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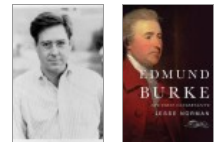
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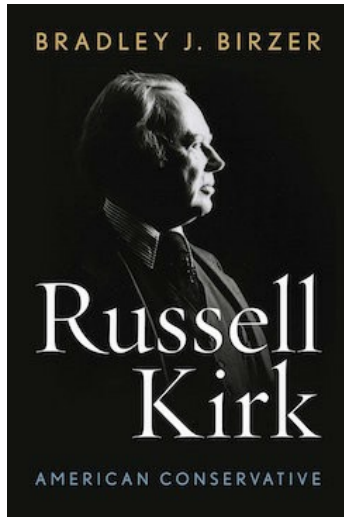
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Russell Kirk: American Conservative

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Allen Mendenhall on *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*

The Conservative Mindset

March 19th, 2016

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THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES are at last upon us. The leading Republican candidates, including frontrunners Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, have resorted to showmanship and grandstanding to make their case for the party nomination. Their harsh, uncouth rhetoric stands in marked contrast to the writings of Russell Amos Kirk, a founding father of modern American conservatism.

Books on Kirk exist, but they're few. Fellow conservatives, many of them friends or colleagues of Kirk's — like T. S. Eliot, William F. Buckley, Barry Goldwater, F. A. Hayek, Eric Voegelin, and Leo Strauss — have received more attention. In this regard, Kirk is the victim of his virtues: he was less polarizing, celebrated by followers and detractors alike for his measured temperament and learned judgments. He did earn numerous adversaries, including Hayek and Frank Meyer, who in retrospect appear more like ambivalent friends, but the staying power of Kirk's congeniality seems to have softened objections to his most resolute opinions.

Bradley J. Birzer, a professor at Hillsdale College who holds a chair named for Kirk, fills a need with his lucid and ambitious biography. Birzer is the first researcher to have been granted full access to Kirk's letters, diaries, and draft manuscripts. He has avoided — as others haven't — defining Kirk by his list of accomplishments and has pieced together a comprehensive, complex account of Kirk's personality, motivations, and influences.

Birzer offers five themes in Kirk's work, and less so his private life, which Birzer only touches on: his intellectual heritage, his ideas of the transcendent, his Christian humanism, his fiction, and the reach and implications of his conservatism. Kirk isn't a dull subject. One need not identify as a conservative to appreciate his polished charm and idiosyncrasies. A plump, bespectacled gentleman who feigned disdain for technology, Kirk was something of a spiritualist with a penchant for the weird. He considered himself a Stoic before he had converted to Catholicism, a regeneration that makes sense in light of the relation of Stoic to Pauline thought.

As a young man Kirk spent four years in the military. His feelings about this experience were conflicted. He suffered from a blend of ennui and disenchantment but occupied his free time with reading, writing, and studying. He was horrified by the use of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the United States had decimated the most flourishing Western cultural and religious centers in the Japanese Empire, just as he was by the internment of Japanese Americans.

The tremendous violence of the 20th century, occasioned by the rise of Nazism, communism, and fascism, impressed upon Kirk a sense of tragedy and fatalism. He came to despise totalitarianism, bureaucracy, radicalism, and "ideology" as leveling systems that stamped out the dignity and individuality of the human person. Hard to place along the left-right spectrum, he was as critical of big corporations and the military as he was of big government and labor.

When Kirk inserted himself into political debates he supported Republican



politicians, becoming temporarily more interventionist in his foreign policy before returning to a form of Taftian isolationism, but he always remained more worried about reawakening the moral imagination than in having the right candidates elected to office. His was a long view of society, one without a fixed teleology or secular eschatology, and skeptical of utopian thought. Kirk advocated a “republic of letters,” a community of high-minded and profoundly sensitive thinkers devoted to rearticulating perennial truths (such as the need to pacify human violence, temper human urges for power, and cultivate human longing for the transcendent or divine) and preserving humanist institutions.

