



Episode 1,340: Conservatives and Libertarians: Natural Allies?

Guest: Ben Lewis

WOODS: I think, in this case, we're doing a little bit of, let's say, movement history, which is kind of important. Frank Meyer's a tricky guy to classify. He had friends all around, and there were some people he just couldn't satisfy, no matter what he said. But I always thought he was interesting. When I was first getting acquainted with the Old Right, let's say, I read a lot of people from the '50s, and I came across Frank Meyer's work as I was learning about the old *National Review*, and I found him very interesting, and I thought the criticisms of him really misfired. I thought he was doing something important, plus I had great sympathy with what he was trying to do. So from time to time, I think it's important for us to go back and revisit some, let's say, neglected or forgotten figures, who to one extent or another, can be said to belong in our tradition of thoughts. So that's what you've done, I think, here with this article, that I'm linking to, about Frank Meyer and his ideas. Of course, we're going to get to the ideas in a minute, but maybe you could tell me a little something just about who the man was. Who was Frank Meyer?

LEWIS: Yeah, so Frank Meyer, he was a pretty significant figure in conservatism post-World War II. So he was a contributor to *The Freeman* and to *Modern Age*, and then he was a longtime editor at *National Review*. And what he's best known for is the idea of fusionism, which was kind of the connection of libertarianism or classical liberalism with a traditionalist conservatism. And so what he attempted to do was to show that those two schools of thought, which are often pitted against each other, really have a lot in common and actually derive from the same tradition. And as he points out repeatedly, they have the same enemy, which is perhaps even more important.

WOODS: And that idea was received, let's say, well by some people, not so well by others. But as you show in this piece, sometimes it's kind of hard to pin down exactly what it was that people who were unhappy with him were unhappy about. So for example, let's take Russell Kirk, who's the classic case here. Russell Kirk is one of the thinkers who had a major impact on the development of American conservatism, even though he's I think largely forgotten now. I almost never encounter somebody who is reading Russell Kirk anymore. My friend Brad Birzer did a great biography of Kirk, but I think far more people reading Rothbard than there are reading Russell Kirk these days. But anyway, Kirk was a real giant in his day, and he wrote that book, *The Conservative Mind*, that went through a lot of editions. And he wasn't all that taken with Meyer, and yet, because Kirk was so — as you pointed out in the article, I mean, he didn't like the idea of ideology and he wasn't really a policy wonk. So it's very hard to pin him down on exactly what he wants to have happen. He could use a lot of flowery language about the way the world ought to be, but when you actually try to pin him down on what he wants done, it's very hard to find out. So what exactly was his problem with Frank Meyer?

LEWIS: You know, my sense is that a lot of that has to do with personality conflicts, and I'm speaking as not nearly the expert on this that somebody like Brad Birzer is, so if Brad disagrees with me about anything, go with Brad on this. But one of Frank Meyer's first articles was published in *The Freeman* in 1955, and it was called "Collectivism Rebaptized." And what it was doing was it was supposed to be a book review or three book reviews of *The Conservative Mind*, Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*, and a book by Clinton Rossiter; I can't remember the name of it right now. And Meyer really used that article to basically just attack Kirk, calling him a collectivist and things like that. And Kirk, who I sense was able to take things personally and then not let them go very easily, was really offended by that, and so I don't know that he ever forgave Meyer for what he perceived to be an attack on him.

Meyer, for his part, got some feedback from Frank Chodorov, who had received a letter from a conservative activist — I think he was a doctor from Texas — who said that conservatives looked at Russell Kirk as basically the most articulate member of conservatism at that time, and this guy recognized that conservatism needed a home. And he said that home isn't always an orderly place, but it's a place you can operate from, it's a place you can call home. And he said that Frank Meyer with this article, and again, what was perceived to be an attack on Kirk, was trying to dynamite the home of conservatism. So Frank Chodorov sent that to Frank Meyer, and Meyer really seems to have taken that to heart, not because he thought that he was attacking Kirk; he thought he was offering some valid criticism. But he began to question whether or not conservatism had a home, and I think that's what led really to him to start to develop the idea of conservatism and libertarianism working together, not pulling apart from each other.

