thinking here primarily of: Nietzsche, Darwin, Freud, and Marx. They were the giants that emancipated the elves by their prophecies of modernity. After the modern prophecies came modern marvels. Technology, modern universities, contraceptive devices, pills, automobiles, no-fault divorce, and social media contributed their respective innovations.

We can follow the modern experiment through early modernity, and then modernity, and what’s now called late modernity. It used to be called postmodernity, but the problem is that it doesn’t really break down that carefully and distinctly. It is not as if there is the “pre-modern age” followed by the self-consciously “modern age,” with the pre-modern left behind. Nor does postmodern mean that modernity is simply left behind. Instead, in many ways the age is the ideology in a later stage, or the fairytale some chapters over. After prophecies and marvels more giants arrived, and even more will arrive. Emancipatory modernity is inevitable, never to be resisted and only to be welcomed.

This is the fairy tale that drives the progressive in this culture. Progressives are absolutely certain that it is not a fairytale, however. For the progressive, this is history, the truth, the goal. What puzzles them, perplexes them, and infuriates them is that there are people who will not go along with the fairytale. Not only that, but it’s also very perplexing to them—and I would say especially in the progressive Christian world—that the very people who follow the fairytale end up with churches that are evacuated of actual people. People tend to gravitate toward those who hold to the ancient truth and preach the timeless truth.

One of the key assumptions of this fairytale is that the state itself must be secular. No religious authority, no religious privileges, no theological truth, no acknowledgment whatsoever of the religious roots, no "comprehensive doctrines," as John Rawls called such traditional claims.¹ Of course, the doctrine of secularism, which rejects comprehensive doctrines, turns out to be a comprehensive doctrine itself. Secularism is a doctrine that is comprehensive and seductive.

The secular dream was supposed to end with the emergence of a secular state of liberated secular citizens. All people were supposed to live happily ever after in a secular state of mind. A secular state of mind that is liberated and free, unrestrained, undiverted, unoppressed, and uninhibited, by even the slightest risk of exposure to a theological thought. Now, in one sense of course, that didn't happen. The very fact that it is a fairytale is undeniable by the fact that it did not happen. Yet we'd have to say, it didn't happen, *except where it did*.

In other words, where this fairytale worked out, pretty much like the tellers of it had predicted, was Western and Northern Europe. It is amazingly prophetic in terms of how this played out. This fairy tale became the predominant cultural story on the American college and university campus. The American college and university campus, which is more European than American in many ways, when you think about secularity in the intellectual climate.

This story didn't happen everywhere, in the modern age, however. In modern industrialized world, the tale did not come to fruition as many had expected. One individual who makes this point clear is Peter Berger. Peter Berger, the religious sociologist, was a brilliant man and one of the very rare human beings who was still making intellectual contributions in his 10th decade of life. Just think about that; he was still writing books in his 10th decade of life. If you live that long as an academic, there is a high likelihood that you might need to go back and revise your theories, because at least some of them have likely been disproved by time. For Peter Berger, that theory was the model of secularization—the theory of secularization.

¹ Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

Peter Berger, the young Peter Berger, held that secularization was the inevitable result of industrialization, mass culture, and high technology. In the West, secularization would happen everywhere, inevitably, pretty much on the same timetable, but it didn't happen—not as had been predicted. Berger came back to revisit his own theory of secularization, and he did it first, in the pages of *First Things*.²

Peter Berger was once asked about the current situation in the United States, and he spoke about a longitudinal study, nation by nation that had measured relative religiosity. The study, without theological claims asked: Which nations tended to be more religious and which less? And it turned out, that as he said, the most religious nation—just marked by religious fervor, religious holidays, the time invested in religion—was India. The most secular was Sweden. Peter Berger was once asked by a reporter, well, what about the United States of America? And he famously said, America is a nation of Indians ruled by an elite of Swedes. That's pretty much the way it goes. The United States has a population of Indians, but that religious population is ruled over by an elite of secularists—who intend to enforce and mandate their secularism.

Now at least the part of what's going on in this meeting is that the Indians are refusing to go along with the Swedes. I've encountered at least one Indian in this sense, but many others are refusing to go evolve. We understand that one of the reasons why is because secular space is not empty space. It is space hostile to human dignity. It is space dangerous for human good. It is simply another fairytale to believe that secular space is space empty of metaphysical and moral claims of ultimacy. In other words, it is a fairy tale to believe that secular space is ultimately secular.

Secular space is hostile to the truth, and space that celebrates the disillusion of the true, the good, and the beautiful. It is space that eventually will be hostile to human dignity and virtue. Once transcendence is denied, once God is denied, a host of alien doctrines establishes a new religion and a new public orthodoxy in various forms and places. That transcendent transplantation has happened

² Berger, Peter L. "Secularization Falsified." *First Things*, February 2008 <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/secularization-falsified>

even in recent history. The evacuated theological space has been filled by Marxism, communism, critical theory, and a post-structural list of identity politics and woke activism. Each new doctrine is driven by a religious fervor that take on a religious shape.

