

# WE ARE ALL LIBERALS BWELL, ALMOST ALL

Nick Gier  
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy  
University of Idaho

See also: [Liberals: Take Back the Flag](#)  
[Religious Liberalism and the Founding Fathers](#)  
[Libertarianism and Christianity](#)

"The pure conservative is fighting against the essence of the universe."  
--Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures in Ideas* (p. 354)

Liberal democracy is spreading throughout the world and these countries are liberalizing their economies. Our conservative politicians praise this development and even encourage it. Liberals in Europe are in the center of the political spectrum rather than on the left. "Conservative" economists at the University of Chicago who support free market capitalism prefer to be called classical liberals. Conservatives support Christian liberal arts colleges, and all of us want our children to have a good liberal arts education.

But what are conservatives doing supporting liberal ideas? Isn't liberalism supposed to be a bad thing? Not in the old days it wasn't. The Latin word *liberalis* means pertaining to the free person, that's the reason why a liberal arts education prepares students for making free and responsible choices in their lives.

In medieval times there was a strict distinction between the *liberi*, the free born nobles, and the *servi*, those who were born to serve and obey. The American and French Revolutions were fought to eliminate this distinction and to declare that all human beings, regardless of their class, had inalienable rights to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

The divine right of kings and the rule of top males constitute classical conservatism, whereas the American and French Revolutions gave us classical liberalism. I don't know anyone who still wants an absolute monarch, so all of us today, conservative and liberal, are living in the political house of classical liberalism.

The watch words of the French Revolution were Equality, liberty, and fraternity. I

would like to redefine *Afraternity@* as *Acommunity@* and point out what I think went wrong in France. The French revolutionaries mistakenly thought that their *Anew man@* would be able to create new values from scratch. Our American revolutionaries were much more reasonable. Although they were critical of oppressive tradition and religion, they still saw value in traditional community values.

In a similar move the [American Wiccan community](#) propose that the French *fraternite* be translated as the virtue of cooperation. They quote the great classical liberal Ben Franklin: "If we don't hang together, we shall surely all hang separately." The Wiccans rightly emphasize that the origins of democratic and republican ideals are pagan not Christian.

Today's conservatives are classical liberals because they support equality and liberty as well as community. Conservatives go wrong when they support, or used to support, traditions that discriminated against people because of their race or their gender. For classical liberalism to work, as it has done where it now thrives in the world, the three values must always achieve balance and harmony.

Classical liberals who stress liberty and neglect equality and community are called *Alibertarians.@* Libertarians believe that adults should be able to do anything they choose as long as they do not kill, assault, defraud, or steal. They make, I believe, persuasive arguments with regard to free speech, private sexuality, and taking drugs, but their rejection of public services and education undermine the ideal of equality of opportunity.

Classical liberals who stress equality are those who have now been tagged as *Aliberal@* as a four-letter word. It was common for some people to argue that no person is equal to another, so this is an impossible ideal. Classical liberals were not talking about physical traits such as strength or skin color; rather, they were talking about formal equality before the law, the very cornerstone of liberal democracy everywhere.

The free born noble Americans who founded our country claimed that only they as male property owners could have a full complement of rights. However, African Americans and then women forced us to realize that the classical liberal promise for America was a

sham until they were included with full and equal rights.

Today Americans who are attracted to people of their own sex, through no choice of their own, are denied the equal rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. When judges, even those appointed by Republicans, repeatedly rule in favor of gay and lesbians, they are simply upholding the ideal of equality won for us by American and French revolutionaries.

When local governments recognize the right of gays and lesbians to marry, it does not undermine traditional values. On the contrary, the love that these couples express to one another preserves the sanctity of marriage, and it causes no harm to heterosexual wedding ceremonies performed according to conservative religious traditions.

It is always surprising to me to find that there are some Americans who are not liberals in this classical sense. There are some right here in Idaho who believe that men should vote for their wives and that gays and lesbians should be executed or at least banned from society. Finally, there are some in the South who want to set up a New Confederacy in which Calvinist males would rule in the name of God over women and other lesser human beings. Classical conservatism will always find a few fans, but it is these folks who are, according to Whitehead, "fighting against the essence of the universe."