

Conserving Russell Kirk

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George A. Panichas, Ed. *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*. ISI Books. 640 pages. \$20.00

Conservatism in general, and in particular the social or traditionalist conservatism reclaimed by the extraordinary lifelong labors of Russell Kirk (1918–1994), counsels that dominant opinion should serve as a starting point for serious inquiry. Dominant opinion in the United States today, at least among the intellectual class, is progressive opinion. And according to progressive opinion, contemporary conservatism is in crisis.

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Certainly conservatism faces many challenges: It has come to be associated in the public mind with naïve efforts to promote democracy abroad by force of arms; it must deal with serious disagreement within its ranks about the justice of, and government role in, abortion, embryonic stem cell research, same-sex marriage, and euthanasia; and it confronts a society and popular culture that continues to drift leftward (as liberal society has steadily done since more or less the time of Locke) in celebrating not only the rights of the individual against the state (with health exceptions for seat belts, smoking, and trans fats), but also the authority of the individual against tradition, community, and family. Yet the progressives' current diagnosis, or rather denunciation, demonstrates an illiberal failure to comprehend the moral intentions and structural features of American conservatism while obscuring conservatism's fundamental convictions and long-term prospects.

The most dramatic recent example of denunciation disguised as diagnosis appeared over the summer in a review in the *New Republic* of *The Essential Russell Kirk* by Boston College professor Alan Wolfe. In "Contempt," Wolfe argued that Kirk's conservatism is "provincial, resentful, bigoted." Indeed, "If you collected all the grumblings in a small-town drugstore by men convinced that somehow the world had passed them by, and then added a few literary and historical references," writes Wolfe, "you would have *The Essential Russell Kirk*."

This is a bizarre description. Far from a provincial, Kirk traveled widely through Britain and Europe and the United States and wrote extensively about his travels. Although he never settled on a campus as a tenured professor, he earned a Ph.D. as a young man, lectured and taught at a diversity of colleges and universities throughout his life, and collected 12 honorary doctorates. He was the author of some 30 books, mostly learned but also including works of popular fiction, and in addition wrote prolifically for newspapers and magazines. And Kirk's collected writings extend far and wide. They explore the fundamental tenets of conservatism and liberalism; the religious foundations of Western civilization and the

principles of order that structure it; the dependence of politics on the moral imagination; the dangers to modern man of ideology; the paramount importance of liberal education; and the origin and development of conservative thought in America.

Wolfe lodges three large criticisms against Kirk. The first is that Kirk's critique of ideology is peculiar and self-serving, because it holds that only liberals can be ideological. To make this criticism stick, Wolfe must labor to obscure Kirk's conception of ideology and of conservatism.

It is generally accepted that since the nineteenth century, ideology has been understood to refer to a comprehensive system of ideas for organizing moral and political life that claims the authority of reason and objective analysis but in reality is rooted in interest and prejudice. No doubt that in defining ideology as a form of "political fanaticism" that is committed to "the belief that this world of ours may be converted into the Terrestrial Paradise through the operation of positive law and positive planning," Kirk gives it a Burkean twist. But he certainly did not mean that no person or party to the right of center could fall prey to ideology. Rather, his argument was that Edmund Burke represented the epitome of the conservative mind. In the French Revolutionaries' attempt to radically reorganize political life in accordance with their novel theories about man and society, Burke saw a destructive ambition. Against it, he championed prudence, a form of reasoning grounded in history, tradition, and experience, and relying not on abstract patterns and general rules but on context-sensitive judgments. To the extent that a conservative is one who makes prudence and not some system of ideas his guide to politics, it is reasonable to say that conservative politics and ideological politics are opposites. It is also reasonable to acknowledge that many on the right, departing from conservative principles, fall prey to ideology. One can, of course, debate whether Kirk was correct to identify the essence of conservatism with Burke, but his doing so, and the critique of ideology that flows from it, are, contrary to Wolfe, more than respectable.

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Second, Wolfe accuses Kirk of propounding a trite and incoherent defense of religion. Since Kirk believed that the practice of religion is critical to social order and civilization, he was obliged, Wolfe insists, to identify the one true religion — say Judaism, Catholicism, evangelical Protestantism, or some form of American civil religion — and defend it to the hilt. Having failed to do that, Kirk is left with nothing but "a denunciation of everything that we modern people do without any convincing account of how anything could be done differently."

Wolfe argues as if the only legitimate conservative critique of contemporary religious practice and opinion is a radical one. If conservatives are serious and thoughtful about their religious faith, then, he insists, they must be unflinching in their devotion to it, and unflinching devotion requires them to demand the imposition of their faith on the public square.

