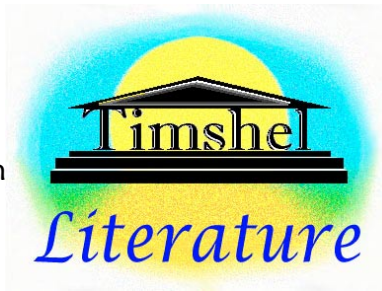


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Just Thinking, 08/11/03:

A Consequence of Thinking

by Justin Katz

People who think and write about life for their daily bread ought to occasionally hold opinions that surprise any given member of their regular readership. Unfortunately, too many of those who *write* for a living often mimic rather than think.

Consistency according to expectations often entails adherence to a set of opinions that proceeds, to some degree, from social alliances between distinct groups. The two major American political parties are case studies in this. The Democrats are currently having difficulty bridging the inherent differences of their constituent special interests. Meanwhile, the Republicans are enjoying an upswing because their hodgepodge of issues accords with demands, such as national security, that supersede the large rifts between, say, conservative Christians and libertarians.

This characterization certainly oversimplifies things even for the political parties, but the important aspect is that consistency in one context, whether political power or a group's "cause," will inevitably entail compromise and, hence, *inconsistency* in another. People who privilege thought as the consistent factor will eventually depart from the partisan path or step away from other thinkers who work from different assumptions. However, those disagreements can be addressed with recourse to the very constant that led to them.

With his positions on two related issues, James Lileks recently stood in the gap between two relatively parallel paths. When he expressed support for gay marriage, his libertarian following applauded; when he subsequently decried the ordination of the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, the social conservatives cheered. The contradiction in these positions implies the ideals that Lileks wishes to hold constant: intellectual consideration, familial responsibility, and social open-mindedness.

For social conservatives, Lileks's emphasis on responsibility in the case of Bishop Robinson suggests an opening in the discussion over gay marriage. Namely, the selfish behavior of the bishop in leaving his two young children, as well as in risking schism to reconcile his career with his personal life, is related to the dangers that gay unions pose to the institution of marriage. It isn't a matter of keeping an open mind about the honest affections of homosexuals as an isolated component of their personalities and relationships; it is a matter of acknowledging the *other stuff* that truly makes those personalities and relationships subversive.

When blogger Andrea Harris — who is (I believe) an atheist libertarian — spoke out in agreement with Lileks regarding Robinson, I emailed to thank her, because she had accepted the traditional religious position as a legitimate one to hold. Thus, she revealed that the opening was not merely from Robinson to gay marriage, but all the way through to differences as profound as belief in God.

This isn't to say that understanding some of the ways in which Robinson's ordination undermines the Christian worldview is one short step away from accepting that worldview as Truth. The progression would require much more than a brief essay to trace. However, it does confirm the logical and philosophical possibility of persuasion. Openness to well-made arguments negates artificial blocks.

In Harris's words in her reply to my note, she doesn't "fit into [people's] nice little boxes." To be more specific, what I had thanked her for was not fitting into the box for the boxless — those who claim that their intellectual independence frees them from established routes. Too often, forswearing the guidance of consensus makes an ideological position's "alternative" marketing the only intellectual basis for settling on it.

The other basis for settling on positions independently of tradition is emotional self-interest. With gay marriage, this factor often manifests with reference to homosexual friends and relatives. It is more difficult to express support for policies that will restrict the options of loved ones. It is also more comfortable to acquiesce to causes that popular opinion has coated in the shade of "tolerance" (read, "goodness").

In ascertaining how Robinson leverages modern sensibilities within their shared religious doctrine, John Derbyshire concluded that the new bishop's supporters represent a recrudescence of the heresy of Joachim. According to Derbyshire, in Joachim of Flora's thinking, the Old Testament phase of history was that of the Father, during which the people were simply commanded by God according to a spiritual law that they could not understand. The New Testament introduced the era of the Son, during which Christians' spiritual maturity was such that they could interpret God's law with the Bible as a guide. The age of the Holy Spirit would be one in which believers required no guide other than the voice of God in themselves; thus, having internalized the underlying message of the literary Gospels, the human race would live according to a mutually understood (and followed) "Eternal Gospel."

Drawing from Derbyshire's summary, it appears that Joachim's most egregious error was in the direction of his analysis. The Third Age would not, in his view, germinate in society as an intuited understanding and behavior — a tradition. Rather, it would derive from, as Derbyshire puts it, "the diligent researches of a tireless intellectual inquirer like Joachim." Given the

framework, it isn't surprising that somebody taking Joachim's view would make suggestions about not only the new processes of spiritual revelation, but the form that society would take thereafter, as well. In this case, Derbyshire describes a sort of religious communism.

This statement ought to have a familiar ring: in order for all people to live as equals, the movement must be guided by the enhanced reason of the elite. Unfortunately, in practice, the elite merely replace whatever it was that had been greater than them. Socialists and relativists cast tradition as the mechanism by which populations have been controlled. While it is true that well-defined societies highlight the paths to success, which members with advantages will reach first, it is more correct to say that tradition represents accumulated experience and enables the masses to understand intricate aspects of their lives.

Those who promote New Ways see this community understanding as an obstacle to overcome, sometimes by reinterpreting doctrine. In the Joachim example, during the process of explaining to the less intellectual why it is that they no longer need Christ's Gospels, it proves too tempting for the "Joachists" to take the explanation itself as the New Gospel. In the case of Robinson, Christian calls to personal spiritual growth and to love are translated into an excuse for selfishness and sexual fulfillment. Similarly, gay marriage transforms a venerable institution into whatever two or a few individuals want it to be by appealing to civil rights.

Because history has arranged a core consistency over many eras through which incomprehensible variables may be addressed, progress and change must grow *from* the past. Proceeding without that reference makes gods of men and religion of the libido. In contrast, reason rooted in experience and tradition can be checked against itself and across issues; it can also be extended through that tradition to reach and persuade others who've branched off in their thinking.

Too much agreement can indicate that we have lost our intellectual, traditional link to others. But while a writer might worry at excessive consistency, surprising an audience should never be done for its own sake. It should be a consequence of consistent thinking.