Many people who explain the modern age would say that it's inherently secular, and that secular means absolutely non-religious and yet, it never was. Witness number one, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was Rousseau who wrote, "I would therefore wish that in each State one might have a moral code, or a sort of civil profession of faith, which contained positively the social maxims that everyone would be bound to admit, and negatively the fanatical maxims that one would be bound to reject, not as impious, but as seditious."³ Rousseau was locally calling for an explicit civil religion, and it would include orthodoxy and heresy, as every religious system inevitably does. It would be a civil religion imbued with theological authority that eventually took the shape of what Rousseau called "the Catechism of the Citizen."⁴

Emilio Gentile referred to this process as the sacralization of the modern world.⁵ Sacralization means that the state eventually takes on the role of the sacred. And the point is, as Rousseau understood, something's going to take on the role of the sacred. And if you deny God, then the state is the most likely suspect to show up and make the demand of ultimacy. It's not only Emilio Gentile, but also Eric Vogel and Raymond Aron.

Raymond Aron referred to secular religion as the doctrines that promised salvation in this life.⁶ Aron offered some corrective history.

³ Letter from J.J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire August 18, 1756 in Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse), Polemics, and Political Economy, Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 3. Edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992). Archived by archive.org https://archive.org/details/RousseauToVoltairet_marshall/page/n11/mode/2up Accessed August 1, 2024.

⁴ Letter from J.J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire

⁵ Gentile, Emilio. *Politics as Religion*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) Translated by: George Staunton

⁶ Aron, Raymond, 'The Future of Secular Religions', in *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Think about the French Revolution. Some have said, “well, it was absolutely irreligious.” But that is not true—it was *anti-Christian*. It was hardly irreligious. Remember that as a part of the early period of the revolution, they stormed into Notre Dame Cathedral and removed the Madonna and Child and replaced it with the Goddess of Reason. They put in place the cult of the Goddess and the cult of Reason. It was a state sponsored religious cult. It was atheistic. And make no mistake, it was explicitly religious—in a cathedral, no less. That’s not by accident.

Eventually in the revolutionary history, and in its sad, tragic unfolding, there would be the release of the Cult of the Supreme Being under Robespierre. Again, a Cult of a Supreme Being. The revolution takes on not only an ideological shape in the abstract, but an explicitly religious shape.

Emilio Gentile described what he called the political religions, and of them he said: “The Enlightenment made an important contribution to the sacralization of civil society and of the nation by elevating them to the status of supreme bodies and values for the modern citizen.”⁷ Gentile continued, “The Enlightenment was convinced that a well-ordered society could not do without some form of collective religion that educated the individual to place the public good above personal interest.”⁸ Now, just think about that, a civil catechesis.

Fast forward to Marxism, communism, the Bolshevik Revolution. Marx would refer to religion, of course infamously, as that which comes down merely to the “opium of the people.”⁹ Religion is a force for oppression then. Any kind of transcendent and theological language was simply nonsense in his materialist worldview.

However, Marxism—and in particular the Bolshevik Revolution—took on a religious shape. Eventually, the revolution resulted in the seizure of religious properties to be filled with a new secular and incredibly lethal cult. In 1925, the League of Militant Atheists, a communist cult,

⁷ Gentile, Emilio. *Politics as Religion*., 17

⁸ Gentile, Emilio. *Politics as Religion*., 17

⁹ Marx, Karl, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* Ed. Joseph O’Malley (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 131

was formed. The League of Militant Atheists had hymnals. I was once at a used bookstore and I bought one of the Wobbly hymnals. This was a communist workers’ movement, and they had songs. They printed them up just like a Christian hymnal. I need Sam Jones, the Methodist evangelist, to come into that meeting.

What would surprise many people is that intellectual figures now associated with critical theory and with neo-Marxism, someone like Antonio Gramsci, made the very same point. Gramsci said, “Once religious faith (in the traditional sense of the word) had gone, people desperately searched for a new system of beliefs and general principles around which to regroup themselves and in which to find reason in their innermost selves for living in a worthwhile fashion. They thus created an endless number of new ‘churches,’ according to their social class: some found followings in the salons, others amongst individuals, and still others among the working people.”¹⁰ Gramsci himself was very much influenced by Benedetto Croce, who also said, “Religion derives from the need for a concept of reality in life and for direction in relation to them. Without religion and without this direction, you cannot live “happily.”¹¹ He meant no secure political system.

Now, I mentioned this, not because I want to point to the social utility of religion. I’m pointing to this because I believe in the *imago dei*. I believe every single human being is made in the image of God. Thus every human being is a religious being and can never be anything other than a religious being. That is one of the reasons I enjoy debating and conversing with atheists. And I dare say they do not enjoy debating me. I do not mean by that I somehow trump them on every question. I just mean I enjoy infuriating them.

When I meet an atheist, I always ask, “What kind of atheist are you?” And they usually say, “An atheist atheist.” To which I respond, “*No, there are no atheist atheists.* There are atheists who are rejecting some specific God—at least that’s where it starts—but there is no generic atheism. In

¹⁰ Gramsci, Antonio as Cited by Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 16

¹¹ Croce, Benedetto. “Per la rinascita dell’idealismo” (1908), in *Cultura e vita morale*, (Bari, 1953), 35. As cited by Emilio Gentile, Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 11

which God do you not believe?" And even if they try to get out of it, I say, "Well, at least you don't believe in God." They say, "Well no, it's just that God is completely absent my worldview." And I say, "Well, you say you're an atheist. That's a Greek alpha-privative in front of the word theism." In other words, there's no intellectual possibility being an atheist without the existence of God. They do not like that argument.