And also, Meyer did begin to reach out to Kirk over the next several years, and when Kirk stepped down from *Modern Age*, Meyer sent him a note and said that he thought that that was a shame and that the publication would be worse without his involvement. So Meyer did try to rebuild some bridges, but it doesn't seem to have taken on Kirk's side.

WOODS: Now let's get into what exactly it was he was saying. His idea has sometimes been called fusionism, which was not a term he liked.

LEWIS: No.

WOODS: And maybe no in explaining what it was that he favored, you might also explain why he disliked that term.

LEWIS: Yeah, so there's an ongoing debate between people — and maybe "debate" is not the right word. There's discussions about: was Meyer at root a libertarian, or was he at root a conservative? And what he saw his role of was showing the common tradition out of which the ideas of freedom and the ideas of virtue came, or put differently, the libertarian side of things and the traditionalist side of things. And he saw both of these growing out of the Western tradition. And the reason he did not like the fusionist label, which was given to him in an article by Brent Bozell, who said that Meyer was trying to fuse these things together, and he said no, that's not what I'm trying to do; I'm not trying to put two things that are separate together; I'm trying to show that they both grow out of the same tradition. So he went all the way back to Greek civilization, to Old Testament Israel, to show the bases of Western civilization, and then on through the rise of Christianity, and really tried to show that out of that and out of the importance that those traditions placed on the individual, both on his freedom and on his duty to pursue virtue, that's where we get both the traditionalist

strain and the libertarian strain. So the idea of fusionism — and it's funny, it was not just him. M. Stanton Evans was also very opposed to the idea of fusionism and publicly remained opposed to that term for 30, 40 years after Frank Meyer died.

WOODS: Huh. And yet, you can see there's something sensible, fundamentally sensible about the idea that if you're really going to encourage virtue, it has to be voluntary, because unless you want to make everybody into automatons, you have to teach people to be virtuous of their own accord. And so there has to be some leeway to make decisions. But then, you know, the conservative response to that, or at least the traditionalist conservative response to that would be: look, human beings have a weakness for doing bad things. They have a weakness for what is bad, and to simply say, as libertarians are apt to, that, *Well, we'll just maximize people's choices, but maybe we'll encourage them to be virtuous, but we'll just maximize their choices, and that's the best arrangement*, aren't you're just making it unnecessarily difficult for people to live a virtuous life by giving them such a wide array of choices? And what's the real harm in taking away some of the most morally egregious choices they might make? And that's a response that — I'm not quite so sure I really got a good answer from Frank Meyer on that.

LEWIS: Yeah, one thing that Meyer doesn't do is get into specifics a lot. So he operates at more or less the same level as Russell Kirk, I think. They're both very high-level, "how the world ought to be" types of writers. And so you don't get specific answers like that to specific questions. And again, I think that's where, if you were to follow on the people who came after Frank Meyer or who continued his work after he passed away, like Stanton Evans, you get some of those answers a little bit more clearly. I think what the idea that Frank Meyer would have is that to say that people should have every choice available to them is a little bit of an overstatement about what he's talking about. Because it's not simply that everybody should be able to do anything; it's that the entities in society that are restricting choice should be voluntary in nature and not state-based. So that's where you have entities like the family and the church and community. And Meyer struggled a little bit with understanding how community could both provide order and remain voluntary, but that's kind of where he would place the restriction of choices. It would be in those institutions which are able to provide negative reinforcement to people when they make bad decisions without resorting to violence and coercion.

WOODS: So I think — you know, I'm listening to your analysis of this. I've read your article, and I've read what both of these folks had to say about each other. And by the way, before I actually continue along that line, let me point out: Murray Rothbard wrote about Frank Meyer.

LEWIS: Yep.

WOODS: And his view was that Meyer is just a libertarian. Why doesn't he just say he's a libertarian? Because if he believes in the rights of the individual, he's perfectly free to say we should behave virtuously and we should encourage virtue. Rothbard says: well, why would you think that would be a distinct position from libertarianism? It's not, of course. You're just a libertarian.

