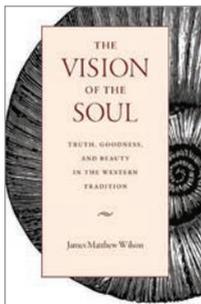


Recovering The Soul of Conservatism

JAMES E. PERSON JR.



The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition, by James Matthew Wilson (Catholic University Press, 444 pp., \$29.95)

SINCE the earliest days of NATIONAL REVIEW, conservative thinkers have recurrently asked: *Precisely what do conservatives seek to conserve?*

Longtime contributor Russell Kirk provided a broad answer to this question in his landmark work *The Conservative Mind* (1953), writing that the modern conservative “is concerned, first of all, for the regeneration of the spirit and character—with the perennial problem of the inner order of the soul, the restoration of the ethical understanding, and the religious sanction upon which any life worth living is founded. This is conservatism at its highest.”

Certain factions within the world of conservatism place little emphasis upon the regeneration of the spirit and character. But if there is *anything* conservatives should stand for, claims Villanova professor James Matthew Wilson in his new book, it should be “those supreme, indeed divine, useless properties of reality: truth, goodness, beauty,” transcendent qualities that inform and uplift men and women in their journey to attain “the Good Life”: a well-rounded life

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lived in fellowship with God and one’s neighbor. The pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty is at the heart of what George Santayana meant when he wrote of “the Great Tradition,” the tradition for which Edmund Burke served as a major post-Enlightenment voice.

“When we ask, what is it that conservatives wish to conserve, Burke and his descendants tell us, above all, they wish to conserve the riches that have been given into our possession by way of the long, uneven assimilation of the genius of Athens with that of Jerusalem,” states Wilson, speaking of the merging of Platonic philosophy with Biblical faith, in what is often called “Christian Platonism.” The author explains that we must seek to conserve the transcendental guideposts of the West, in an effort “to reawaken the natural yearning—the irresistible interest—for them

necessarily to the sinful, but to the shallow and the third-rate, which are, at best, only temporarily satisfying.

What is the alternative to this state of affairs? Wilson begins with the assumption that man is something other than an accident of the universe. Man, however flawed, is a rational creature, with an inborn restlessness to pursue what he believes to be the good, to prefer the true to the false, and to enjoy the beautiful. These assumptions align with the emphasis of Burke’s famous *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Wilson also examines Burke’s more famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, deeming it a seminal document that affirms the classical view of an ordered universe and beauty as a truth readily understood by those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

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that is always at least germinally present in the human spirit and, above all, is woven into the ordered fabric of the cosmos itself.”

This is a fine goal; but the first order of business is to shoo away the elephant in the room, represented by this question: In speaking of truth, beauty, and goodness, aren’t we speaking of highly subjective concepts? Do we not live in a world in which the very idea of objective truth is scoffed at, goodness is defined as whatever our betters in government say it is, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder (however bloodshot with passion, illness, or madness that eye might be)?

Wilson points out that the source of this distortion lies in an essential corruption within human nature itself, one that has dulled and befogged man’s perceptions of the true and the beautiful even as it has warped his philosophies and ideologies. As Boethius put it, humanity’s quest for what is best might be likened to the plight of drunken men who wander in cloudy memory but no longer know the road home. In the meantime, the search for the enduring transcendental qualities often leads not

In a passage reminiscent of the Inklings, Wilson notes that men and women are story-creating and story-telling creatures well suited to myth-making, and that myth is a largely unacknowledged element within the realm of human reason. C. S. Lewis famously averred that “reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.” *Mythos* and *Logos* do not exist in separate, watertight compartments, Wilson notes; they are intertwined.

Wilson seeks to point in the direction of a fuller life: to provide “a compelling account of truth, goodness, and beauty that will make the reality of these transcendental properties of being visible, comprehensible, and defensible for a new generation.” In this, he has succeeded. A closely argued work that rewards careful reading, *The Vision of the Soul* belongs on the same shelf as the works by Burke and Kirk already named, along with C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* and Gregory Wolfe’s admirable study *Beauty Will Save the World*. **NR**