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The Philosophy of Freedom

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Introduction

Business owner Jim Leadbetter “stepped out from under the metal canopy and sniffed the night air.”¹ As he walked home, Jim reflected on his workday. He was disturbed to discover that his employees had taken $46.33 in stamps for personal use in the past year. The cost of this minor theft concerned Jim less than the violation of principle it represented. Jim expected his staff to behave with the same “integrity” and “moral righteousness” he demanded of himself.² By stealing company property, Jim’s staff had eschewed the tenets of Christian and American values which he held in high esteem.

Still deep in thought, Jim arrived home, only to learn that a representative from the Internal Revenue Service awaited him. Jim confronted the IRS representative with trepidation. The man had come to obtain Jim’s signature on his income tax form, which he had neglected to sign. Jim reviewed the form for accuracy and, in light of his recent reflection on integrity, guiltily recalled a few small items he had not reported. Jim decided that he must adhere to his honest principles, despite his resentment against the government for levying an unfair tax against him. He resolved to amend the form before signing.

Though Jim was forced to admit to falsifying his taxes, he won the day and the admiration of the IRS employee. As the employee left Jim’s home, he noted that Jim was a stand-up gentleman with a “pretty fine house” and a more principled person than the government “crooks I work for…”³ Victorious, Jim sat down to a hot dinner prepared by his loving wife Grace.

This vignette, titled “Jim Leadbetter’s Discovery,” was published in a 1957 edition of The Freeman, a monthly journal operated by a libertarian think tank The Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). The story, written by Robert LeFevre, typifies the kind of simple, allegorical story often found in FEE publications and offers the reader a glimpse into the group’s ideology and its intended readership.

Historian Kim Phillip-Fein describes FEE as an organization that sought “to persuade random people of the beauty of the market.”⁴ That assessment fails to capture the complexity and nuance of FEE’s mission. This paper will contend that, in fact, FEE targeted a select audience and promoted an ideology centered around individual freedom. FEE’s advocacy for limited government and market deregulation was grounded in this doctrine. This philosophy of freedom not only provided spiritual underpinnings to libertarian ideas, it also fostered a personal connection between the individual and his politics. FEE promoters employed religious and patriotic traditions to validate those principles.

² LeFevre, “Jim Leadbetter’s Discovery,” 10.
³ LeFevre, “Jim Leadbetter’s Discovery,” 16.
Through folksy, allegorical stories like that of Jim Leadbetter, FEE expounded its ideology to a target audience of sympathetic upper and middle-class white men. FEE empowered followers to articulate the virtues of capitalism, while evading issues that plagued the conservative movement like income inequality, gender marginalization, and racial exclusion. FEE did not address or attempt to resolve the very real issues surrounding class, gender, and race that confronted conservatives. Rather it employed philosophical principles to sweep these issues under the rug.

This paper will explore FEE’s message and its audience in the context of the formation of the modern conservative coalition. The first section of this paper will chronicle the early years of FEE, from its founding in 1946 through the end of the 1950s. The next section will attempt to describe FEE’s target audience. Finally, this paper will deconstruct the message FEE communicated to that audience.

The early history of the Foundation for Economic Education informs our historiography of modern conservatism in several ways. Historian George Nash proposes that, despite their divergent ideologies, “classic liberals” (the predecessors of modern libertarians) and religious “traditionalists” allied themselves against the common enemy of anticommunism in the post-war era to create the modern conservative coalition. Readers of early FEE communications will note that libertarian economics and traditionalist values are continually paired. Their cozy, almost seamless relationship suggests a unity formed by stronger, and perhaps older, bonds than anticommunism.

This paper will also contribute to the historiography that attempts to identify the conservative base. Kim Phillips-Fein proposes that modern conservatism was born as a capitalist class movement. Kevin Kruse contends that the Right became a haven for whites committed to maintaining de facto racial segregation. Lisa McGirr locates the base of conservative support in post-war suburbs, particularly among politically active women. This paper argues that the FEE understood its support base to be a community of individuals, bound not by the demographics of class, race, or gender, but by a shared outlook. FEE’s communications, however, were directed to a white male reader who lived in suburbia, enjoyed an upper-middle-class income, and valued traditional religious principles. FEE’s target readership validates the theses of all three of these historians, but proposes that class, race, and gender must be examined as a connected group of traditions and prejudices that together propped up the ideal conservative man.

