

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Robert George, professor, Princeton University

Table of Contents

I: Conservatism and the University 0:15 – 39:28

II: Growing Up in Appalachia 39:28 – 55:00

III: What Is Natural Law? 55:00 – 1:04:38

IV: Why We Need Social Conservatism 1:04:38 – 1:23:57

I: Conservatism and the University (0:15 – 39:28)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONSERVATIONS. I'm very glad to be joined today by Robert George, longtime Professor of Politics at Princeton University, Director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. Did I get that right?

GEORGE: You got it right.

KRISTOL: "Ideals and Institutions," we'll have to talk about that. Robby, obviously, you're one of the most prominent faculty members at Princeton, but also certainly one of the most prominent conservatives. And not terribly abashed about being conservative who's a faculty member at a major American university. Let's just begin with that. Everyone thinks universities are bastions of liberalism and worse. What is it like being an outspoken conservative faculty member at Princeton?

GEORGE: Well, you described me as one of the most prominent, but it's easy to be prominent when there are only six of us.

Actually, there are more of us than people know. Now, some people are in the closet since you get a good bit of grief at a contemporary academic institution for being a conservative. Some find it advisable just to keep a low profile about it. I don't have the personality to do that. Bill, you and I have known each other long enough that you know that I couldn't keep my mouth shut about things that I really care about and believe in. So I've been outspoken from the moment I began my academic career.

I finished graduate school and started at Princeton, and to Princeton's credit, I must say, they hired me knowing exactly what they were getting. I wasn't flying in under the radar screen. I was quite outspoken in my opinions even as a graduate student.

KRISTOL: And you teach courses where politics is very much involved – moral philosophy, Constitutional law.

GEORGE: Yes, that's right. So in our courses we discuss affirmative action, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, marriage, and sexual morality. All the hot-button, morally charged issues of law and public policy.

I have to give credit where it's due, and really, Princeton hired me, they promoted me, gave me tenure, installed me in the chair that I now occupy, which is the chair once held by Woodrow Wilson. It's an important chair in the university, and I'm very honored to have it.

They permitted me to start my own program, the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, which you were kind enough to mention. We've been going now as a program for 15 years. I've been teaching for 31 at Princeton – the program has been in existence for 15 years. It's a program really devoted to enhancing our students' understanding of the basic principles of American constitutionalism in the hope – in my hope, that it will also enhance their appreciation of the value of what we were bequeathed by our Founding Fathers and by the men over the many decades who gave their lives to preserve freedom for us in the United States.

So what can I complain about, Bill? Princeton has been very good to me.

KRISTOL: That's good. And that's to Princeton's credit, actually. As you say, it's not a trivial thing. So over 30 years.

Of course, the universities have been liberal a long, long time. I've been out of the universities for 25 years – maybe 30, now that I think about it. I do have the sense that it's gotten worse or the uniformity of opinion has gotten a little more stultifying. The pressure to conform, a little strong. The deterrence against being a dissident, a little more daunting, or I guess, more imposing. Am I right, or how is it in general, do you think? How worried should conservatives be about the state of the academy?

GEORGE: I honestly wish I could say you were wrong, but alas, you're not. You're right, the situation has gotten worse.

If there's anybody who can claim to be a founding father of liberalism, it's John Stuart Mill, the great 19th-century British writer, who among other works gave us the work *On Liberty*, which is a kind of charter of liberalism. And Mill's great worry was exactly what you put your finger on in contemporary universities – uniformity of thinking, conformism. Universities pride themselves and style themselves and present themselves as institutions that provide a forum for the vibrant, robust discussion of the spectrum of points of view that are held by reasonable, responsible people.

No one imagines that you need the Nazi point of view or the Stalinist point of view necessarily represented. Laying aside extreme and deeply pernicious ideas, like Nazism or Stalinism, there's a broad spectrum of responsible opinion. Universities claim that they provide the forum for people to engage that range of ideas, but the reality is that they don't.

Some institutions are better and some are worse, but not very many really live up to their own publicity, providing a forum in which the range of ideas can be discussed. The phenomenon we've now come to know as political correctness, it's present, it's a powerful force, and it does what Mill worried that conformity of opinion would do. It stifles not only speech – that's bad enough – but thought. People, students, sometimes even scholars are afraid even to consider different ideas for fear that they will run afoul of the norms of thinking that are in place.

So one of the big projects that I think we need to have when it comes to academic reform is cracking through conformism. Stimulating people actually to think about the range of ideas that are on the table for serious discussion.

One of the ways I like to do that is by co-teaching. Teaching with a person who represents a point of view different than my own. So for example, I regularly teach with Cornel West, the great left-wing intellectual, who sees things rather differently from the way I see them. But Professor West and I, on a regular basis, every couple of years, get together for a seminar. Because it's a seminar, we can only take about 18 students; we have to turn away several hundred who want to be admitted.

KRISTOL: But the example of it is important, I think.

GEORGE: That's what we do.

KRISTOL: The fact that it shows something –

GEORGE: So we'll start, maybe, with Sophocles, read *The Antigone*, read some of Plato's dialogues, St. Augustine's writings, maybe Machiavelli, all the way up through the 20th century. So we're reading John Dewey or C. S. Lewis, Gabriel Marcel – someone you and I discussed very briefly recently – Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." And in the context of those readings, we're able to engage some of the most important and difficult and controversial issues of the time.

And this way students get to hear two people with two very different perspectives engaging each other. I've worked with other colleagues as well. My colleague Michael Smith in the Philosophy Department and I have on a couple of occasions taught philosophy of law together. I regularly make appearances in colleagues' courses to defend my point of view, which, ordinarily, is radically opposed to their point of view. And I invite scholars who have a different point of view into *my* classes so *my* students can be exposed to arguments that are critical to the positions that I hold.

That's Mill's idea, and although there's much in Mill that I reject, that I think Mill got absolutely right.

KRISTOL: Where do you think the pressure comes from? So it's not just in the atmosphere – the administrators, the faculty, the students themselves? What is the heart of the problem in the modern college or university, or can one not separate it that way?

GEORGE: I believe it began with faculty members. Certainly not with administrators. I think the generation of the 60s and 70s was a highly politicized generation, and when that generation became professors and deans – and many of them did gravitate to the universities where their careers as radicals had begun when they were students – it led to a strong politicization of the university. And I think eventually to the phenomenon of political correctness.

Now, of course, what is happening is what leftwing revolutions do tend to produce, whether they're talking about the Russian Revolution or the French Revolution, and that is students – the next generation of revolutionaries – become not only more radical than their radical professors, but they turn on them so the revolution tends to consume its own. So now people who think of themselves of impeccably leftwing will say something that offends some group of radicalized students – perhaps students that they themselves helped to radicalize – and suddenly they are the ones under fire for not conforming sufficiently to the contemporary orthodoxy.

KRISTOL: And which parts of the orthodoxy are most authoritarian or most insisted-upon do you think in the universities? Are all parts of conservatism equally vulnerable?

GEORGE: No, it's race, class, and gender. About the safest area in which to be a conservative today and academic institutions is economics. Now that doesn't mean it's easy to be an economic conservative in a mainstream, contemporary, secular academic university, but you're less likely to draw the real, ferocious ire of people on the Left if you're talking about economic ideas.

If you're talking about sexual morality or if you're talking about abortion or even euthanasia, things get pretty hot pretty fast for you if you're a conservative. But, my advice to my own students, to my graduate students, to my younger colleagues is refuse to be intimidated, refuse to be bullied.

What your father and my father told us, "Bullies are cowards, and if you stand up to them, they back away," has certainly proved to be true in my experience. The phenomenon we know as political correctness thrives on people's permitting themselves to be intimidated by the people who are the enforcers of these norms and orthodoxies.

