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Science Genuine and Corrupt: Russell Kirk's Christian Humanism

If "science" is converted into ideology, a substitute for philosophy and religion, then rightly men of humane and social imagination will recoil from the fraud.

— Russell Kirk¹

Among scattered essays, reviews, and book chapters, one finds evidence that Russell Kirk reflected a good deal on matters of scientific interest. As a perceptive critic of the modern scene, Kirk was compelled to attack this ideology. Scientism is wonderfully diverse, taking on many distinct forms. Characteristically, it is the attempt to defend an ideological or metaphysical position through an appeal to scientific findings, observations, or theories. The proponents of scientism attempt to force science into service as a substitute for philosophy and religion, or to present science as somehow a determinant of religious, moral, or political ends.

As early as 1954 (ten years before he was baptized a Roman Catholic), in *A Program for Conservatives*, scientism figured large in Kirk's critique of modernity. He denounced it as the chief cause of the decline of religious belief throughout the Western world that

closed "the eyes of the masses to religious truth."² Scientism, Kirk believed, was the logical outgrowth of the Baconian doctrine that the goal of science was to attain power over nature. This goal, which replaced the older, legitimate schema in which science sought knowledge for its own sake—"a knowledge which reaches upward toward the source of reason"—was ultimately destructive. Men soon found that their increased power over nature was unsatisfying, boring, and seemed "to lead nowhere"; they thus sought to extend their power over nature to power over man.³

In order to gain this power, Kirk believed, scientism "gnaws at the root of traditional faith."⁴ Genuine science had not somehow falsified religion, but it was the goal of scientific intellectuals to fool the public into believing it had. As Kirk demonstrates in some of his fiction, such folk could do real damage to religious belief and the body politic. Several of Kirk's villains are scientists of this stamp. Barner, for instance, the Planning Officer in "Ex Tenebris," looks forward to the employment of "scientific methodology" to con-

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trol the weather. “But for the stupidity of entrenched interests,” he thinks to himself, “the thing would have been accomplished already. Superstition!”⁵ Significantly, Barner meets his end at the hands of a wraith—the parson of the defunct village swept away by planners such as himself. Kirk describes Dave Dawson, a naïve and stupid Peace Corps volunteer sympathetic to the Marxist rebels in *A Creature of the Twilight*, as “a science graduate of American University”; the Marxists, themselves scientific, wish to levy a “Rationality Rate” on all religious cults.⁶ Kirk’s consistent message is that many of science’s apologists will not abide the eternal and so attempt to efface it from human cognition.⁷

Elsewhere Kirk links scientism to the ideology of rationalism or Comte’s positivism.⁸ As in Comte’s system, scientism is an erstwhile religion that replaced more orthodox beliefs, since “all men must have some sort of religion.”⁹ Early in his career Kirk spoke of scientism as a belief system in decline; it was a doctrine in which serious scientists no longer could believe, if ever they once could.¹⁰ Kirk was certain that modern, post-Einsteinian physics had undone the facile mechanistic view of the universe promoted by the popularizers of vulgarized science in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But his optimism regarding the decline of scientism, so discernible in Kirk’s earlier writings, was somewhat diminished in his later work, when it became clear that scientism was not dead. In a 1991 foreword to a new edition of *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, Kirk reiterated his belief that the “growth of the anti-cult of scientism”¹¹ was the chief reason behind the decay of religious belief. By promoting “the popular notion that somehow the revelations of natural science, over the past two centuries, have demonstrated the obsolescence of religious beliefs,” scientism allegedly “informed mankind how men and

women are naked apes merely; have pointed out that the ends of existence are production and consumption merely; that happiness is the gratification of sensual impulses merely; that notions of the resurrections of the flesh and the life everlasting are superstitions of the childhood of the human race merely.”¹² Two years later, in *The Politics of Prudence*, Kirk elaborated on this theme:

