

avoid placing society's imprimatur on homosexual relationships, or in ugly and unfounded stereotypes about gay people as hopelessly hyper-promiscuous or unstable. But it cannot easily be found in a world-view that affirms, as Blankenhorn recently did, "the equal dignity of homosexual love."

Perhaps, just perhaps, Blankenhorn will one day see that marriage offers gay people and their families, at no cost to heterosexuals, the best hope that they too will not be "condemned to drift in and out of shifting relationships forever."

Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement

BY KEVIN J. SMANT

*Reviewed by Michael B. Brennan**

Temporary deviations from fundamental principles are always more or less dangerous. When the first pretext fails, those who become interested in prolonging the evil will rarely be at a loss for other pretexts.

James Madison

Civilized society seeks to achieve a proper balance between freedom and order. Law is often the arbiter. The tension between liberty and order is litigated ubiquitously, from criminal courts to the "war-on-terrorism" cases. While appellate courts adjudicate this balance, the debate over government imposition on individual liberties has its deep roots in a philosophical and historical exchange.

The subject of this biography—a Communist *apparatchik*, *National Review* editor, conservative philosopher, and a central figure in the development of the conservative movement in the United States—devoted his life to that debate. The epigraph above could be his credo.

Frank Meyer, born in New Jersey in 1909, joined the Communist party in 1931 while at Oxford. For ten years he served the party as an educator and organizer. When Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, he and other American Communists urged American entry into World War II on the side of the Soviets. The Communist party gave Meyer permission to join the U.S. Army, but he suffered severe foot problems before completing officer's training. An instructor took pity on Meyer and gave him free time that he spent in the library. In this unlikely spot, while an active Communist training in the U.S. Army, the seeds of conversion were planted. There Meyer read *The Federalist Papers*, which engendered an appreciation for the separation of powers and limited government in the United States. He was also influenced by Friedrich von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* which argued that Communism requires planning which must lead to violations of individual rights, and Richard Weaver's *Ideas have Consequences* which affirmed the existence of universal truths and defended private property.

*Michael B. Brennan is a judge in the Milwaukee County Circuit Court in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

In 1945 Meyer and his wife Elsie, whom he met through the party, broke from the Communists completely. This autodidactical conversion brought the Meyers and their growing family extreme difficulties. The Communists were known for Stalinistic assassination of their enemies. The Meyers took to sleeping with a loaded rifle next to their bed. During the early to mid-1950's Meyer testified in several prosecutions of Communists under the Smith Act, and the FBI debriefed him extensively.

Meyer also began to contact authors and journalists, hoping to become active in the conservative movement, which at the time was defined by Russell Kirk in his monograph *The Conservative Mind*. While Meyer agreed with Kirk's attacks on "collectivism," as it was called, he found they lacked a body of principles upon which to base their attacks on modern liberalism. Thus began Meyer's lifelong role of critiquing and defining American conservatism. Meyer had begun a friendship with a young William F. Buckley, Jr., who asked Meyer to join the original staff of a new magazine named *National Review*.

The bulk of Smant's book reviews Meyer's work at *National Review*. From 1956 until 1972 Meyer was a senior editor and wrote a regular column entitled "Principles and Heresies" (from which Smant's book takes its title). Throughout his tenure Meyer played a crucial role in the magazine's debates. Meyer aptly chose the title of his *National Review* column: identifying, developing, and applying first principles animated his work. Smant portrays Meyer as an intellectual and articulate teacher longing for ideological purity, and *National Review* as an outlet for Meyer's thinking. Meyer was a deep reader in classical literature and history with a habit of developing ideas through long argument and discussion. This book details his unceasing attempts to bring principle to bear on political, legal, and cultural issues of the day, through his column and five books, the most famous of which, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo*, offered a defining statement of Meyer's beliefs.

Meyer's key philosophical contribution to the conservative movement was to address the divide between traditionalists and libertarians. Traditionalists emphasized maintaining a moral order based on transcendent virtuous principles. This strand of conservatism holds that absolute truths and an objective moral code exist, that these are knowable by man, and that a fundamental view of humanity follows from those truths: the individual person is the reference point for all politics and philosophy. He argued that traditional precepts, rather than the relativistic or materialistic premises of modern thought, were needed to undergird a regime of freedom. Meyer embraced a traditional interpretation of the Constitution understanding the Framers' intent and the importance of the separation of powers.

Libertarians hold freedom as the only absolute. Among creatures, only human beings can choose, and no ideology, government or institution should deny this right. "Truth withers when freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it," according to Meyer. In the 1960's libertarians constituted an increasingly vocal and sizable portion of the American conservative movement. While Meyer considered himself a "libertarian-conservative," he was wary of the extremes

of libertarians. While freedom is the highest goal of a political order, once attained, Meyer questioned how it should be used. The libertarian response was to do what they wanted. But only in civilizations have men risen above savagery. To Meyer, “[t]he first victim of the mobs let loose by the weakening of civilizational restraint will be, as it has always been, freedom—for anyone, anywhere.”

