

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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Occasional Essays  
and Other Stuff  
for Christian  
Students

Presented by the  
President of

Central Baptist  
Theological  
Seminary of  
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,  
out of season;  
reprove, rebuke, exhort  
with all longsuffering  
and doctrine.”

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July 28, 2006

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## Tolerance: Locating the Boundaries

Kevin T. Bauder

Some societies have perished because of anarchy, and some have perished because of tyranny. A just society must avoid both. It must escape anarchy by refusing to tolerate at least some activities in which at least some people would like to engage. It must avoid tyranny by tolerating at least some ideas and activities that at least some people find objectionable.

How is a society to determine what ought to be tolerated? Some Christians have been tempted to answer this question by using biblical morality as a shortcut around reasoned discourse. They have presented the view that no violation of divine law ought to be tolerated. If their theory could be implemented, it would result in a theocracy. Short of Messiah's presence, however, it cannot be implemented. Nor should it be. Christians are nowhere authorized to use coercion in order to impose biblical morality upon their societies. A society cannot establish the boundaries of tolerance simply by appealing to divine law. Theonomy is a dead end.

Another dead end is the appeal to xenophobic self-preservation. People within a society seem to react intuitively against any idea or practice that challenges their shared, fundamental assumptions. Such a reaction would be a good thing only if all of the fundamental assumptions were true. When they are not true, however, they likely result in an unjust society. The only way of righting the injustice is to challenge the false assumptions. This can occur only where some measure of dissent and difference is tolerated.

Both the theonomist and the xenophobic approaches to intolerance are wrong. So is the notion that “might makes right,” and its kindred philosophy that the majority rules. While brute strength or sheer numbers often do determine the boundaries of tolerance within a given society, strength may be employed amiss, and the masses are often wrong.

How, then, may the boundaries be drawn so as to avoid both anarchy and tyranny, and to foster both order and justice? There is a right answer to this question, and the answer is neither theocracy nor theonomy. It is what, for lack of a better expression, can be called “conservatism.”

Conservatives believe in an ordered universe, which is simply another way of saying that they believe in a *uni*-verse. They affirm that all of immanent reality coheres in a pattern or design in which each part is consistently connected to every other part. This order is not imposed upon reality by the perceiving mind, nor do multiple realities exist. This immanent, interconnected reality is properly referred to as *nature*.

Conservatives also believe in a transcendent universe. By this they mean that the order of the universe is not generated from within nature itself, but is given from without. In other words, reality is not accidental, as if it could have been something else. Since it is not accidental, it cannot be reinvented at will. It can be studied, explored, and to some degree known and understood, but fundamentally, it cannot be altered.

As one aspect of this transcendent order, conservatives believe in a moral universe. In other words, the given order of the universe includes not mere material connections and phenomena, but moral ones. Virtue is a real category, and so, by negation, is vice. Morality is not merely a human imposition upon reality, but is intrinsic to reality itself, just as real and constant as gravity or the speed of light.

In his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago and Washington, DC: Regnery Books, 1986), Russell Kirk devotes an introductory chapter to “The Idea of Conservatism.” In that chapter he lists six canons of conservative thought, the first of which is “[b]elief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience” (p. 8). Kirk is exactly right. This principle is fundamental to every form of conservatism, whether political, social, or religious.

Just as no one ever really breaks the law of gravity, so no one ever really breaks the moral law. One may defy gravity by leaping from the roof of a forty-story building, but *ceteris paribus* gravity has the final say. One may defy the moral law by stealing, murdering, or betraying a friend, but moral reality will have the final say—not merely in some anticipated eschaton, but within imminent reality itself. Those who engage in vice will pay a frightful price here and now.

This natural law is available to all people. In his commentary on Romans 2:14, John Calvin observes that,

. . . [I]gnorance is in vain pretended as an excuse by the Gentiles, since they prove by their own deeds that they have some rule of righteousness: for there is no nation so lost to every thing human, that it does not keep within the limits of some laws. Since then all nations, of themselves and without a monitor, are disposed to make laws for themselves, it is beyond all question evident that they have some notions of justice and rectitude . . . which are implanted by nature in the hearts of men.

In a similar vein, C. S. Lewis has written about natural law in *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1947). He argues that most civilizations have recognized a “Way,” a common moral core, that he labels the *Tao* (p. 29). In an appendix, Lewis devotes about twenty-five pages to a listing of these common moral precepts.

No civilization can endure for long when it abandons the natural virtues in its public conduct. An individual who practices vice will pay a price here and now, and so will a society that becomes vicious. Respect for life, for property, and for family must be maintained or else the society will spin into anarchy.

This does not mean that a society must prohibit every form of private vice. What is done privately will certainly affect the individual, but its effects upon the society as a whole may be limited. Some virtues are so important, however, that rejecting them would imperil any society. Even tolerant societies must draw the line at these vices.

All of the natural virtues are also biblical virtues. This means that Christians automatically foster these virtues as part of their faith. This creates a tendency for Christians to rely upon the Bible as the authority for establishing these virtues within the public square.

If they are to participate in public discourse, Christians need to pay greater attention to the natural virtues as an aspect of the ordered, transcendent, moral universe within which they live. They need to learn to appeal to the moral nature of the world as a way of gaining public justification for certain moral obligations. These are the virtues that they should allow to establish the boundaries of tolerance. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

# He dies! the Friend of sinners dies!

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

He dies! the Friend of sinners dies!  
Lo! Salem's daughters weep around;  
A solemn darkness veils the skies,  
A sudden trembling shakes the ground.

Come, saints, and drop a tear or two  
For Him who groaned beneath your load:  
He shed a thousand drops for you,  
A thousand drops of richer blood.

Here's love and grief beyond degree:  
The Lord of Glory dies for men!  
But lo! what sudden joys we see,  
Jesus, the dead, revives again!

The rising God forsakes the tomb;  
The tomb in vain forbids His rise;  
Cherubic legions guard Him home,  
And shout Him welcome to the skies.

Break off your fears, ye saints, and tell  
How high your great Deliv'rer reigns;  
Sing how He spoiled the hosts of hell,  
And led the monster death in chains!

Say, "Live forever, wondrous King!  
Born to redeem, and strong to save;"  
Then ask the monster, "Where's thy sting?"  
And, "Where's thy vict'ry, boasting grave?" ✠

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