KRISTOL: And you say that even to junior faculty who don't have tenure –

GEORGE: Even to my own graduate students. And it's difficult for them to do because everything in them – as they are trying to get through the PhD program, get a job, once they've gotten a job, trying to get

tenure, be promoted – everything tells them to lay low. Hang back. Then, someday when they get tenure, when they've been successful, they can hoist the Jolly Rodger, as our friend Harvey Mansfield says. I actually don't think that is the way to go.

And I say this for two reasons – I think, first, it's bad for the soul. The one thing we've got control of –

KRISTOL: A word you're not supposed to use in the modern academy, but you can use it here on our conversation –

GEORGE: It's bad for the soul, it's not good for your character, for you to enter academic life, to enter the realm of ideas and decline to say what you think and why. There's something that is enervating of the spirit. There's something that, in some circumstances, even corrupting about keeping your mouth shut about issues you've been thinking about and writing about and have opinions about when those positions, the positions you hold, turn out to be controversial or risky.

But the second reason that I have is really more practical. I think you've actually got a better chance of succeeding in the academic world as a conservative, or even if you're not a conservative, but you're a questioner of the orthodoxy – you're heterodox in some way or another, you're a heretic. I think you've got a better chance of succeeding, if you step forward, present your ideas and arguments, defy people on the other side to actually retaliate against you in unfair ways when it comes to hiring or promotion, make arguments against you in faculty meetings that are discussing your tenure case or something.

I think you've got a better chance of surviving than if you try to hide. Inevitably, you get found out at some level. People get suspicious. Then, the hit job comes at tenure time or promotion time, and you know that you're being victimized because of your conservative or heterodox viewpoint, and yet when you complain about it, when you say anything about it, people will say, "I didn't know you were a conservative. It can't really be a hit job because of your views because who even knew that you were a conservative?"

I myself practiced what I preach, and it worked for me. Now, it's not a guarantee that it's going to work every time so when I give this advice to my graduate students or my young colleagues I do it knowing that not everybody is going to succeed, but I just think the odds of succeeding are better if you go ahead and fly the flag boldly from the beginning than if you try to remain in hiding till someday you get tenure.

And I think it is much better for your soul. If you're not going to say what you think, if you're not going to reveal the content of the beliefs that through your rational inquiry you have arrived at, my goodness, there are lots of other things you can do with your life. The insurance business is a great business. You can sell cars. You can practice medicine. There are lots of things that you can do where you're not really required as part of the enterprise itself to say what you think. But if you're going to be in academic life, you should say what you think.

KRISTOL: That's strong. Now, of course, the students are in the different position because most of them aren't going to academics, and they are trying to get a degree and get good grades and have a pleasant time at Princeton or anywhere else and go onto a professional school or wherever. They do seem to me to have more incentive to not pick fights.

If you're in the academy, anyway, I kind of agree with you. At least, that's also just my temperament, though. Kind of pointless to be a professor and not enjoy the play of ideas. But if you're a student, you could easily tell yourself, "Why am I going to get in an argument with some professor who seems very intolerant and short-tempered? I'll just keep my head down in this class and do well and move on." Do you see that a lot?

I've been a little struck – I met with the Hertog Political Studies students this summer in Washington who are very good students – you've taught them, too – and from all kinds of colleges and universities, not just one place. I've generally been a sort of, little bit of a debunker of excessive conservative alarms about political correctness, in terms of "It can't be quite as bad as people say, and people need to have the nerve to speak up, and it's good for you anyway to be in the minority," as you and I have been for all

these years.

But I've got to say these were very good students, and, I've got to say, personally quite courageous ones, I would say. And they were spending six weeks studying really great books with great teachers. The degree to which they said that they personally had to really think in some classes before offering an opinion that would be viewed with disfavor by the professors or just generally on campus, getting known as someone who had certain opinions – I was a little spooked by this. And I think that is sort of new in the last few years. Do you think that's the case? Maybe Princeton will, maybe, be better than most places?

GEORGE: It's gotten worse in the past few years. And I do think that Princeton is better than most places. I don't think I would have survived, given my views and my outspokenness, at a lot of other universities. But I have at Princeton. And not only survived but really flourished. I can complain about nothing when it comes to the way that I've been treated at Princeton. But I do think this situation has gotten worse nationally, and students are more frightened about speaking their minds and stating their opinions even on examinations, which I think is a terrible shame.

And I think it's something that faculty members have to do something about. My colleagues and I at Princeton, not just my conservative colleagues, and I have more than a few conservative colleagues at Princeton, actually. Not just a few of my conservative colleagues, but some of my colleagues that are old-fashioned liberals, the liberals of the old school. I'm thinking, for example, of my friend and colleague, Stanley Katz from the Department of History. He's a very eminent Revolutionary War historian, former President of the American Council of Learning Societies. Or John Burgess in our Philosophy Department.

We've sort of joined together to defend freedom of speech on campus, freedom of thought on campus. Where we mean not simply encouraging and protecting students when they speak their minds, but actually sending a message to our colleagues that we're watching. If students complain that they've been treated unfairly because they've stated an opinion that crosses a professor or contradicts his point of view, that we're going to be there to advocate on behalf of the student. You can't just take a student's word for it, right? Student gets a C, which these days is a very bad grade –

KRISTOL: I'm amazed you even have them at Princeton.

GEORGE: If a student gets a C –

KRISTOL: Harvard has totally given up on them as far as I can tell.

GEORGE: We still hang onto them, at least I do. If a student comes in and says, "Look, I got a C, and my liberal professor discriminated against me." Well, the first thing I want to do is to look at the work on which the student was evaluated, if it's within my area of competence, or have someone else have a look at it, if it's outside my area of competence, and see if I think a plausible case exists that real discrimination occurred. And it doesn't always.

Sometimes, the kid deserved a C or, at least arguably, deserved a C. But, on occasion, even at Princeton, a student has been given a grade far worse than the student deserved or given a bad grade when the student actually deserved a good grade. Then, you narrow down the explanations pretty quickly to the professor just doesn't agree with this. So the professor is offended that the student would have a view.

Then, I think that's when good old-fashioned liberals and conservatives alike need to join together to be advocates on behalf of that student. And I think you can create an environment at a university, even with a relatively small number of faculty participating, you can create an environment in which faculty members just internalize the idea that students should be graded fairly without regard to the point of view that they're defending.

KRISTOL: This is where I think your personal prominence at Princeton – maybe Princeton, in general having a certain old-fashioned view of these things, which is good – and the Madison Center, which has

created kind of a critical mass, perhaps, of heterodox thinkers and other figures on campus. I always – people ask me, “How important can you be?” You teach a couple 100 students a year if you teach a big lecture class, and you bring in guest professors and they teach another hundred or two and there are thousands of students. But I think people underestimate the importance of the effect of having something there. There, I do think Princeton is maybe a minority, unfortunately. It’s also a bigger university, which means – it’s a very good university – so it’s just enough people, it’s a little hard to suppress every idea.

I really – I’m a little shocked, and you go to a smaller college or actually a less good one, the better schools are less politically correct than the second- or third-tier schools. Do you agree with that?

GEORGE: Sometimes, the second- or third-tier schools think that they need to be even more ferocious in their political correctness in order to live up to their image of what’s going on at Harvard or Williams or something.

KRISTOL: Having the Madison Program, and therefore, just having sort of the visible symbol on campus or sort of “this isn’t quite in the mainstream of current liberal academic thinking,” is so important. But places that don’t have that, the students can feel more alone, I think.