The Foundation for Economic Education

The story of the Foundation for Economic Education must begin with its charismatic founder, Leonard Read. Read has been described as “relentlessly populist,” a “nearly pacifist mystic…a secular Zen libertarian saint who believed that the only way to change the world was

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through relentless self-education and self-understanding.” This combination of folksy populism and principled libertarianism became Read’s, and FEE’s, trademark.

Leonard Read was born in 1898 to a pioneer family in the small town of Hubbarston, Michigan. Following the death of his father, when Read was only eleven, he worked various jobs to help support his family. After serving briefly in World War I, Read married Gladys Cobb in 1920. In 1925 the couple moved to California, where Read became Treasurer of the Burlingame Chamber of Commerce. He successfully revitalized the finances of the failing Chamber, and soon gained a reputation as an astute business organizer. He and his family travelled up and down the West Coast throughout the 1920s and 30s, as Read worked for various Chamber branches. In 1939, Read was named head of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, a position he held until the end of World War II. During his time as a Chamber organizer, Read became friendly with Southern California Edison Company executive W.C. Mullendore, who exposed him to the libertarian philosophy that would become his calling.

As Read became more enamored with libertarian ideas, he left the Los Angeles Chamber to take a position with the National Industrial Conference Board (NICB), where he organized public education events promoting NICB’s business-friendly message. He quit after eight months in protest of an internal policy that required him to present “both sides” of an issue at public events. Read felt that the conservative voice was drowned out by the liberal political establishment and deserved its own forum.

Frustrated by the dearth of advocacy for his cause, Read decided to form his own libertarian think tank in 1946. His Foundation for Economic Education would not only promote free market ideas, but would be an organization of “militant alarmists” for libertarian ideals. Read culled FEE’s early funders from the extensive Rolodex he had compiled during his career with the Chamber of Commerce. Executives of B.F. Goodrich, Consolidated Edison, U.S. Steel, General Motors, Chrysler, The Earhart Foundation, and The Volker Foundation lent the nascent think tank capital and credibility.

From the start, Read envisioned FEE as a resource for the public. The organization’s fourteen original goals, as published at its launch in March 1946, included encouraging scholarship, funding studies of economic issues, producing pamphlets and a journal for mass distribution, the creation of a radio program, publishing textbooks, hosting lectures, and organizing study groups across the country. An early meeting of FEE investors proposed that the organization should house its own publishing company, printing press, and intellectual thinkers in order to create an alternative to mainstream avenues of public communication, which investors perceived to be dominated by liberals.

Unlike other contemporary think tanks, FEE did not directly lobby the government or involve itself in political campaigns. Instead FEE self-identified as a public resource and an intellectual center for conservative thought. Read’s biographer Mary Sennholz compared FEE to a medieval cloister that “affords an ideological home and refuge for the remnants of liberty where they may rebuild their strength and whence they emerge again with new courage and knowledge.”

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In the late 1940s FEE completed this monastic image by establishing its headquarters at a mansion in the scenic New York town of Irvington-on-Hudson.

At Irvington-on-Hudson, FEE set up a publishing house and printing press that would churn out public communications for decades to come. Almost immediately, FEE began producing educational pamphlets like *Roofs or Ceilings*, a twenty-two-page treatise on the evils of rent control penned by Chicago School economists Milton Friedman and George Stigler in 1946. FEE distributed 36,000 copies of this pamphlet and printed 500,000 more for the National Association of Real Estate Boards. The following year FEE published a critique of the Marshall Plan by journalist Henry Hazlitt, which it sold for $1.50 per copy. FEE released 80,000 copies of *Will Dollars Save the World?* before an excerpt of the pamphlet was reprinted by *Reader’s Digest* in 1948 and circulated to its 13 million subscribers.

FEE’s earliest communications were widely distributed and controversially received. One such pamphlet representing this dualism, *Morals and the Welfare State* by F.A. Harper, caught the attention of liberalism’s grand dame, Eleanor Roosevelt. Horrified by Harper’s comparison of the United States government to a pseudo-communist welfare state, the former First Lady contended, “This effort to call what we have done to promote greater social justice a welfare state and then make that mean that we have adopted a Communist pattern is a completely untruthful picture.” Her objections, published at length in October, 1951 in her syndicated daily column, *My Day*, suggest FEE made an immediate impact on popular political discourse in the first years after its founding.

