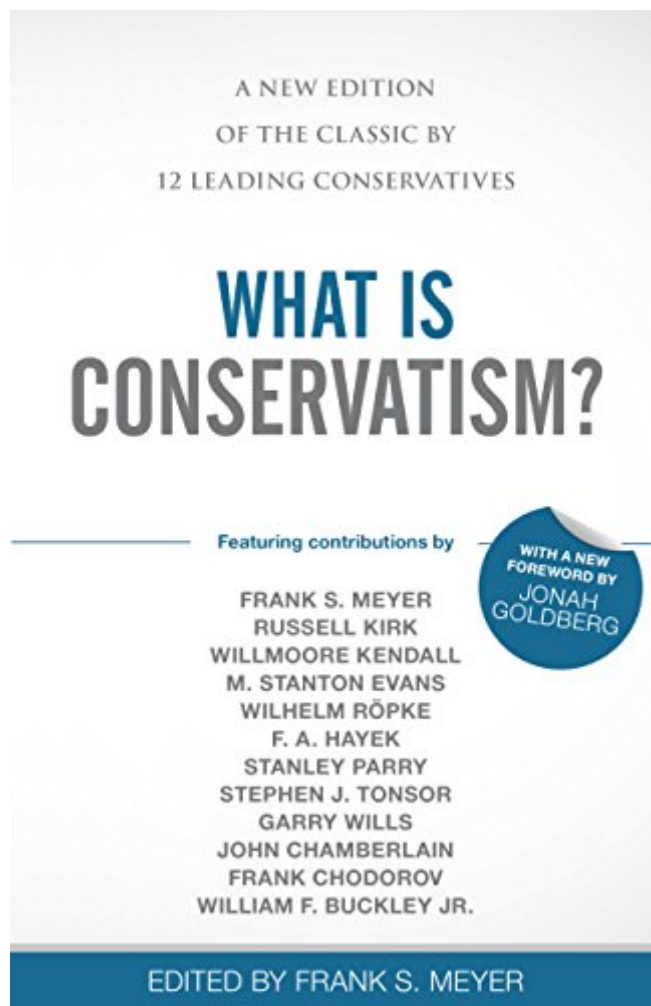


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What Is Conservatism?



Synopsis

What Is Conservatism? (1964) is a conservative classic— as relevant today as it was half a century ago. Just what is conservatism? Many people are groping for answers, especially as conservatives seem to be retreating into factions— Tea Partiers, traditionalists, libertarians, social conservatives, neoconservatives, and so on. But this illuminating book shows what unites conservatives even as it explores conservatism's rich internal debate. Edited by Frank S. Meyer, who popularized the idea of "fusionism" that became the basis for modern American conservatism, What Is Conservatism? features brilliant essays by twelve leading conservative thinkers and spokesmen, including: F. A. Hayek, Nobel Prize-winning economist and author of The Road to Serfdom; William F. Buckley Jr., founder of National Review and the man perhaps most responsible for the rise of the modern conservative movement; Russell Kirk, whose seminal book The Conservative Mind gave the conservative movement its name; M. Stanton Evans, author of the conservative movement's central credo, the "Sharon Statement" (1960). In a foreword to this new edition, #1 New York Times bestselling author and National Review contributing editor Jonah Goldberg explains the profound influence of What Is Conservatism? on conservative thought and the book's relevance today.

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Customer Reviews

Intrigued by the title, *What is Conservatism?*, I approached this book thinking it would answer the question posed. Little did I know, the question was more suited to ask at the end of the book rather than the beginning. The strength of the book is also its weakness. The strength is these essays clearly demonstrate the variety of ideas -- the first principles, the metaphysics, and so on -- that inform the individual's particular brand of conservatism. Stated differently, the many branches of conservatism that can offer satisfaction to one's cultural and philosophical needs -- rebuking the "collective" and "predictable" accusations commonly alleged of conservatism. And though there is little unity on where to begin, these branches are joined together by the tree of their common fight to resist the tyrannical tendencies of modern liberalism. The weakness is the essays are lacking in depth. The essays don't explore key issues, rather they seek to establish generalities and patterns of thought, which are helpful enough, though unsatisfying. I've discovered in the preface to another book what I think can most aptly sum up *What Is Conservatism?*: "Those who charge that there is no conservative position have an easy time of it rhetorically. There is no commonly-acknowledged conservative position today, and any claim to the contrary is easy to make sport of. Yet there is to be found in contemporary conservative literature both a total critique of liberalism, and compelling proposals for the reorientation of our thought. Conservatism must, however, be wiped clean of the parasitic cant that defaces it, and repels so many of those who approach it inquiringly. Up against the faith of a conservative, the great surrealistic ideologies reduce to dust... To do that we must bring down the thing called liberalism, which is a powerful but decadent; and salvage a thing called conservatism, which is weak but viable." -- William Buckley Jr., *Up From Liberalism*

It's also worth noting something which occupies a least a paragraph or two of most of the essays: which type of conservatism Lord Acton and Alexis de Tocqueville belong to. The book offers some marvelous quotes to meditate on (particularly Russell Kirk's essay), which probably merit at least one read of the book, and even the weakest of the essay offer very helpful definitions of conservatism, one of which I will conclude with: "The conservative believes man should be free; he does not believe being free is the end of human existence. He maintains that man exists to form his life in consonance with the objective order, to choose the Good. But "choice" of the Good can take place only in

circumstances favoring volition. Freedom is thus the political context of moral decision; it is the modality within which the human mind can search out moral absolutes. In the conservative view, then, right choice is the terminal value; freedom, an instrumental and therefore subsidiary value. To the conservative, economic and political freedom per se is not "moral

Meyer was a former Communist, but he atoned for this by the many contributions he made to the anti-communist cause and to the conservative movement. The latter, I believe, owes an incalculable debt to him. Before 1960, Meyer, who was at the time a senior editor of National Review, began arguing that there was no inherent contradiction between the two major streams of the Right in America, free-market principles and traditional values. He further argued that if the conservative movement was going to succeed, adherents of both lines of thought, natural allies on most issues, must be fused together. Supporters of a conservative economic policy, he taught, couldn't expect their policies to be enacted without the backing of social-issue conservatives. And it was equally true, he continued, that social-issue conservatives couldn't expect their policies to be enacted unless they allied with economic conservatives. The presidential elections of 1980, 1984 and 1988, as well as the congressional elections of 1994 and 1996, were manifestations of the wisdom of Frank Meyer.

This collection of essays is pretty readable for a work published in the 60s. It's also amazing how much the debate has stayed the same - it still pits libertarians against cultural conservatives, with some of the essays in this book (Hayek's "Why I Am Not a Conservative", for example) remaining as crucial texts today. The authors in this book who remain famous are Hayek, Ropke, Garry Wills, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Russell Kirk. Unfortunately, the others are mainly of historical interest. All in all, it's worth reading just to see how timeless some of these arguments are and to see arguments of these important thinkers.

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