

Russell Kirk, 1953

THE APPEARANCE in 1953 of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, coming as it did toward the end of the long reign of doctrinaire liberalism, was greeted almost as an escape from bondage. It was not, to be sure, the first assault on the basic premises of the welfare state—Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* preceded it by almost ten years; it was the great achievement of Kirk's book to give the scattered forces of the opposition coherence and a name, and to bring them together under the banner of conservatism. Conservatism has become so much a part of American life—not only do we have a president who is proud to call himself a conservative, the conservative movement has even become the subject of books, including an excellent history—that it is difficult from the distance of nearly thirty years to comprehend how much of an achievement it was to establish conservatism not merely as an opposing force to liberalism, but as a vital force in its own right and a positive factor in American life. Some idea of this can be gained from August Heckscher's review of *The Conservative Mind* in the old New York *Herald-Tribune* which begins, "To be a conservative in the United States has for so long been considered identical with being backward, and even faintly alien, that Mr. Kirk's proud justification of the term is to be welcomed."

In his first letter to me, in reply to my inquiry about the manuscript a mutual friend had strongly recommended, Kirk, who was then a young instructor at Michigan State University, described his project as "...my contribution to our endeavor to conserve the spiritual and intellectual and political traditions of our society." He went on to say, "The struggle will be decided in the minds of the rising generation—and within that generation, substantially by the minority who have the gift of reason. I do not think we need much fear the decaying 'liberalism' of the retiring generation.... But we do need to state some certitudes for the groping new masters of society." There can be no doubt that it was the minority of the rising generation with "the gift of reason" who particularly

responded to *The Conservative Mind*. Having been brought up, for the most part, at the hands of the education establishment on a diet of warmed-over liberalism, a book in clear, uncluttered English which affirmed a "conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes," or "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life" must have come as a great awakening. Stanton Evans, who was then an undergraduate at Yale (it was the Yale described by William Buckley in *God and Man*) has told me of the deep impression the book made at the time on him and the discussions it aroused among his friends. As he said he would, Kirk did give some certitudes to many groping young minds, a number of whom, besides Stan Evans, have gone on to positions of leadership.

Although Kirk describes his book as "a prolonged essay in definition," he is careful to point out that "conservatism is not a fixed and immutable body of dogma," nevertheless, he goes on to say, "the essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity." Kirk's conservatism is not, therefore, so much concerned with preserving social structures or political forms and practices as in articulating and preserving the moral traditions in which all legitimate social and political structures take their root. Solzhenitsyn, under Kirk's conception of conservatism, although violently opposed to the existing political structure of his country, would be a conservative, as, I am sure, he considers himself to be. Where I would place Brezhnev, with his moral relativism, it would probably be better not to say.

Kirk's six canons of conservatism, which he offers in place, as he puts it, of "a few pretentious phrases," have become well known and, although both Frank Myer and Willmoore Kendall rejected them as primarily rhetorical rather than logical, an essential part of the intellectual armor of conservatism. Since they are readily available in the many editions of *The Conservative Mind*, I hope I will be forgiven if I offer them here in drastically shortened form:

1. Belief 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. . . . Politics is the art of apprehending and applying the justice which is above nature.
2. Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism and utilitarian aims of most radical systems.
3. Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes. The only true equality is moral equality. Society longs for leadership, and if people destroy natural distinctions among men, presently Bonaparte fills the vacuum.
4. Separate property from private possession, and liberty is erased.
5. Man must put a control upon his will and his appetite, for conservatives know man to be governed more by emotion than by reason. Tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man's anarchic impulse.
6. Recognition that change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress. Society must alter, for slow change is the means of conservation, like the human body's perpetual renewal; but Providence is the proper instrument for change, and the test of a statesman is his cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces.

For Kirk, conservatism begins with Edmund Burke; his discovery of Burke, in fact, must have marked a turning point in his life, and something of the thrill of discovery is contained in his book, and doubtless contributed to its success. One senses the immense pleasure of a young man, searching for his way in a confused and confusing world who has discovered a view of life that satisfies him and seems to answer his most pressing questions. Burke's philosophy, Kirk tells us, derived from a deep sense of piety and a profound understanding of the sources of order. "Now and again," Kirk goes on to say, "Burke praises two great virtues, the keys to private contentment and public peace: they are prudence

and humility, the first pre-eminently an attainment of classical philosophy, the second pre-eminently a triumph of Christian discipline. Without them, man must be miserable; and a man destitute of piety hardly can perceive either of these rare and blessed virtues."