In addition to pamphlets, FEE organized lectures and seminars across the country. Read frequently addressed trade associations and corporate conferences like the Commercial Club of Chicago (1947), the National Coal Association Convention (1949), and the Edison Electric Institute (1957). FEE staff hosted multi-day educational seminars on libertarian thought around the country, as well as at FEE headquarters in Irvington-on-Hudson. Additionally, FEE maintained one staff member, Bettina Bien Graves, whose primary responsibility was to disseminate libertarian educational materials to high school and college debate teams nationwide.

From 1950 to the present day the flagship of FEE communications has been its monthly journal, *The Freeman*. The journal began as an independent project under the leadership of journalist and FEE supporter Henry Hazlitt. By 1952, the magazine floundered with only 4,100 subscribers. FEE officially took over its production in 1954 and turned over editorship to Frank Chodorov. Circulation shot up to 42,000 subscribers and 9,000 donors by 1956. The *Freeman* contributors included FEE staff, as well as guest writers from the press, academia, and business. In the late 1950s FEE hired Edmund Opitz, a former leader of Spiritual Mobilization, a Los Angeles-based group that advocated religious and capitalist values, to discuss religious issues in *The Freeman*.

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15 Hazlitt, “The Early History of FEE.”
17 Hazlitt, “The Early History of FEE.”
Each month, *The Freeman* published articles addressing a range of topics, from foreign aid to income tax and the dangers of fluoridated water. No matter what the subject matter, editor Frank Chodorov consistently packaged *The Freeman’s* articles in the personal, simple, cheerful style that was Leonard Read’s trademark. Read disliked macroeconomic theory and the idea of the invisible hand of the market. Economics, he felt, should not be so impersonal. Read understood the market as “personal, intimately so and in detail whereas the alternative, government overseeing, is what’s so impersonal.” This was Read’s mastery. F.A. Hayek called Read “a profound and original thinker who disguises the profundity of his conclusions by putting them into homely everyday language.”

Perhaps the most famous example of Read’s accessible communication style is “I, Pencil,” an article he wrote for *The Freeman* in 1958 in which Read recounted the life story of a pencil in the first person. He traced the myriad resources and manpower that contributed to the making of a pencil, from American lumber to Sri Lankan-mined graphite, to the lighthouse keepers who guide commercial ships bringing the graphite to American shores, and the complex ingredients of the lacquer painted on the finished pencil. Read sought to persuade readers of the beauty and complexity of the market. “There isn’t a single person in all these millions, including the president of the pencil company,” he concluded, “who contributes more than a tiny, infinitesimal bit of know-how” to making a pencil. In Read’s telling, the invisible hand of the market was more like the benevolent hand of God himself than an anesthetized economic theory. In this story Read proposed that the market was divinely controlled. Ergo, man should not meddle with it.

Stories like “I, Pencil” abound in FEE’s early publications, many of which were widely distributed. In its first four years alone, FEE “mailed out over 4 million bits of literature, saw its work appear in four hundred newspapers, and compiled a mailing list over thirty-thousand strong.” Such prolific production naturally begs the question, who read all this material?

The Audience

Unfortunately, *The Freeman* subscription records, housed at the FEE archives in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, were not accessible as sources for this study. Nevertheless, information on how FEE communications were distributed, as well as the content of *The Freeman* articles themselves, can help us approximate FEE’s audience.

A 1955 *The Freeman* article reminding readers how greatly capitalist progress has improved daily life betrayed the journal’s narrow vision of its own audience: “The day moves by, your office is closed, your tools laid down, and thanks to a thousand items of capital in stores and at home, your wife, although busy at P.T.A., club or church through the afternoon, spreads a wholesome and appetizing dinner before you.” The ideal reader described in this passage is male, if only because his wife is clearly not the subject of the article, and the sole breadwinner of the family, thus suggesting a middle or upper-class status. His wife was able to engage in housekeeping and community service because she does not work.

