

T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr.

## Why Russell Kirk Mattered, and Matters

The year 1953, which saw the publication of Russell Kirk's great work *The Conservative Mind*, also witnessed the birth of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute—under our original name, the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists. In effect, both ISI and *The Conservative Mind* were “present at the creation” of the post-war American conservative movement. And I think it is fair to say that over the years, ISI was the movement organization with which Dr. Kirk was most closely associated—in his many articles published in *Modern Age* and the *Intercollegiate Review*, in his many campus lectures under ISI auspices, and in ISI's long tradition of sponsoring Piety Hill Seminars at Kirk's ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan.

As it happens, ISI's connection with “the benevolent sage of Mecosta” was not always so close and cordial. In May 1954, Kirk was asked to join the academic advisory board of the nascent Intercollegiate Society of Individualists. He responded in a rather testy letter that he would *not* join, and that he deplored even the *word* “individualist.” Politically, he wrote, individualism “ends in anarchy; spiritually, it is a hideous solitude. ... I do not even call myself an ‘individual’; I hope I am a *person*.” Perusing a list of philosophical authorities that ISI had assembled to convey the spirit of the new

Society, Kirk was decidedly unimpressed. He volunteered an alternative tradition, including

Moses in place of Lao-tse, Aristotle in place of Zeno, Pascal in place of Spinoza, Lord Falkland in place of John Locke, Dante in place of Milton, [Samuel] Johnson in place of [Adam] Smith, Ruskin in place of Mill, Burke in place of Paine, Adams in place of Jefferson, [James Fitzjames] Stephen in place of [Herbert] Spencer, Hawthorne in place of Thoreau, [Orestes] Brownson in place of Emerson....

This rather awkward episode is a telling one. For as we look back on ISI's own fifty-year history, we see that the authorities Kirk offered in that letter have, in almost every case, become our own—at least, they have been added to our pantheon, even when many of the figures Kirk deprecated have also been proudly retained because of their eloquent vindications of human liberty. In the event, Kirk became an active participant in ISI by the 1960s, and in 1973 he became a member of our board of trustees, a trust he would hold until his death in 1994.

Russell Kirk was a controversial figure during his lifetime, and he is not without his

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T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr. is President of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. This essay is adapted from remarks delivered at a White House symposium marking the fiftieth anniversary of *The Conservative Mind*, October 24, 2003.

detractors today. I sometimes hear it contended that his high reputation among conservatives is undeserved; that in any event the movement's real attitude toward him amounts to nothing but empty, ritualistic piety; that his books are more often cited than read; that the influence of his traditionalist ideas upon actual American politics is negligible; that his style of conservatism is foreign to our traditions, not really American. Our brief glimpse into that exchange of letters in 1954 shows just how mistaken these claims are.

It does so because we can see in the list of authorities that ISI proffered and Kirk rejected a vision of the American conservatism that "might have been" had it not been for Kirk's contributions. For one thing, the American conservatism that "might have been" would not even have been called "conservatism," but rather "individualism." It was Kirk who gave our movement its very name. Of course, a high view of the individual and his liberty is a necessary element of any American conservatism. Kirk recognized as much: the link between property and freedom is the fourth of his six canons of conservative thought.

But Kirk placed this vital principle of sound economics within a larger context. He reminded us that American freedom is not license, nor even the freedom to grow wealthy that is sometimes mistaken for the American dream. Rather, our freedom is the precondition that enables men to *choose the good*. It is the freedom to make one's own way in life, to choose for oneself how to behave honorably and to live lovingly within one's family and community. Free markets are a *means* for reaching ultimate *ends*. In his insistence that conservatives strive for a free and humane society, we can see that "compassionate conservatism" is simply conservatism properly understood—or at least, conservatism as understood by Russell Kirk.