There’s no Robby George, there’s no guest professors, or visiting speakers even coming in. There aren’t debates of the kind you host or classes of the kind you teach with Cornel West or whatever. And there is a way, I think, where you kind of do get the real what Mill and Tocqueville really feared, which is the genuine suppression of freedom of speech, which can spill over to – which you said, I think it would be interesting to hear more about this – not saying what you think, but deciding you shouldn’t even think about certain things because it’s too risky. Or in any case unprofitable. What’s the point?

GEORGE: A particular view on sexual morality, for example, or abortion just can’t be questioned. You don’t even permit yourself to think about the possibility that, say, the pro-life position is correct because that would make you such an outsider. You would even experience yourself as an outsider, you would be creating alienation between you and your friends and fellow students. But, you know, Bill, in my own experience, you’d be surprised at how few professors can make a big difference. It really doesn’t take a hundred professors, it takes five to make an enormous difference on campus.

The other thing that I’d note is sometimes the smaller colleges, the small liberal arts colleges, which when the academic world is healthy, are the very best places to get an education because of the close contact students have with faculty. Where academia is not healthy, where you have conformism, and imposed orthodoxies, they end of being the worst places because they’re just hot-houses of political correctness so often, and any dissent is immediately squashed.

One thinks of what happened to Professor Gilbert Meilaender at Oberlin. Oberlin is a very distinguished small college, but the ethos is very leftwing, it’s very politically correct, alas conformist, which was proven by the Meilaender episode. Meilaender’s one of the most distinguished bioethics writers of our time. He and I served together under Dr. Kass – who’s been subject of one of these CONVERSATIONS with his late wife Amy – on the President’s Council on Bioethics, and he’s a person that I have enormous admiration for.

Well, some years ago, he signed a perfectly reasonable statement questioning the Oberlin orthodoxy – it wasn’t directed at Oberlin, it was a general statement questioning the demands of the homosexual movement. The statement was called “The Homosexual Movement” in the pages of *First Things*.

Well, there was an uproar on campus. He was accused of being an enemy of humanity, being a homophobe, being a bad person, being someone unfit to teach. His life was made miserable, and eventually pretty quickly, actually, not long after this all began, he just decided that it wasn’t worth trying to put up with pariah status at a small place like Oberlin, where everybody knew everyone, where there was no place you could just retreat to and lead a normal academic life.

So he left the place, which was an enormous loss for Oberlin, which needed his dissenting voice on the

campus. And of course, was tough on Professor Meilaender himself, who loved the college, who devoted many years and had many friends there.

KRISTOL: *Federalist* 10 was right, if you have a larger sphere, minority interests have an easier time sometimes.

GEORGE: That's absolutely true. Madison was right on the mark there, as he was in so many things.

KRISTOL: Good point. That's right – you're pro-Madison, being from Princeton. Insufficient appreciation of Hamilton due to your Princeton bias, probably.

So what should people do? Let's just talk about that for a minute. There are a lot of people, perhaps watching this conversation and who would like to help foster genuine diversity, diversity of thought at colleges and universities. And especially, leaving aside colleges and universities, for young people.

So there's an inside strategy, it seems to me, that's what you've done at Princeton, and you're helping do at other colleges and universities. That's sort of what we're trying to do with these kinds of conversations and the websites that the Foundation for Constitutional Government puts up to make the thought of people, including you, much more accessible to everyone, obviously, since they're online. But especially to young people who might not otherwise hear about you in some course and maybe you being derided by some leftwing professor at Oberlin, thinking, "Oh, that guy may be interesting," and look it up and go around the universities in a sense. Together, can these things make a difference, do you think? How overwhelming is the forces of consensus on colleges and college campuses among young people against various forms of conservative or heterodox ideas?

GEORGE: There's a lot that can be done, Bill. Let me say, the first thing we need to do is not give up on the universities. Some conservatives and others that are disgusted at the political correctness and monoculture and the conformism and the enforced orthodoxies just want to wash their hands of the universities and say, "Look, we're going to support the think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation." Which are great and very important part of the outside strategy. We're going to support the Intercollegiate Studies Institute – again great thing to do – but we're just going to give up on the universities. Well, that's a bad idea.

Because the universities have the students. AEI doesn't have them, Heritage doesn't have students. The students are going to go to universities. So we need to be about the business of reforming universities, which is basically a matter not of turning the universities into conservative institutions or institutions that have a conservative orthodoxy. But making them a place where there's a vibrant dialogue between people representing the spectrum of reasonable, responsible points of view.

The question is how do you do that, obviously. First, support programs or even individual faculty members on campuses who are doing something to ensure that there is a vibrant marketplace of ideas on these faculties. Financial support can make an enormous difference. If people are building an institution that's going to create vibrant thought about the economy, and really be a place that, in which Keynesians and disciples of Hayek or Friedman can have a debate, well, that should be supported financially. And the same in any other area, whether it's sociology or political science or constitutional law or whatever. Financial support can make a difference.

I'll bet there are some viewers of CONVERSATIONS that are religious people. If you're religious, you believe in the power of prayer. Well, pray for those of us in the academy who are trying to make a difference. Trying to cause these academic institutions to live up to their highest and best ideals, their stated ideals.

Support the religious organization, for example, both through prayer and financially at these institutions that are calling into question some of the campus orthodoxies, especially about things like sex. I mean, one of the worst things about contemporary universities is the so-called hook-up culture. The culture of promiscuity and really narcissism and selfishness that is dominant in so many places. Well, there are

Orthodox Jewish communities on these campuses, there are Catholic chaplaincies, these Evangelical chaplaincies, these Muslim chaplaincies. People from all the different traditions can support the kind of defiance that is represented by those religious organizations on campus.

Then, there's the outside strategy, not just the think tanks, although they're very important and very good. It's things like the CONVERSATIONS, that this is part of, this conversation's part of. I learned from the ones I had seen before I became one of your interview subjects, especially the one with Dr. and Dr. Kass, Leon and Amy Kass. Now, Leon is someone I've known for decades and admired for decades, and I think I've ready pretty much read everything that he's ever written, and yet I learnt new things from the conversation.

The effort to found institutions in university communities that are not necessarily within the university but have a lot freedom to expose students in the community to new ideas, different ideas, such as the Witherspoon Institution at Princeton or the Elm Institute at Yale, or the Zephyr Institute at Stanford. Those are great things to support. And if you're a student, look for the resources that are made available to you in those types of institutions in your community.

So there are a whole lot of things that we can do.

KRISTOL: You're not fatalistic and not too pessimistic?

GEORGE: The opposite. It takes 11 guys to change the world. It takes five to change a university. We can do this.

KRISTOL: I'm just curious you've taught at one place for 30 years so you're a decent control – it's apples to apples, so to speak, in comparing them. "Young people today," I mean, conservatives are always so worried and wringing their hands, "It's much worse than it used to be."

What are – you've got 18-year-olds showing up, you had 18-year-olds showing up 30 years ago. Different? Not so different? How much has the culture changed them? How much has the country, growing up in a slightly different country changed them? What's your sense? I'm just curious. Not many of us have a chance to kind of have this controlled experiment of seeing every year a new wave of 17-, 18-year-olds showing up.

GEORGE: I have no big news because students when I began in 1985 weren't all that different from the students that I have in 2015. The majority are open to considering points of view different from the ones that have shaped them.

KRISTOL: You think, really? High school education, better or worse than it used to be, you think?

GEORGE: Probably not quite so good. Just the technical things like teaching people to write well – there certainly has been a decline there. So you can have students who, you know, have the top grades and very high standardized test scores who really don't know how to write grammatically correct English or put together an essay coherently. So part of what we do – and liberals complain about this as well as conservatives – part of what we have to do is the work that one would think high schools would be doing. It's remedial, in other words, when it comes to writing when students arrive.

