

# The Intra-Conservative Quarrel Over Universal Principles

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor  
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This weekend the [National Conservatism Conference](#) hosts “NatCon 3.” Featuring speakers from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, the conference convenes “public figures, journalists, scholars, and students who understand that the past and future of conservatism are inextricably tied to the idea of the nation, to the principle of national independence, and to the revival of the unique national traditions that alone have the power to bind a people together and bring about their flourishing.”

NatCons rightly stress the connection between the conservative spirit and the national spirit, but they tend to downplay or overlook the connection between the conservative spirit in America and universal principles. Transnational abstractions such as “the idea of the nation” and “the principle of national independence” cannot alone capture the American experiment in ordered liberty. “Unique national traditions,” moreover, contain conflicting elements and differ from one another. They have been known “to bind a people together” to their detriment and to others’ sorrow. Duly elected officials, despots, and mobs have summoned distinctive national beliefs, practices, and institutions to sanctify oppression of minorities at home; to energize violent conquest abroad; and to vindicate authoritarian rule on behalf of a singular race, religion, or party.

Because the U.S. is a rights-respecting and constitutional democracy, “the past and future” of American conservatism are also “inextricably tied” to certain universal principles, ones that the

Declaration of Independence holds to be self-evident truths. Among these universal principles are that all human beings are by nature free and equally endowed with unalienable rights, that government's chief purpose is to secure basic rights and fundamental freedoms, and that just government power derives from the consent of the governed.

The U.S. Constitution institutionalizes these universal principles, which stem from the modern tradition of freedom. Throughout U.S. history, these principles have served as a goad to, and touchstone of, political reform, starting with the long, agonizing process of abolishing the evil institution of slavery. At the same time, U.S. national traditions encompass a diversity of elements. No account of the nation would be complete that disregards America's biblical heritage, debt to classical Rome, and British common-law background. In part because they are intertwined with these, universal claims about individual rights and limited government occupy a place of preeminence in the American spirit. In the U.S., universal principles do not represent an alternative to, but rather an essential dimension of, national tradition.

In its rootedness in universal principles, the U.S. is far from alone.

So much do universal principles inform the West that in August, a group of 29 distinguished conservatives from Australia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. took to the pages of The European Conservative in response to "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles," which appeared in the magazine in June of this year. The authors of "An Open Letter Responding to the NatCon 'Statement of Principles'" called on the national conservatives to recognize that universal principles form an indispensable component of the morality, politics, and faith the NatCons champion. "Although we welcome its timely critique of destructive globalisation and sympathise with its call for the renewal of national culture and traditions, we find ourselves unable to agree with its assault on 'universalist ideologies,'" wrote the open letter's authors. "What after all has underpinned the Western, European and Christian civilisation that National

Conservatism claims to defend and uphold if not a universalist ethical, spiritual and, yes, political vision?”

The original June 2022 NatCon Statement of Principles – signed by some 75 intellectuals and opinion shapers from Europe, the Middle East, and North America – confused matters by expressly attacking universalism while implicitly embracing it. “We emphasize the idea of the nation because we see a world of independent nations – each pursuing its own national interests and upholding national traditions that are its own – as the only genuine alternative to universalist ideologies now seeking to impose a homogenizing, locality-destroying imperium over the entire globe.” This formulation mischaracterizes a genuine problem, which is not universal principles but a particular progressive interpretation of their substance and reach.

The NatCons oppose the progressive project that shifts power within sovereign nation-states from the people to bureaucrats and courts, and from nation-states to international organizations. Both anti-democratic and illiberal, the progressive project polices social norms; imposes a left-wing interpretation of diversity, equity, and inclusion; and unravels family, religious life, and language.

The progressive understanding of universal principles and their imperatives, however, is not the only one.

Indeed, in the struggle against progressives’ partisan ambitions clothed in the language of universality, the NatCons espouse a universal ideal of their own. They regard a world of sovereign and independent nations as the one right approach to international order. They share that conviction with the U.N. Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But the NatCons violate their universal ideal. Contrary to their professed respect for unique national traditions, NatCons maintain that there is one right way for a Christian-majority nation to organize

relations between church and state. “Where a Christian majority exists,” they declare in their statement, “public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private.”

Some Christian-majority nations, however, believe that Christianity requires a wall of separation between church and state to protect religious liberty. In some Christian-majority nations, this belief draws sustenance from biblical teachings about the dignity of the individual, the imperfections of humanity, the corrupting effects of power, the impossibility of coercing genuine faith, and the duty to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

One such Christian-majority nation is the U.S. While affirming that religious faith is essential to the well-being of a free people, the American founders generally thought – along with the weight of religious authorities in America at the time – that only a Christianity that neither sought nor exercised political power could remain true to Jesus’ teaching.

The signatories of the open letter to the NatCons see Christian faith and practice as instructing the national spirit rather than as instruments or objects of public policy. Christian teaching, for example, highlights vital associations that operate below and above the national plane: “As critics of contemporary liberalism from both Left and Right, we believe that the just nation must take account of the principle of subsidiarity – that power should be devolved to the lowest appropriate level.” This requires caring for those institutions of civil society – family, community, religion – that cultivate individual character. It also impels the formation of partnerships and alliances among nation-states, including international organizations, to deal with “tasks which are beyond the scope of any one nation.”

The conservative critics also fault NatCons for obscuring the disadvantages of unchecked nation-state power. For instance, nation-states, in the critics’ estimation, have not been an innocent victim

of globalization. Rather, they enabled it “by the wiping out of local cultures, and the centralisation of power away from both local governments and civil society – notably churches, guilds, and other associations.” Moreover, “[b]y implicitly asserting the supremacy of nations over culture and communities,” the NatCon advocacy of nationalism “subordinates both the universal and the particular to the national, as if national interests and national traditions were necessarily good and anything exceeding nations must therefore be evil.”

While standing with the NatCons in defense of the local and the particular against a leveling globalization, the NatCon’s conservative critics caution that “[t]here is no safeguard within nationalism that necessarily promotes” the local and the particular, and there is “no principle within internationalism that inherently opposes them.” The nation-state is not a supreme standard: “We cannot outsource our political prudence solely to the nation-state; rather, we must pursue the common good, and the substantive goods of men and women, at every level of social organisation, from the family to international bodies.”

Indeed, the conservative critics of national conservatism reject the notion that any merely political good can serve as an ultimate standard. “We were most disheartened by the lack of reference to the supreme theological virtue and the guiding ideal of Christian civilization: charity,” they write. “In its list of ideals – ‘patriotism and courage, honor and loyalty, religion and wisdom, congregation and family, man and woman, the sabbath and the sacred, and reason and justice’ – no mention was made of friendship, compassion, or love.”

It is entirely consistent with America’s founding principles and the best in its constitutional traditions to recognize the intrinsic value of those moral and intellectual virtues and higher goods that lie beyond government’s purview but which are crucial to the pursuit of freedom, prosperity, and justice.

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