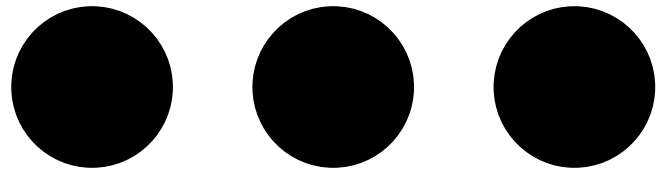




A Review of “Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism”

Russell Kirk, *Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism*, intro. by Wilfred M. McClay, (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2019) 106 Pages. Paperback. \$16.99.

As conservatives mark the centennial anniversary year of the birth of two of the greatest minds of the 20th century, Russell Kirk and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a new edition of a book by Dr. Kirk reminds readers of the brilliance and moral suasion that is the substance of many of the scholar’s enduring works. In 1957, Kirk authored *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Conservatism* — the title was a send-up of George Bernard Shaw’s *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* — which was written as a brief encapsulation of the conservative principles set forth and defended in Kirk’s *magnum opus*, *The Conservative Mind*. The book has remained out of print for over six decades, but the recent republication of this work as *Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism* demonstrates quite ably the enduring relevance of the fundamental principles of conservatism.



In the midst of the Cold War, Kirk understood that the ideological tensions that were tearing nations and cultures apart were only secondarily concerned with economics. As Kirk notes near the end of this Concise Guide:

I have said little enough about political economy, principally because I think that economics has been over-emphasized in our generation. I do not believe that the great contest in the modern world is simply between two theories of economics, “socialism” and “capitalism,” as Bernard Shaw tried to convince women a generation ago. No, I happen to think that the real struggle is between *traditional society*, with its religious and moral and political inheritance, and *collectivism* (under whatever name) with its passion for reducing humanity to a mere tapioca-pudding of identical producers and consumers. There is far more to this struggle, in short, than questions of profits and wages and management.

Kirk traces the roots of modern conservatism to the writings of Edmund Burke and his peers against the



Written by [James Heiser](#) on May 20, 2019

fanaticism of the French Revolution: “Modern conservatism took form about the beginning of the French Revolution, when far-seeing men in England and America perceived that if humanity is to conserve the elements in civilization that make life worth living, some coherent body of ideas must resist the leveling and destructive impulse of fanatic revolutionaries.” As has been the case in generations past, Kirk recognized that the present generation must oppose the ideologists with wisdom and wit in defense of the received centers of authority in Church, State, and Home:

The true conservative does stoutly defend private property and a free economy, both for their own sake and because these are means to great ends:

Those great ends are more than economic and more than political. They involve human dignity, human personality, and human happiness. They involve even the relationship between God and man. For the radical collectivism of our age is fiercely hostile to any other authority: modern radicalism detests religious faith, private virtue, traditional personality, and the life of simple satisfactions. Everything worth conserving is menaced in our generation. Mere unthinking negative opposition to the current of events, clutching in despair at what we still retain, will not suffice in this age. A conservatism of instinct must be reinforced by a conservatism of thought and imagination.

Kirk recognized that the conservative is the defender of just government: “In the eyes of conservatives generally, government is a necessary good — so long as it is just, constitutional, balanced, restricted government. Justice, order, and freedom are dependent upon a satisfactory balance between governmental authority and private rights.” Thus, “He is opposed to the theory of Hegel that the State somehow exists independently of the individual human persons who make up society. The conservative believes that government is a contrivance of human wisdom, under Providence, to provide for human wants. The chief of those human wants are justice, order, and freedom.”

The brief chapters of this short book address a wide variety of topics, including religious faith, the conscience, individuality, the family, community, just government, private property, power, education. *Russell Kirk’s Concise Guide to Conservatism* is thus a wonderful starting point for a whole range of points of discussion with those individuals who may have a view of conservatism that has been ill-served by the prattle of neoconservative “talking heads.” It is brief enough not to scare away those readers who might be intimidated by a heftier tome, and yet it is still filled with a wisdom that succinctly distills the essence of the troubles that confront our civilization and offers a response that builds on the foundations that we have inherited and built upon throughout the generations of Western Civilization. For those conservatives who have looked for a brief introduction to the central tenets of our philosophy that may easily be shared with others, this *Concise Guide* is the book for which one has long sought.



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