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Other articles from *The Freeman* in this same period also revealed the reader to be a middle or upper-class male. “Time to Read,” a brief sidebar article compiled by editor Frank Chodorov in 1956, offered advice for finding time to read and educate oneself during the day. Tip 5 in the article illustrates that the intended reader of the article was male, worked in an office, and made important long-distance phone calls thus suggesting a middle-class or wealthy status. It reads: “5. Keep a book handy to pick up (at home, when waiting for the dinner; at the office for waits between engagements, or for long-distance phone calls to come through.)” Reaffirming the reader’s presumed gender, tip 8 encouraged men to “keep an unread book in your car in case of...a wait for your wife to do her shopping.”

FEE not only wrote its communications with a target audience in mind, it actively reached out to that readership. FEE worked with corporate partners like General Motors to distribute FEE publications to GM employees and make FEE materials available in corporate break rooms. Lemuel Boulware, General Electric’s famous community relations executive during the 1950s, also handed out FEE materials to General Electric employees. As we have seen, the ideal reader was also reached through his trade or civic associations like the National Board of Real Estate Associations, or his local Chamber of Commerce branch.

FEE actively marketed its publications, but it only targeted audiences likely to be sympathetic to its cause. FEE did not try to convert avowed liberals to its freedom philosophy. Rather, it sought to empower the ideal reader to articulate his pre-existing beliefs. This desire to uncover an audience already inclined towards libertarianism helps explain why FEE targeted white, well-to-do males. This demographic was most likely to own businesses and most likely to perceive income tax and social welfare policies as unfairly burdening people like themselves. With this ideal audience driving its communications, FEE systematically, if subtly, excluded people of other class, race, and gender backgrounds from its readership.

FEE marginalized the poor and the issue of poverty by focusing squarely on the benefits of capitalism. The organization embraced a business-friendly message that reflected the politics of its corporate funders. It proposed that what is good for business is good for all. A 1955 article entitled “More Machines Mean More Jobs” proposed that “it was machines alone which enabled England to support her rapidly growing population and provide it with a rising standard of living...Machines and tools have proved, beyond doubt, to be the greatest single source of man’s material welfare.” Within a decade of the publication of this article, historians like E.P. Thompson challenged the common assumption that per-capita income was an appropriate measure of happiness and prosperity. In his famous study *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, Thompson proposed that working-class English families experienced industrialization as a massive catastrophe that destroyed traditional ways of life. FEE, it seems, never entertained this possibility.

On the occasion that FEE did address the issue of class, it typically found the poor responsible for their own poverty. “It isn’t buildings that make slums, but people,” offered Hans Sennholz in a 1958 *The Freeman* article on public housing. “Some people tend to create a slum wherever they move...subsidized housing that actually succeeds in attracting slum dwellers deteriorates quickly into new slums. Our experience with public housing since 1937 clearly

demonstrates this.”31 This assessment of slums is not only insensitive to the lived experience of poor people, but also disregards the structures that make and keep people poor, from housing covenants to Federal Housing Administration redlining.

FEE also excluded women from its mission. Women played almost no role in the early leadership of FEE. Exactly one woman sat on FEE’s original forty-member Board of Trustees. According to Read’s biographer, not even one among the dozens of people who served on FEE’s Board of Directors between the 1950s and the 1980s was female. 32 In its communications, FEE alternately ignored women, infantilized them, or hoisted them on a pedestal of maternal grace. Jim Leadbetter’s caring, cooking, loving wife Grace exemplified the latter characterization. In 1955 a female reader wrote to The Freeman to ask why her husband received federal subsidies for his wheat crop, while she received none for the eggs her chickens produced. FEE staffer M.H. Banner replied by informing the woman that all federal subsidies violated libertarian values and advised that she get out of the egg business if she had trouble selling her eggs on the free market. “I don’t think she liked my answer any more than a child likes to be told there is no Santa Claus,” Banner remarked.33 Banner not only casually infantilized the female reader, but also disregarded her valid question about federal subsidies.

A 1957 article about the miracles of the modern supermarket again dismissed women as childish. The author remarked that shoppers were willing to pay more for convenience than in the past:

I have seen a cute little bride return to the meat counter with a canned ham she has purchased. When she opened the can, the meat was not sliced-and she came back for the slicing service…Mrs. Homemaker pays the price whenever she values the extra convenience more highly that she does the extra money.34

Despite her apparent cluelessness, the bride is the consumer in this story. Her demand for convenience drove the market for canned hams. However, the author chose to portray her as a robot responding to the magic of the market, not an informed consumer influencing demand.

