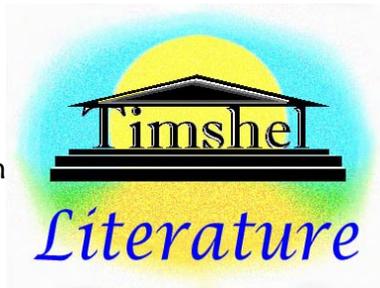


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Oh Very Young

Forgive Your Elders Their Naïve Wisdom

By Justin Katz

God, grant me the wisdom, serenity, and tolerance to reach out in the face of Youthful Self-Assurance.

I. Youth Culture's Nascent Wisdom

Let me begin, Mr. Barton Wong, by telling you that I was very impressed with your article, "Social Conservatism Is Dead." Not only is your facility at writing beyond what is to be expected of college students these days, but, in the area of thinking, I believe that you are on a very intelligent and rewarding path. So, know from the outset that this response is meant not as an attack but as an incentive to hone and maybe redirect your powers. Moreover, as I am only 26 and also not as facile in the very specific practices of "societal commentary" (including those compulsories of name dropping, generalizing, and obscure referencing) as yourself, do not take this letter as an instruction from a grownup "who knows," but as an observation from an older brother, of sorts, "who suspects." My taking the latter persona is made both in thorough anticipation of your complete dismissal of what I have to say and in the hope that, one day, my having written this may elicit just the tiniest of smiles on your reminiscing face, whichever way your social theories take you.

That all said, eloquent nonsense is nonsense nonetheless, and since yours was given credence by the gatekeepers to an international audience (by its citation in FrontPage Magazine) it deserves rebuttal. Despite your claiming to be a conservative and your presumption that you may call many of your elders "naïve and laughable," your youth and its liberalism shine through

from their intrinsic place in your argument. You believe yourself to be against pop culture, without seeing that you adhere to many of its basic tenets. You see the truth of some conservative positions but swallow whole some of the garbage given you by the liberally minded academy in which you live and the decadent media with which you were raised. You are apparently well read in conservative and liberal argumentation but disregard both the context of that argumentation and the context of your reaction to it. You sense the wisdom of conservative policies but do not seek through to the heart of the wisdom itself. Consequently, you pick and choose among varied positions on many topics without understanding your central premise because you have none, other than perhaps your own welfare. This is also why you tend toward all or nothing on each point on its isolated merits.

These faults are nothing striking. Indeed, inconsistency and stubborn microcosmic extremism are part of adolescence (and also of liberalism). However, I believe that young conservatives, as a subset of youth culture, should understand better than most youths that the young don't know everything. Essentially, I want to convey to you that the wisest thing you can hope to discern at this point in your life is that youth culture catches superficialities but not substance. Knowing this will help you to expand your own ideas because you'll be better able to see where there is potential for expansion. More specifically, knowledge of the potential for this flaw in yourself will help you to actually make a point with your writing rather than merely state that the Old Movement should step aside for your undefined and objectless New Movement.

II. Satan in Song

The core of my criticism of your proclamation is your removal of yourself from context. You are judging social conservatism through the tinted glasses of both the academic culture in which you currently exist and the pop culture in which you've been raised. Without realizing these influences, you trust that the information that you have been given is valid and that your circumstances relate directly to universal truths.

One of the more obvious and fun examples of your reliance on vague sources actually made me laugh out loud, and I use it here emblematically. You rhetorically ask, "Does anyone recall the time when social conservatives were telling us that jazz was the work of the devil? Then it was Rock n' Roll. Then it was Elvis' pelvis." But do you remember any of these events?

