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Vigen Guroian

The Conservative Mind Forty Years Later

In his essay "The Tower of Babel," Michael Oakeshott said this about the modern age:

Ours is a world dizzy with moral ideals while we know less about how to behave in public and in private than ever before. Like the fool, our eyes have been on the ends of the earth. Having lost the thread of Ariadne, we have put our confidence in a plan of the labyrinth, and we have given our attention to interpreters of the plan. Lacking moral behavior, we have fallen back upon moral opinions as substitute...and we exaggerate the significance of our moral ideals to fill the hollowness of our moral life....[We establish] ideology...because this appears the only means of winning the necessary moral stability for the society. But in fact it is no remedy; it merely covers up the corruption of consciousness, the moral distraction inherent as the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals.

Michael Oakeshott, arguably the best Anglo-American political philosopher of this century, understood that morals and not politics are at the root of the crisis of our times. He understood that the great attraction of ideology is not as political program but as religious creed and moral program.

Reflecting anew on *The Conservative Mind*, I find that the single resounding lesson Russell Kirk taught in this great work is that the crisis of our time is religious and moral. He exposed the cruel hoax of every modern ideology, whether of the right or of

the left: the claim that it is really capable of filling up the emptiness of our moral and religious bankruptcy.

The revisions that Russell Kirk made over the years to *The Conservative Mind*, especially to the last chapter, intensify the critique of ideology and make even more clear how conservatism is different. This last chapter, originally titled "The Recrudescence of Conservatism" and later "The Promise of Conservatism," is especially instructive. Kirk removed from the later editions the early exhortation that conservatives construct "a plan of action," and replaced it with H. Stewart Hughes's statement, "Conservatism is the negation of ideology." Only in modern times have those who look at human nature and society conservatively called themselves conservatives. Only in modern times have "conservatives" been aware that they hold this vision in contradistinction to the ideologue, who is wedded to a plan, a grand design. Only in modern times would conservatives fall under a temptation to make conservatism into

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an ideology, to move from a helpful awareness of their distinct identity to an overemphasized awareness of the same, to translate an idea inextricably joined to a task into a credo and program.

I think that the downside of the Reagan and Bush years was the increase of this temptation and the fall of some conservatives to it. Suddenly, during these years, it seemed imperative to have a conservative program. Policy study replaced reflective study and not enough attention was given to the moral and intellectual mortar that holds the dike firm. Now the dike is leaking due in no small part to the neglect of liberal and humanistic study of the kind of which *The Conservative Mind* is a model.

From first to seventh edition of *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk argued that conservatism is not a plan, but rather that it is a disposition and way of looking at the world; and, yes, that out of this disposition or way of looking at the world a variety of political and economic visions that might be called conservative have arisen. It was Russell Kirk's utter conviction, a conviction lived by, that *pietas* and humility are the fountainhead of conservatism's moral disposition and political craft. We as individuals stand within the immense complexity of historical existence governed by the transcendent purposes of God. Our finite minds cannot wholly grasp the workings of this providential order. We stand humbly within this order as participants, not lords. Humility engenders social realism in the realm of politics—a deep and abiding respect for the variety of human life and community. Magnanimity is the political reflection of humility. And prudence, guided by right reason, is the first rule and principle of political governance. These were the wellsprings of Burke's wisdom when he advised reconciliation with the American colonies, guarantee of civil liberties for the

Irish, and justice for the peoples of India.

Ideology banishes *pietas* and humility from the polis. It abandons social realism and prudence on the pretext that if put in practice it will perfect the higher values of freedom, justice, and equality. Last and most importantly, ideology suffocates what Russell Kirk has called the moral imagination. In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk gives us a genealogy not just of a mind but of a way of imagining human ends and purposes. He pleads for the reinvigoration of the moral imagination without which even social realism flattens to just plain pragmatism and utilitarianism. Liberalism and its near relation socialism are diseases of this moral imagination. They first attack its religious foundations and finish by sucking out the vital ethical marrow of the political constitution. T. S. Eliot became Kirk's mentor for this analysis and it is highly significant that later editions of *The Conservative Mind* conclude with a discussion of Eliot.

Eliot disclosed the very essence of liberalism in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. "By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of *getting on* to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism," wrote Eliot, "prepares the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanized or brutalized control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos."