There are a certain percentage of students who are not open-minded. They come in thinking they know everything. Everything turns out to be whatever the *New York Times* editorial board says is to be believed. They think they know everything, and that their job is to be trained to be a community organizers and social activists and Black Lives Matter activists and so forth. And they're just not interested in hearing an argument or different point of view.

But that's a relatively low percentage. Whether the students are conservative – and I would say 15 percent of the students who walk through the door at Princeton are broadly speaking conservative – or liberal – and that's probably 40 percent who walk in the door – the majority are open to arguments. So

that's why so many students want to sign up for my seminar with Cornel West.

I hate that we have to turn so many away in order to keep the magic of a seminar working. But the fact that they want to come in and hear two guys argue about these things and consider what these two guys who have different points of view have to say. Although Cornel and I don't always disagree as a matter of fact, but to listen to what we have to say is evidence that students are more open than, perhaps, people would think.

Now, is the same true of the faculty? Not so much. The faculties in general, I would say – with exceptions, notable, honorable exceptions – are less open to having their most cherished ideas challenged than students are.

Now, this is point actually on which Brother West and I completely agree. Someone asked us in an interview what we thought about safe spaces and trigger warnings and micro-aggressions and so forth. And Cornel responded by saying, "Well, if a student is interested in being in a safe space, he is best advised not to come into a seminar with Professors George and West, because we're not a safe space. No matter what your cherished views are, you're going to find those views challenged. Because we think that the way to move toward knowledge, or deeper knowledge, or greater understanding is to subject even your most cherished values to critical, rational scrutiny." And on that point he and I are 100 percent in perfect harmony.

So yeah, our classroom is not a safe space. I mean, you're going to have to think even about the things that are most important to you. Things that you might regard as identity-forming to you. We're going to call those things into question, and we're going to invite our students to call our beliefs into question. We're going to call each other's most cherished identity-forming beliefs into question. That's what both of us, I think, would call the Socratic spirit. We want to put together a seminar in the Socratic spirit.

The great thing about Socrates – at least as he's presented by Plato, he's presented less favorably by others as you know. But the Socrates we have from Plato is a Socrates who questions everything. That doesn't mean that he's a moral skeptic or a relativist or thinks there's no truth. Quite the contrary, you question everything because you want to deepen your understanding of the truth – you want to correct your errors and deepen your understanding of the truth.

KRISTOL: I think your point about how it doesn't take many – you said 11 or five or whatever. That's really an important point because you can have eight courses where you have, you know, foolish dogmatic interpretations of the history or political philosophy or anything, but it only takes one good teacher to open you up.

It's unfortunate that you wasted your time in eight bad courses, and that's one reason we have these CONVERSATIONS but also the Contemporary Thinkers and Great Thinkers websites. You're one of the Contemporary Thinkers. We've been pleased to be able to put it up there. But so many others, Leon Kass and Harvey Mansfield and James Q. Wilson. People who are no longer with us also, Lionel Trilling and Leo Strauss.

I think sometimes conservatives despair because, gee, there are 46 in the Sociology Department, and 43 of them are not very – some of them probably aren't very good and a lot of them are probably teaching a certain kind of liberal dogmatism. The good news that you don't have to have 43 – it would be great if you had 43 great teachers, but you don't need that. And that's where having the websites and having access to the thought, I think, is so important.

It just takes a little bit to open things up. As long as it's just not too – having one or two on campuses is really important, I think. You can still get to students when there are no good professors on campus. We all know people who have learned on their own and read a book and said, "Wow, look at this." At least there, we make it easier for them to find other books by the same author and other authors that that person has cited – you know, that's where it's so important I think to –

GEORGE: Read the footnotes. See what's in the footnotes.

KRISTOL: And then you get led to someone else and suddenly you see a whole world that you didn't know existed. But it is great if you can have one or two actual professors, no question.

GEORGE: I think that's right, and this again is the value of the Contemporary Thinkers program, the online Contemporary Thinkers websites. They do give students who would otherwise not have access to these thinkers – perhaps, professors wouldn't even assign them.

You'd have professors that were so biased against Leo Strauss even though they're political theorists, and Strauss is obviously one of the most important political theorists of the 20th century. You can go through a whole modern political theory course without ever encountering *Natural Right and History* or any of Strauss' works. So having the Contemporary Thinkers website is important.

Again, if I can speak to students who may be viewing: gosh, if you've got professors on the campus who are questioning the campus dogmas, the campus orthodoxies, regardless of what side you're on, whether you're a liberal or a conservative, seek out that professor. That professor is potentially your very best friend. He's going to cause you to think. He's going to cause you to question some things that you're taking for granted that really ought to be questioned.

And I don't think it takes, in any particular student's life, more than two or three professors to really liberate the mind in such a way that from that point on you can do it on your own engaging with your fellow students and engaging with others. The mentorship of a Paul Cantor, for example, or a Harvey Mansfield can launch you. Even if, you know, you've just gone sleep-walking through 20 other courses by 20 other professors.

I have been the beneficiary of the work that's done by people, especially like Harvey Mansfield. I've had students who are undergraduate students of Harvey's who Harvey has transformed. Just the engagement with Harvey has opened them and liberated their minds to make them nascent scholars, true scholars. And then they come to me to work on their PhD at Princeton, and it's easy work and a pure pleasure. I'm thinking of one right now, Melissa Moschella. I'm not sure if she's someone you've run into. She's terrific. She was a student of Harvey's; as an undergraduate, Harvey turned her onto thinking. To thinking! She came to work on philosophy of law and political theory with me at Princeton, wrote a brilliant thesis on the basis of the rights of parents to direct the upbringing and education of their children, and she's now an Assistant Professor, tenure track, at Catholic University, here in Washington, DC.

KRISTOL: I hope we haven't damaged her prospects by referencing her here. But this – you've cheered me up; this is good.

GEORGE: An undergraduate teacher can put somebody on the road, and then they can look for a graduate supervisor, if they do want to stay in academic life, look for a graduate supervisor who will continue working with them in a way that is in line with the way they were shaped by their undergraduate mentor. It can turn out really beautifully. I just want to see more of it.

II: Growing Up in Appalachia (39:28 – 55:00)

KRISTOL: You spoke eloquently about the difference teachers convey, and mentors. I guess when we first met, you were an Assistant Professor at Princeton, and I was God knows what in Washington. I've never really asked you, how did you get to where you got, such that you launched on this distinguished academic career, but also in terms of your own ethical and moral and political views? What's the backstory on Robby George?

GEORGE: I grew up in the hills of West Virginia. It was a Huck Finn existence of hunting and fishing and playing sports. I was shoeless most summers if that gives you a picture of what it was like growing up in West Virginia in the old days. I got interested in politics fairly early, and I think that was familial. My grandfathers were both coal miners, and my father's father who was an immigrant from Syria – he was

fleeing Ottoman oppression in Syria.

KRISTOL: Ottoman governance.

GEORGE: Ottoman governance. He worked in the mines and on the railroads his entire life. He was a laborer and then died of lung disease. My mother's dad began in the mines but after a few years he was able to save enough money. He was an Italian who was fleeing the poverty of Calabria, Southern Italy. Saved up enough money to do what Italian did, which is go into the grocery business, so he went into the grocery business. They were both union guys. My father's father, in particular, they were great disciples of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, admirers of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

He was the other picture in the house, besides Jesus Christ. There was Jesus Christ and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We were Democrats, very partisan Democrats. Not only did we not like Republicans, we didn't know any. The Republicans were the people who were rich and oppressive, who lived outside the state, but who owned the mines in which our fathers and grandfathers worked.