Who, specifically, was the social conservative that told you (25 years or so before your birth) that Elvis was the devil? Observing the liberal media's current penchant for digging up some idiot somewhere who criticizes a movement and labeling him or her as "representative" ought to have lent you a higher level of perspective. Sure Elvis was controversial, that cannot be denied, but I'm not aware of any large-scale mobilization of the forces of social conservatism. He was not so controversial that he was prevented from appearing on mainstream television shows like *Ed Sullivan*. The currently accepted view of Elvis' original detractors, which you've so seamlessly paraphrased as original, is invariably presented by documentaries that revel in the "revolutionary" aspects of rock music, a genre that is not widely known for its interest in exploring opposing views for valid points. The same observation can be extended to jazz. With your unique view of the comedy that is liberal propaganda, you should realize that it may not be but so extreme an exaggeration to suggest that all it necessarily took for us to currently believe that the backwards conservatives of the time were, en masse, anti-jazz were a handful of editorials and some extremists preaching loudly enough to be laughed at by jazz proponents. I cannot say for sure because I was not around at that time, but I suspect that the anti-jazz movement never came to a crisis point simply because there weren't that many people, social conservatives included, who saw the singing of the devil in it (i.e., it wasn't as big a deal as your professors might have you believe). At the very least, I'm not aware of any Congressional debate about banning it.

Imagining that there was indeed a vast movement against this musical "progress," you don't seem to have traced it to its modern-day parallels. You've apparently been sold the line that Republicans are the old-boy party of censors, but take a look at almost-Vice-President Lieberman's quest to expand government control into Hollywood. Also consider that it was Tipper Gore who led the campaign against 2 Live Crew (remember them? or were they before your time?... they were practically prudes compared to Eminem), and it seems that this is a Democratic illusion. It is indubitably true that conservatives will be the first to speak out against a trend with which they do not agree, but that does not equate to the more radical-liberal strategy of censorship. Regardless of its origin, this fight against the pop-musical movement of the past 50 years is still too new, mind you, to know its ultimate outcome. However, if pop music goes much beyond Eminem, I'm afraid I'll have to admit that Elvis' detractors were more long-sighted than heretofore thought.

III. Scratching the Surface

Not only is your context problematic to your argument by its limit in time, but you have no basis to “speak for your generation.” Your generation (which is perhaps mine as well, depending on where you draw the line) may very well “produce some kind of renaissance of moral redemption,” something that you’ve taken upon yourself to declare as an impossibility. However, it is certainly a trend among many of my acquaintances, and, though I’ve done no extensive research, I do believe that a return to moral roots is not a limited movement among twentysomethings. Whatever the specifics, you are hardly in a position, from your Canadian college, to speak for all the under-30 world and “tell the older generation of conservatives that their brand of Puritanism appeals to no one outside of their own limited circle.” What a supercilious bit of hypocritical claim-staking! Especially when you don’t appear to understand what it is that you’re labeling as “Puritanism.”

For example, there is no direct correlation between the two positions in your statement, “if conservatives have a strong case for *not* blaming the [Columbine] killings on guns, then liberals probably have an equally strong case for not blaming the surrounding culture.” Actually, the opposite is true. If conservatives are correct in not blaming the specific instruments of the tragedy, then the blame lies even more securely on the underlying cultural beliefs that helped to instill both the specific and general ideas and symbolism surrounding the crime and the impetus to follow through with them. “Underlying” here means not just the specific movie-provided images of a shotgun under a trench coat, for example, nor just the unfortunately proven theory that the act would make them famous, but also the lack of solid moral foundations in their raising.

Here is where we shift into another problem that is pervasive among conservatives of your ilk (a word that you all apparently love to use) and the liberals with whom you seem to agree with so much more consistency than is found in the conservative aspects of your platforms. You address issues based on their superficialities, not their substance.