Now, there may be some who believe you could believe yourselves to be atheist. And I understand that the structure of thought is theoretically possible, but based upon what is revealed by the Creator, it is inevitable that every human being will worship something. In our day, we see the deadly political consequences of this.

Charles Taylor and others go on to say this is just secularization at work. The argument is that secularization is just inevitable, because the society's moved through modernity. There's less and less dependence upon any kind of transcendence, any kind of divine authority. Everything from the social systems, the financial systems, the academic systems, the moral systems, they all just have to move to a new basis of rationality. Robert Audi, an American, goes so far as to say that the only way that we should allow any civil discourse in this country is if you have no religious structure of thought and no religious motivation to what you think.¹² So even if you show up with a better religious argument, if in your heart you're religious, you are not a good American. John Rawls famously argued for just basically the same thing. Absolutely no comprehensive doctrine.¹³ By the time you read Rawls, you recognize that is in itself a comprehensive doctrine.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, we've seen major revelations of this in unexpected moments. One was in the period of drafting and adopting the Constitution for the European Union. In the draft treaty for the Constitution for Europe, there was an acknowledgment, originally, of the Christian roots of Western civilization. But eventually, not for all nations, not for all delegations, but for the majority, that acknowledgment was just

¹² Audi, Robert. *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

¹³ Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

too much. By the time the vote occurred, the vote to dilute the statement was not even close at all.

The European Parliament refused to acknowledge even the Judeo-Christian roots of the European project, and instead they adopted new language. This is some of the most evasive language you've ever heard. "Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law."¹⁴ That's all there is. The undefined, unidentifiable "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance." As if Western Civilization just happened, came out of the ether.

When you come to the modern age, and you come to the United States, you come to arguments very relevant for us. Charles Taylor—who's Canadian but has vast influence here in the United States—wrote about the requirements of the secular state. Now get this, he said: "There must be equality between people of different faiths or basic belief; no religious or (religious or areligious) Weltanschauung [worldview] can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official view of the state."¹⁵ I have shared a fairy tale and offered some corrective history and now I want to make an argument.

One of the great myths is that the American constitutional tradition emerged out of a secularist impulse. I'm going to argue that what Peter Berger referred to as a sacred canopy¹⁶ created the space whereby the two principles of the First Amendment—free expression and no establishment of religion—could be adopted. That canopy of theological fixed meaning was grounded in some form of Christianity, even explicitly, when it comes to the American experiment. Even Charles Taylor recognized that the big issue at the time of the founding was to avoid strife among Protestant

¹⁴ Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Preamble, Legal Act (July 6, 2016) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12016ME%2FTXT> Accessed August 1, 2024

¹⁵ Taylor, Charles. "What Does Secularism Mean" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2011), 309.

¹⁶ Berger, Peter. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1990)

sects, to use his word.¹⁷ We're in a very different world now. And yet, it's a world uninformed by history, either constitutional or political. A world that lives under the assumption that somehow, we have a secular state that just emerged, virgin born.

Yet, Charles Taylor recognized, "The whole range of comprehensive views, or deeper reasons," speaking of deep theological reasons, "were in the original case, variants of (Protestant) Christianity, stretching to a smattering of Deists."¹⁸ So in other words, they could afford to say, "No establishment of religion," something that I actually agree with when it comes to the establishment of a state church. They could afford no establishment of religion and free expression because they existed under a sacred canopy. But some in our day would take it a step further and argue, that by extension there was no acknowledgment of religion whatsoever. Such a claim is historically false. Even Charles Taylor who was arguing against the recognition of religion, in this sense, nonetheless had to acknowledge that throughout most of American history, religious *recognition* was the norm. Religious *acknowledgment* was the norm even while national religious *establishment* was prohibited.

Consider also Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story in the 1830s. Story argued that the goal of the First Amendment was to "exclude all rivalry among Christian sects."¹⁹ But he also argued that "Christianity ought to receive encouragement from the state."²⁰ By the 1890s, 37 of 42 state constitutions recognize the authority of God. By 1892, the Supreme Court would just simply say, "This is a Christian nation."²¹

Now I want to back up because I'm a Baptist, and thus I'm a conversionist. I believe that salvation comes to those who come to a personal knowledge and confession of the Lord Jesus Christ and repent

¹⁷ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 237-238.

¹⁸ Taylor, Charles. "How to Define Secularism" in *Boundaries of Toleration*. Edited by Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor. (New York: Columbia, 2014), 61

¹⁹ Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution* §991.

²⁰ Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution* §988.

²¹ *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457 (1892), 471

of their sins. I do not believe you become a Christian by being born in a nation predominated by Christians or defined by Christian morality. But I am thankful to live in a society that is the inheritance of a Judeo-Christian civilization. Where else do we have access to any stable notion of human dignity? Where else do we have any access to the notion and defense of human rights in any substantial form?