So when I was – even in my early teens I started working on political campaigns for Democratic candidates, and I was involved in a Democratic youth organization. It was kind of a young Young Democrats organization called the Democratic Youth Conference, and I was twice elected governor of the Democratic Youth Conference. I even had some letterhead at the Governor of the West Virginia Democratic Youth Conference. I actually ended up attending the 1976 Democratic National Convention. I was in college at Swarthmore as an alternate delegate. I will confess this on the air and in front of Bill Kristol – forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

KRISTOL: I was a Democrat once, too.

GEORGE: You were too?

KRISTOL: I worked for Scoop Jackson.

GEORGE: I was supporting Jimmy Carter. I learned better pretty quickly. But we were raised with the Democratic Party being kind of like a religion.

KRISTOL: Did you admire one particular figure? John Kennedy or something like that?

GEORGE: Not in particular. I think, of course, we thought of the Democratic Party also as the party of civil rights. Looking back at it, that's at best a complicated picture. I and people in my family admired, for example, Hubert Humphrey, who was a genuine civil rights liberal. He was an old-fashioned, honorable civil rights liberal. Jackson – you mentioned Scoop Jackson – being a Scoop Jackson Democrat. So I think by contemporary standards, looking back, I would say we were what now would count as conservative, maybe very conservative Democrats.

KRISTOL: Civil rights – don't you think? I'm a little bit older than you – it was so important for our generation, don't you think in making people – and it was a little odd that Democrats got to be the party of civil rights since Republicans –

GEORGE: Well, they got the credit for it, but they actually weren't.

KRISTOL: Republicans supported it more in Congress. I guess in '64 with Goldwater's opposition, even though he personally was not bigoted or anything – constitutional matter. I think that really was defining for so many people around our age. That if you were a decent person and you thought you couldn't possibly defend the treatment of black Americans in the South or for that matter in the North in some ways, the moral power of the Democratic Party and of liberalism really was very strong.

Young conservatives today don't understand that. "How could you ever have been?" You know, I was for Humphrey in '68, I was for Jackson in '70. "How could you have ever have had that view?"

GEORGE: So a very important moment for me came in 1973 – I guess, I'm trying to think how old I was, maybe 16 or 17 years old. I was involved in Democratic Party politics and so forth. And that's when the decision in *Roe v. Wade* was handed down. We were what we would now recognize – it didn't seem that way at the time – we were conservative Democrats. We just thought of ourselves as liberal Democrats, but we were, by contemporary standards, conservative Democrats. *Roe* was a shock to me because even at 16 or 17 years old, I understood that abortion was killing an unborn baby. It was very simple and straightforward, and indeed, it is simple and straightforward.

You can try to make this complicated, but it's simple and straightforward. You've got a new human life developing in the mother's womb, and abortion is the business of killing that baby. Now, the Planned Parenthood videos have made that very graphic, but you didn't actually need the videos, at least I didn't need the videos to know that. But even then we didn't think of abortion as something Democrats were for and Republicans were against. The division of the parties into pro-abortion and an anti-abortion party came a little later.

KRISTOL: Before you could argue it was more pro-choice and Jimmy Carter –

GEORGE: Oh yes, I think that's the right. And remember the majority of the Justices that handed down *Roe v. Wade* were Republican appointees. One of the two dissenters, White, Byron White, was a Kennedy appointee. He was a Democratic appointee. And we thought of the pro-life position as being the liberal view.

I mean, liberals are for inclusion, liberals are for protecting the innocent, protecting the little guy. Well, here was the littlest guy of all so we just thought the natural thing for a pro-poor, pro-vulnerable party, the party of civil rights, the natural thing is for that party to be on the side of innocent human life. And our view was you reach out – and love and care and compassion to mother and baby alike – you never would pit mother against baby, you wouldn't try to solve a women's problems by offering her an abortion. That's just too horrible to think about. But, of course, before too long the liberal movement and then the Democratic Party went down the path of the pro-abortion lines.

So the leaders of the party who had been pro-life, Richard Gephardt, Teddy Kennedy, Jesse Jackson – very outspokenly pro-life. Jackson made some of the most powerful pro-life arguments of the 1970s, relating them to his personal experience of being born out of wedlock and saying he himself would have been a victim of the abortionist's knife, had abortion been legal and available at the time when he was conceived and in his mother's womb. Of course, as those guys decided to run for president, the liberal movement and the Democratic Party viewpoint was such that they had to conform themselves to the new pro-abortion orthodoxy.

Not quite as fully or clearly or dramatically as the Republican Party became the pro-life party, in part because former Democrats who were scandalized and appalled as I and my family were by the liberal movement and the Democratic Party's embracing of abortion began to find their way out of the Democratic Party and ultimately, into the Republican Party.

The Reagan Democrats were motivated by a lot of issues, but one of those issues was abortion and the sanctity of human life. That's what put me on the road, I think, toward being what today counts as a conservative. The other, maybe of some interest to you, and that is as I got older and in college and in graduate school having been opened up to rethinking some of the Democratic Party and liberal movement orthodoxies, I began reading a very interesting journal called *The Public Interest*.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

GEORGE: By a man named Irving Kristol, and I was reading articles from James Q. Wilson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and I was reading those articles in light of my own experience growing up in Appalachia where Great Society programs and various initiatives, government initiatives, were supposed to make things better. Now, there were real problems, serious problems with poverty and despair in

Appalachia. We were not poor, we were not rich, but we were not poor. But I knew many people who were poor, I was close to many people who were poor.

I was a bluegrass musician – I still am, I play the bluegrass banjo – and I played a lot of music in the hills and hollows of West Virginia and the west part of Virginia and western part of Maryland as well. And often I played music with people who were genuinely poor, some really great musicians, by the way, who were genuinely poor and suffering.

I was reading the work of writers in *The Public Interest* in view of that experience, and I could tell that what they were saying was right. These well-intentioned programs – they were well-intentioned programs – were not only not helping the people they were meant to help in some cases they were actually hurting those people. What began with an opening of my mind to questioning some of the orthodoxies that I had grown up with as a result of watching the liberal movement devolve into a pro-abortion movement – when my mind was opened, I began to, I think, get a clearer view of what worked and what didn't work when it came to, for example, anti-poverty programs, tax regulation, and things like that.

So that's what put me on the way to being a conservative.

KRISTOL: Any professor who made a huge difference?

GEORGE: Yeah, he was not a conservative at the time, interestingly, but James Kurth, the foreign policy, international relations scholar at Swarthmore where I as an undergraduate, had an enormous impact on me. Although we didn't have the label political correctness back then, again looking back, it was Kurth who by both precept and example taught me to question the campus orthodoxies, the leftwing campus orthodoxies.

And this while he was still on the Left. Again, he gravitated to the Right, and he was a secular person, and he has become an Evangelical Christian. He had his own journey in many ways similar to my own, but even when he was on the Left, he urged his students, he cajoled his students – I would go so far as to say – to really question those orthodoxies and not just to accept these things on faith or because they were popular, or because they made you part of the group or were fashionable or whatever.

KRISTOL: How did you find – Swarthmore at the time was?

GEORGE: Very leftwing.

KRISTOL: But believed in the old kind of liberal education and open-minded?

GEORGE: Not so much. There was that phenomenon we know as political correctness. Kurth wasn't alone. I had a wonderful teacher of medieval philosophy named Linwood Urban who was also of the old-fashioned school that wanted a range of points of view to be heard. There was a wonderful professor in English Literature named Derek Traverse. There were many fine professors there, but there was also political correctness. There was a heavy Marxist element of the faculty, and even growing up in strong union families, I was pretty shocked to run into Marxists.