But that is to impute to conservatives typical progressive thoughtlessness about conservatism and religion. Faith can coexist with doubt. Reverence for the variety of teachings and moral discipline stemming from biblical religion are consistent both with maintaining a critical stance toward biblical faith and with a life-long quest to understand God's order and its implications for politics. Moreover, religious belief itself may counsel against imposing religion in the public square. Contrary to Wolfe, it is neither cliché nor contradictory for Kirk to urge readers to return to the sources of biblical faith while declining to undertake a full-scale defense of any particular Christian denomination. What Wolfe objects to in Kirk's writings on religion, and attempts to recast as vice, are qualities officially — and rightly — celebrated by liberals: moderation and tolerance, openness to mystery and doubt, and appreciation of the claims of competing sects, denominations, schools, and traditions.

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Third, Wolfe condemns Kirk for his adulation of the American founders. Kirk's views on religion and politics should have compelled him, insists Wolfe, to revile the founders, who took their bearings from Locke and the liberal tradition. Surely, Wolfe contends, the Constitution, which repudiates the political role of religion by separating church and state, is responsible for the decline of religious faith that Kirk laments. To Wolfe's disgust, Kirk stands by the Constitution as well as the founders. Kirk's failure to denounce the Constitution is particularly egregious in Wolfe's eyes given that "Kirk's hero Burke insisted that order required an established church." But instead of faulting the founders for failing to establish a church, Kirk argues that the Constitution "was to be a practical instrument of government, not a work of political-religious dogma." In Kirk's embrace of the Constitution and its commitment to separating church and state, Wolfe discovers "dishonest thinking at its most repellent."

To convict Kirk of repellent dishonesty, however, Wolfe must obscure the historical record and advance defective arguments. He appears to be unaware of the scholarship over the last several decades, including the writings of John Dunn and Charles Taylor, exploring the Christian framework of thought influencing John Locke's writings on morals and politics. Nor does he appreciate the voluminous scholarly literature on the Christian dimensions of early American social and political thought. Wolfe may be right that Kirk fails to recognize the extent to which the Constitution itself brought into existence a way of life that elevated liberty over piety, and so paved the way for the liberal decadence that Kirk deplores. Nevertheless, contrary to Wolfe, Kirk is on solid ground in arguing that the Constitution is a document that aims to protect religious faith while recognizing the claims of liberty and democracy. Indeed, while there are familiar secular reasons for separating church and state, the separation also derives support from Christian thinking about how best to protect religion, as legal historian Mark DeWolfe Howe convincingly argued more than 30 years ago in *The Garden and the Wilderness*.

Furthermore, it is wrong to argue that since Burke defended an established church, Kirk was obliged to repudiate the founders because they rejected an established church. Admiration for an author does not require one to follow him slavishly in every respect. In fact, nothing could be less Burkean, given the importance Burke attached to the role of custom, tradition, and local context in applying principle to concrete circumstances. And finally, does Wolfe think that it was “dishonest thinking at its most repellent” for George Washington, who presided over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, and who undoubtedly conceived of the Constitution as a “practical instrument of government,” to have famously declared in 1796 in his Farewell Address that, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports”? If Washington can consistently hold that religion is a critical support of a constitutional order that separates church and state — and, like Madison, Burke, and Tocqueville, he can — why can’t Kirk also do so without incurring Wolfe’s wrath?

Our liberty under law is nourished not by one but by three great traditions — the biblical, the classical, and the tradition of modern constitutionalism.

In conclusion, Wolfe rebukes Kirk for asserting that in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) Lionel Trilling “found the liberal imagination nearly bankrupt.” To which Wolfe replies, “Oh really? What Trilling actually wrote was that ‘liberalism is not only the dominant but the sole intellectual tradition’ in the United States.” This would be a devastating reply to Kirk if the liberal intellectual tradition were synonymous with the liberal imagination, which it is not. Moreover, the major point of Trilling’s great preface (from whose first page Wolfe quotes) was, much as Kirk wrote, that liberalism, driven by the demands for ever greater individual freedom and greater rational control of human affairs, “drifts toward a denial of the emotions and the imagination.”

To deliver the coup de grace, Wolfe employs a truncated version of Trilling’s oft-quoted observation that in his day conservative impulses were not expressing themselves in ideas but rather “in actions or irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.” “A better description of Russell Kirk and his view of the world,” declares Wolfe, “could not have been written.” Never mind that Trilling published *The Liberal Imagination* not only before the renewal of the American conservative tradition which Kirk led but before Kirk had published his first book. More important, to enlist Trilling in such a denunciation shows either a gross misunderstanding or willful disregard of Trilling’s intention.

