

at levels deeper
omic. More than
today, he beck-
of ends as well as

challenge looms.
ll Kirk has found
er the years in the
rvative imagina-
tent been a liter-
aking personally,
al. Nevertheless,
be repressed. If
o the culture, will
word suffice? I
ersity town, and
bookstores, I see
and for the kind
agination most
ud. No, the cul-
nd even the not-
v to be shaped by
cture entertain-
onservative pres-
e. Conservatives
at the other side
As long as this

to conclude on a
ften said, cheer-
ng in. Some years
al edition of *The*
iversity library.
s someone had
Kirk in 1984?"
one, *The Conser-*
and its contents
who discover it.
ought rising gen-

Edward E. Ericson, Jr.

Conservatism at Its Highest

The greatest events of our historical moment are occurring in the former Soviet empire. These events signal not only the end of our century—which, in quantitative terms at least, has outstripped all others in manifesting man's inhumanity to man—but also the end of the whole modern era to which the Enlightenment gave normative shape. What Edmund Burke inveighed against two hundred years ago we now see collapsing of its own dead weight. History books will, I believe, some day say that the twentieth century began in 1917 (or maybe 1914) and ended in 1991 (or maybe 1989). They will say that the Enlightenment's utopianism, which began in high hope with the doctrines of progress and human perfectibility, came to its crashing end with the totalitarian brutalities of the Soviet experiment in the centrally planned society.

The best witnesses to the great events of our day are to be found among those who experienced first-hand the depredations of communism and lived to tell the tale. Similarly, the keenest interpreters of the nature of communism, and indeed of the twentieth century as a whole, are to be found among those who have come out from under the rubble. For me and for many, the greatest of all these is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. To his name I would now add that of Václav Havel, first president of the

post-communist Czech Republic.

As we commemorate the life of Russell Kirk, we naturally turn to his seminal work, *The Conservative Mind*, and recall just a few of that book's long list of worthies: Burke, John Adams, Randolph of Roanoke, Tocqueville, Disraeli, and Irving Babbitt. Were Kirk to have composed his list now instead of then, and gone farther afield than Britain and America, he might well have included Solzhenitsyn and Havel. In his last book, *The Politics of Prudence*, Kirk lists ten modern events "in which the conservative cause retained or gained some ground." One of them is the change of residence of Solzhenitsyn, about whom Kirk says, "Solzhenitsyn's denunciation of the tyranny of ideology did more to dispel illusions—although not from everybody's vision—than did any other writing of our time."

What is that fundamental quality in Kirk which we also find in Solzhenitsyn and Havel? Meaning in human life lies ultimately in the transcendent realm, and we properly understand the nature of human beings and human society only as we locate

Edward E. Ericson, Jr., is professor of English at Calvin College. He is the author of *Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision* and, most recently, *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* (Regnery Gateway, 1993). This is a version of a paper delivered at a 1993 tribute to Russell Kirk sponsored by The Philadelphia Society.

their source in the transcendent. In Kirk's elegant formulation, from the opening pages of *The Conservative Mind*, "Conservatives believe that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead." Later in the book, when enumerating the chief problems facing conservatives, he mentions as the first one "the problem of spiritual and moral regeneration: the restoration of the ethical system and the religious sanction upon which any life worth living is founded." "This," he says, "is conservatism at its highest...."

It is through spiritual perception, normally employing religious categories, that we apprehend transcendent meaning. Religion is resolutely out of fashion among our intellectuals. They emphasize instead the primacy of politics and resort to immanent political, economic, and social categories of analysis for their final word. The race, class, and gender claque which is so shrill among our cultural pacesetters focuses upon those contingencies of our being which are inherently of only secondary importance to us. Kirk would have us keep our eyes fixed on what binds human beings together: on our commonality, on our universal and fixed human nature.

Solzhenitsyn and Havel understand and share this vision with Kirk. All three reject ideology. The word is used very loosely today to refer to any set of ideas that a person holds. Alas, even some conservatives use it to describe their position. But when they do, they sell their souls. It is always a virtue to use words accurately and precisely. All three thinkers would accept Kenneth Minogue's definition of ideology as "the propensity to construct structural explanations of the human world." Minogue uses the word ideology "to denote any doctrine which presents the hidden and saving

truth about the evils of the world in the form of social analysis."

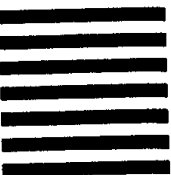
Kirk said just over forty years ago, "An intelligent conservative feels that the ills of the world cannot be cured by any single ingenious system of improvisation or any solemn political contrivance." The first chapter of his last book is entitled "The Errors of Ideology." Ideology is an inverted religion; it is "the disease not the cure." Thus, he specifies, "The ideologues who promise the perfection of man and society have converted a great part of the twentieth-century world into a terrestrial hell."

Havel describes ideology as "a specious way of relating to the world. It offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality, while making it easier for them to part with them." Its "primary excusatory function is to convey the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of the universe."

Solzhenitsyn's enmity toward ideology is most forcefully expressed in his 1973 "Letter to the Soviet Leaders": "Cast off this cracked ideology....Let us all pull off and shake off from all of us this filthy sweaty shirt of ideology which is now so stained with the blood of those 66 million that it prevents the living body of the nation from breathing. This Ideology bears the entire responsibility for all the blood that has been shed."