LEWIS: Yeah, I think that what Meyer would — so Meyer would agree with that, I think. I mean, people eulogized him as a radical libertarian when after he passed away. And so I don't know that he would disagree with that characterization. I think what's different with Meyer is

that, having separated the political order from the social order and having said this is a limit of the state and then here's the extensiveness of the other entities in society, he doesn't then say: and it doesn't matter what happens to social order. He then makes a positive case for what society should be like if it's going to be healthy and if it's going to protect the political freedom that is being communicated through the theory of the state that he puts forward. So I think it's the matter of, after segregating these things apart, reinforcing both of their mutual importance.

WOODS: The way I would have made the case, if I'd been Meyer and I were trying to talk to somebody like Kirk — the thing is, as you point out, Kirk actually seems fairly indistinguishable — at least his views in a lot of ways seem indistinguishable from ours. He wrote a book on economics that was very free market. He's very sympathetic. So again, I agree with you that this is personalities and largely overblown. But if I were speaking to a traditionalist conservative around this time — so this would have been the '60s, let's say?

LEWIS: Yeah, so he started writing, as far as I can tell, mid '50s, around 1955. And then he wrote his major book, *In Defense of Freedom* in 1962.

WOODS: Okay, I read that. Okay, I remember, I enjoyed that. All right, so the way I would make the case is that I get that you want to live in an environment that kind of backs up the ideas you're trying to teach your kids, that doesn't constantly undermine you at every single turn, that you want to live in a society that seems to support the ideas that you believe in. And that's not collectivist; that's just a normal instinct. People want to live around people who don't feel like they're at war with the way they believe. That's totally normal.

LEWIS: Right.

WOODS: But what I would say is that, ever since the French Revolution at least, it should be obvious that the instrument of the state, yes, it can be used to back up the traditional family, and you can use it that way. But it can also be used to take radical ideologies and instantiate them in the lives of everyone and ram them down everybody's throats until there's no resistance left. And it seems far more likely, given the sort of people who are attracted to and drawn to politics, that that's the route the state is going to take much more than upholding a traditional family with many children who get tax credits for having a big family. That's just — you know, that may happen. It's not impossible, but it's not the general thrust of the way the state is as we've known it for least over 200 years. So therefore, don't depend on it. Build your civilization on the basis of other institutions, and do not rely on the state. That's how, if I were trying to make the case to those people, I wouldn't start with the nonaggression principle. I'd start with that point. And I don't think Meyer makes that point.

LEWIS: No, one thing he does do in other articles is he shows that the 19th century really changed everything — well, the 18th and the 19th centuries — when you have the development of classical liberalism, and then the response of what he calls classical conservatism. And so he says that they both kind of distorted some truths. And so he says one of the things that traditionalists do is kind of pretend like they're still living in a Burkean society in England, where the common law is still relevant and essentially, in effect, the state is extremely limited. And what he points out is, as these new ideologies were developing in the 19th century, that destroyed a lot of that. So he makes his case, he founds it on trying to return to the basic principles of Western civilization. But he says that you can't do that by going back to what had been previously. He said you have to take the principles and the ideas

and build something new. And from that, he says the state cannot be involved with enforcing virtue, because it has shown itself to be actively opposed to virtue. And I really do think that that's one of the key insights that has become absolutely clear in the 50 years since he died, almost 50 years, because anybody who thinks that today the state does anything that is supporting of traditional virtue or traditional values is just blinding their eyes to the realities.

WOODS: I'm curious about where you see Robert Nisbet fitting into this. Now, Robert Nisbet's another guy that's really worth knowing. He was a professor at both Berkeley and Columbia University. He was a sociologist. He didn't like the term conservative, but I don't care if he didn't like it or not. He obviously was one. I don't see how else you classify him. So how do his ideas maybe help us dig deeper into this issue?