We were Rooseveltian Democrats, but we certainly weren't Marxists. And in part because, you know, we were religious people. My mother was Catholic, my father was Eastern Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox so I had these relatives on the one side who were very devout Eastern Christian people and on the other side were Catholic people, and the one thing we knew about Communism is that it was atheistic and godless and materialistic. That didn't square with the way we saw the world.

So I hit Swarthmore and I see what the Left is really – I thought I was on the Left because I was a Rooseveltian Democrat, but then I saw really what it meant to be on the Left, and I wasn't buying that for a moment. There was also quite a lot of hostility not only to religion, and especially Christianity, but a lot of hostility to the US in part because we were in the wake of the Vietnam War. I entered college in '73 so '73 through '77 was a time of pretty intense anti-Americanism. On a lot of campuses and especially

leftwing campuses, and I wasn't buying that, I just wasn't buy it.

I had been critical of the war, which seemed to me pointless. There didn't seem to be any real desire on the part of the Johnson Administration to win the war, and of course, Nixon got caught up in Watergate and so forth so the whole thing was a mess. But my father had served with great honor and courage in the Second World War. He fought for a country that was not only great but good. It had its flaws, it had its imperfections, there was the original sin of slavery, which we hadn't completely extirpated because we still had racial injustice in the 50s and 60s and 70s. We had only recently abolished, formally abolished segregation.

So I was aware that America had its flaws and defects in its history, but I also believed in the country and believed in its principles. That's the way I was brought up. So I was shocked when I found people who were just openly, vociferously anti-American. Condemning not only America's sins, but America itself, condemning its principles and pointing in some cases to Communist regimes like Cuba as being superior.

You know, I was still very young and, you know, hadn't yet gotten much of an education, but even I could perceive that all the traffic across, you know, the Berlin Wall or through the Iron Curtain was one-way. There was a reason people wanted to come to the West and especially to the United States. And not to go to Cuba or Bulgaria or Romania, Soviet Union. That, too, I think started to move me in the direction of conservatism because conservatives, though willing to be critical of the country's flaws, also believed and were willing to defend the nation's principles, which I believed were right and good.

III: What Is Natural Law? (55:00 – 1:04:38)

KRISTOL: And your work in moral philosophy is associated, I think, usually with the natural law and tradition. Say a word about what that is, and how did that come about? That was a little unusual, I guess, though it's very powerful and a strong tradition, obviously, when you step back in the history of political thought and philosophy. Not the most fashionable thing, I would say, in 1977 when you were graduating from Swarthmore.

GEORGE: That's certainly true. I became interested in natural law when I was reading some of the classic writings in moral philosophy under Professor Urban, a professor at Swarthmore I mentioned who taught medieval philosophy. So he had us reading Aristotle, he had us reading Aquinas, he has us reading Hume, Hobbes, Mill.

And I'd encountered some of these writers in other courses as well. And I got very interested in the foundations of moral philosophy. How is it that we can have any knowledge of what's right and wrong? Most of us have pretty firm opinions of what's right and wrong; for example, most, at least today, think racism is wrong or discriminating against somebody because of the color of his skin is wrong. Okay, how do we know that? Do we know that because God whispers it into our ears? Do we know that because we were taught that by Scripture? If so, how do we know that Scripture is an authoritative teacher and so forth?

And that brought me to a consideration of the leading points of view. So for example, the school of thought known as Utilitarianism, whose founder was Jeremy Bentham: You should consider something right if it conduces to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. And it led me to a consideration of Kant's philosophy, Immanuel Kant's philosophy and the idea of a categorical imperative. Basically, boiling down to the idea that the morally right thing is the thing that is logically consistent, and if it's not logically consistent, then it can't be the morally right thing.

Well, among the competing schools of thought I encountered was the Aristotelian tradition, which as it is developed in Christian and actually later Jewish thought in the Middle Ages and forward, becomes known as the natural law tradition. And of course this is also the tradition, or the stream of the tradition, that produces the American Founding and the principles of the Declaration of Independence, principles of natural law and natural rights.

And the basic idea there is that there is indeed a law, a higher law, a law above the positive law, a moral law. That we can know even by unaided reason, that is, reason without the benefit of revelation. This is not to deny that there is a God or that God can reveal or reinforce what we know in the way of moral truths and how we should live our lives, but the idea is that the basic understandings of morality are available to us as rationally capable creatures, as people capable, and creatures capable of inquiry, understanding, and judgment. And we come to know it – and this is Aristotle's great insight, really – by reflecting on what is intrinsically fulfilling of human beings as rational animals. And what is contrary to that, what are the privations of the goods that are constitutive of our overall flourishing and well-being, what is in Greek called *eudaemonia*.

I was impressed by that school of thought, and so I began working on that, studying Aristotle, studying Aquinas, and studying Enlightenment figures who had their own twist on the tradition. You wouldn't want to say that, you know, the Enlightenment writers are just like the medieval or ancient writers, but these are streams that are feeding the American Founding. As Jefferson himself said, you can't account for, say, for the Declaration of Independence purely with reference to Enlightenment ideas, leaving out the medieval or the ancient ideas. Now, of course, you can't account for it by just the medieval and ancient ideas either – their streams fed it.

And then there was a very important moment for me intellectually, perhaps the most important moment. And it was not in a course with one of the professors I mentioned, it was in a perfectly good introduction to a political theory course, survey course. I must have been a sophomore at the time, if I'm remembering correctly. I couldn't have been more than a junior, but I think I was a sophomore. It was a survey of, you know, Plato to the present.

And in that course we encountered Plato's dialogues. We read the dialogue called *Gorgias*. And *Gorgias* is a dialogue that raises among other questions, the question, "Why do we enter into discussion, debate, argument?" Do we do it, as the Sophist would say, and Socrates' adversaries would say, in order to gain glory by winning victories? Or to enhance our prestige? Or to get ahead in life or to rise up the ladder? Is that why we do it? Do we do it in order to uphold the honor of our tribe or group or clan? Or do we do it for the sake of truth?

And if we do it for the sake of truth, then that probably is going to change how we do it and the attitude that we take going into these discussions. The whole attitude we take toward conversation and toward the learning that we aim for in conversation. I have to tell you, Bill, when I read the dialogue, I was startled. Because I could see immediately that I was actually on the wrong side of this.

That I had come to take as a matter for course unthinkingly, uncritically, without even considering the alternative that the point of discussion was to win. I was a very good debater, I even did formal debate in high school. I was good at it. I thought it was about winning, it was about vindicating our clan's position, or our tribe or political party or our religion, whatever. But Plato was very persuasive in saying, that's just a mistake. The real goal is truth. And if the real goal is truth that means you've got to be willing to put everything you believe, even the ideas that you're most attached to, that you've emotionally wrapped yourself around, on the table for critical scrutiny with your interlocutor. And you can never regard your interlocutor – if he's an honest person, really engaging in dialogue or debate with you for the right reasons – as your enemy. He's not your enemy; he's your friend.

In a true discussion, no matter how strongly the two interlocutors may disagree, they're bound together by a common good. A common goal. That is getting at the truth of the matter. They want to be corrected. So Plato teaches, if you're wrong, you want to lose the debate. It's in your interest to lose the debate. And to be straightened out. And if you're defeated, you shouldn't be bitter toward your adversary; on the contrary, you owe him a great debt of gratitude because he's given you the greatest gift of all, moved you from error to truth.

And even if you're the one who's right or closer to the truth than your adversary, if it's an intelligent adversary who's given you credible arguments that reason is on the other side, then he's deepened your

understanding of not only why the position you have been holding is the true position, he's deepened your understanding of the significance of its truth. The existential meaning of its truth.

Well, I was converted instantaneously. Like Saul of Tarsus being knocked off the horse on the way to Damascus.

KRISTOL: That's amazing. More 2,000 years ago. It's impressive –

GEORGE: The most important intellectual moment in my life was an encounter with an ancient Greek.