A multitude of writers and publicists and members of the class of persons commonly styled ‘intellectuals’ gloomily inform us that we human beings are no better than naked apes, and that consciousness itself is an illusion. Such persons insist that life has no purpose but sensual gratification; that the brief span of one’s physical existence is the be-all and end-all. Such twentieth-century sophists have created in the murky caves of the intellect an Underworld; and they endeavor to convince us all that there exists no sun—that the world of wonder and of hope exists nowhere, and never did exist.¹³

Significantly, this lamentation is not accompanied with an optimistic hope that the reign of scientism is sure to end. The deflation of Kirk’s optimism seems warranted. The social science disciplines—particularly psychology—remain cesspools of scientific belief. Open any psychology textbook and one finds—implicitly or explicitly—that “scientific” psychology has rendered obsolete belief not only in the soul, but in the mind as an entity distinguishable from the body. In Kirk’s paraphrase, “we human beings are no better than naked apes.” Certain evolutionary psychologists write matter-of-factly that humans are nothing but “self-reproducing chemical systems, multicellular heterotrophic mobile organisms.”¹⁴ Though this statement is beyond parody, it is a perfect example of that unalloyed scientism Kirk believed so destructive.

Although scientism is alive and well, legitimate science still exists, and Kirk was nearly always careful to distinguish the two.

Scientism is the vulgarization of science, the work of popularizers, and, he noted, is therefore often rejected by serious scientists. The genuine scientist is aware of the limits of his discipline and does not aspire to the role of priest, ruler, or artist.¹⁵ Nor can the genuine scientist be misled into thinking it his duty to evangelize the world with the gospel of skepticism. On the contrary, it is only in accepting the existence of a transcendent order and an objective reality that the scientist finds an anchorage for his work¹⁶ and can pursue pure science, which is “the pursuit of truth, with no end except the apprehension of the truth.”¹⁷ Kirk praised Loren Eiseley, Michael Polanyi, and Stanley Jaki as humane scientists and commended the science writings of Alfred North Whitehead, Simone Weil, and Arthur Koestler.¹⁸

Far from holding to a principled anti-scientific position, then, Kirk recognized the merit of genuine science. He conceded that he personally found it a difficult field of study—“[T]o study Newton is a chore, though to keep company with Swift is a delight”—and that other literary-minded people had similar difficulties, but he insisted that the natural and physical sciences, “[e]xciting and mysterious,” were “an integral part of liberal education, rather than a presumptuous substitute for religion, politics, and humane studies.” Indeed, “[i]n our time, the principal contributions to knowledge have been made in the physical and natural sciences; to be ignorant of science, therefore, is to neglect whatever the men of the past hundred years and more have added to human wisdom.” For this reason, and because the humanities had become largely unimaginative and pedantic, “science now attracts a disproportionate share of the more active intellects of the rising generation.”¹⁹

Kirk disagreed, of course, with C. P. Snow’s imperialistic intellectual program

that would make the humanities subservient to science. But he allowed that both the humanities and the sciences were necessary for an adequate understanding of truth and for a just ordering of society. For their advancement the sciences depended upon the imagination, which was greatly strengthened by studies in the humanities, while the humanities could benefit from “the vitality and reality of scientific inquiry.”²⁰ Kirk felt it was also essential that scientific study always be considered in relation to philosophy.²¹

Perhaps surprisingly, given his efforts in unmasking the religion of scientism, Kirk held out hope that science could be used to revitalize religious faith. In the vistas opened by the new, post-mechanical physics, he saw a world in which, for instance, the resurrection of the flesh no longer seemed an impossibility. Repeatedly, and with only minor variations, he stated that