If we go back to December 22nd, 1952, Dwight David Eisenhower was President-elect of the United States. Eisenhower spoke at a meeting believed to have been at the Waldorf Astoria, although he apparently wrote his notes on another hotel's stationery. That has driven historians mad ever since. But wherever he spoke from, Eisenhower got up and simply said that our form of government "has no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is."²² Quite possibly the most honest presidential statement of all time. The historian William Lee Miller later said, "One might say that President Eisenhower, like many Americans, is a fervent believer in a very vague religion."²³ And there's a sense in which that was true.

Eisenhower was a very firm believer in an extremely vague religion. But there have also been secular historians, and even liberal Protestant historians, who have taken that and said, "Look, he's just throwing religion out, it's nothing but the social utility of faith." But they missed the entire context, which is that at the very time Eisenhower was giving that statement, just short of 100% of Americans identified either as: Protestant, Catholic, or Jew.

Will Herberg, the famous religious sociologist, who was himself Jewish, would publish a book some years later by that very title, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.²⁴ For Herberg that was to be representative of the American population. Herberg's point was that the United States was

²² Address at the Freedoms Foundation, Waldorf-Astoria, New York City, New York, December 22, 1952 <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/eisenhowers/quotes> Accessed August 1, 2024.

²³ Miller, William Lee. *Reporter* 9/1 (July 7, 1953): 15. Archived by Archive.org. https://archive.org/details/sim_reporter_1953-07-07_9_1/page/n6/mode/1up?q=fervent+believer. Accessed September 30, 2024.

²⁴ Herberg, Will, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

refuting the sociological prophecy about the end of religions, refuting a notion of an inevitable secularization. Herberg pointed out that there was a vast increase in attendance of synagogue, church, and mass. Will Herberg was also enough of a theologian to recognize that that doesn't necessarily represent lasting, authentic, organic religious faith. But it certainly is not secularism.

Well, the Christian faith has had a great deal to say about life in this world, in this age, and in the in-between time. The most classic work short of Scripture that is in our Christian tradition is the great church father Augustine's work *The City of God*, which made very clear that there are two cities. Even as Jesus says, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21) There are two cities driven by two loves. Christians, by faith, are part of the City of God in the eternal Kingdom of Christ. But, by God's own sovereignty, we're left in this world with a responsibility in this age. In this age we are to be good citizens in the City of Man to seek the good of the City of Man, without any compromise of our primary allegiance to the City of God. That's tricky these days.

Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde is known for a principle in law known as the Böckenförde dilemma. That dilemma is formulated from the question he asked. Böckenförde asked, "Does the free secularized state exist on the basis of normative presuppositions it cannot guarantee?"²⁵ That's the paradox. Therein lies the dilemma. Does the free secularized state exist on the basis of normative presuppositions that it itself cannot guarantee? And the answer to that is absolutely. Or at least, it is trying.

The free secularized state is attempting to exist on the basis of normative principles that it itself cannot guarantee. You cannot make assertions about human dignity, unless you believe that human beings are made by God. Otherwise, we're just some form of dignified or undignified dust. Unless human rights are grounded in the righteousness and justice of God, then

²⁵ Böckenförde, E. W., "Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation" (1967), in *Recht, Staat, Freiheit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), PP. 92ff. (here: p. 112). as cited by Habermas, Jurgen. "Pre-political foundations of the Democratic Constitution?" in *The Dialectics of Secularization* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 21

they are nothing more than political fictions to be endlessly negotiated and renegotiated.

I want to suggest that if there is to be a future for conservatism in the United States, it's going to be a conservatism of strong theological arguments. Here at this conference, you have heard some strong theological arguments. Even now, I'm hoping you hear some strong theological arguments. You should get accustomed to hearing strong theological arguments. That does not mean that conservatives are limited to those who make strong theological arguments. But I will say to other conservatives who do not make theological arguments, you're riding on the wake of strong theological argument. You are living off the capital of the Old and the New Testament, of Israel and the Christian church and her witness.

We see the great alternative religion before us, the post-Christian religion of the woke, once again demonstrating the *imago dei*. Demonstrating the fact that we will worship something. We will be religious, and that religion is going to work its way out, in a very religious form. The new woke religion has its own liturgy, its own doctrines, its own catechisms and catechesis. It has its own cathedrals. It has its own doctrine of sin and promise of salvation. It has its own notion of sanctification. It has its own written canon of scriptures and slogans. It has its own crusading flags, and choirs. It has its own inquisition and holy office. It has its cherished dogma, and it enjoys the right of excommunication, known more popularly as cancel culture.

I want to thank you for having Christians as a part of this conversation, and Jewish friends as a part of this conversation. Protestants as a part of this conversation, and Catholics as a part of this conversation. And I just have to say, as the closing speaker and as a Baptist, when you get us, you get all of us. I don't just mean every one of us, I mean all that we are, as individual believers. I've got to show up in full Baptist battle dress wherever I go. I show up with a full weight of Baptist conviction, which means yes, I'm ready to argue with a Methodist. Not to mention a Roman Catholic, or anyone else in the room. What fun is there in life if you cannot enjoy a good argument over what matters? We may be the only people on the planet who know we show the greatest respect to one

another when we honestly disagree with one another, and respectfully, honoring God and the truth, seek rightly to come to an understanding not only of one another, but of the one true and living God.