As evidence that conservatives, as represented by *The National Review Online*, have “fully embraced pop culture,” you cite articles that have been written about pop culture icons. However, a quick reading of these articles is all that is necessary to discover that the fact of

discussing a topic does not imply a position on that topic, let alone approval of some aspect of it. Go back and follow the links that you yourself provided, and you'll find quotes that are every bit as critical of pop culture as any indictment of *Hair* ever was (FYI, a sexual-revolution play about the 60s counterculture with naked actors). William F. Buckley Jr. did write an article about *The Sopranos*, but in it he states, "The wonder isn't that *The Sopranos* is so marvelously conceived and executed, but that it is so widely viewed and enjoyed without any hint of concern over the depravity it relies upon." Your links do, indeed, lead to articles about Bob Dylan and U2, but the former concludes that "anything more or other [than lauding Bob Dylan as a rock-music artist] — such as eternalizing him with the title of poet — lessens pop music as much as it lessens poetry," and the latter is entitled, "Hey U2: Shut Up and Sing." As all of the authors of these articles know, one must understand something in order to criticize it (you'll find this strange belief among surprisingly many conservatives).

But doing a scan for pop icons in the titles of conservatively leaning periodicals and citing that as a bowing to pop culture, is only one indicator of the terrible danger that concentration on superficial aspects presents to a point of view. It is only misunderstanding of the core thesis of a commentary such as that by Roger Scruton that "conjures up images of the McCarthy hearings and Puritan witch trials for people in [your] age range." Mr. Scruton's point was that peer-instigated stigma and shame is far superior, as a social construct for decreasing dangerous behavior, to locating the source of the censure in the law (a position that I would not be able to sum up more clearly than did he). Look beneath your puerile reaction of "don't tell me what to do," and you'll see that both the McCarthy hearings and the Salem witch trials were government-sanctioned actions, which is half the danger of which Scruton's article warns (the other half being that getting busted for a crime does not force consideration of the morality of that crime and so does not force rehabilitation).

Elsewhere, you do not see the difference between "Pride Week" for gays and Hanukah for Jews. Even beyond the external contrasts between a "long succession of bare, writhing, sexually suggestive flesh" (as you call the Pride Week parade) and a family-oriented religious tradition, these events are not even in comparable categories. They are even less so than spring break and the week that some universities grant for study before exams. Another difference that you do not see because you don't recognize the essences of your examples is that between large-scale admission that women have equal rights and a large-scale statement that "we are all sexual

libertines now,” which, you claim, “can’t happen too soon for young conservatives who are so often exasperated by their elders’ lack of coolness and inability to be ‘with it.’” The former indicates that we have come to the conclusion that we should not belittle the humanity of others on the basis of their gender; the latter would suggest that we have no control over our libidos and are, in fact, slaves to our lust and, therefore, less than human. Whatever your collegiate sexual appetites may be, Mr. Wong, you apparently have no conception of the fact that many people in the world find meaning and fun in life outside of aberrant sexual behavior.

IV. God and the Foolish Skeptic

An extension of not pushing to the core of matters is extrapolating a partial relationship as evidence of two groups’ identical natures (a pervasive liberal strategy, by the way). The fact that you take American Evangelicals to be representative of all Christianity, when, in fact, they are a fringe group and an example of the problem with religious consciously attempting to appeal to a young audience provokes me into a tangent.

[Begin tangent.]

I can only hope, if there are many more conservative arguments against religion such as the one you cite by Jim Versluys in our future, that they are equally poorly conceived because that would continue to prove Dennis Prager right that wisdom requires faith. My favorite statement of Versluys’ is that the “streets of Houston and Manhattan are filled to the brim with common people and their common idiocies, overwhelmingly people who believe in some kind of God or higher meaning. Mostly, the extent to which God and His commandments are ignored or made irrelevant is the extent to which those people are able to be wise.” Oh yes, I know of many a sage for whom the highway to wisdom was paved with murder, adultery, theft, lies, and greed. Even beyond this obvious rebuttal to his statement, I believe that the simple fact that Mr. Versluys cannot even disguise his contempt for people who are not as elitistly enlightened (read, privileged and bigoted) for the space of a short essay about religion makes a flawless case for the suggestion that religion is, indeed, necessary among the “non-masses” (whoever that group might include besides him). Even my agnostic father states that, beyond faith in a higher power,

the core message of a great number of religions is “be good to others.” In his derision against faith and religion (note that he does not once specify “organized religion”), Versluys proves himself to be a stuck-up snob who is neither good nor wise in the least.