LEWIS: So what Nisbet is best known for is his focus on community, and *The Quest for Community* was his first book. It was released the same year as *The Conservative Mind* by Kirk, so it's kind of a huge year for conservatism. And what Nisbet believed was that the idea of community and the older forms of community, again, like the church and the family, local guilds and things like that, were what he called intermediary institutions between the individual and the state. And they protected the individual from the state, and they also provided the context for things like individuality and freedom. So he prioritized very highly community, and in some ways, it seems like he was willing to say that the individual was not truly an individual, not from a human standpoint, but he just could not express his individuality outside of community. And so he placed a very high priority on that, and that was something that Meyer took exception with, because he thought that that was, as I call it in the article, a more benign form of collectivism.

So I don't know that Nisbet did this because of Meyer's criticism, but he wrote that book in 1953, and then he lived another 40 years. And over those 40 years, you see Nisbet refine some of those ideas that he introduces in *The Quest for Community*. So by the '70s, he's talking about how classical liberalism and classical conservatism are essentially concerned with the individual, but they approach it differently. The conservatives approach it in the context of the community and things like that. And one of the really interesting points that Nisbet makes is that he sees in Burkean conservatives a very strong similarity in goals to something like Proudhonian anarchists, and so he says that there are differences in emphasis, but that a Burkean conservative has more in common with a Proudhonian anarchist than he does with anybody who would call themselves a modern conservative. So it's very strongly a Frank Meyer type of argument, because Meyer constantly stressed the differences in emphasis between libertarianism and traditionalism, but also stressed their underlying compatibility and their ultimate goals and their values.

WOODS: Nisbet, in his book *The Quest for Community* – which, by the way, I think is an extremely important book for people to read, and it is an incredible shame that he gave it such a lame title. *The Quest for Community*? I mean, I have probably 80 years on this earth. You're telling me I've got to spend a fraction of it reading a book with that title? Yes, actually, you do, because it's like a graduate course in political theory in one book. It's just tremendous. But what he's trying to say there, as you say, is – he's not saying that the individual doesn't matter or something, or that the community is all that matters. He's saying that individuals, like it or not, they have a craving for belonging, for being part of something, for being a part of something that's bigger than themselves. And that doesn't go away. If you simply strip these identities away from them, what will then happen is they'll go around and look for another one. And what totalitarianism, he says, in the 20th century was partly all

about was substituting a new kind of identity for the ones that the totalitarian state had stripped away. *Now, you're going to be the new Soviet citizen.* Well, this is a total novelty. This has never existed before. They're trying to build a new identity out of the wreckage of old identities, because people crave some kind of identity.

LEWIS: Yep.

WOODS: So I think Nisbet would be saying, it's not that all collective associations are evil; it's that artificial ones that are just created to oppress people are evil. But if you love your neighborhood or your family or your church or your profession or whatever, there's nothing wrong with any of this. And if you try to undermine these things, you don't create a rootless individual who has no attachments; you create a walking time bomb who will attach to, oftentimes, just the most horrifying kinds of associations because they crave something.

LEWIS: Yes. Yeah. And the thing that Nisbet wrote that has always stuck with me is that he writes that the state has become strong not by what is taken from individuals, but what is taken from intermediate associations. And that's a really fantastic point of: once these institutions are stripped of their power and their ability to communicate meaning to people's lives, the state is basically free run and is the entity that people give their devotion to. And I mean, the 20th century shows that clearly.

WOODS: How does any of this debate, one way or the other, how is it relevant to us in 2019?

LEWIS: I think it's more relevant to us now than even it was in Meyer's day, because we are that much further down the road from traditional values that he prioritized, and we're that much further down the road from any sense of individual liberty. And so I think that, as libertarians and conservatives or traditionalists continue to disagree with each other on certain topics, it is beneficial to realize where we have commonality. And it's also, I think, really important for libertarians to understand that, simply because we separate the state from the rest of society, that we tried to say that there are either limits or that it should completely be abolished, that that does not mean that we can just forget about what happens within the rest of society, that we should have a clear vision of the kind of society that we want to live in, the kind of culture that would not only protect liberty and a belief system that would protect liberty — which Meyer, again, sees coming out of the Western tradition and traditional beliefs, the same as the traditionalists did — but that we have to have an idea of what kind of society is going to make us happy as individuals and not just be something where everybody's is attempting to express their maximum amount of freedom. Because at the end of the day, what Meyer and other traditionalists believed is that freedom was not all there was to the individual. There was much more to the whole man, and individuality was part of it, but again, the yearnings of man are much deeper than just freedom.