So, what do we do now? Well, I want to argue that a part of what it means to be conservative is to be committed to the pre-political.

Politics is important. There's so much political discussion here, and frankly, there simply must be so much political discussion here. But at the end of the day, the pre-political is more important, more foundational, than the political. The political is an extension of the pre-political. If you don't believe that there is an institution before the state, then you idolize the state.

To be a conservative is to have to conserve the whole. We must recognize a prior commitment to the pre-political realities of creation order: marriage, family, community, nation. A real commitment rooted not merely in ourselves, nor in human will, but in the entire structure of creation as the revelation of the Creator's glory. We must define them biblically. We must strive to have concern for them all. And that's to say that a conservative movement that does not conserve what it means for God to make human beings male and female in his image, that does not conserve marriage as the lifelong covenant union of man and woman, that does not define the natural family as the essential heart of human society, that does not protect life in the womb and life in the family, that does not acknowledge the theological roots of our political life as a nation, is by no means conservative. Any such society, any such intellectual project, is unable to sustain a defense of community or nation. And the nation will not survive the undermining of the prerequisites of marriage, family, and human dignity grounded in ontological truth.

Despite many challenges around us, I have great hope. And as an evangelical, it is good to be with thoughtful Catholic, Jewish, and convictionally conservative friends, as we think about our duty to conserve what must never be lost, and what must always be honored. In that conserving project, we cheer each other on, and bear honest witness to one another, respectfully, lovingly, continually. We have a common enemy in the image of a supposedly secular state, and the looming threat

of a new progressivist religion raised up with an official state idolatry. And so here we are.

John Courtney Murray, a major Catholic figure during Vatican II, helped to define the modern Roman Catholic notion of religious liberty. In 1948, he offered a very stern word of warning to Protestants who were living upon the false idea that there could be some kind of neutrality in a secular state. And I have to say, that liberal Baptists were at the top of that list of culprits. He said then: "If the myth of democracy as a religion is triumphant, and achieves its 'establishment' as our national religion, the triumph will be over you."²⁶ He said to Protestants, "Your God will have been supplanted by an idol."²⁷ If the last word is the secular state, then our God will be supplanted by an idol. If all we have to offer is the argument of secular sterility, then our God has become supplanted by an idol. If conservatism can somehow be severed from creation and severed from the Creator, then our God has been supplanted by an idol. Conservatism severed from the pre-political ultimately has nothing left to conserve.

One of the great privileges of being here together is that at least a part of our disappointment is that we did not have conversations, personal conversations, worthy conversations, with just about everyone in the room. We leave with great hope, cheering each other on, praying for one another, and understanding that we do have a common enemy, and that enemy is advancing swiftly. The enemy of a new progressivist woke religion that is raising itself up as the official state ideology. You say, "Well, that's not a very hopeful word on which to end." Well, Christians know that we are neither optimistic, nor pessimistic. Because of Christ, we live in joy. We live in hope. Hope is not optimism, and hope is not pessimism. But joy is security and joy is motivation, which reminds us that we have work to do.

It's been good to be together. Now let's get to that work.
God bless you all.

²⁶ Murray, John Courtney, "A Common Enemy, A Common Cause," *First Things*, October 1992, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1992/10/a-common-enemy-a-common-cause>, Accessed August 1, 2024.

²⁷ Murray, John Courtney, "A Common Enemy, A Common Cause," *First Things*. Accessed August 1, 2024.

The Impotence of Secular Conservatism

National Conservatism Conference

Washington, D.C.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

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It is an honor to be here at NatCon 2024. We all know that we are meeting at an urgent moment and we can also see that the urgency has been made clear by some sobering events even over the last couple of years. When last I had the opportunity to address this movement in late 2022, I spoke on the impossibility of a secular state. What I want to speak about today is the impotence of a secular conservatism. I don't mean thereby to divide the room, but rather to speak honestly about where I think we are and what I think we should be thinking. I do speak as a Christian. I do speak as a theologian. I speak with a great deal of common concern and common cause.

I also want to acknowledge a bomb on our moral landscape that reshapes our consideration, and that is the 2022 *Dobbs* decision and its aftermath. These developments force a new awareness upon us. I have been a part of the pro-life movement my entire adult life. I've had the privilege of being in rooms where major decisions have been made, strategies have been laid, and where facts and analytics have been considered. I can tell you that there are those now, and were those in the past, who were quite convinced that this is an argument we were winning. Many had convinced themselves that we were winning the argument for life, even if we were not winning that argument everywhere evenly. The pro-life movement shared the confidence that if all those years of work in conservative argument, organizing, and what became a conservative legal recovery, a constitutional recovery—if all that led to a reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, we would be ready for it and we would discover a pent-up, pro-life conviction on the part of the American people, certainly in key states painted red, where we would see pro-life conviction translated into pro-life legislation.

But of course, what we've seen is exactly the opposite. First in Kansas, but then also in my own Kentucky, suddenly the bomb went off, announcing to us that whatever commitment there was to the pro-life cause it was much less substantial than we had thought. It was much less convictional than we had thought. It was, most fundamentally, far less *ontological* than we had thought. And that leads me to the consideration for today. To be conservative is to hold allegiance to certain fixed truths and principles.