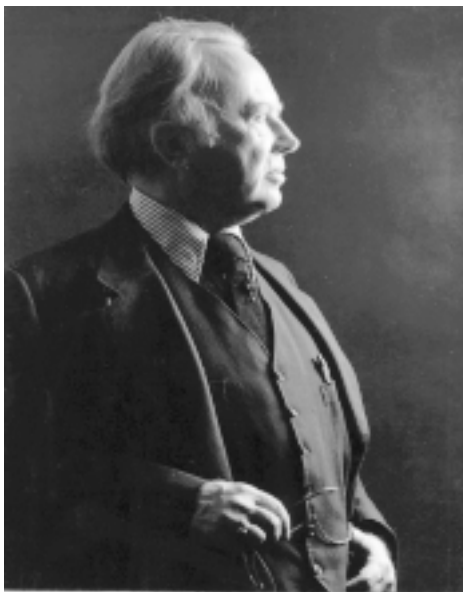
physicists instruct us that we of this seemingly too-solid flesh actually are collections of electrical particles, held in an ephemeral suspension and arrangement by some ‘laws’ that we do not understand in the least. We are energy—and energy, which we can neither create nor destroy, incessantly is being transmuted into new forms. No longer need we say, with Tertullian, *credo quia absurdum est*. For the science of quantum mechanics has undone nineteenth-century concepts of matter, and it becomes conceivable that whatever power has assembled the negative and positive charges composing us may reassemble those electrical particles, if it chooses.²²

This speech even finds its way into the mouths and minds of many of Kirk’s fictional characters,²³ suggesting, since it is within his fiction that the essentially moral character of Kirk’s social criticism is revealed, the fundamental place this insight had in Kirk’s thought.

Kirk also believed that scientific analysis of the Shroud of Turin might eventually “undo the reductionist notion of the human condition and restore general aware-

ness of the transcendent.”²⁴ Toward the latter part of his life, Kirk manifested a keen interest in the Shroud, coming to believe its mysterious image to be that of the crucified Christ. At a conference on the Shroud held at Elizabethtown College in 1986, Kirk spoke of the Shroud as a “spiritual and archaeological time bomb” and attributed to it immense significance:

The Shroud, if indeed it is a [sic] artifact of the time of the death of Jesus, is a confirmation of the Synoptic Gospels and indeed of the whole Christian story; but particularly of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Also there may be something more than that. If it is produced by a miraculous means—that is, using the word ‘miraculous’ to mean an occurrence or process which is something beyond the ordinary operation of what we used to call the laws of nature, an exceptional, most extraordinary event—if indeed the image on the Shroud is the product of a miracle, then Christian dogmas seem to be confirmed; and we may return to the Ages of Faith.²⁵



Russell Kirk

This seems over-confident, to say the least. As the conference’s participants themselves pointed out, science itself could never confirm the Shroud’s authenticity, but could only *disconfirm* it.²⁶ Perhaps Kirk’s aim was to discomfit the secularists in the audience with bold claims pronouncing the possible confirmation of ancient religious doctrine. “People who have built their careers upon the assumptions of nineteenth-century materialism and mechanism are dismayed” by the Shroud, Kirk proclaimed, because they “*fear* the influence of religion,

and...the Christian religion in particular.” And for dogmatic skeptics he had little use. As he had scrawled in large capital letters on his preparatory notes, “Newman: Better to believe all things than to doubt all things.” If God were to use “scientific speculation,” so disastrous to religion since the Enlightenment, to lead society back to belief—well, Kirk, the man of letters, must have thought that this would be a touch of irony worthy of fiction.

As fond of natural and physical sciences as Kirk could be, he nevertheless detested most of what passed for modern sociology and the “social sciences.” He denied the social sciences a place in his model college curriculum;²⁷ he cited approvingly Richard Weaver’s view that social science re-

search suffered from “pedantic empiricism,” needless jargon, and meliorism;²⁸ he criticized positivistic “sociological postulates which promise us an earthly paradise but promptly deliver us at the gates of an earthly hell”;²⁹ and he described the typical sociologist as the “Benthamite charlatan, the counter of noses...willing to pander to the modern affection for quantitative judgments, which everyone can understand precisely because they contain no real meaning,” accomplishing little but to convert his students “into an inferior order of statisticians.”³⁰