KRISTOL: In translation, I suppose? It shows how powerful thought is. Even if slightly, whatever – That's a great story actually, that's impressive. Most people – that's unusual, I would say, and a credit to you. Like most people, you need to have the teacher in a way pointing out to you the things you said, but you seemed to have jumped over that stage.

GEORGE: It put me on the trajectory to the vocation that I've lived. I would never have dreamed prior to that encounter with the ancient Greek that I would be a university professor. Furthest thing from my mind, Bill. I would have thought I'd be a lawyer because I was good at debating. And that I would maybe go into politics. Again, because I was good at debating, and I had strong views about things. Maybe the views weren't always very well-informed, but they were our clan's, our tribe's, our party's views.

Well, all that went out the window. And I started to become interested in the ideas for the sake of the ideas. Become generally interested in ideas rather than seeing ideas as just instruments, either to get ahead personally or to have stature or status or influence. Or to advance the goals of partisan interests that I myself happen to be associated with or anything like that. But once the scales fell from my eyes, after that encounter with Plato, well, gosh, everything was about ideas, and I didn't realize it just at the time, but it put me on the road to wanting to spend my life teaching and learning.

IV: Why We Need Social Conservatism (1:04:38 – 1:23:57)

KRISTOL: That's great. And you have such wonderful things that can be read on the website Contemporary Thinkers. I'm glad we got that up now, and I encourage people to read your explorations in moral philosophy and other cognate areas of philosophy of law and constitutional law.

But let's talk about – let's come back down from the heights of ideas and pure intellect to politics here. You're known as a strong social conservative. I think the conventional view, if you ask people in Washington on the conservative side or at least on the Republican side, "Oh, social conservatism, it's had its uses, but not the most promising part of conservatism." Young people aren't really attracted to it, and it's kind of a problem for conservatives, almost. Don't you think people – You must run into this.

GEORGE: That's the conventional wisdom, and the conventional wisdom isn't always wrong. Well, again, I can speak best from my own experience. It's not that young people have heard the argument for socially conservative positions on marriage or abortion or euthanasia or drugs, it's not that they have heard the position and they have rejected it. It's just that they haven't heard the position. Or if they've heard the position, they haven't heard the arguments for the position.

And I find that when students actually hear the arguments, well, it can make an enormous difference. Even those that are still resistant to them, they realize that they have the devil of a time explaining what's wrong with, say, the pro-life position. Or even the idea that marriage is actually the union of husband and wife. To students who've never considered why, literally for millennia, marriage has been considered the union of husband and wife. For students who have not considered that and just think of marriage just as sexual, romantic companionship or domestic partnership, it's unfathomable that anybody would really think that marriage was really a man and a woman as opposed to two men or two women. Or three of whatever sexes or four of whatever sexes in polyamorous ensembles. It just completely puzzling to them.

But then when they hear the argument, even if they're not willing to bite the bullet and say, "Gosh,

marriage actually is inherently a man and a woman,” they realize that it’s hard to explain any of the norms – exclusivity, fidelity, the idea that it’s two and not three or four or more – by reference to the new idea of marriage that they want to embrace. Then, I look at my students – I mentioned earlier Melissa Moschella, I could mention Sherif Girgis, Ryan Anderson – people who are now very prominent young social conservatives, who encountered the arguments, are persuaded by them, and go out and are very effective persuading other people.

So I think the question is not “Are socially conservative ideas sellable?” it is, “Can we clear the room?” Can we find the space? Can we find the forums and opportunities to present the argument to each new rising generation? Those on the Left on the social issues are operating shrewdly, astutely, when they try to shut down debate. They’re right to try to do that because their greatest concern ought to be that the debate will take place. Because if the debate takes place, they’re going to lose a lot of ground. It should be our goal on the conservative side to open up spaces in which the arguments can be made because we can only benefit from that.

KRISTOL: And I suppose a somewhat sophisticated argument is well, look, you’re a great teacher and you have some very smart students and they get persuaded by these arguments, but that’s not the way politics works. And here we have a huge popular culture out there, a social atmosphere in which we all live, and there it just seems – I mean, correct me, and do correct me if I’m wrong – it’s all going in the other direction.

It’s one thing for a professor to have excellent students at a seminar and convince them of what you’ve just talked about with respect to marriage and other issues. But can a politician do that in the popular culture, in the social world in which we live? Isn’t that a tougher challenge?

GEORGE: It’s a tough challenge, but things always seem impossible until people do them. We are still, even those of us who are conservatives, to some extent in the grip of the Hegelian-Marxist idea that there are laws of history and society that generate outcomes quite independently of what individual actors or people organize together do. Now, that’s a really stupid view.

KRISTOL: Somehow deep in the modern world. Progress goes in one direction, more or less.

GEORGE: Just think of how much traction folks on the Left get out of accusing their adversaries of being on the wrong side of history. Many of their adversaries are actually concerned about that. They’re worried about being on the wrong side of history, as if history were endowed with the powers of judgment with God to determine what’s right and what’s wrong, separate the sheep from the goats on the last day, so to say. But of course, history – this is why I say it’s stupid – history is an impersonal sequence of events. It has no power to judge than a rock outcropping or a golden calf. It’s just literally an idol.

KRISTOL: It’s a powerful idol. Bill Buckley doesn’t get enough credit for standing athwart history. That was a very important thing just to say. He didn’t believe history had a movement either, I don’t think. But he thought it was important to show people that a young, well-educated, intelligent, fun-loving person could say no. You know, one forgets just in the mid-50s how bold that was, I think, and how much people did believe in a sort of decayed version of Hegelian-Marxist history with a capital H.

GEORGE: We’re still in its grip today. Can I say one more word about that, Bill, before you move on? You’ll probably find it surprising that I was not taught this view, but strongly reinforced in this view when I was a student at Harvard Law School by a leftwing professor. It was actually Roberto Unger who strengthened my belief in the radical contingency of history and my skepticism about the Hegelian-Marxist idea of a progressive history because although he was on the Left, he was a radical anti-Marxist when it came to the idea of laws of history and society. Radically skeptical about them, as well he should be. And you know, I don’t agree with various other aspects of his thought – on this, I think he was absolutely right – but he was a very strong influence on me.

KRISTOL: That’s interesting. I remember he was such a prominent – considered far on the Left in a way. Radical Left, as you say. More radical than Marxist almost.

GEORGE: And some people both on the Left and the Right just regarded him as a very sophisticated Marxist. When he himself said, “No, I’m not that. You’ve misunderstood me,” people were puzzled.

There was an exchange he had in the *University of Minnesota Law Review* years ago after his first book was published, *Knowledge and Politics*, when Tony Kronman who later became a very prominent law professor, Dean of Yale Law School. Tony Kronman in a review of *Knowledge and Politics* just identified Unger as a sophisticated sort of Frankfurt School Marxist. Unger wrote back in saying, “No, you’ve completely misunderstood me.” Kronman couldn’t understand, and Unger said, “The thing that you most misunderstood me about is I can’t be a Marxist because I do not believe in a dialectic of history. I don’t believe in the inevitability of anything. I believe in the radical contingency of history. That idea is much more comfortably categorized as a Catholic idea.” Unger himself was not a believer. But he said, “That’s much more easily categorized as, say, a Catholic idea than as a Marxist idea.”

KRISTOL: One other argument, I’ll let you knock this one down. Whatever the status of history, once liberationism, let’s call it, or individualism of a certain kind –

GEORGE: Expressive individualism. What Robert Bellah called expressive individualism.