I'm old enough to remember in my own adult lifetime the argument that conservative basically means holding to a conservative temperament and a conservative commitment to timeless tradition. But the truth I want to underline today is that tradition without a fundamental commitment to truth—and that truth being fundamentally transcendent and theological—will soon evaporate.

I would take that argument further and insist that conservatism requires fixed religious truths as well as traditions. I would underline the fact that these fixed religious truths are grounded in specific acts of divine revelation, on which we are entirely dependent.

There are two points of urgency I want to make. Number one, conservatism is not just another form of liberalism, and then secondly, conservatism is not just liberalism or progressivism arriving later on the schedule, with greater respect for the costs and challenges of what is defined as inevitable social and moral progress. Neither of these positions is genuinely conservative.

The great challenge that now confronts conservatives writ large in the United States, is the challenge of first things and fundamental truths. The great challenge is understanding that any worldview that does not ground itself in divine revelation, in the moral character of the self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient God – any conservative tradition that is not grounded in a prior commitment to ontology is going to evaporate. The only question is, will that evaporation happen quickly or more slowly?

One of the things we've witnessed in recent weeks, as a matter of fact, just in recent days, is the collapse of the Conservative Party in Great Britain. I follow that party and that Anglo-American tradition very closely, and the argument I made in an article published immediately after the election is that we should not be surprised that the so-called Conservatives lost, because the Conservative party had abandoned conservatism long ago.²⁸ In that article, I pointed to an incident that had taken place now more than a decade ago, when David Cameron, then the

²⁸ Mohler Jr., R. Albert. "Britain's Conservative catastrophe: Lessons from the U.K. election—and a warning to conservatives everywhere." *WORLD Opinions*, July 8, 2024 <https://wng.org/opinions/britains-conservative-catastrophe-1720435535>. See the Appendix for the full text.

British Prime Minister and head of the Conservative Party, came out and demanded that the party abandon what had been a very longstanding commitment to social conservatism. Cameron called for the party, and thus the government, to abandon the definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman. In his memorable words: “I don’t support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I am a Conservative.”²⁹ At that point, the entire ontological structure of Creation Order was denied by a party that still dared to call itself conservative.

A party that does such a thing does not deserve a conservative reputation, much less conservative affirmation. This act, taken so brazenly, was a repudiation of Creation Order and the order that had made this civilization possible. I’m not denying the importance of social traditions, morals, political principles, constitutional norms, and much more shared among conservatives. An inheritance certainly shared as a glad stewardship. That is an important stewardship. But if that tradition is all a matter of constant negotiation under a process of accommodation to changing circumstances, we are losing, we are destined to lose, and we deserve to lose. There is no lasting conservatism that is not self-consciously grounded in revealed truth and in ontology. To be conservative is to affirm what is *real*. If we lose this conviction, we lose everything.

Now when you consider the challenges we face at this moment, it’s impossible to say the challenge is not ontological. We’re living in a society that increasingly believes a boy can be a girl and a girl can be a boy. Just in terms of fundamental ontology, if we don’t understand anything else, we must understand that it has been assumed rightly throughout virtually all human history that anatomy and ontology are definitive, determinative and not an imposition, but a gift.

We live in a time in which the progressive idea of personal autonomy has reached the point that many in our society—Including a disproportionate number among the cultural elites—believe human

²⁹ “Full text: David Cameron’s Conservative conference speech.” BBC. October 5, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-15189614>

beings are autonomous from ontology. I think this cultural crisis underlines the fact that when you have a conservative movement that is not itself committed to ontology, everything collapses into a matter of endless negotiation.

However, the ontological grounding of the American order was made very clear in the Declaration of Independence and in other founding documents. When the founders spoke of nature and nature's God, when they claimed we are "endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights," that is not just decorative language, it is not just illustrative language. The Declaration of Independence makes a truth claim. Its language hearkens back to what in the Lutheran tradition has been referred to as Creation Order, and I'm glad to say behind that the affirmation of what might rightly be called a Natural Law. The point is there is a created order, it is a revealed order, and it is orderly. Behind that order is the God of the Bible, the God of Genesis, the one true and living God. Behind Creation Order is the Creator. Behind the Natural Law is the supernatural Lawgiver.

One of the interesting things we should note is that all I have stated there would have been noncontroversial at the time of the American founding. For one thing, the set of intellectual circumstances at the time was predominantly theistic. Prior to Darwin, there was really no other explanation for the existence of the world. The only explanation for creation was the prior existence of the Creator. Western civilization was the inheritance of Christendom, with a very clear biblical worldview. Prior to Darwin, there really was no substantial alternative cosmology. This is where Richard Dawkins's interesting statement comes to mind—that it was impossible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist until Darwin.³⁰ Not only that but the dominant worldview of the age was not merely supernatural, not merely Christian, but explicitly Protestant. Historians even refer to the existence in North America of a Protestant Empire.

