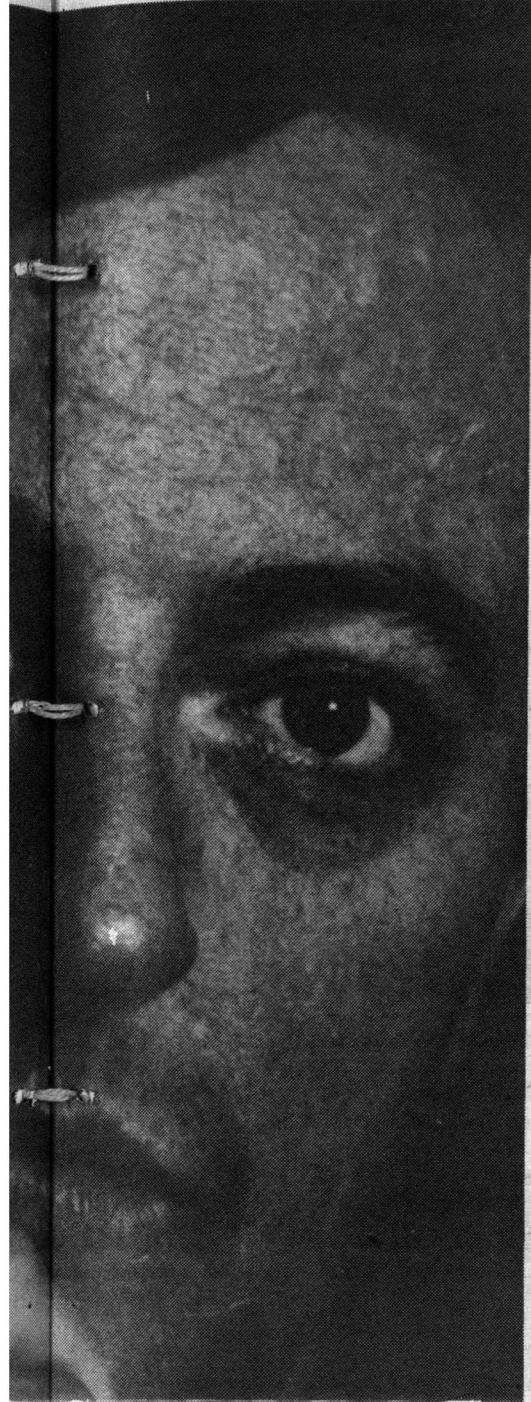


ive or mere pussyfooter?



F. Buckley, Jr.

*Buckley: "The sustenance that gives a special bloom to Christian conservatism fails to reach the purely secularist conservatism."
Translation: "God is on our side."*

by Jens Andersen

I disliked William F. Buckley from the moment I first began reading him. That was more than ten years ago, when my cheeks were downy, and I still thought that the imprimatur of the *New York Times* on a book was ipso facto proof of its worth:

To say Buckley is merely an entertainer is to do him gross injustice. His thoughts and epithets crackle from the page; he engages himself squarely in all the issues of the day, and his gadfly stings often draw blood. Buckley is a man of character and conviction.

New York Times

I bought two of Buckley's then-current books of essays and his *Up from Liberalism* on the basis of the *Times* blurb plus praise from *Esquire* ("What Buckley has is a sort of sparkle and grace..."), *Newsday*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Malcolm Muggeridge ("In our time free minds are desperately rare and precious, and in Buckley I detect one."), Evelyn Waugh, and other pundits.

But, try as I would, reading Buckley simply made the bile rise in my throat. I didn't force myself to read very much — just enough to get a whiff of a few disagreeable ideas (e.g. rock music is trivial at best; Christianity is exalted; censorship of the explicit depiction of sex is good policy) and to note a certain slipperiness and sanctimoniousness in his arguments. Then I shelved the books.

There they rested for many years, until in 1978 I ran across a copy of *Doonesbury's Greatest Hits* with an introduction written by...guess who. Buckley, as it happened, was as rabid a fan of the *Doonesbury* strip as myself, and the only off-note my sensitive radar could detect was Buckley's heavy-handed stress on the remarkable resemblance between cartoonist G. B. Trudeau's scintillating ideas and his own conservative views.

Well, self-promotion is only a venial sin, and if conservatism is a crime, then I am certainly liable to be arrested, for in the intervening years my own observations of the human comedy and the catalytic criticism of H. L. Mencken had made me fairly conservative, at least in my political and economic outlooks.

So I sat down to re-read Buckley, wondering if I hadn't missed something the first time around. Alas, Buckley's writing still stuck in my craw. But this time I resolved that, suffering be damned, I was going to read Buckley until I got to the bottom of his ideas.