The great problem with ideology is that it imposes upon people a system which is, in Havel's words, "built on lies." One recalls that Solzhenitsyn's final words to his countrymen as he was being forced into exile in 1974 were entitled "Live Not by Lies." In an abnormal society where falsity permeates everything, there is, says Havel, only one way for individuals to get along with their daily lives: they "must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it."

NO POSTAGE
NECESSARY
IF MAILED
IN THE
UNITED STATES



J.C.

NO POSTAGE
NECESSARY
IF MAILED
IN THE
UNITED STATES



J.C.

In such straitened circumstances, says Solzhenitsyn, "the absolutely essential task is not political liberation, but the liberation of our souls from participation in the lie forced upon us."

But wherein lies the root of the Great Lie of our age? Here both Havel and Solzhenitsyn turn, unfashionably, to religious categories. For Havel, the fundamental mark of this century is "a great departure from God which has no parallel in history. As far as I know, we are living in the middle of the first atheistic civilization." Solzhenitsyn concurs: "Atheism is the core of the whole Communist system." He remembers those elders of his childhood who explained "the great disasters that had befallen Russia" by asserting simply, "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." So he continues: "And if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the *entire* twentieth century, here too I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: 'Men have forgotten God.'" Every calamity of the century stems from "the flaw of a consciousness lacking all divine dimension."

If ideology is chiefly what our three thinkers reject, what they chiefly embrace is the concept that, in my book *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World*, I have called the moral universe. Here is what Kirk in *The Politics of Prudence* articulates as the very first conservative principle: "The conservative believes that there exists an enduring moral order. That order is made for man, and man is made for it: human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent."

Solzhenitsyn, whose Christian faith is by now well known, has the same starting point. Thus he describes himself as a writer who "acknowledges a higher power above him and joyfully works as a common apprentice under God's heaven." This kind of writer will subordinate politics or economics to

the more universal and eternal questions, such as "the laws of the history of mankind that were born in the depths of time immemorial and that will cease to exist only when the sun ceases to shine." Moreover, he declares, "...the state structure is of secondary significance. That this is so, Christ himself teaches us. 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's'—not because every Caesar deserves it, but because Caesar's concern is not with the most important thing in our lives." And if the state oversteps its bounds? "When Caesar, having exacted what is Caesar's demands still more insistently that we render unto him what is God's—that is a sacrifice we dare not make."

"Politics is the art of apprehending and applying the Justice which is above nature." Kirk's idea is illustrated in a section of Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*. Varsonofiev, an old sage, speaks as the author's mouthpiece when he tells some young students, "The laws for constructing the best social order must be inherent in the structure of the world as a whole. In the design behind the universe and in man's destiny." When one of the students suggests that "justice is an adequate principle for the construction of a good society," Varsonofiev replies: "Yes, indeed!...But not the justice we devise for ourselves, to create a comfortable earthly paradise. Another kind of justice, which existed before us and for its own sake." Justice is just one of the full panoply of moral principles which are built into the universe. It is God who made this moral order as it is; and it is true for all persons, whether or not they acknowledge that it is so.

That Havel shares this conception of the moral universe is all the more noteworthy for his being unable to embrace unreservedly the Christian faith. On the other hand, he says, "I can try to live in the spirit of Christian morality," and he admits to "an affinity for Christian sentiment and I'm

glad that it's recognizable." What he is very clear about is that there is a "higher responsibility, which grows out of a conscious or sub-conscious certainty that our death ends nothing, because everything is forever being recorded and evaluated somewhere else, somewhere above us, in what I have called 'the memory of Being,' an integral aspect of the secret order of the cosmos, of nature, and of life, which believers call God and to whose judgment everything is liable."

Thus, when Havel tries to explain the very heart of his "presidential program," he says it is "to bring spirituality, moral responsibility, humaneness, and humility into politics and, in that respect, to make clear that there is something higher above us, that our deeds do not disappear into the black hole of time but are recorded somewhere and judged." This is hardly the usual vocabulary of politicians. But it squares with Kirk, who writes: "Providence is the proper instrument for change, and the test of a statesman is his cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces."

In *The Politics of Prudence* Kirk provides a quotation from Solzhenitsyn which he describes as "the essence of the conservative principle": "Our life consists not in the pursuit of material success but in the quest of worthy spiritual growth. Our entire earthly existence is but a transition stage in the movement toward something higher, and we must not stumble or fall, nor must

we linger fruitlessly on one rung of the ladder....The laws of physics and physiology will never reveal the indisputable manner in which the Creator constantly, day in and day out, participates in the life of each of us, unfailingly granting us the energy of existence; when this assistance leaves us, we die. In the life of our entire planet, the divine Spirit moves with no less force: this we must grasp in our dark and terrible hour."

Of all the strands in the conservative movement, Kirk is right to ally Solzhenitsyn most closely with the cultural conservatives, or traditionalists.

If my emphasis on things spiritual is discomfiting, I can only reiterate that this way lies the route to the heart of Kirk's vision. Shorn of this emphasis, even conservatism will tend toward programmatic ideology. I believe that there is a wide audience today for this kind of vision, for it is universal, not provincially American. The most eager listeners may be in those parts of the world that have borne the full brunt of our terrible century. Solzhenitsyn and Havel, luminous witnesses though they be, are far from alone. Indeed, we in the comfortable West have much to learn from those in the devastated East. A conservatism that listens to them will be an enriched conservatism which will have a future. It will hold firm to what Russell Kirk calls the permanent things. And it will speak to the deeper longings of humanity.