³⁰ Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York: Norton & Company, 1996), 6

Thus we see that there is a great break in modernity with the arrival of a modern secular metaphysic and what was claimed to be a modern secular ontology. Modern secular ontology is an empty ontology that results in absolutely nothing determinative. What does it mean to affirm rights endowed by our Creator, when the Creator is denied? Our entire system of rights and reality is based in a Christian ontology and morality, which is based upon Jewish antecedents in both general and special revelation.

The secular experiment that is now underway, and has been underway for some time, is now seen in retrospect as that which is based upon nothing at all, nothing ontological, nothing in terms of reality, no particular metaphysic. This can be seen now in open arguments made among the Left. The ideological and political Left no longer shares any objective moral order. It seeks to impose a new morality—based in a view of reality—that explicitly rejects the ontological commitments of the Christian tradition. The Left brings to the table absolutely no ontological commitments of its own. It's all just politics and power. It's all they can see.

A conservatism that plays the same game, and shares the same assumptions, is no genuine conservatism. It is just a language game or a way of playing for time.

When we look at American history, at the Protestant Empire, the longstanding Christian consensus, we also ought to understand the rise of conservatism. Conservatism arose as a response to the early cleavages in our society, and in particular to the Wilsonian period and beyond in the 20th century. Then suddenly, there was this enormous appreciation among many conservative Americans for the work of someone like Edmund Burke. And yet as much as such a an appreciation is honorable, it was a half-hearted appropriation of Burke. The appropriated part was Burke's understanding of the importance of the tradition and the binding authority of tradition on society. The part many left behind was also essential to Burke. And that is the existence of an ontological order behind that tradition, truth behind that tradition. *Ontology* behind the tradition.

Thus, when you look at the United States, even much of what's been called conservative turns out to be either a conservatism which is another form of liberalism, or conservatism that is nothing but an attempt at a delayed fuse. If you look back at previous Republican administrations, you can see these two 'conservatisms' undertaken for so long. The post-Dobbs position now makes that very clear, even in the conversations within the Republican Party. Behind all of this is also the experience of the Reagan Revolution, and behind that William F. Buckley, *National Review*, and fusionism.

I am not denying that Christian conservatives can have secular allies. I'm not denying that we can share vast areas of common agreement and common concern, but I am saying that at the end of the day, without an ontological commitment which is grounded in theological conviction, I don't believe there's any lasting conservatism to be found. Actually, I am certain that without ontological commitments, conservatism is just an endless negotiation with progressivism and its progeny.

Conservatism has to be grounded in a commitment to truth. The fight to conserve reality is going to be very costly. But, if we are not contending for revealed truth, if our position and argument is just another theory to be placed alongside competing theories—if that's all there is to it—we are doomed. An impotent conservatism that is grounded in no ontology cannot sustain itself, nor can it perpetuate itself. It cannot accomplish its stated aims. It cannot defend its most basic principles and postulates. A secular worldview, consistently held, denies what we believe to be absolutely necessary and foundational, a conservatism that negotiates with that worldview in the end will have the same destination.

If you want to see evidence of what I mean, just look at the collapse of Protestant liberalism. Last year marked the hundredth anniversary of J. Gresham Machen's famous book *Christianity and Liberalism*. In that work Machen rightly argued that the conflict between the orthodox and the liberals in the churches was not a conflict among Christians, but a conflict between adherents of two different religions – the Christians and the liberals. He was absolutely right, and the tragedy of liberal Protestantism is that it has become so endlessly accommodationist, that it is merely a

cartoon of the age. That is what accommodation produces. That is what denying ontology produces.

What we see in the larger society is the collapse of conviction and the replacement of Christianity with a new religion. That's why we shouldn't be surprised by the rise of Marxism in all its different forms, such as critical theory. Adolf Von Harnack, the paradigmatic German liberal, argued that modern Christians must learn to separate the kernel and the husk of Christianity, keeping the kernel and throwing the husk away.³¹ You can try to keep the kernel, that is religious experience, and get rid of the husk, which is the claims of divine revelation. But what you end up with is not theological liberation, but European decadence. A secular conservatism cannot meet the challenge of the day, and an accommodationist Christianity will do no better. A flimsy theism will disappear in the midst of modernity. Most have disappeared already.

In Robert Kagan's latest book, he makes an amazingly honest argument: "Liberalism is not inherently about progress, therefore, except the progress that comes from the expanding recognition of people's rights. It has no teleology, no final resting point toward which it aims."³² What an amazing statement. Kagan admits the bare fact that there is no end game to liberalism. It is an endlessly open game with no teleology at all. There is no ultimate goal to the unfolding of inevitable Hegelian progress. The revolution never ends. We have been warned.

My response is simple. The only answer to that argument cannot be anything short of ontological in force, and that ontology has to be grounded in theism. Cardinal Manning, perhaps an unusual person for an evangelical Protestant Christian to cite, said something profoundly true and nearly irreducible in terms of words. Manning said famously, "All human conflict is ultimately theological." This is exactly right. The cardinal nailed it. All human conflict is ultimately theological.

Many will claim amidst our current conflicts "There is no theology here, nothing remotely theological, don't believe your eyes." But the

³¹ Harnack, Adolf von. *History of Dogma*.

³² Kagan, Robert. *Rebellion: How Antiliberalism is tearing America Apart Again* (New York: Knopf, 2024), 13

reality is all human conflict is ultimately theological. It is good to know what the alternatives are. It is good to know the challenge we face. It is good to speak honestly.