We cannot know how many women actually read FEE publications. Quite possibly they comprised a large part of its readership. Historians like Michelle Nickerson have recently contended that women played a much larger role in the rise of modern conservatism than previously recognized.35 However, it is clear that women were not part of FEE’s target audience. Its message was directed squarely at men.

The issue of race was rarely addressed directly by FEE, but it was ever-present between the lines of The Freeman articles. By prioritizing the individual, FEE was able to ignore racism, while simultaneously complying with racist structures. FEE spoke of race in code, using terms like “freedom of association,” a common segregationist refrain. A 1955 article in The Freeman penned by Read himself proposed that “every person should be free to pursue his ambition to the full extent of his abilities, regardless of race or creed or family background…Every person should be

free to associate with whom he pleases for any reason he pleases...”36 The first sentence condemns racial discrimination, while the second effectively sanctions the “freedom of association” segregationist mantra. Such was the subtlety of Leonard Read’s message.

The Freeman contributors used similar language to oppose school desegregation in the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education. “Parents have the inherent right to choose whatever schools they desire for their offspring,” argued August Brustat in a 1956 article entitled “The Case for Religious Schools.”37 Instead of directly condemning or promoting school integration, Brustat offered the reader a principled alternative: religious education. Education is best taken out of government hands anyway, advised George Schulyer in another 1956 article, “The Case for Private School.” “Control of government school systems,” contended Schulyer, is “too remote and too difficult to influence…parents are mere robots in a machine that leaves little individual choice.”38 Both articles were framed around individual choice and local control over education, but in the context of Brown v. Board of Education it is hard not to read them as commentary on school integration. As Kevin Kruse proposes in White Flight, a study of segregation in 1950s Atlanta, many white parents chose private or religious education for their children rather than face the reality of racial integration.

The Message

As we have seen, FEE’s audience was anything but random. The organization’s communications were crafted for a white male, middle-to-upper-class audience. Its message was also more complex than Kim Phillips-Fein suggests. FEE did more than promote the “beauty of the free market.” It advocated a whole life philosophy that tied individual freedom to the metaphysical and physical self.

Leonard Read’s doctrine revolved around the unquestioned value of individual freedom, which Read defined as the right of a person “to do as he pleases in general as long as he doesn’t infringe the equal right and opportunity of every other person to do as he pleases.”39 Read linked individual freedom to a pantheon of other virtues including integrity, self-reliance, and adherence to tradition. Read also believed that private property was a moral value. “Any person,” he argued, “has the moral right to the fruits of his own labor.”40

Read’s ideology relied heavily on religious traditions and ideas of patriotism to validate its tenets. In 1958 journalist Christopher North wrote a story for The Freeman revealing the journal’s ideological foundation on religion and patriotism. This story reads like a biblical parable, in which Jesus and the Founding Fathers appear at the altar of a church and together preach the values of freedom. Jesus calls “for this nation to dedicate itself to the fulfillment of its divine destiny which is to demonstrate the significance of the living spirit of freedom.”41 Religious and national myth converge in this tale to confer legitimacy on the philosophy of freedom. This theme recurs in The Freeman articles throughout the 1950s. A November 1959 tribute to Thanksgiving praised the

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39 Read, “In an Ideal America.”
holiday as a celebration of God, freedom, pilgrims, and property rights. Leonard Read and his staff found no conflict between religious tradition, patriotism, and libertarian economics. Rather, they intertwined these ideas frequently and felt no need to justify their pairing to readers.

FEE employed its ideology to defend limited government and condemn what it termed “collectivism.” The state, FEE submitted, should protect its citizens and ensure their freedom to act out their God-given liberties. Any government action exceeding this mandate or dabbling in the redistribution of wealth was denounced as “collectivist” by FEE. Leonard Read’s creed held individual freedom in such high regard that any perceived violation of a person’s liberty was presumed to result in an inevitable loss of all rights. “Religious freedom,” blustered industrialist Howard Pew in a 1957 article, “cannot exist in a collectivist state. Freedom is indivisible. Thus, if we should lose our economic freedom, then religious, political, and other freedoms will certainly fall.” FEE encouraged its followers to uphold principle above pragmatism. Any social welfare program, no matter how badly needed, represented an unprincipled use of government power and an attack on individual freedom.

