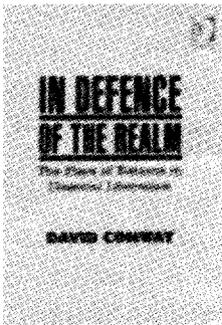

Book Reviews

In Defence of the Realm: The Place of Nations in Classical Liberalism

by David Conway

Ashgate Publishing • 2004 • 210 pages • \$79.95

Reviewed by Richard M. Ebeling



Classical liberalism is a universal philosophy of the social good. It argues that the individual should be recognized as possessing the fundamental rights to life, liberty, and property, which neither private individuals nor political authorities should be permitted to violate or abridge. The role of

government in the classical-liberal ideal is protector and respecter of those rights, and very little else.

Classical liberalism is universal because the rights to life, liberty, and property are not reserved for any special people or nation. Every individual, everywhere and at any time, is entitled to those rights. For the classical liberal, history is the story of the struggle for liberty.

The tradition of liberty has been the heritage of only a tiny number of nations. Its focal point over the last several centuries has been Great Britain and the United States, with a few other countries in the shadow of their influence. And for a hundred years now, the tradition in those countries has been under constant attack by proponents of various forms of collectivism, from the mild to the extreme.

If this heritage were to be completely lost in those few countries, it would be a loss not only for them, but also for the entire world. How shall the heritage of liberty be preserved, therefore, in Great Britain and the United States? This is the question political philosopher David Conway attempts to answer in his recent work, *In Defence of the Realm: The Place of Nations in Classical Liberalism*.

Liberty is under attack, Conway warns, from the ideology of political correctness and multiculturalism. Government economic and social policies, and the

curriculum in public schools, are undermining both the practice of liberty and any knowledge of its history and importance. The idea of group and collective “rights” based on race, gender, ethnicity, and social “class” has replaced the ideal of individual liberty. The ethics of coercive redistribution of wealth has superseded the principles of inviolate private property and self-responsibility.

What needs to be restored, Conway argues, is a national awareness of and patriotic pride in being a Briton or an American born into the ideal of liberty. In no way does Conway fall into the trap of “my country right or wrong.” He would consider that a false and twisted sense of patriotism rightly understood.

He refers to and extensively quotes from leading figures of liberty over the last three centuries to demonstrate that it was once understood that what made someone a “real” Briton or American was the knowledge that his forebears had fought for personal, social, economic, and political liberty. That is what created much of the national identity, political loyalty, and social spirit in Britain and America.

The central question then arises over how that older sense of what it means to be an American (or a Briton) can be restored. The issue is not the desirability of a rebirth of a national spirit of liberty. (See Richard M. Ebeling, “What It Means to Be an American: Let Freedom Reign,” *Notes from FEE*, November 2003.) The problem concerns the most appropriate means to that end.

Conway wishes to use the power of the state to move back in this direction. While he recognizes the rationale for privatizing education, he nevertheless proposes to use the existing public schools to educate young Britons and Americans about the true history of their countries. He wants to impose legal requirements to guarantee that English remains the national language. And he wishes to stem the flow and more selectively determine the patterns of immigration into the two countries.

The problem is that those means will fail and may very well make a restoration of the tradition of liberty even more difficult. Given the stranglehold that advocates of political correctness and multiculturalism have over the government’s monopoly school system, the

only way to undermine its power is for a growing number of people to opt out. The continuing growth of a parallel network of private schools and home-schooling families offers the better chance to liberate the minds of America's young from government propaganda. At the same time, a new generation will learn the morality and the practice of self-responsibility and self-improvement as foundation stones of a free society.

The power of a common language in reinforcing a sense of a shared identity certainly cannot be denied. But a government mandate is not consistent with the ideal of freedom. Instead, the drive should be for a repeal of laws that rigidly impose bi- or multilingual education and standards on society. Freedom of association and the gains from trade in the market should determine which or how many languages within the nation best serve the interests of the people. The selection of language should be left to the "invisible hand" of the free society, rather than the fist of government.

Finally, it is difficult to see how the principle of liberty can be consistently practiced if it does not include freedom of movement. Immigration laws, no matter what rules and standards may be used, remain a form of social engineering and political planning. There are presently a variety of perverse incentives at work in attracting some people into the United States (for example, various welfare-state benefits for which the new arrival may be immediately eligible), and policy reforms should aim to eliminate them. If the welfare state cannot be abolished in the near term, one method of limiting its influence would be to stipulate that all new immigrants are ineligible for welfare benefits of any sort for the first ten years they and their dependents reside in the United States.

There has been a unique British and American character, and among its qualities has been a greater cultural and political appreciation of liberty. This is increasingly threatened today. If that heritage is to be preserved and enriched, the means must be consistent with the ideal.



Richard Ebeling is the president of FEE.

Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice

by Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn

Brookings Institution Press • 2004 • 151 pages • \$16.95

Reviewed by James Otteson



Is *the Market Moral?* is a debate between economist Rebecca Blank and *Wall Street Journal* editor William McGurn not about the extent to which market economies are compatible with morality, as the slim volume's title suggests, but rather about the extent to which they are compatible with Christianity. Both Blank and McGurn are Christians, the former a Lutheran and the latter a Catholic; the book comprises their statements of their views and their responses to each other.

Despite her acknowledgment that "there is no viable alternative to the market as an organizing principle for an economic system in a complex society," Blank believes that "there are a variety of justifications for government action beyond those conventionally recognized by economists." In support of the first claim, Blank lists several advantages of market economies: proper alignment of incentives, efficiency, and decentralized decision-making. She also raises standard problems, however, like asymmetrical information, externalities, public goods, and monopolies, which she argues require government intervention. Still, her claim is that the government's role is to help keep the market competitive, not to replace it or pervert its generally beneficial structure.

But when she turns her attention to the market's concordance with Christian principles, she finds it more seriously lacking. She argues that whereas the market concentrates only on individuals, Christianity focuses on both individuals and communities; whereas the market calls on us only to be self-interested, Christianity calls on us to be "other-interested"; whereas the market tells us that "more is better," Christianity tells us that sometimes less is more; whereas the market tells us that any good may be produced for which there is a demand, Christianity cannot view all choices as morally neutral; and, finally,