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Trilling’s intention was to wake up sleepy and dogmatic liberals by impressing upon them the need to study conservative thought. Writing at a time which, unlike our own, lacked a vibrant conservative intellectual tradition, Trilling lamented that “it is not conducive to the real strength of liberalism that it should occupy the intellectual field alone.” Invoking John Stuart

Mill, who insisted on his profound debt to the conservative mind of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Trilling contended that the encounter with conservative thought “would force liberals to examine their position for its weaknesses and complacencies.” Indeed, “a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism might find its most useful work not in confirming liberalism in its sense of general rightness but rather in putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time.” It follows that in the encounter with conservative thought — not with conservative policy positions or electoral politics, where polemics and partisanship are to be expected — liberalism’s interests are served by a sympathetic rendering of those features, priorities, and perspectives that distinguish the conservative mind.

What might a liberal who takes to heart the interests of liberalism — to say nothing of conservatives who wish to renew their appreciation of the spirit of conservatism — learn from Kirk? One could do worse than to start with Kirk’s own self-description, found in the title to his autobiographical *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory* (1963):

A Tory, according to Samuel Johnson, is a man attached to orthodoxy in church and state. A bohemian is a wandering and often impecunious man of letters or arts, indifferent to the demands of bourgeois fad and foible. Such a one has your servant been. Tory and bohemian go not ill together; it is quite possible to abide by the norms of civilized existence, what Mr. T. S. Eliot calls “the permanent things”; and yet to set at defiance the soft security and sham conventionalities of twentieth century sociability.

To see through contemporary practice and find not anarchy or nihilism but venerable traditions and permanent standards of civilized existence is a hallmark of Kirk’s conservatism. Despite the great gap he discerned between how the majority of Americans live and how we ought to live, Kirk had modest expectations concerning social and political reform, because change always carries a considerable risk of making things worse. And whatever its other faults, America protected liberty, which was a precondition for human dignity, and so a paramount good and a priority to conserve.

With the exception of his unflinching critique of communism, there is next to no discussion of contemporary policy or electoral politics in the 600 pages of eclectic and elegantly woven essays that constitute *The Essential Russell Kirk*. But Kirk’s focus on ideas cannot be reduced to the lack of a “convincing account of how anything could be done differently.” Wolfe’s suppressed assumption is that in the face of sweeping social and political criticism the only things worth doing differently are political in the narrow sense. Kirk rejected that assumption. Instead, he believed that the most urgent task consisted in educating hearts and minds through the recovery and renewal of neglected sources of wisdom.

This education is what liberals — and conservatives too — can gain from Kirk. It consists in appreciating first that liberty and tradition are not antitheses but mutually dependent goods. It involves understanding that our liberty under law is nourished not by one but by three great

traditions — the biblical, the classical, and the tradition of modern constitutionalism — and that, notwithstanding the tensions among them, the defense of our freedom requires study of all three, and the preservation of what is best in them. It directs attention to literature, which enlarges our imagination and fosters an appreciation of the mystery, diversity, and complexity of human affairs, and in particular to the high modernism epitomized by the work of T.S. Eliot, which finds in the maladies of modernity an opportunity to reclaim forgotten teachings about “the permanent things.” It places liberal education at the heart of civic education, and not the other way around, because knowledge of literature, history, philosophy, religion, and science prepares students for freedom by opening their eyes, invigorating their hearts, and furnishing and refining their minds. And finally, it extols moderation, which is prior to and presupposed by prudence. Moderation is the virtue which, among other things, controls partisan passions and allows us to recognize and give their proper due to the variety of goods we confront. Not least among the goods that moderation enables us to balance are the progressive and conservative strands in the American political tradition.

Kirk made his mistakes, and his writings betray blind spots. He does not wrestle with the entanglement of nineteenth-century American conservatism with slavery. He does not often give progress its due. And at times he underestimates how the individual liberty that he wished to conserve corrodes the very sentiments, traditions, and principles that provide, in his judgment, liberty’s greatest justification and support. These are real problems, and critics should confront them directly. And yet “a criticism which has at heart the interests of liberalism,” cannot begin and end with Kirk’s errors, much less wildly exaggerate his errors and invent vices and sins of which he is not guilty.

Kirk’s defense of “the permanent things” merits a defense in no small measure because of the role the permanent things play in sustaining liberty.

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