

**Critics of the Enlightenment: Readings in the  
French Counter-Revolutionary Tradition**  
**Foreword by Philippe Bénéton**  
**Christopher Olaf Blum (Editor and Translator)**  
Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2003 (357 pages)

The sudden failure of the Soviet empire in 1989 opened a space for two intellectual traditions, both of which had been expressly rejected by Bolshevism and its imitators and both of which had been harshly critical of that experiment while it was grinding its bloody way forward. The first may be called liberal: prizing the individual and his liberty, restricting government to the tasks of procedural equality and restraint of force and fraud, valuing the market as a noncoercive means of arranging the passions and interests of an irreducibly diverse polity. The other may be called conservative: respectful of the religious, cultural, and political traditions ruthlessly attacked and uprooted by Bolshevism, as by its revolutionary forebears, and desirous of fostering a reawakening of that deeper mode of human engagement that rests upon an awareness of them.

Nineteen eighty-nine also revealed which of these broad orientations—which, to be sure, share many points in common and joined forces often during the “long twilight struggle”—most vividly speaks to the aspirations of the populations that had been frozen in historical time by the Communist alliance. While conservatism can certainly count its successes—the Catholic character of a nation such as Poland has been asserted with unmistakable clarity from time to time, and the continuing controversy over Solzhenitsyn is an indirect but welcome sign of his enduring resonance—the lion’s share of the action has certainly been elsewhere. Most of the regimes recently relieved of the tender mercies of Soviet dominance, direct or indirect, have opted for some version of the political marketplace of parties and coalitions rather than returning to a pre-Bolshevik polity of religious dynasties. Likewise, they have been among the most vociferous advocates of open economic markets in all of Europe. Beyond the European Union, too, the surprising inroads of something approaching liberal or at least multi-party democracy, and cosmopolitan economies in places such as South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and even China and India, have put their respective cultural traditions increasingly in the shade as well. The phenomenon of globalization is almost entirely a liberal or at least a liberalizing one.

All of this seems to be well understood by Philippe Bénéton in his admirably candid and lucid foreword to the volume under review. While paying justifiable homage to the conservative tradition for the enduring doubt that it casts upon progressivist providentialism in its various guises, he does not shrink from the larger problem. “Counter-revolutionary thought appealed to history,” he notes, adding that it “falls under its own condemnation because the course of history has not vindicated it” (vii). The purposes of the editor, Christopher Olaf Blum, are somewhat less clear. While admitting that the nineteenth-century authors he has anthologized sought to establish the “timeless significance” of “monarchy, the union of throne and altar, and traditional culture based upon

family, agriculture, and the ... Christian past,” and conceding that there “is no question today of restoring thrones,” Blum nonetheless declares his purpose to be “raising issues that are rarely discussed by Anglo-American conservatives,” and “challenging us to look deeper into some of the fundamental aspects of human society” (xvi–xvii).

Which issues and which aspects he has in mind, however, are not made crystal clear, a lacuna that is particularly problematic for the collection he has assembled because of how topical and transitory are the subjects treated by his six late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French authors. The ratio of prophecy to polemic, which a broad cross-section of fair-minded readers would judge quite high for a Burke or a Tocqueville, strikes me as markedly lower for these six Frenchmen, even though they are expressly compared to the former both on the back flap and in the editor’s introduction (xiv, xxxvi).

Without doubt, there is considerable historical interest in this volume. Of the six French authors represented, three are fairly well known to American readers and three less so. From Chateaubriand, we have an 1814 work, *On Buonaparte and the Bourbons*, written as the allies were occupying Paris, which Blum calls “one of the monuments of counter-revolutionary literature” (xxii). Louis de Bonald gets four entries: his favorable review of a then-recent biography of Bishop Bossuet (1815), his 1826 essay “On the Agricultural Family, the Industrial Family, and the Right of Primogeniture,” as well as excerpts from his “Thoughts on Various Subjects” and his 1818 “Observations upon Madame de Staël’s Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution.” Joseph de Maistre, perhaps the best-known continental counterrevolutionary on this side of the Atlantic, makes an appearance in his “Reflections on Protestantism in its Relations to Sovereignty” (1798) and in excerpts from “On the Pope” (1819).

The three lesser known authors anthologized here are Frédéric Le Play (1806–82), an important figure in the Catholic workers’ movement and probably the most engaging voice heard in this volume; Emile Keller (1828–1909), whose defense of the papal encyclical *Quanta cura* with its famous Syllabus of Errors (1864) is excerpted here (“The Encyclical of the 8th of December 1864 and the Principles of 1789, or, the Church, the State, and Liberty”); and René de la Tour du Pin (1834–1924), whose Catholic corporatism is expressed in “On the Corporate Regime” (1883).

Readers of this journal, it must be said, will find much more of morality than of markets in the texts translated here. Indeed, not once do any of the six authors speak well of the possibilities of an extended market for civilized life. More common is the practice of lumping commerce with all the Enlightenment and Revolutionary values these authors are concerned to combat. “Farmers live in peace,” Bonald informs us, while “merchants” are in “necessary conflict” (72). Commerce stands condemned for being more conducive to republicanism than to monarchy—a cardinal sin in this literature—and for causing “all our wars for some time” (76, 108). Keller depicts the merchant in colors worthy of Marx, complete with a starkly polarized view of capitalist society as divided indefeasibly between a bourgeoisie and a proletariat. (292–94). De la

Tour du Pin, for his part, frankly prefers medieval serfdom to the “unlimited competition of the free market” (315, 317).

Culturally, there is a recurring aspiration detectable throughout this volume to, as it were, replay the religious wars. Maistre commends Louis XIV’s Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (144), a move that denied toleration to French Protestants and led to their mass exodus. Keller contrasts his proposed Catholic corporatism with the “financial feudalism” of “the Protestant school” (302). Virtually all the authors are strongly opposed to the separation of church and state (73, 153, 266, and passim). Keller wants even higher education to be religiously based (307). Maistre denies that Protestantism is a religion at all; it is a mere spirit of rebellion (154).

The translations in the volume—which, it should be noted, is recommended for its literary style as well as its intellectual content—are generally readable, and the book is handsomely produced (though minor errors and/or translation problems will be found at 16, 36, 52, 73, 140, 162, 177, 193, 250, 251, 319, 322, 330, and it would have been good to know which page numbers from the French originals were being translated). If the current liberalizing global order—whose fragility is often underestimated, especially by its boosters—should stumble badly or (who knows?) be proven untenable, conservative alternatives will certainly be sought with more vigor than at present. Readers will decide for themselves how many good ones are to be found in this collection.

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**Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Tradition:  
Contemporary Perspectives**  
**John Goyette, Mark S. Latkovic, and Richard S. Myers (Editors)**  
Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004 (311 pages)

The history of natural law thinking during the twentieth century is perhaps best described as turbulent. Until the 1960s, the study of natural law throughout the Roman Catholic world flourished in the wake of Pope Leo XIII’s call in his 1879 encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, for Catholic theologians to return to the study of Thomistic thought. Attention to natural law, however, underwent a sudden decline in the Catholic intellectual world following the Second Vatican Council. It even became far less prominent in documents of the Roman Magisterium (until forcefully revived by John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*). Among the Protestant confessions, attention to natural law had long been relegated to the academic sidelines following the famous Brunner-Barth debates of the 1930s.

The reasons for this eclipse are many. They range from the dominance of either Barthian thought or theological liberalism among Protestant scholars, to the fascination within the Catholic academy with the work of people such as Karl Rahner, whose later