On the religious plane, liberalism progressively discards "elements in historical Christianity" which to its individualistic reason seem "superfluous or obsolete," or contrary to equality and *demos*. Liberalism is controlled not by its goal but by its origin in the revolt against prescription and authority. Thus liberation gradually "loses

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force after a series of rejections, and with nothing to destroy is left with nothing to uphold and nowhere to go." In liberalism's last stages subjective preferences replace objective principles and interchangeable lifestyles replace a way of life. When liberalism finally has sucked the moral marrow out of the political community it has nothing to commend other than a vacuous "democracy." But this empty form of democracy can be filled with totalitarian content. It can be fascist. Said Eliot: "The fundamental objection to fascist doctrine, the one which we conceal from ourselves because it might condemn ourselves as well, is that it is pagan." What Eliot meant by pagan is not traditional pagan religion. Rather, he meant *impious*, the absence of reverence.

What prescience in Eliot's observations, penned at mid-century. In the seventh edition of *The Conservative Mind* Russell Kirk concluded: "As much as any man in his time, Eliot foresaw the destruction of order, and labored to avert total ruin. In the pageant *The Rock*, his Chorus intones that warning:

*It is hard for those who live near a Police Station
To believe in the triumph of violence.
Do you think that the Faith has conquered
the World
And that lions no longer need keepers?"*

Reinhold Niebuhr called liberalism a "soft" utopianism as opposed to the "hard" utopianism of Marxism. But positivism, naturalism, and utilitarianism have replaced liberalism's original moral substance. This moral vacuity of contemporary liberalism makes it noxious to the human spirit. New and more virulent strains of liberalism are produced that utterly contradict the original meaning of liberal in its Latin and Greek etymologies—*liber* and *eleutheros*, meaning free and broad of spirit.

Conservatism itself, especially Anglo-American conservatism, has gained broadness of spirit and an appreciation of

social and personal freedom from liberalism. Conservatism inherits liberal societies. And as Kirk reminded us, conservatism, if it is to do the good and noble work of preservation and timely reform, must not forget these inheritances that link it to the broader culture it seeks to preserve. Such figures as Newman, More, Babbitt, and Eliot represent such conservative wisdom though they consciously oppose conservative ideology.

Just over forty years after publication of *The Conservative Mind*, much needs at-



Russell Kirk at the time *The Conservative Mind* was written (early 1950s).

tending to. Dark beasts are afoot. There is no time for lamentation of political losses when culture itself is in jeopardy. Two things that *The Conservative Mind* has encouraged are chief among the tasks before us. First, we need desperately to cultivate anew the tradition of humane letters. We have diverted our attention too much from this noble endeavor. This requires renewed com-

mitments to foster not just political studies but especially moral and religious thought, literature and artistic creations worthy of the name. Presently, intellectual history is scorned and replaced by statistics and charts handy for the utilitarian Prometheus. Biography is being transformed into a branch of psychology and psychotherapy. The study of literature is under siege by hermeneutical terrorists. The fine arts are enraptured with not only sexual pornography but the pornography of death. Moral philosophy is overtaken by formalism and consequentialism. Theology squanders its patrimony of faith in the attempt to be socially relevant. Feminist theologians embrace old pagan fertility goddesses. And even old fashioned liberals have begun to utter the unspeakable, that a new fascism is afoot, a fascistic liberalism in our academies and spreading into the public and political realms.

For the summer of my graduation from high school I prepared a reading list. That was in 1966 and I was wary of the radicalism I might encounter in college among my peers and teachers. I wanted to be ready to respond. The two books that headed this list were Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* and Friedrich Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*. I carried these books with me to the University of Virginia and they remained with me through four years of college. They inspired the curriculum I chose. The old liberals were still in the ascendancy in those days and so a conservative student at the

University of Virginia could find plenty to fill up on in intellectual history, sound literary study, and even courses in classical rhetoric.

My children are not likely to fare so well when they enter college. Where I teach, at Loyola College in Maryland, the single largest budgeted program is Multiculturalism. Its noxious spirit permeates every department and every hiring decision. If we really want to honor *The Conservative Mind* we must find ways in this inhospitable environment to encourage not only new books like *The Conservative Mind* but new works of literature, political and moral philosophy, art, drama, and poetry that in the future will become the inspiration and sources for such studies. "Nothing is but thinking makes it so," Russell Kirk has written. "If men of affairs can rise to the summits of the poets, the norms of culture and politics may endure despite the follies of the time." I do not think Dr. Kirk would have minded if I close not with this citation from *The Conservative Mind* but with a passage from T. S. Eliot's poem "East Coker" which expresses consummately the conservative spirit.

*There is only the fight to recover what
has been lost
And found and lost again and again;
and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps
neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not
our business.*