WOODS: It is interesting, though, to look back and see the conservative movement grappling with really big issues, not ethanol subsidies or whatever just trifling nonsense, but really what we're all about, what we as human beings — I don't mean we as conservatives, but what we as human beings are really all about. You know, is there a point to anything? And if so, what is it, and how should we arrange ourselves in light of that, and what are the dangers? And the idea that you would actually have a conversation about big issues — I mean, I can't imagine this happening in the age of Sean Hannity and Jonah Goldberg. It's just not going to happen. So another interesting part of all this is that it — it's like reading Senate speeches from the

19th century, not like I'm particularly enthralled by political speeches, but the fact is, if you read Daniel Webster speaking about the Union, and then you read Robert Hayne or John C. Calhoun, it doesn't matter which one of those people you agree with, or none of them. They're at a level that we could never approximate today [laughing]. And so it seems, in a way, like we're seeing that here also. These sorts of debates — it also reminds me of the debate in *Modern Age* between Harry Jaffa and M.E. Bradford about equality and whether equality was a conservative principal. There's no way that debate's happening today, first of all, because the equality people have won, but secondly, no one's capable of having a debate on that level. It's just been so degraded.

LEWIS: Yeah, reading the people like Kirk and Nisbet and Richard Weaver, it really does open your eyes to how strong the intellectual foundations of conservatism are, because it's not simply: we don't like this or we don't like that or these particular policies. It's very fundamental issues to human nature and to the nature of society and to what degree does principle play a role over prudence and things like that. And I really, really encourage libertarians to read these guys, because if nothing else, even if you don't agree with them, you understand the essentials of conservatism more than you will ever get watching Fox News or listening to talk radio. The level of insight that you get from reading these guys is really, really high.

WOODS: I remember just in my old days of when I was first getting acquainted with all these people, I read all the books. I've read the Meyer book, *In Defense of Freedom*; I read Russell Kirk, multiple volumes. The best book by Russell Kirk, that I read, was *John Randolph of Roanoke*, his biography of John Randolph of Roanoke. That's a great book, and that's a great guy to write a biography of. Then there's, for Nisbet, I liked *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*. I liked *The Quest for Community*. I liked *Twilight of Authority*, about half of it.

LEWIS: Okay.

WOODS: Half of it's kind of weirdly neocon, and the other half kind of good. And then what was the — oh, yeah, Richard Weaver, you correctly point out in your article that most people just associate Weaver with the sort of banal expression "ideas have consequences." *Oh, really? Do they? What an insight.* And so not only is it worth noting that that was not Weaver's idea for his title of his book and he hated that title, but I mean, who the heck denies that ideas have consequences? Why even say it?

LEWIS: Right.

WOODS: So there's that. But the book of Weaver's that I really liked was *The Southern Tradition at Bay*. That is a tremendous book, and it's so funny that that in the old days — and by old days, I think I mean 1980s, if you can believe that — Liberty Fund published a collection of essays by Richard Weaver called *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*. And I am pretty sure Robert E. Lee, a statue of Lee is on the cover, I don't know that for sure, but I —

LEWIS: Yes, it is.

WOODS: Okay. So even like one of the premier libertarian organizations thought absolutely nothing of issuing a collection — and nor should it.

LEWIS: Right.

WOODS: Issuing a collection of Weaver's essays on the South. Today, there is just no chance that would happen. No chance. And yet nothing about the essays has changed in the intervening period. None of the facts involved have changed, because they're all written about things that happened 100 years ago. Nothing, other than what is allowed and respectable and whatever. But Weaver was such a smart, knowledgeable, learned, cultured gentleman that he could – when I think of the pygmies who attack people for saying the sorts of things he said in that that book, you would need 100,000 of them to actually take on a Richard Weaver.

LEWIS: Yes.

