



Russell Kirk: A Real Conservative

The name “Russell Kirk” is heard seldom, if ever, in conservative circles today. This is tragic, and maybe even a bit scandalous, for as William F. Buckley — a person whose name is well known — once said, it “is inconceivable even to imagine, let alone hope for, a dominant conservative movement in America without [Kirk’s] labor.”

Given all of the current talk over the need to reawaken conservative “principles,” we are in need of Kirk’s guidance today more than ever.

The author of 32 books and legions of essays, this World War II veteran was a college educator, novelist, intellectual historian, and political theorist. At Buckley’s request, Kirk helped to found *National Review*, a publication to which he contributed for many years. He also founded his own magazine, *Modern Age*. Kirk gave over 60 lectures to the Heritage Foundation, where he was a distinguished fellow, and was very much involved with the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. In 1989, five years before his illustrious life came to a close, Kirk was granted the Presidential Citizens Medal by President Ronald Reagan.

Conservatism, Kirk explained, is neither a doctrine nor a dogma, but “a way of looking at the civil social order.” Still, from looking at the “leading conservative writers and public men” from “the past two centuries,” Kirk gathered 10 principles that distinguish conservatism as the intellectual tradition that it is.

First, there is “an enduring moral order” of both “the soul” and “the commonwealth.” It is at our peril, conservatives insist, that we ignore this order.

Second, “custom, convention, and continuity” constitute the glue that keeps us together. Custom “enables people to live together peaceably,” convention helps us “to avoid perpetual disputes about rights and duties,” and continuity “is the means of linking generation to generation.”

Third, *prescription* — “things established by immemorial usage” — is the stuff of which a flourishing civil society is made. Since we are not likely “to make any brave new discoveries in morals or politics,” since we are “dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, able to see farther than [our] ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time,” we are best served by following the prescriptions of thousands of generations.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on April 18, 2013

Fourth, prudence is a cardinal virtue. Change is needed if society is to preserve itself, but prudence demands that we attend to it cautiously, and only after considerable reflection. “Sudden and slashing reforms are as perilous as sudden and slashing surgery.”

Fifth, variety is both necessary and desirable. Conservatives “feel affection for the proliferating intricacy of long-established social institutions and modes of life.” On the other hand, they abhor “the narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of radical systems.”

The sixth principle is that of human imperfectability. Because human beings suffer “irremediably from certain grave faults,” the best “that we reasonably can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering will continue to lurk.”

Seventh, freedom and property are indissolubly linked. “Upon the foundation of private property, great civilizations are built,” Kirk writes. He adds: “Separate property from private possession, and Leviathan [the government] becomes master of all.”

Eighth, “voluntary community” is as essential to the civil order as “involuntary collectivism” is destructive of it. Duty and virtue are learned within our local communities — our “little platoons,” as “the patron saint” of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, famously called them. But when, “in the name of an abstract Democracy, the functions of community are transferred to distant political direction,” this centralization of authority and power proves “hostile to freedom and human dignity.”

Ninth, there must be “prudent restraints upon power and upon human passions.” Kirk notes that “political power” must be “balanced” so as to prevent both “anarchy” and “tyranny,” both the unbounded will of the individual and that of any group. To this end, “constitutional restrictions, political checks and balances, adequate enforcement of the laws,” and “the old intricate web of restraints upon will and appetite” are indispensable.

The 10th and final principle of the conservative attitude concerns the affirmation and harmonizing of “permanence and change” in “a vigorous society.” Kirk succinctly summarizes this principle when he writes: “The conservative takes care that nothing in a society should ever be wholly old, and that nothing should ever be wholly new. This is the means of the conservation of a nation, quite as it is the means of conservation of a living organism.”

If today’s conservatives are serious about wanting to return to “the roots” of their tradition, then they have no option but to familiarize themselves with Russell Kirk.



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