Meyer’s reconciliation of these two philosophies bridged a troubling gap in the burgeoning American conservative movement. As Smart describes Meyer’s synthesis of principles, truth and order exist, “and freedom was the highest *political* end, it being the way for the individual legitimately to choose the truth.” This synthesis came to be called “fusionism” (a label Meyer rejected; he preferred “marriage”). Meyer corrected those who emphasized one school of thought to the exclusion of the other, and preached that disagreements between them resulted from inadequate vision and ignorance of the cultural record. Rather than an organization to compel virtue, the State can facilitate the conditions for individuals to choose virtue. A politician’s responsibility is to broaden liberty for those choices to occur. Accordingly, Meyer emphasized limiting the size of the state and expanding individual freedom while maintaining a moral order based on transcendent principles.

To Meyer, this “marriage” became the first premise of conservatism. From it answers to political and cultural issues could be derived: the efficacy of the free market, opposition to a centralized federal government, the proper role of the courts, and of course fierce anti-Communism, which was the defining issue for *National Review* and Meyer. He viewed the Cold War in moral terms, and saw the world in crisis brought on by continued Communist aggression. Meyer and *National Review* made unrelenting efforts to fortify public opinion against Communism. Smart writes of Meyer’s sense of duty, as a former Communist, to educate the West and warn of Communism’s serious dangers. A shared hatred of Communism formed the umbrella under which traditionalists and libertarians found shelter. Meyer brokered an uneasy truce between them.

While Meyer was a libertarian, in his own words “by temperament and by inclination,” this aspect of his political philosophy is not fully explored by Smart, perhaps because it was a more instinctual part of Meyer’s thinking. It is true that Meyer took the core concept that attracts libertarians—freedom—and explained its necessity for traditionalists. But Smart does not develop Meyer’s objections to John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism, a philosophy so attractive to some libertarians. Meyer had great problems with an Enlightenment philosophy in which the state has no stake on the question of virtue, and in which the term “liberty” is polymorphous to the point of uselessness. How Meyer would join issue with libertarians over Mill might explain why he retained his libertarian roots, notwithstanding difficulties inherent in that philosophy.

Developing a philosophy is one thing; seeing it applied to issues of the day is another. As Meyer and *National Review* faced the 1960’s and 1970’s, they confronted this continuing tension between principles and pragmatism. Meyer believed that politics should be based upon principles, and that compromise without attention to those first principles led to bad public policy. But

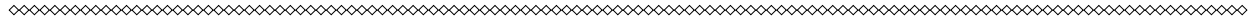
National Review was neither a philosophical quarterly nor a political party publication. It was a journal of thought and opinion. Through heated editorial meetings, which the staff called “agonies,” and a flurry of memoranda, Meyer attempted to impress his view of principle upon his colleagues. When Meyer argued, he placed the issue in historical and cultural context (Smart uses the same approach, to good effect), and usually let the argument flow from his first premise, described above. Buckley would occasionally refer to Meyer’s home in Woodstock, New York as “ground control,” guiding *National Review* on the correct path.

But Meyer did not just hole up in his mountain home in Woodstock. He helped build a conservative movement by befriending younger conservatives, lecturing across the country, and seeking contacts with conservative groups and organizations. He applied his organizing talents learned in years as a Communist to help found New York’s Conservative party, as well as the American Conservative Union.

Smart methodically and thoroughly describes how this tension between principle and pragmatics played out through the events of the 1960’s and 1970’s: the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater election with its potentially apocalyptic result for conservatives; the expulsion of the John Birch Society from the conservative movement; the formation of New York’s Conservative party; the civil rights movement; conservatives’ relationship with candidate and then President Nixon; and Vietnam. Throughout, Meyer contended how conservatives should understand and act in the political circumstances of the day. Meyer’s role was to hold those involved (of any political stripe) to first principles, while taking into account the practical political consequences of their positions. For Meyer, on any of these questions political parties do not have to be “paradigms of ideological purity,” but must take “broadly principled position[s].” While prudential choice among “immediate practical alternatives” was proper, conservatives must know the essential nature of the tradition they wanted to conserve.

Conservatism as an American political philosophy has become a popular scholarly topic. Meyer’s philosophical and political contributions have been outlined in other recent works, such as Rick Perlstein’s *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* and George Nash’s *The Conservative Intellectual Movement since 1945*. But not until this biography is Meyer’s full story told, and told well. While the book is heavy with internal *National Review* struggles, and may understate the ex-Communist’s contributions to political organizational efforts, Kevin Smart makes an erudite addition to this corpus by analyzing the difficulties of translating Meyer’s views of the balance between freedom and order into practice.

Meyer’s life elucidates how “conservatism” is hardly a static label. Conservatives differ greatly on many questions, legal and political, and those battles inform not just the issues of that day, but the shades of conservative judges, scholars, and politicians whom we see today. While not an Oz behind a political curtain, Smart’s book details how Meyer’s voice resonates in American conservatism. In his roles as ideological purist and political organizer, Meyer shepherded the conservative movement into



prominence. Meyer would not live to see the victories and defeats of his political philosophy as they played out, even in today's law and politics. He died of cancer in 1972.

While the Cold War has been replaced by the War on Terror, that battle is still seen in and fought on moral terms. For Meyer, "conservatives, irrespective of whether their emphasis is upon tradition and order or upon liberty, unite in their veneration of the ordered liberty conceived and executed by the framers of the Constitution." Meyer identified and promoted that a keen vision and cultural knowledge can provide a philosophical premise from which to address the issues of the day. His philosophical legacy can bring clarity to the historical debate over the contours of "ordered liberty."

