

9-8-2016

Book Review: A Challenge to the Progressive Ascendancy

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Recommended Citation

Samson, Steven Alan, "Book Review: A Challenge to the Progressive Ascendancy" (2016). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 450.

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BOOK REVIEW

A Challenge to the Progressive Ascendancy

- *The Conservative Rebellion*
- By Richard Bishirjian
- St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana 2015
- 978-1-58731-158-1

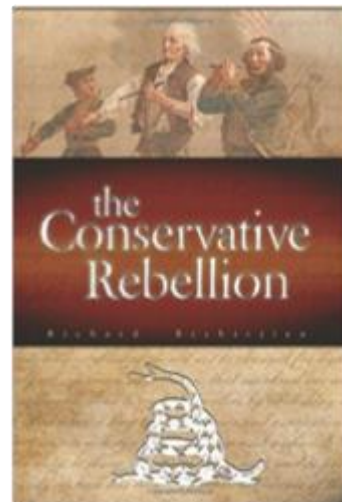
“Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.” The most popular vision of heaven these days is the prospect of some version of heaven on earth. The spirit of our times seems to embody so many possibilities. Todd Huizinga in *The New Totalitarian Temptation* (2016) scrutinizes the “soft utopia” of the European Union’s path to “global governance.” Mary Eberstadt in *It’s Dangerous to Believe* is equally critical in her analysis of the “neo-puritan” secularism that is directed at “marginalizing, silencing, and punishing its traditional competitors” via the sexual revolution. What seems to be heaven on earth is just the opposite for those on “the wrong side of history.”

For the chief political philosopher of Progressivism, Herbert Croly, in *The Promise of American Life* (1909), the expected utopian transfiguration was most likely to be achieved through some “outburst of enthusiasm” that would be “partly the creation of some democratic evangelist—some imitator of Jesus, who will reveal to men the path whereby they may enter into spiritual possession of their individual and social achievements, and immeasurably increase them by virtue of personal regeneration.”

This last speculation may sound vaguely Christian and clearly out of tune with contemporary sensibilities. But this would be to confuse rhetoric with substance. The packaging is different but the utopian sentiment is much the same. Welcome to the Elysian Fields, the last resting place of the modern West’s Edenic imagination.

In *The Conservative Rebellion*, Richard Bishirjian takes up a characteristic theme of the American historical imagination: rebellion against the abuse of authority, whether that of the colonists against the Stamp Act in the mid-1760s or, more recently, against what may be called the Progressive Ascendancy that has dominated the past century of American politics. This is both a memoir that could be entitled the Education of Richard Bishirjian and a wide-ranging meditation on political philosophy, civil religion, and what Henry Adams called the Degradation of the Democratic Dogma.

“The purpose of this study,” the author declares, “is to examine how the American people have come to understand their nationhood as the mystical substance of their common existence.” To relate this story to his own experience of it, he travels two paths which are woven together throughout the book. The first is his own twenty-year participation in the Conservative Rebellion



in the 1960s and 1970s, during which time he worked on election campaigns for Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. The second path is his own experience and education in classical philosophy under Stanley Parry, Gerhart Niemeyer, Ralph McInerny, and Eric Voegelin at Notre Dame, and Michael Oakeshott at the London School of Economics.

The first strand culminates with the beginning of the Reagan presidency and the inevitable fraying of friendships that resulted from “the in-fighting for prominence.” With the end of the Cold War, however, “there occurred a rise of sectarian enthusiasms that threatened to impose a confessional standard on American politics.” This is perhaps the unavoidable outcome of a misplaced longing to bring heaven down to earth. It is perhaps the most important thread that runs through the book and binds everything together.

Bishirjian identifies four historical paradigms that have shaped and reshaped America’s civil society and national identity. The first three are “the Spirit of ’76,” the Founding of the Constitution, and “President Abraham Lincoln’s ‘unsurpassable fusion of democratic symbolism with theoretical content,’ to use Eric Voegelin’s description of the Gettysburg Address” (pp. 3-4). Bishirjian regards Lincoln as “the forerunner of a truly revolutionary fourth paradigm of the American regime who, motivated by abhorrence of slavery, would fashion a civil religion that touched a responsive chord in his listeners because Lincoln’s language was evocative of the King James Version.” Even so, Lincoln was a transitional figure, a forerunner to a utopian idealist who transformed the American regime into a government without limits, “a limitless regime pursuing possible realities—much celebrated in the revival of the myth of Camelot by the Kennedy family.”

President Woodrow Wilson’s Progressive idealism fathered a political religion that became a fourth, thoroughly radical, paradigm that actualized the revolutionary potential of Lincoln’s language and a secular democratic vision developed by Unitarian preachers responding to European nationalist movements and reflecting the deification of man of German idealism. . . .

Following Wilson’s leadership, Progressives reengaged in a permanent revolution aimed at overcoming American traditions, traditional society and the remnants of Christianity. Through them, an aggressive idealism was fashioned that sought not truth, but power to engage in revolutionary acts that would replace reality with another, ‘second reality,’ more to their pleasing (p. 5).

This last phrase echoes the 99th quatrain from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, a popular Victorian-era collection: “Ah, Love! could you and I with Him conspire/
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,/ Would not we shatter it to bits—and then/
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!” The concluding phrase of the quatrain serves as the banner of the Fabian Society’s stained-glass window, in which Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw are depicted hammering away at a globe placed on an anvil.

The balance of the book unpacks the various elements and layers of this tightly wound thesis which, in some critical ways, echoes the conclusions John W. Burgess reached almost a century earlier in *Recent Changes in American Constitutional Theory* (1923).

The hinge of Richard Bishirjian's critique of America's civil religion of Progressivism comes at page 100 of *The Conservative Rebellion*, where he confronts us with a stark choice: "at issue is not whether the Progressives' ideological expectation of eternal peace in history will be realized" but whether America "may well become a nation quite unlike that envisioned by the Founders of American constitutional government—the instrumentality for a New World Order."

The revolutionary dream of Babel is age-old. Global governance is merely its most recent avatar. The resistance tends to be unpopular and underfunded. Now and then, it gives rise to imaginative thinkers and institution-builders. The reader should be prepared to digest *The Conservative Rebellion* slowly and carefully. It should be mined for its philosophical riches. The author has been prospecting this particular field for decades.

Richard Bishirjian, who founded Yorktown University, is a long-time member of the Philadelphia Society, a leading conservative fellowship of scholars and activists. He blogs at <https://dickbishirjian.com/>.

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