So I read his seminal treatise *God and Man at Yale* in which, as a fresh Yale graduate, he exposed the sinister collectivism and atheism that crept into the university in the late 1940's, slithering past indifferent students, faculty, alumni and trustees, who were paralyzed by liberalism and delusions of academic freedom. Then his second book *McCarthy and His Enemies*, wherein he argued that the crusading anti-communist Senator was perhaps a bit misguided, but basically an admirable fellow on a noble mission. Then great portions of his numerous books of essays. Then his political fable *Stained Glass*.

Then I waded through his autobiographical vignette *Cruising Speed* and glimpsed at *The Unmaking of a Mayor*. Another glance at *Up from Liberalism*. All of *Four Reforms*. Snippets from *National Review*. Some newspaper columns syndicated in the *Edmonton Journal*. A peek into Buckley's anthology of 20th century conservative thought (yawn). And finally, for a little perspective, Charles Markmann's shallow but occasionally interesting book *The Buckleys* — mostly about Bill Jr. of course.

A horrible dose of Buckley it was, even spread over three years, and there was scarcely a page that didn't make me thirst

for a drink of Mencken to wash away the bad taste. But like most painful experiences it was educational. What I learned was, first, that contrary to the *New York Times* Buckley does not address issues squarely, rather he pussyfoots around them, with more adroitness than any sophist since Pangloss. Secondly, his conservatism is at best commonsensical, and at worst muddled, superficial and even downright hallucinogenic. And third, his writing has, contrary to *Esquire*, all the sparkle and grace of canned music.

As regards the first conclusion, avowed Catholic Buckley almost perfectly fulfills Nietzsche's dictum that, "Whoever has theological blood in his veins is shift and dishonorable in all things."

Take, for instance, this extract from his essay "Notes Toward an Empirical Definition of Conservatism" (from *The Jeweller's Eye*):

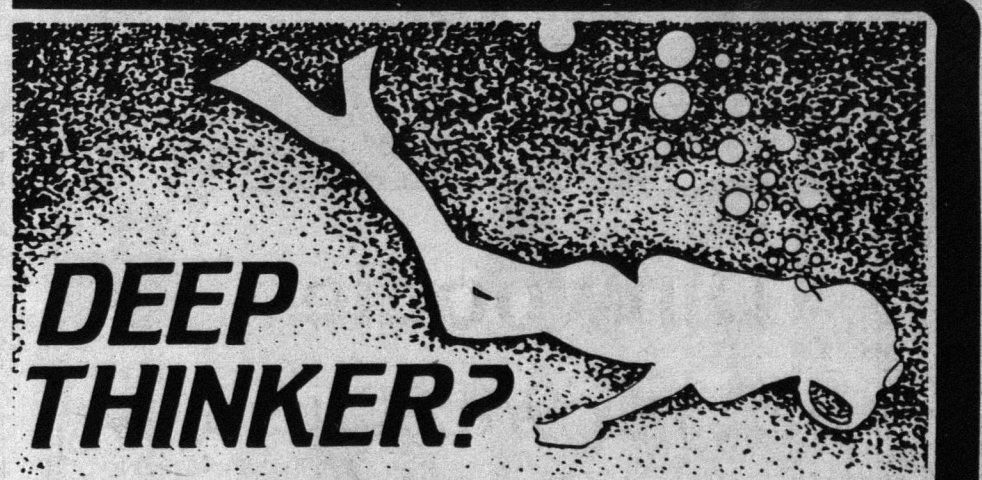
Can you be a conservative and believe in God? Obviously. Can you be a conservative and not believe in God? This is an empirical essay, and so the answer is, as obviously, yes. Can you be a conservative and despise God and feel contempt for those who believe in him? I would say no. True, Max Eastman is the only man who has left the masthead of National Review in protest against its pro-religious sympathies, but it does not follow that this deed was eccentric; he, after all, was probably the only man on National Review with that old-time hostility to religion associated with evangelical atheism — with e.g., the

names of Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Henry Mencken and Clarence Darrow, old friends of Eastman. If one dismisses religion as intellectually contemptible, it becomes difficult to identify oneself wholly with a movement in which religion plays a vital role.

The uninformed person reading this passage would quite reasonably conclude from it that Theodore Dreiser and Co. were atheists, hostile to religion, who spent a good deal of time trying to convince people that God does not exist. This innuendo, which Buckley clearly put into the passage, has all the idiot simplicity of the suggestion that Freud was a sexualist, hospitable to copulation, who spent a lot of time urging people to go to bed. It doesn't even begin to summarize the complex religious beliefs of these four markedly different men.

For example, it would hardly be an exaggeration, and perhaps even an understatement to say that the central feature of novelist and writer Theodore Dreiser's personality was his religiosity. He may not have ended up believing that heaven is paved with sapphire as described in Exodus 24:9-11, but his writings contain an unmistakable vein of deep religious feeling, which quite refutes any charge of mere hostility to religion. Indeed, more genuine awe and wonder at the ultimate mystery of life is expressed in Dreiser's one short story "The Lost Phoebe" than in the whole range of Buckley's work.

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