Kirk, as I have said, was an obscure instructor of history at Michigan State University when we published his book, so obscure, in fact, that when a representative of *Time* called at the university to interview him following the publication of his book, he was told in the administrative office that they had no one by that name on the faculty. While I was thoroughly convinced of the quality and importance of the book, its immediate success was as welcome as unexpected, as is evident by the fact that we began with a first printing of only 3,000 copies. One would not say of Russell Kirk that he has a highly developed sense of public relations, but in this case his sense of timing was exactly right—the literate public was waiting for just such a book. It was reviewed favorably and at considerable length in the *New York Times* by Gordon Chalmers, who was then president of Kenyon College; I have already quoted from August Heckscher's review in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, but the event that put the book in the center of discussion was the review in *Time* magazine whose reviews at that time were discerning and of high quality. This came about through the intervention of Whittaker Chambers who told Roy Alexander, then the editor, that *The Conservative Mind* might well be the most important book he would ever have a chance to review. He responded by devoting the *entire* book review section to this one book—it was the July 4th issue and featured George Washington on the cover—and mentioning it in the news section. By this time Michigan State probably did realize that they had a man on their faculty named Russell Kirk, but they didn't keep him long; he soon resigned from what he was later to call "Behemoth U.", using the opportunity to get off a great blast at the president, John Hanna, for corrupting educational standards. Russell Kirk is not a man to compromise.

The scholarly publications, on the whole, were equally favorable in their response to the

book. There were a few dissenting voices—Peter Gay of Columbia University, for example, ended his review in the *Political Science Quarterly* with the observation: “In trying to confute Lionel Trilling’s observation (that American conservatives have no philosophy and express themselves only in action or irritable mental gestures) Kirk has only confirmed it.” But Clinton Rossiter, in the *American Political Science Review* wrote that Kirk’s “scholarship is manifestly of the highest order,” and concluded his review: “Certainly the so-called ‘new conservatism’ of the postwar period takes on new substance and meaning with the publication of this splendid book.” *The Conservative Mind* was the subject of a long essay by John Crowe Ransom in the *Kenyon Review* and in another by Brainard Cheney in the *Sewanee Review*. It was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*,

and both Golo Mann and Wilhelm Roepke discussed it at length in German publications. The post-World War II conservative movement had attained identity and intellectual standing, and was on its way.

There have been many additions of *The Conservative Mind* since it was first published in 1953—it is still in print, in both paper-bound and hard-back additions—and in one of the early revisions the sub-title was changed from “From Burke to Santayana” to “From Burke to T.S. Eliot,” but in all the revisions the book ends, quite appropriately, as Kirk describes it, with “Cupid’s curse against the hubris of the ruthless innovator”:

They that do change old love for new,
Pray Gods they change for worse.

—HENRY REGNERY

Will Herberg, 1955

WHEN WILL HERBERG died in 1977 at the age of 75, America—especially American religion—lost one of its most interesting and brilliant personalities. Jews and Christians saw him as an important theologian. Sociologists agreed that he had made significant contributions to the understanding of the sociology of American religion. Political thinkers acknowledged the depth of his insight into the problems of political structure. And generations of students mourned the loss of a brilliant teacher.

His Life: Herberg’s biography exemplifies some of the currents that characterize this stormy century. He came to the United States from Russia at a very young age. When the family arrived in America, his parents, whom he described as “passionate atheists,” were already committed to the faith that socialism would bring happiness to mankind and freedom from the shackles that had bound societies for centuries. They found life in the

new land not easy and economic and social injustices painfully evident. No wonder Herberg joined the Young Communist League while still in his teens, and became submerged in the work to promote Marxism.

A young man of great gifts, passions and versatility, Herberg found formal schooling too confining for his seeking mind. He was largely self-taught, mastering all kinds of subjects and languages with ease. He became a regular contributor to Communist journals, and the managing editor of *Workers Monthly* and *The Communist*, producing long and complicated articles on such topics as the relevance of Einstein’s theory of relativity to Marxism, and the relationship between Freudian psychoanalysis and Communist thought. Herberg was an overpowering polemicist, adept at reconciling contradictions and finding distinctions. He defended the received Marxist canon against difficulties that might be raised by new developments in science, personality theory, and literature. In