

# The Great Buckley Stand-off Continued from page 7

## Michalyszyn

WFB: Well, something like that. It is a risky proposition that a Christian could associate with a God-hater more easily than the God-hater with the Christian. But the reason why Christians can associate with atheists is because we hold that, above all, faith is a gift and that, therefore, there is no accounting for the bad fortune that had beset those who do not believe or the good fortune that has befallen those who do.

I have grounds for optimism based not merely on my own amiable experience with all but the most dedicated atheists, but on the conviction that the hideousness of a science-centered age has resulted in a stimulation of religious scholarship and of all those other impulses, intellectual and spiritual, by which man is constantly confounding the most recent wave of neoterics who insist that man is merely a pandemonic conjunction of ethereal gases. The atheists have not got around to answering Huxley's self critical confession that neither he nor his followers had succeeded in showing how you can deduce Hamlet from the molecular structure of a mutton chop.

Gateway: We're wrapping up, but I would like to ask, what you think is the gravest crisis we face today?

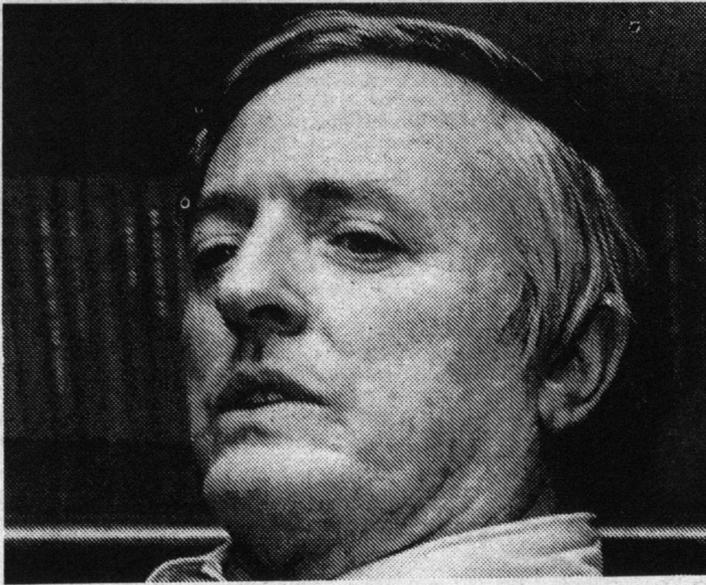
WFB: I deplore this century's most distinctive aggression, which is against privacy, publicly understood. It is not simply that we want peace and quietude. Indeed, Trotsky observed that "If you wish to lead a quiet life, you picked the wrong century to be born in." ("And indeed," observed Whittaker Chambers, "the point was finally proven when a pickaxe mauled the brain of the man who framed those words")

But given that, recognize that is essentially the modernist view that only the state can negotiate the shoals that lie ahead of twentieth century man. We are accordingly urged to believe in the state as the primary agent of individual concerns, a belief that is embedded in the analysis and rhetoric of socialism.

It is the chronic failure of liberalism that it obliges circumstance because it had an inadequate discriminatory apparatus which might cause it to take any other course. There are unemployed in America? *Rush them aid.* Commuters do not want to pay the cost of subways? *Get someone else to pay it.* Farmers do not want to leave the land? *Let them till it, buy and destroy and produce.* Labor unions want the closed shop? *It is theirs.* Inflation goes forward in all industrialized societies? *We will have continued inflation.* Communism is in control behind the Iron Curtain? *Coexist with it.* The tidal wave of industrialism will

## Andersen

One could also mention that Mencken was an agnostic, not an atheist; that his general attitude to religion was not



William F. Buckley, Jr.

sweep in the welfare state? *Pull down the sea walls!*

Gateway: You have the answers, no doubt.