One of the dominant concerns of men of

the right in the 1940s and 1950s was the rise of "mass society." In a world of advertising, consumer credit, and the welfare state, the conformity of "other-directed" man and a spirit of dependency were becoming the American norm. Pessimistic about the prospects for the older American virtues of rugged self-reliance, individualists often imagined themselves as a "saving remnant" of non-conformists, doomed hold-outs against the tidal wave of the masses. Kirk certainly shared this concern about the emergence of the "servile state"; his aristocratic tone is one of the reasons he is thought un-American. But in fact, he had more confidence in his country: he showed in his work that there are resources *within* the American tradition to *ennoble* our democracy—with the high virtues of classical republicanism.

Again in the 1940s and 1950s, all men of the right were alarmed at the growth of the federal government, a growth made possible by revolutionary breaches in American constitutional law. As with our Founders, Kirk knew that any mere recitation of individual rights would crumble before concentrations of government power. He sought, rather, to defend liberty through the concrete legal traditions of our republic. His genealogy of the conservative tradition made plain that the Constitution's original *federalism* was a common concern of all American conservatives, rather than a peculiar interest of the South. As with the separation of powers, the other great structural doctrine of the Constitution, federalism protects individual rights by dividing power against itself. In their zeal to empower the federal government to enforce the "rights revolution," so-called civil libertarians have cut through these very constitutional doctrines that the founders devised to protect our liberties from their most potent enemy—the federal government itself.

In the course of this judicial revolution, novel rights have been asserted against traditional social structures such as family, marriage, religion, and the web of mediating institutions whose authority Kirk properly understood as a bulwark against the plenary power of the state. Thus, the “rights revolution” has become an engine of social disintegration, attacking the traditional institutions through which Americans have ordered their freedoms. Kirk’s consistent emphasis on the wisdom embedded in the common law’s respect for ancient social forms is an approach to jurisprudence sorely in need of rediscovery.

But beyond the strict construction, or “conservation,” of the text of our Constitution, Kirk was intent to conserve what we might call America’s “unwritten constitution.” Foremost a man of letters, Kirk had a profound understanding of the priority of *culture* to both politics and economics. He was nearly unique in his day for his focus on aspects of American cultural life, the “moral contents of life,” that were endangered by pernicious social developments—and thus, in need of innovative strategies of conservation. Are not these moral questions precisely what lie at the core of our current “culture war”?

Finally, we must not forget Kirk’s *first* canon of conservative thought: the conviction that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience. For us, it is a truism that religion is a central pillar of American conservatism and that religious Americans are overwhelmingly conservative. But this was not always so. When *The Conservative Mind* was written, the liberal social gospel movement was at its apogee. Conversely, most of the figures in the list of authorities ISI offered and Kirk rejected in 1954 are marked by an emphatic theological skepticism. Kirk forged an intellectually serious conservative commitment to ecumenical orthodoxy:

a respect for the Judeo-Christian roots of Western civilization. Had it not been so, could conservatism in America ever have amounted to anything more than a kind of intellectual coterie?

Russell Kirk wrote to ISI in his 1954 letter that he deplored the very word “individualist”—and yet he was surely an American original. In a century whose literature speaks obsessively of the search for personal identity, usually to be found by leaving home for the expressive opportunities of the city, Russell Kirk managed to live out the life of an independent “bohemian tory” *happy at home* in the American heartland. Was this not the most “individualist” statement imaginable for an American public intellectual?

As a young man, I once spent time with Dr. Kirk on a walking tour of the Scottish Borders. One day, I asked him for a succinct definition of conservatism, and he, quite politely, flatly refused. Instead, he offered the insight that conservatism is a disposition of *openness to reality*—that is to say, openness toward the world as God has created it, rather than a blind allegiance to one of those hypothetical worlds in whose name so many were slaughtered in the twentieth century. In an era diabolically attracted to the ideological answers of communism, fascism, and all the other “isms,” Russell Kirk insisted that conservatism is the *negation* of ideology. In a mighty labor of moral imagination, he provided the intellectual tools to defend the common decencies of American life.

When the marble walls of this White House are rubble, when all of us here have resolved ourselves into a dew, the legacy of Russell Kirk will live on; because one day in 1953, he picked up a gauntlet and became the champion of the unseen things that do not die. In introducing countless thousands of young minds to the great, unthreatened truths, he has written upon eternity.