The problem with modern sociology was that, in a pathetic attempt to copy the methods of the natural sciences, it treated

man as a soulless object not fundamentally different than any other material or biological entity. For Kirk, the work of Alfred Kinsey was particularly objectionable in this regard.³¹ Behaviorists such as Kinsey, just beginning to make serious headway in the fifties, could not by their very premises treat man as possessing free will, but only as an animal. Kirk insisted that this procedure was impossible and irrational; man is living, erratic, largely unpredictable, and exists not only within the physical realm but within the spiritual realm of value and meaning.³² Society will eventually pay dearly, Kirk warned, for the substitution of the behaviorist sociologist for the humane scholar, “who looks upon men as persons, not units.”³³

Kirk refused to grant that sociology could proceed on “value-free” grounds, and in this belief he may have been influenced by Eric Voegelin. In *The New Science of Politics*, published in 1952, Voegelin delivered a withering critique of the positivist attempt to develop a “value-free,” perfectly neutral social science. Whether or not Voegelin’s argument directly influenced Kirk, he was surely sympathetic to it. A piece published in 1961 in the *New York Times Magazine* is a good example of the approach Kirk typically took. Kirk does not mention Voegelin, nor does he summarize Voegelin’s or anyone else’s case for the impossibility of value-free social science. Instead, he gives examples of value-judgments intruding upon sociological studies in scientific guise; he appeals to the practical value of normative judgments in sociology. “What social studies need more than anything else, I suspect, is the recovery of norms: a restoration of normative disciplines, a return to the knowledge of standards for human personality and for the just order.”³⁴

This appeal—especially as presented by Kirk, unencumbered by an argument for the intrinsic necessity of value-judgments—

must have seemed even more quixotic in 1961 than now. Kirk’s article certainly elicited the attention of some eminent sociologists, all of it negative. Robert K. Merton published an article-length rebuttal,³⁵ and V. O. Key, Jr., Paul Hollander, and Paul Lazarsfeld, among others, wrote condemnatory letters to the editor.³⁶

Seventeen years later Kirk would repeat his criticisms, noting this earlier response and dismissing it as “the mark of men cut to the quick and uneasy in conscience.” “I have sinned against the Holy Ghost of Comte, and am a fit subject for the Holy Sociological Inquisition.”³⁷ But again, without making explicit or even citing arguments indicting attempts at value-neutrality, Kirk made suggestions for the improvement of social science that probably left the vast majority of his readers puzzled. Just as Comte and Bentham had consciously aimed at using social science for ideological ends, Kirk proposed that it be directed toward ethical and moral ends—that is, at helping us understand the “principles of social coherence” and saving us from “a totalist order.”³⁸ “It would be well,” wrote Kirk, “for scholars in the human sciences... to abandon the sterile notion of a ‘value-free science.’”³⁹ But why, aside from its alleged necessity if we are to avoid cultural collapse? Why *must* the human sciences serve as “means for ascertaining the norms of the human civil social order?”⁴⁰ It must have been the question of every reader who had accepted the by-now familiar separation of *social science* from *social philosophy*. There was the germ of an answer in Kirk’s paraphrase of Cardinal Manning: “all differences of opinion are theological.”⁴¹ But no further would Kirk go.

In at least intuiting the bankruptcy of the “neutrality” approach, Kirk anticipated some contemporary philosophers, most notably Alvin Plantinga. According to Plantinga, the Christian is as justified in

bringing to his philosophy a pre-philosophical opinion that God exists—irrespective of the validity of philosophical arguments for His existence—as the skeptic is entitled to the opposing pre-philosophical opinion.⁴² To proceed from the skeptic's perspective in science, philosophy, or any other discipline is anything but neutral; it is inherently anti-theistic and has no more justification as a starting point for intellectual inquiry than does theism. It follows from Plantinga's analysis that a "value-free," neutral approach to any intellectual endeavor is quite impossible.

