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Russell Kirk, The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism

Teaching Humbly and Without Malice

by ALLEN MENDENHALL



Russell Kirk

Russell Kirk has been dead now for over a quarter of a century, yet he remains the subject of student conferences across the United States and of the recent [bestselling biography](#) by Bradley J. Birzer. And, wonder of wonders, he's out with a new book.

Actually, it's a new edition of a 1957 book. *Russell Kirk's Concise Guide to Conservatism* in fact was originally called *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*—a swipe at George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (1928). This invigorating primer on the history and characteristics of American conservatism is of course suitable for female and male audiences alike, hence Regnery's revision of its title.

In 12 brisk chapters, Kirk addresses the following themes: the essence of conservatism, religious faith, conscience, individuality, family, community, just government, private property, power, education, permanence, and change. He concludes with the question: "What is the Republic?" His answer: "a

commonwealth in which as many things as possible are left to private and local management; and in which the state, far from obliterating classes and voluntary associations and private rights, shelters and respects all these.”

Anyone familiar with Kirk will recognize in the opening chapter the “chief principles” of conservatism that in *The Portable Conservative Reader* (1982) and *The Conservative Mind* (1953) he condenses into six “canons.” These involve a recognition of moral laws derived from God, a celebration of variety and diversity over coerced uniformity, the pursuit of justice, the protection of private property, a skepticism of power and centralization, a reverence for custom and tradition, and the rejection of utopianism or political programs predicated on a belief in the perfectibility of man.

Combining a Disposition to Preserve with the Ability to Reform

At a time when conservatism stands in need of definition and direction, this book remains strikingly relevant. “We need to undertake,” Kirk admonishes his readers, “the conservative task of restoring in our generation an understanding of that freedom and that order which have expressed and encouraged our national genius.” Decades have passed since he penned these lines, yet the task remains.

Freedom and order aren’t the only seemingly incompatible concepts that Kirk reconciles. He balances liberty with duty and charity, and clarifies how conservatives can be both individualistic and communitarian at once. He explains why conservatives may embrace permanence and change without contradiction: Progress —“genuine progress”—develops “within the framework of tradition.” Moreover, “grand principles endure” while “their application . . . alters.” A conservative thus “combines a disposition to preserve with an ability to reform.”

Kirk targets, as well, the canard that conservatism is the greedy defense of capitalism, that the man or woman espousing conservative views is “a monster of selfishness” who is “morally impure, ruthless, and avaricious.” This caricature is still with us, though few thinking people would accept it as true anymore. After all, the Left dominates corporate America, Silicon Valley, Big Tech, Hollywood, higher education, and the mass media—with certain obvious exceptions. Commonsense conservatism, by contrast, flourishes in rural, agrarian America, in the heartland, in Southern states, in flyover territory, among blue-collar workers—not among the wealthy elites or rich CEOs. The idea that a small group of Randian, egomaniac “fat cats” controls American society is simply ridiculous. Were he alive today, Kirk wouldn’t have needed to refute such silly stereotypes.

He warns that “very powerful forces are at work to diminish the influence of the family among us, and even to destroy the family for all purposes except mere generation.” If he only knew. His treatment of the family seems dated by current standards—not because he embraced old-fashioned views but because the threats to the family that he predicted turned out to be greater than he could have imagined. He could not, for instance, foresee the redefinition of marriage that occurred through judicial opinions.

What, according to Kirk, is the purpose of formal education? Is it to equip students with the skills they need to excel in the workforce? To ensure that a democratic citizenry is sufficiently informed to refine and improve governing institutions? To bring about opportunities for historically marginalized or disenfranchised peoples?

No. “The purpose of education,” he says, “is to develop the mental and moral faculties of the individual person, for the person’s own sake.” One doesn’t need to attend a university or earn a degree to fulfill this goal.

He Teaches Humbly and Without Malice

In our era of shouting pundits and social media sniping, Kirk’s mild manner, Victorian prose, and relaxed tone are charming reminders that, even when the stakes are high, we can be civil and reasonable toward detractors. He eviscerates sacred cows—for example, the notion of equality that, if instantiated, would lead to a “boring” world “in which everyone was the same”—cleverly yet with goodwill. The most egalitarian among us would entertain his controversial argument about equality because he does not provoke, incite, or inflame the passions. He teaches humbly and without malice.

Equality and diversity—ideals commonly associated with the Left—are, Kirk reminds us, incompatible to the extent that equality requires an eradication of the beautiful and remarkable distinctions that make each human being unique. The conservative is the true advocate of diversity, he points out, for it is the conservative who “desires to see the rich, invigorating, interesting variety of a society,” not to “pull everyone down to a dead level of equality.” Our equality before God and the law admits of natural and inevitable inequalities between people. Any other form of equality is the *enemy* of diversity.

If you believe the chief end of inquiry is to cultivate “human dignity, human personality, and human happiness,” and to understand and appreciate “the relationship between God and man,” then you’re a Kirkian conservative. All the weight of history, the entire strength of civilized society, depends on these for the preservation of freedom and order, which complement rather than oppose each other. In them, with God’s grace and providence, we put our hope for the future.

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