WOODS: So when I get criticized because every now and again I say something favorable about the South, and they say, "Oh, that just goes to show, that evil Tom Woods" – look, Liberty Fund had no problem, again, because back when people weren't hysterical lunatics, you could write a book about the South, and it would be all right. It'd be okay.

LEWIS: Yeah, and writing about something does not mean that you are condoning something.

WOODS: Duh [laughing].

LEWIS: You know, Weaver, that *Southern Tradition at Bay* was really his attempt to show how the South was trying to maintain its culture, not every aspect of its culture, but how it was trying to retain its sense of identity after the Civil War. I mean, it had nothing to do with, *Oh, and all the things that happened in the South that were bad were actually good*. I mean, he was writing really interesting, thought-provoking things. The really interesting thing about Weaver too is that he would write about the South, and then he would go write about rhetoric and the traditional Plato, and then he wrote about the effect of nominalism, and he would go talk about John Dewey. He cast a very wide net in his writing. Of the three big traditionalists, I think that Weaver is the most interesting of the three.

WOODS: Yeah, I agree and totally underrated.

LEWIS: Absolutely.

WOODS: And I mean, I'm pretty sure he has a thing against the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

LEWIS: He does. Yes, actually, Kirk does too.

WOODS: And so does Pat Buchanan. Isn't that funny, huh? The traditionalist conservatives tend to be against all-out war. Huh.

LEWIS: Yeah –

WOODS: Gee, there's a fact we should entertain for three seconds and then forget about, like the rest of society. All right, go ahead.

LEWIS: Yeah, no, Weaver had an entire chapter in *Visions of Order* caught "A Dialectic on Total War" —

WOODS: That's right.

LEWIS: Yeah. But he also takes it on in *Ideas Have Consequences*, and he calls the people who worked on the atomic bomb project, he calls them in that book ethical eunuchs, because they gave away —

WOODS: Ooh.

LEWIS: Yeah, they gave away any thought of whether what they were doing was right or not, and they just went to work and created a tool to kill hundreds of thousands of people.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. See, this is what makes him so good. And I only wish he had written more, in a way. And by the way, let me just add, that book, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, that was his PhD dissertation. It didn't get published till after he died, but you read that and you think, *Oh, surely this is the result of a lifetime of learning*. No, that's what he wrote when he was a young man, getting his PhD, and it almost makes you despair for your own scholarly contributions, that, *What? This guy did that by that age? I give up*.

LEWIS: Well, that's the other benefit of reading the traditionalists, is that, you know, I went into reading some of these guys, and I was a fairly confident libertarian, and I came out of it like, man, I don't know anything. I should really shut up and read more.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, I still — I mean, I don't know how old you are. I'm not asking you to tell me. But I've read enough to last me four lifetimes at this point, and I feel pretty secure on where I am on the major things, but even now, every once in a while, I have to regroup myself, and I like the fact that I have, in my personal life, surrounded myself with people who do challenge me from time to time, who aren't just carbon copies of myself. That makes life more — that gives it a little bit more texture, let's say.

LEWIS: Yes, I agree.

WOODS: So let's make sure people check out your article. I'm going to link to it, of course, at TomWoods.com/1340. And tell me a little something about the publication in which it appears.

LEWIS: Sure. So this is part of the first issue, the inaugural issue of the *Austro Libertarian* magazine. It is part of C. Jay Engels' AustroLibertarian.com. So CJ is a former *Tom Woods Show* guest, and he is the founder and the executive editor of this new publication. So the vision for the publication is to have original long-form content in both a digital and a print form, whereby ideas related to Austrian economics, libertarianism in the natural rights and the Rothbardian vein, and some conservative social commentary, as well, can kind of come together and influence the way people think in larger than a kind of a meme can communicate. So as I said, this is the first issue of that magazine. It's just out about a week ago. And their next edition will be for spring, so it'll be a quarterly issue, and it will be about war and the cultural, historical, political, and economic aspects of war. So CJ and the team that we have are busy putting the next issue together already.

WOODS: Well, sounds great. So I'll link to the article and to the general site at TomWoods.com/1340. All right, thanks, Ben. I appreciate it.

LEWIS: Thank you, Tom.