Despite referring to Immanuel Kant as “The Greatest Philosopher of Modern Times” (my caps), Versluys does not even blink at implying that he is Kant’s intellectual superior because Kant hadn’t the ability to consider his own faith. Moreover, far from disproving Prager’s statement, whether or not Kant attained “an almost deistic view of God” has no relevance whatsoever, anyway, because deism is a type of faith. Prager did not say that he never met a wise non-Jew, not even a wise non-Judeo-Christian; in fact, Prager did not specify which religion leads to wisdom at all, which suggests that any belief in more than just our individual, visible, selfish realities will do.

Digging more deeply than the actuality that Versluys only mentions a few others of the “wisest minds throughout history” (all of whom were apparently born in the 315 years between 1588 and 1903) as proof that wisdom can come without religion, his broader misconception about what faith and wisdom represent comes to light — right down to his definition of the two words. Taking as true his statement that “wisdom is the ability to separate appearance from essence,” it does not follow that “Faith, in [not only] its abstract [but also its] religious sense, is an attack on this beautiful quality.” Quite the opposite is true: faith, in both its abstract and religious senses, is exactly the ability to acknowledge the essence of reality (God, however you define Him) even where the false appearance of perceivable reality seems to contradict the possibility.

Furthermore, it is neither true that “religious faith [is] the exact opposite of the scientific impulse,” nor that “skepticism is the opposite of faith.” First, witness Einstein’s religious “scientific impulse.” Then, consider that skepticism does not constitute the “essence” of mankind’s “excellent and deeply wise fruits.” Skepticism deals in questioning that which we are told, that much is true, but the only possible fruits to which it can lead arise where the skeptic is able to devise a more fully satisfying conception of reality. Throwing a dead cat into a church to prove that you will suffer no consequences only proves that you have the guts (and the dead cat) to do so; it does not debunk the theory of a Being beyond our potential to comprehend, and it does not offer any replacement for the valuable fruits of faith. On the whole, science is, itself, built on faith: faith that the apple will fall from the tree, faith that the sun will come up the next

day, and faith that there is a pattern to reality. Conversely, a science built on skepticism is impossible — as the basis of the scientific impulse, it will only lead in circles — but is precisely the inane project of liberal social engineers. It is true that you must be “skeptical” enough about the claims of others to check them, and it is also true that you must be skeptical enough about your own theories to check them as well, if only to make sure that you are not fallaciously insulting “the average fool” lest you prove to be he. However, skepticism as a driving force is foolish in its own right.

Our dear Mr. Versluys takes on faith that people of faith are idiots so that he can sardonically assume that he is among that extremely limited group (especially considering that they’ve apparently only existed for a little over 400 years) of the “smartest and wisest,” without giving sufficient credulity to the “smartest and wisest” of the faithful (a much larger and more historically dispersed group). In fact, he disregards the faith of one of his own heroes while believing that listing less than a half-dozen names of people who may or may not have (they’re all dead) agreed with him about the existence of God constitutes proof that they are — and that he is — among the smartest or the wisest. In short, this atheist is presenting a whole lot of “appearances,” but real wisdom does, in fact, derive from the recognition of the “essence” that holds true through every aspect of reality: a Supreme Truth and, given our inherently limited ability to conceive of something as intangible as pure Truth, a Supreme Being.

At the very least, a wise atheist would understand that if there is no God then there is no inherent value to the realization that there is no God, so even just taking comfort in faith is enough of a benefit to religion (broadly defined) to outweigh skeptical impulses. In this light, the only reason to pursue the propagation of atheism is out of spite. Being objectively atheist — meaning not based on some petty desire to feel smugly superior to “the masses” — *must* lead to the conclusion that religion, where it does not make one a target for duplicity, is valuable to those who can find it. This is not to say that organized religion isn’t often used for duplicity, but Mr. Versluys’ attack is against the general idea of faith itself, a principle that an honest atheist would conclude is inescapable. Therefore, recognition of that fact is a prerequisite to wisdom and an article of faith.