As the intellectual hegemony long enjoyed by science crumbles in the wake of postmodernism, scholars searching for a "post-Enlightenment" account of science and its relationship with other modes of inquiry will profit by taking into account the critique of science provided by a Christian humanist like Kirk. His work shows us that, while a healthy respect for genuine science can be held alongside vigorous religious faith and humane learning, both traditional Christianity and traditional humanism preclude any effort to arrive at a "value-free" science, especially social science. And in his analysis of scientism, Russell Kirk serves to remind us that we must study science not only "for wisdom's sake," but "for self-defense against *Brave New World* and *1984*."⁴³

Notes

1. *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 63. 2. *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago: Regnery, 1954), 120. 3. *Ibid.*, 118. 4. *Ibid.*, 110. 5. "Ex Tenebris," in *The Surly Sullen Bell: Ten Stories and Sketches, Uncanny or Uncomfortable, with a Note on the Ghostly Tale* (New York: Fleet, 1962), 71. 6. *A Creature of the Twilight: His Memorials* (New York: Fleet, 1966), 96, 101. 7. See also Jackman, the dangerously evil psychiatrist who is Kirk's antagonist in *The Old House of Fear* (New York: Fleet, 1961). 8. See *The Intemperate Professor*, 64. 9. *Academic Freedom:*

An Essay in Definition (Chicago: Regnery, 1955), 49. 10. *Intemperate Professor*, 64. 11. *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, rev. ed. (Peru, IL: SherwoodSudgen & Co., 1991), xiv. 12. *Ibid.*, xvi. 13. *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993), 289-290. 14. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "The Psychological Foundations of Culture," in *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1992), 20-21. 15. *The Intemperate Professor*, 67. 16. "Science and American Society, Part I", 2-3. 17. *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory: Episodes and Reflections of a Vagrant Career* (New York: Fleet, 1963), 246-247. 18. Whitehead and Eisely are praised in *The Intemperate Professor*, 69-70; Polanyi is praised in *Eliot and His Age*, 350; Weil and Koestler are commended in *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning*, 228-229; and Jaki in "Scientific Ideology vs. Christian Realism," *The World & I* (March 1987), 395. 19. All the quotations from this paragraph come from *The Intemperate Professor*, 62-68. 20. *Ibid.*, 70. 21. "The Revitalized College: A Model" in Anne Husted Burleigh, ed., *Education and the Free Society* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1973), 131-160. 22. *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 13-14. 23. See *The Princess of All Lands* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1979), 50, and *Watchers at the Strait Gate*, 34, 90-91. 24. *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, xvii. 25. These and the following quotations from Kirk regarding the Shroud are from remarks delivered at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, 15-16 February, 1986. 26. See Fritz Williams, "The Shroud of Turin," *Apprise* (April 1986), 14-15, 26. 27. "The Revitalized College," 157. 28. *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, rev. ed., 83. 29. "Science and American Society, Part I," 1. 30. *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 70. 31. See *A Program for Conservatives*, 14, 118-119; *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, rev. ed., 69-78. 32. *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 118. 33. *Ibid.*, 70. 34. "Is Social Science Scientific?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 1961, 18. 35. "Now the Case for Sociology," *New York Times Magazine* 16 July 1961, 14, 19-21. 36. "The Battle of Sociology (continued)," *New York Times Magazine* 23 July 1961, 30-31. 37. "Narrow Visions," *Society* 15 (March/April, 1978), 54. 38. "Prospects for a Conservative Bent in the Human Sciences," *Social Research*, 35, (Winter, 1968), 582. 39. *Ibid.*, 591. 40. *Ibid.*, 590. 41. *Ibid.*, 586. 42. "Advice to Christian Philosophers (with a special preface for Christian thinkers from different disciplines)." Delivered Nov. 4, 1983, as Plantinga's inaugural address as Jim A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. 43. *The Intemperate Professor*, 63.