Kirk’s politics were shaped by imaginative literature and characterized by a rich poetic vision and vast cultural literacy. Fascinated by such disparate figures as Edmund Burke, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, T. S. Eliot, Sir Walter Scott, George Santayana, and most of the American Founders, Kirk was also versed in the libertarianism of Albert Jay Nock and Isabel Paterson, whose ideas he admired as a young man but vehemently rejected throughout his mature years. Burke and Babbitt, more than any other men, shaped his political philosophy. And his irreducible imagination made room for mysticism and a curious interest in ghosts.

Kirk’s debt to Burke cannot be overstated. “Like the nineteenth-century liberals,” Birzer says, “Kirk focused on the older Burke, but he countered their dismissal of Burke’s ideas as reactionary and exaggerated.” Kirk also downplayed Burke the Whig, who championed the cause of the American Revolution, which Kirk considered to be not a revolution but a conservative restoration of ancient English liberties. Kirk was wary about the Enlightenment, as was Burke, because the scientism of that period tended to oversimplify inherently complex human nature and behavior. Kirk also thought the Enlightenment philosophes had broken too readily from the tested traditions of the past that shaped human experience.

Kirk appealed to American patriotism — which he distinguished from reckless nationalism — in *The American Cause* (1957) (which he later renounced as a “child’s book”), *The Roots of American Order* (1974), and *America’s British Culture* (1993), drawing attention to what he saw as the enduring customs and mores that guard against utopian conjecture. Yet American patriotism was, in Kirk’s mind, heir to the patrimony of Athens, Jerusalem, Rome, and London. From the mistakes and successes of these symbolic cities Americans could learn to avoid “foreign aid” and “military violence,” as well as grandiose attempts to “struggle for the Americanization of the world.”

Disillusioned with academia after his graduate work at Duke, Kirk was offered a position, which he turned down, at the University of Chicago. Kirk fell in love with the University of St. Andrews, however, where he took his doctorate and wrote a lengthy dissertation on Edmund Burke that would later become his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk revised *The Conservative Mind* throughout his life, adding new permutations and nuances in an attempt to ensure the continued resonance of his cultural mapping.

The almost instant success of *The Conservative Mind* made Kirk an unlikely celebrity. The book featured sharply etched portraits of men Kirk considered to be representatives of the conservative tradition. Regrettably, and perhaps tellingly, Kirk tended to ignore the contributions of women, passing over such apposite figures as Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe, with whom he, as a mystic Catholic anglophile, had much in common. Kirk shared more with these women, in fact, than he did with Coleridge or Thomas Babington Macaulay, who appear in *The Conservative Mind*.

Kirk was also woefully uneducated about American pragmatism. He overlooked Burke’s influence on, and compatibility with, pragmatism. (As Seth Vannatta ably demonstrates in *Conservatism and Pragmatism* (2014), Burke “is a model precursor of pragmatism because he chose to deal with circumstances rather than abstractions.”) Kirk failed to see the pragmatic elements of Santayana, whom he adored, and he seemed generally unaware of the work of C.S. Peirce. Kirk’s breezy dismissal of William James, Santayana’s teacher and later colleague, suggests he hadn’t read much of James’s *oeuvre*, for Kirk lumped the very different James and Dewey together

in a manner that proved that Kirk himself was susceptible to the simplification and reduction he decried in others.

Conservatism, for Kirk, consisted of an attitude or mindset, not an explicit or detailed political program. Enumerating vague “canons” of conservatism that Kirk tweaked from edition to edition, *The Conservative Mind* was a “hagiographic litany,” a genealogy of the high-minded heroes of ordered liberty and convention. Kirk didn’t intend the book to be model scholarship. It was something more — an aestheticized bricolage cannibalized from Burke and Eliot and others, with inspirational and ritualistic value. It has never gone out of print.

Kirk is sometimes accused of being contradictory, holding simultaneously incompatible positions, in part because he lauded apparent antagonists such as John C. Calhoun and Abraham Lincoln. “Kirk found something to like in each man,” Birzer says of Calhoun and Lincoln, “for each, from [Kirk’s] perspective, embodied some timeless truth made sacramentally incarnate.” Tension between rivaling conservative visions is reconciled in Kirk’s desire never “to create an ideology out of conservatism, a theology at the quick and the ready with which one could easily beat one’s opponents into submission.” Ideology, Kirk believed, was a symptom of totalitarianism, and as such was the common denominator of fascism and communism. Kirk believed his own philosophy was not an ideology, because he, like Burke, preferred “a principled defense of justice and prudence” to any specific faction or agenda. He recognized that change was necessary, but thought it should be guided by prudence and historical sensitivity.