[End tangent.]

V. The Painfully “Uncool” Truth of Wisdom

One of my ultraliberal college professors was enthralled with the idea that managing to define things as “natural,” “normal,” and/or “inevitable” wins the battle over whether those things are “right” and “moral.” Mr. Wong, you don’t seem to have been taught that there can actually be a battle over this. Indeed, not believing in the possibility *is* your argument. My point is that you should learn to challenge the inevitability. Put in other terms, you must realize that you can investigate the mechanisms of an article of faith (e.g., some force causing an apple to fall, God’s influence on evolution, or homosexuals indeed being human) without even touching the possibility of the faith.

Simply put, you cannot presume that the greatest extent of something is inevitable. If that were true, then the recently increased church attendance and incidence of adult conversion (such as mine from Orthodox Intellectualism) would mean that everybody will eventually be Catholic. You’ve reversed Kant, who suggested that one should imagine a position as universal law in order to test its morality. Seemingly by your own admission, following Kant’s reasoning would lead to the conclusion that the very cultural attributes that you see as inevitable should have been squelched long ago, even in Elvis. The real truth is, however, that on the other side of adolescence (for some) is the realization that, far from having to be all or nothing, specific external issues can never be all or nothing, but broader internal philosophies can only be compromised in their externals. As with religion, so with conservatism: it can only compromise superficially for the purposes of gaining followers because, unlike liberalism, it is the idea itself from which derives its value, not the popularity of the idea.

Another truth, a painful one, Young Master Wong, is that you can’t enjoy the spoils of the libertines and rely upon the general, inherent morality demanded by conservatism. This inclination indicates a mere picking and choosing from among an array of external manifestations of possible philosophies for the express purpose of confirming yourself in your emotional impulses. But you cannot, if you are truly the thinking person that you appear to be, forever continue to laugh at South Park without acknowledging the horror of what it portrays and coming to understand the reciprocal relationship between society and its entertainment.

Social movements aren’t trains that shoot toward an inevitable conclusion. They swing back and forth — rather, they swing obliquely, changing slightly in response to whatever is

picked up at each apogee. All we can really hope to do, given our contextual confines, is to try to ensure that what survives from our times does not contribute to either a social explosion or a social entropy: that is social conservatism, and that is wisdom.

You touch on the end of the Clinton era and the decline of forced affirmative action, but you take these as indication of the more pervasive extent of the “progressive” social liberalism. What you never take into account is that you are a young conservative, and, by definition, proof that the pendulum is swinging. Since my first tentative steps out of the liberal teenage wasteland, I’ve been looking for the specific trend that you finally manifest. I wonder if you’d be willing to evaluate yourself to the extent at which you can determine whether, in some part, you’ve become a conservative (if only in title) because at this point in history that is the rebellious position to take. Beyond being a teenage cliché, rebellion always feels more sensible when the pendulum begins to head back toward center for the simple reason that, at that point in the progress of history, it is. Rebellion would explain why the attribute that you dislike about conservatism appears to be its history. However, your view of this history has been purposefully skewed by the forces that have held the ideological avant-garde for more than your entire lifetime.

In addition, the extent to which you’ve been given this view of conservatism’s history without contradiction is due not only to liberal control of the media through which it has been transmitted to you, but also to the fact that most conservatives — again, like many religious — will quietly wait without trying to conquer that media or compromise to gather a larger audience. This quiet persistence owes its force to their knowledge that you will not, at this time, find it “cool” enough (as you admit) and so either are a lost cause or, just as inevitably as your progressive train, will come around to understand.

This is wisdom: I can do very little to convince you of the propriety of my opinion. The best I can do is place some echoes of doubts and experience somewhere in your mind. If I truly am correct, you will either deny them indefinitely or come around eventually. However, I can tell you this: If you’ve debunked all of the cores of moral conservatism (from the Bible to family values to a dislike for Eminem), you are going to have to rebuild them all from the outside in should you grow in this direction — a painful, though ultimately beneficial, process in which I am in the midst.