WFB: A Program? Call it a No-Program, if you will. I will not cede more power to the state. I will hoard my power like a miser, resisting every effort to drain it away from me. I will than *use* my power, as I see fit. I mean to live my life an obedient man, but obedient to God, subservient to the wisdom of my ancestors; never to the authority of political truths arrived at yesterday at the voting booth. That is a program of sorts, is it not?

Gateway: And how goes it?

WFB: I can only repeat what I said along time ago. It is undoubtedly necessary, every now and then, to bare one's teeth; and we do so, preferably in the course of smiling. But the smiles have a way of freezing, as the sadness rolls in. The joys of warmaking (for conservative causes) presuppose the eventual stillness of victory; and that, so far as I can see, is beyond our reach. Perhaps it was meant to be so.

The next line was "Perhaps. But one must resist...." written by Geroge H. Nash

hostility, but amused disdain; that he was reverent, not hostile to Bach's *B Minor Mass*; that in his time Mencken championed the Latin Mass of the Catholic Church as vociferously as Buckley does nowadays; that Mencken made no special

efforts to "evangelize" for agnosticism since he was convinced that believers of any stripe could only switch delusions, not drop them; and finally that all four men were not hostile towards "religion" per se (such an attitude is biologically impossible, as Buckley knows full well, for he has argued that man is basically a religious animal) but rather they were hostile towards certain aspects of religion, e.g. the harrassment of civilized people by pious busybodies who yowl for prohibition, suppression and censorship of ideas they dislike, anti-evolution laws, blue laws, anti-birth control laws, ad nauseam.

Buckley probably knows all this (he regularly drops Mencken's name with an air of easy familiarity) so the misrepresentation seems willful. Buckley has bitterly and justifiably complained about being labelled a fascist on many occasions, but the intellectual decency he expects from his opponents is something he seems reluctant to return.

Note also Buckley's curious logic in his rhetorical question, "Can you be a conservative and despise God and feel contempt for those who believe in him?" Notice, especially, how the question is predicated on the assumption that God exists (one can't despise something that doesn't exist). Note, finally, how this assumption makes nonsense of the question, since if one assumes God exists then it would be absurd to feel contempt for someone who likewise believes in him. Clearly Buckley was less interested in asking a pertinent (and intelligible) question than in raising the spectre of atheists gnashing their teeth at the devout.

Buckley's horrendous English also makes an appearance, in the last sentence of the passage. To say that religion plays a vital role in conservatism is to say nothing. It plays a vital role even in communism, where it performs the crucial function of scapegoat. Indeed, it would be hard to find an area of human affairs that it doesn't play a role in.

Buckley has always been vague on the exact nature of the link between conservatism and religion, but he has always vehemently insisted it was there. Here is another sample, still from the same essay: "The sustenance that gives a special bloom to Christian conservatism fails to reach the purely secularist conservatism." Translation: "God is on our side." Never mind that Buckley blooms into libel of Mencken, incomprehensible logic, and opaque cliches like "playing a vital role"; the inspiration is definitely there.

(This spectroscopic analysis will be continued Thursday, including the great revelation about the hallucinogenic side of Buckley's conservative philosophy.)

P.M.

in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, a lengthy excerpt of which appeared in the 20th Anniversary of *National Review*. I should note at this point that contrived 'interview' with William F. Buckley; it relies principally on two sources: Buckley's introduction to *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?: American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* and the last chapter of Buckley's *Up From Liberalism*, in which he outlines his conservative program. Other sources include Buckley's *Inveighing We Will Go*, *The Governor Listeth*, *The Jeweler's Eye*, *A Hymnal*, *Rumbles Left and Right*, and innumerable editions of *National Review*.

It has been my intention in contriving a chat with Buckley really to expose to our readers some thoughts and some literature uncommon to the twentieth century. Though certainly I have taken Buckley out of context and attributed to him quotations clearly unspoken and unwritten, (albeit rarely), and then for transitional purposes, I have sincerely tried not to attribute things that he *could not have* said or written.

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