For a history buff, Kirk could be positively ahistorical and uncritical, ignoring the nuances and particularities of events that shaped the lives of his heroes. He ignored Calhoun’s commitment to the peculiar institution, and with a quick wave of the hand erased slavery from Calhoun’s political calculus, adding without qualification that “Calhoun defended the rights of minorities.” Kirk made clumsy caricatures out of his assumed enemies, calling men like Emerson “the most influential of all American radicals.” Emerson had met Coleridge, whose Romanticism partially inspired Emerson’s transcendentalism. Yet Kirk loathed Emerson and praised Coleridge and saw no inconsistency in doing so.

Kirk was not alone during the 1950s. The decade witnessed a renaissance of conservatism, exemplified by the publication of not only Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, but also Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community*, Strauss’s *Natural Right and History*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Eliot’s *The Confidential Clerk*, Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics*, Gabriel Marcel’s *Man against Mass Society*, Christopher Dawkins’s *Understanding Europe*, C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness*, and Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale*. It was *The Conservative Mind*, however, that “gave one voice to a number of isolated and atomized voices.” It also lent intellectual substance and credibility to the activist groundswell surrounding such politicians as Goldwater a decade later.

When Kirk joined Buckley’s *National Review*, the manner of his writing changed. Previously he had contributed to literary and scholarly journals, but, as Birzer points out, his “contributions to the *National Review* slowly but surely crowded out his output to other periodicals.” Working for *National Review* also drew Kirk into personality conflicts that passed as theoretical disagreements. Kirk sided with Buckley, for instance, in banishing from the pages of *National Review* any writers associated with the John Birch Society. Kirk despised the egoism of Ayn Rand, scorned the label *neoconservative*, and did not take kindly to the doctrines of Irving Kristol. Yet Kirk held Leo Strauss in high regard, in no small part because of Strauss’s scholarship on Burke and natural rights.

Strauss is sometimes treated as the fount of neoconservatism, given that his students include, among others, Allan Bloom, Harry Jaffa, and Paul Wolfowitz. But Kirk never would have considered the esoteric and conscientious Strauss to be in a league with neoconservative provocateurs like Midge Decter and Norman Podhoretz, who indicted Kirk for anti-Semitism after Kirk, in a speech before the Heritage Foundation, stated that some neoconservatives had mistaken Tel Aviv for the capital of the United

States — a tactless comment that was blown out of proportion.

“Kirk never sought conformity with those around him,” Birzer argues, “because he never wanted to create a sect or a religion or a cult of personality.” Kirk labored for the sake of posterity, not self-promotion. “The idea of creating ‘Kirkians,’” as there are Straussians, Misesians, Randians, and Rothbardians, “would have horrified [Kirk] at every level of his being”; Birzer insists that Kirk “desired only to inspire and to leaven with the gifts given him,” adding that “[h]e did well.” “I hope,” Birzer concludes, “I have done at least half as well” in writing Kirk’s biography.

Bringing Kirk into renewed focus during a contentious election season, as the term *conservatism* is bandied about, contested, and abused by commentators as varied as David Brooks and Phyllis Schlafly, Megyn Kelly and Rush Limbaugh, Karl Rove and Michael Savage, Birzer reminds us that conservatism, properly understood, is a “means, a mood, an attitude to conserve, to preserve, and to pass on to future generations the best of the humane tradition rather than to advocate a particular political philosophy, party, or agenda.”

One wonders, watching the campaign stops and debate spectacles, the ominous political advertisements and alarmist fundraising operations, what’s left of this humane tradition in our current political discourse. When our politicians lack a responsible and meaningful awareness of the residual wisdom of the ages, we get the leadership and politics we deserve. Would that we had more Russell Kirks around to remind us of the enduring things that, in times like these, are hard to find and difficult to believe in.

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Allen Mendenhall is a staff attorney on the Alabama Supreme Court and an adjunct professor at Faulkner University and Huntingdon College.

Recommended Reads

- The American Aftershock: An Interview with Thomas Frank
- What Would Edmund Burke Say?
- The Return to Kant
- Of Love and Politics

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