FEE perceived “collective” government action not only as an affront to an individual’s spiritual freedom, but as a violation of his physical self. Violations of doctrine are frequently represented in FEE communications as physical assaults. Returning to “Jim Leadbetter’s Discovery,” we find that Jim expressed his consternation at finding an Internal Revenue Service representative is in his home by comparing the government to a scavenger:

Hang the government, anyway. They sat around like vultures watching you work, watching you create wealth and meet payrolls and handle problems and fight your competition; and when you were all through for the year, they swooped down on you, as though you were a carcass, and tore off strips of your income like a carrion bird would tear off strips of still living flesh.

Jim employed these graphic images of physical desecration to express his resentment against the federal government. By robbing him of his income, which he believed to be his rightful property, the government violated his very body.

Various articles in The Freeman also used imagery of sickness to describe government encroachments on individual freedom. Sir Ernest Benn compared socialism, always a favorite target for FEE outrage, to a sickness. “Socialism,” he proposed, “is not a system; it is a disease. The ‘something for nothing’ mentality is, in fact, an economic cancer.” Such strong language seems designed to frighten the reader into embracing anti-communist and anti-socialist views. Similarly, Leonard Read compared the economy to the circulatory system of the body in order to explain the dangers of inflation: “one’s bloodstream could be thinned or diluted [by inflation] to the point where it would cease entirely to perform this function on which life depends. The patient would die.”

Collective government eroded freedom and would eventually, FEE writers argued, lead to the enslavement of the individual. Slavery is a common recurring theme in FEE articles. The term almost never referred to America’s fraught history of actual human slavery, but rather to the

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44 LeFevre, “Jim Leadbetter’s Discovery,” 12.
45 Sir Ernest Benn, “Socialism is a Disease,” The Freeman 9 (1959).
perception that “collectivist” policies made the modern American a slave of his own government. James Rogers compared the biblical slavery of Israelites in Egypt to the current “enslavement” of American taxpayers in a 1955 submission to The Freeman.\(^{47}\) Two years later, The Freeman reprinted a speech given by General Douglas MacArthur in which he warned, “Excessive taxation can reduce men to serfdom, can destroy initiative, absorb the capitalistic system, and level representative government to sovietism.”\(^{48}\) Serfdom and slavery were the ultimate consequences of collective government. With such high stakes before him, the FEE reader developed a personal, physical connection to his own liberty.

The philosophy of freedom armed FEE readers with an articulate defense of libertarian tenets of limited government and individual freedom. It enabled readers to disavow social welfare programs on the basis of principle alone. Leonard Read’s creed also fostered a personal, visceral relationship between the individual and his freedom.

**Why FEE Matters**

As we have seen, FEE sought to convert an audience of middle-to-upper-class white men into radicalized conservatives dedicated to its philosophy of freedom. This life doctrine was predicated on an unquestioned belief in individual liberty and limited government. It was legitimized through ties to religious and patriotic traditions. FEE encouraged readers to develop a spiritual and physical connection to their freedom, and to perceive government intervention in matters of social welfare as a violation of their personal wellbeing. FEE’s creed may have informed a generation of politically active conservatives who enthusiastically embraced like-minded politicians including Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan and vocally opposed social welfare programs and reproductive rights. This connection calls for further investigation into FEE’s role in arming and organizing politically active conservatives.

The Freeman and other FEE communications also contribute to our historiography of modern conservatism. FEE’s fundamental reliance on religious traditions raises questions about George Nash’s fusion theory. Stronger ties than anticommunism alone bound traditional conservatism and libertarian economics in FEE’s brand of conservatism. A shared belief in putting principle before pragmatism seems to have naturally allied these two traditions. Further inquiry may perhaps reveal this bond to be older and more fundamental than Nash supposed.

FEE is still around today. It continues to expound its doctrine of freedom to a conservative audience through The Freeman. In light of the organization’s continuing relevance and the rising popularity of its free-market philosophy in Washington, it is high time historians took a closer look at its past.

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