We face the most insidious attacks upon human dignity and the sanctity of life, the goodness of marriage and family, the structures of human society, even the reality of good and evil. We live amidst a great rebellion against transcendent reality, the true, the good, and the beautiful. Our answer to that cannot be less than political. Our answer to that cannot be less than cultural. It cannot be less than strategic. But I also want to say it cannot be less than theological, and it is good and necessary that we acknowledge this truth.

I speak as a Christian theologian. I do not want to confuse Christian theology with some vague idea of nationalism or conservatism. Vague ideas will not hold. I want to say that I do not believe this nation and all that it represents can survive abandoning its theological roots. We will recover those roots and commitments or lose everything.

May God Bless America.

Appendix: Britain's Conservative Catastrophe

WORLD Opinions

July 8, 2024

¹ This article was originally published at WORLD opinions on July 8, 2024 as “Britain’s Conservative catastrophe: Lessons from the U.K. election—and a warning to conservatives everywhere.” *WORLD Opinions*, July 8, 2024 <https://wng.org/opinions/britains-conservative-catastrophe-1720435535>

Britain's national election was held, ironically enough, on July 4. Just a few weeks ago, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had adopted the risky strategy of calling for a quick national election months ahead of schedule. Sunak was desperate for a political play that might change, avoid, or at least mitigate the catastrophe his Conservative Party faced when an election was held. His strategy was a total failure. Britain's Conservative Party, one of the most successful and powerful political parties in history, now faces legitimate questions about its political survival.

How could this have happened? Sunak is now a *former* prime minister and the new prime minister is Keir Starmer, the decidedly bland leader of Britain's Labour Party. The conservatives had held power for 14 years and had long been considered the nation's "party of government." The Conservatives, sometimes referred to as "Tories," are the party of Benjamin Disraeli, Winston Churchill, and Margaret Thatcher. They have been the unquestioned political establishment for the nation and its parliamentary system. That establishment is now broken. The party has been broken. In reality, it broke itself.

When the election results came in, Labour had won 411 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons—a landslide of epic proportions. The Conservatives lost 244 seats won in the previous election and held onto only 121. It was a wipeout from which the party may not survive. Britain's party of government has lost its reputation for competence, and voters were ready to see them go. Starmer's Labour Party ran on a very fuzzy set of policies and proposals, but this was not an election about big ideas. It was an election over basic competence and voter frustration. The Conservatives' 14-year hold on power was through five prime ministers. The party had exchanged the political and moral clarity of the Thatcher years for a mess of incoherent policies and ruinous scandals.

Historians may well argue that it was the 2016 Brexit vote that broke the party. Prime Minister David Cameron, faced with a challenge to his Tory establishment (Eton and Oxford) pro-European worldview, stunned the political class by putting Brexit to a vote. He was sure it would lose. It won. Britain voted to exit the European Union. Cameron was destroyed in terms of political credibility and accordingly resigned. He was followed by no less than four Conservative Party prime ministers.

First came Theresa May, who then gave way to the populist (and near cartoonish) Boris Johnson. He would eventually go down in a crisis over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that he had thrown a party in violation of the policies he enforced on the British people. Johnson was followed by a true conservative, Liz Truss, who went on to make history as the prime minister with the shortest term in British history: 49 days. Truss was followed by Sunak, a technocratic politician of enormous personal wealth (and his wife is even wealthier), whose tumultuous term in office saw a general breakdown of the British welfare state (certainly in terms of wait times and competence), rising inflation, and massive citizen unrest. Not a good look for a wealthy prime minister with a country estate in the U.K. and an expensive house in California. Oddly enough, it also turned out that Sunak held a coveted green card from the United States. Again, not a good look for a British head of government.

Sunak announced his party's bid for another term in office with his call for a quick and unexpected national election. His announcement was in itself a massive political disaster. The prime minister was determined to open his campaign with a major speech outside of No. 10 Downing St., the iconic residence of British prime ministers. He continued giving his address in what became a heavy rain. By the time he finished (which no one remembers for its content), he was standing in a soaking suit looking like a man experiencing a tidal wave. That's exactly what Sunak and his party were facing.

There will be many in the United States who will point to the Conservative Party's defeat in Britain as a failure of conservatism. In this case, that is nonsense. The Conservative Party had abandoned conservative principles and, in one of the weird ironies of the situation, the formerly socialist Labour Party seemed more conservative in personality if nothing else.

This disastrous run of supposedly conservative prime ministers began with Cameron, who in 2012 infamously came out in favor of same-sex marriage with these astounding words: "I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because

I am a Conservative." In other words, he has no earthly idea what conservative means.

Britain faces interesting days ahead. The new Labour government made a lot of promises it can't possibly keep, and all the economic challenges that faced the Sunak government, and more, will face Starmer. Meanwhile, the Conservative Party is going to have to figure out if it intends to be conservative, or even a party at this point. The Republican Party in the United States would do well to look at the catastrophe of the Conservative Party in Britain and learn the lesson fast. If any conservative party forgets conservative principles, it will deserve to be out of power with its leaders soaking wet.



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