KRISTOL: And the sort of doctrine that one should make up one’s mind, liberate oneself from all traditions, constraints, etc. – once that’s sort of unleashed as a practical matter, even if history really isn’t moving in one direction, that’s a very powerful thing in people’s psyches, souls. The traditions depended on a certain kind of, you know, habit and just deference because of their age, and once the traditions are knocked over by expressive individualism or radical liberationism, or whatever it is, it’s very hard to put that toothpaste back in the tube, to use a metaphor that’s often used. There is a way in which – we’re not exactly on the losing side of history, but we’re at a disadvantage for making the case for various constraints and limitations that would seem to be the freedom to be whatever you want to be – or what does Anthony Kennedy call it? Define your own identity and all that stuff.

GEORGE: You find it articulated by the Supreme Court in the famous mystery passage about *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, that liberty means to the right to make up your own theory of existence and meaning and the universe. Yeah, it is a powerful idea, but pretty soon in our individual lives and in our lives together, we begin to see what the consequences are of licentiousness – let’s use the old-fashioned word for what it is. Sociologists call it expressive individualism. The kind of layman’s term for it, which is completely accurate is the “Me Generation liberalism.” Remember the “Me Generation,” Bill?

The Me Generation slogan was “If it feels good, do it.” Well, people have been acting on that for some time, and we’ve seen what the consequences are in people’s individual lives and in the lives of communities. And it’s not pretty. And that’s because there is actually a human nature and there is actually a human good. And when we act contrary to the human good, we do not flourish as individuals or as communities.

There is a natural law, which is not just some ancient idea that Aquinas had but is articulated and defended, for example, by Martin Luther King and his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In fact, King says this is how you distinguish just from unjust laws; it’s by reference to a higher law, which he sometimes calls the law of God, and sometimes calls the natural law. And I think the only distinction that he has in mind is it’s the natural law insofar as we access it by our common human reason and it’s the law of God to the extent that we access it by way of revealed teaching and Scripture.

If in fact there is a human nature or human good, a natural law, then there are going to be consequences in our lives for acting contrary to it. I think many people have experienced that who’ve tried to live out the Sexual Revolution, the drug culture, the descent into a culture of narcissism. There’s a price to be paid.

Let me say something else about that. It’s the rich and powerful, by and large, who glamorize immorality. But it’s the poor and vulnerable who pay the price. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his famous report, *Report on the Negro Family*, in which he rang the alarm bell. He was an Assistant Secretary of

Labor working for a Democratic regime, the Johnson Administration, about to launch the Great Society. He rang the alarm bell when the out-of-wedlock birthrate for blacks had reached 25 percent. Now, at the time, the out-of-wedlock birthrate for the general population was about 5 percent, but he warned that this would be an untenable situation, it would lead to delinquency, despair, drug abuse, violence, crime, incarceration in a vicious cycle. And that the consequences for this historically oppressed and vulnerable and, in many cases, poor sector of American society would be just devastating.

Well, fast forward. Of course, Moynihan was vilified. The term of “blaming the victim” was invented to use against Moynihan. He was accused of being a racist. Liberal Democrat and Harvard professor, actually. He was a Harvard professor at the time, who would later become a famous liberal Democratic Senator. He was vilified, people didn’t want to listen to what he wanted to say. What happens? Well, fast forward to 2015, what do we see? Out-of-wedlock births in the black community over 70 percent. For the general population now over 40 percent, and everything that Moynihan had predicted came true.

So, who paid the price for the liberationism that is glorified by Madonna or Miley Cyrus, profited on by the suits up in Manhattan or out in Hollywood? Who’s paying the price for all that? I dare say the spiritual cost is being born even by the children of the rich, but the material cost, in addition to the spiritual cost, is being paid by the poor and vulnerable.

And we now know that it’s not just about race. The recent work by Putnam and Murray and David and Amber Lapp and others have showed that the same social pathologies that Moynihan saw developing in largely urban, largely minority areas, we now see among working class and lower middle class whites and my own native Appalachia or in historic Rust Belt cities, and the problems are not just economic. Nobody can really say with any credibility anymore that the problems are economic. There are economic components to the problem; we can’t just write out the economic dimension of it, but it is even more fundamentally cultural and when we say cultural, that’s just a polite way of saying moral. Liberationism does exact a cost. And it’s the weakest and the poorest and the most vulnerable who pay the cost.

KRISTOL: I guess people could agree with that – and I certainly do – and then say still it’s hard to regenerate the communities, to regenerate the moralities, the morality and the moralities, if you want.

GEORGE: It takes leadership.

KRISTOL: That could get us back to a healthier situation. The vicious-cycle metaphor actually implies, in a way, that you – once you’re in the cycle, it’s hard to break out. And I think that’s –

GEORGE: But reforms have happened in history. Methodism made a profound impact.

KRISTOL: That really is an important point, I think. Our peers are too fatalistic about this kind of thing.

GEORGE: We shouldn’t be fatalistic. From a religious point of view, whether you’re Jewish or Christian or Muslim, you shouldn’t be fatalistic because ultimately God is in charge. But even from a purely secular perspective, there’s no need to be fatalistic. There are no laws of history, no inevitability, but we can learn the lessons of history because we have seen in the past societies fall into decay – sometimes go kaput, but sometimes regenerate themselves with renewal movements, very often religious or spiritual like Methodism in England, really rescuing those on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale from terrible alcoholism, domestic violence, abuse, criminality.

But if that’s going to happen for us, it’s going to take the dedicated, courageous leadership of people at every level. We need, for example, religious leaders who really will speak the truth out loud and not simply accommodate themselves or accommodate the teachings of their traditions to the new morality in order to be acceptable.

We need political leaders who have the courage to speak up about the public policy changes that need to be made if we’re to heal the culture. Intellectuals, at least those who see the problem and can understand something about the solution, need the courage to speak up. And take the slings and arrows

that do come in the academic world when you run up against the conventional dogmas and orthodoxies. That's one of the reasons I encourage my own students and young faculty colleagues to do it. Not only because it's good for their souls. Not only because it actually works better as far as your career is concerned, but also because we owe it to the country and we owe it to the civilization. We really can make a difference.

Even people in business, certainly, people in philanthropy have important roles to play in this project of cultural renewal. I can tell you this, unless people in all these areas step up to the plate, then defeat will be self-fulfilling prophecy. I'm just calling on everybody at all levels. There's something for everybody to do in this fight, but we have to do it for our children and for our grandchildren, and so that this profound experiment in ordered liberty that was bequeathed to us by Madison and Washington and Hamilton and Adams, and by Lincoln doesn't collapse. That republican government, which is ultimately what's at stake here, because a licentious people is not going to sustain republican government.

We've got to make sure that republican government, not only of the people – as all government is – but by and for the people doesn't perish from the Earth. If we lose it here, it's not as if it's going to be restarted somewhere. People look to the United States to see whether self-government can actually work. And it's not going to work unless we as individual people and as members of small communities, institutions of civil society are able to govern ourselves, are able to control our own passions and desires.

I say to my students, I say to my own children, I say to myself, the most abject form of slavery there is is slavery to one's own feelings or passions or desires. The goal, the project of living a human life is all about self-mastery. Now, if people live in a culture that encourages them to be masters of themselves, and if they become masters of themselves, if they're able to control their own passions – no one is going to be perfect, right? Eliminate sin from the world or from the human heart, but if we're able to be masters of ourselves, masters of our own passions, then we will be able as a people to govern ourselves. We can genuinely make the republican experiment in ordered liberty work. But if we lose it at the personal level, there's no way it's going to work at the societal level.

KRISTOL: I think that's an appropriate note to close on. There's a lot more I'd like to ask you about, and maybe we'll do that in another conversation but, Robby, thank you very much for taking the time.

GEORGE: My great pleasure, Bill.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]