

The Kirkian Ethos

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The Conservative Mind, Fifth Revised Edition, by Russell Kirk, *Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1972. 436 pp. \$15.00.*

IT IS NOT NECESSARY to reiterate the impact made by Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* when it first appeared in 1953. Among other things, it converted the term "conservatism" from the lexicon of the intellectual historian into the general parlance of American political discourse. It sparked a revival of scholarship on Burke and other neglected social commentators of the past. It revealed a continuity of Anglo-American political thought that was before maintained only by academic specialists. But, perhaps, the book's major accomplishment, looked at in retrospect, was its demonstration of the difference between real compassion and vapid sentimentality, its revelation of the cracks in the icons of popular liberalism that revealed underneath not the sordid meanness of man, but rather his tragic aspects, to be redeemed not so much by censure and suppression as by empathetic sensitivity and custodial concern.

Thus, conservatism was cast by Kirk into the image of social concord and reciprocal obligation, a "soft" conservatism, indeed, proudly proclaiming its humanistic ancestry and its adherence to the resolute conservation of principles tempered by the influences of both aristocratic benevolence and the recognition of the universal existential plight of human beings. There was a notable absence in *The Conservative Mind* of 1953 of the brittle, almost bellicose pseudo-sophistication of the later "conserv-

ative" writers whose work has stimulated a rhetoric which, though it displays a veneer occasionally smoothed by humanistic terminology, is substantially constructed out of a harsh social Darwinism and aggrandisements of the ego.

The evolution of contemporary conservatism has certainly featured an attack, direct and oblique, upon the humanistic premises of *The Conservative Mind*. To a writer of less integrity than Kirk, there would be a distinct temptation in revising the book to modify it along the lines of a more eclectic approach, compromising its avowed traditionalism with the fashionable attitudes of current neo-liberal thought, to dilute the tone of aristocratic social compassion with strong draughts of the bourgeois ethic and popular jingoism. The revised edition of *The Conservative Mind* sturdily refuses to do so and its all-new concluding chapter is Kirk's ringing reaffirmation of his humanistic commitments, its prose laced with the language of a proud spirit unwilling to bend to present vulgarities, and exhibiting (to change the metaphor) a white plume of defiance.

In the current revision, Mr. Kirk has greatly altered and expanded his final chapter—and retitled it (from "The Recrudescence of Conservatism" to "Conservatives' Promise"). Kirk expands upon the conservative promise in terms of leadership, order and community. The leadership he seeks is humanistic, aristocratic and even imbued with a stylistic elegance—he quotes Paul Elmer More's epigram that "Conservatism is in general the intuition of genius, whereas liberalism is the efficiency of tal-

ent." His views on order reflect a foundation of theistic rationalism. His attitudes regarding community reveal a preference for what Orestes Brownson called "territorial democracy" or what Robert Nisbet has called a "new *laissez-faire*," the freedom of autonomous groups as basic social units.

Indeed, Kirk employs Professor Nisbet as an example of a current crop of practitioners of the "human sciences" that Kirk believes will succor true scholarship from the bondage of an arid "intellectualism," who will revitalize the imaginative *élan* of social philosophy. In like fashion, Kirk argues that the learning of these theoreticians is "allied nowadays with the armed vision of the poets" and he selects Frost and Eliot as exemplars.

The renovated final chapter of *The Conservative Mind* exudes a considerable measure of practical confidence in the culture, well beyond the earlier chapter of 1953. The "recrudescence" of conservatism is now a *fact*, a palpable political and social fact. Mr. Kirk conveys a message of hope. He does not explicitly discourse on what this reviewer believes is the threatened erosion of current conservatism by neo-liberal revisionism, but he gives all indications of being highly sensitive to this condition. His list of the principal conservative writers included in the new chapter is in itself extremely enlightening (it is rather different, for example, from Mr. Buckley's inclusions in *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?*). Kirk's technique is to articulate sharply his own credo (which the reviewer thinks is the "mainstream" of conservatism) and let the reader draw the obvious conclusion.

The hope that Mr. Kirk purveys is this: the opportunity is present—the convolutions of the culture have generated it—and the resources are available in terms of genuine conservative insight and talent. What remains is for conservatism to redeem its historical obligations to leadership, order and community, to be, yet again, the amelioratory spirit of renewal, concord and discriminating cultural loyalty.