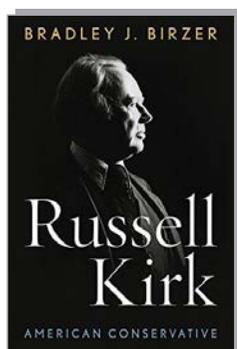


## **Russell Kirk: American Conservative**

by Bradley J. Birzer  
University of Kentucky  
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Reviewed by Samuel  
Gregg



Though it's not accurate to say that modern American conservatism did not exist until the publication of Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953), it—along with Kirk's subsequent writings—provided serious intellectual substance to the reaction against modern liberalism that surfaced during Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign and culminated in Ronald Reagan's 1980 victory. One of the many strengths of Bradley J. Birzer's *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* is the way in which this intellectual biography functions as a history of post-war American conservatism and the individuals who shaped a movement that is presently undergoing considerable soul-searching.

Kirk, as Birzer shows, wrote on an extraordinary number of subjects, defying the narrow specialization that marks most of the contemporary academy and policy world. Kirk's broad scope of interests was matched by genuine erudition that enabled him to see the connections between, for instance, culture and American foreign policy, or the significance of moral philosophy for one's commitments in the realm of political economy.

Though Kirk is often dismissed as a knee-jerk reactionary, Birzer establishes the unfairness of such a characterization. Birzer makes it clear that Kirk wanted to give conservatism a face that differentiated it from, say, libertarianism or classical liberalism. That did not mean, however, that Kirk thought that conservatives had nothing to learn from free-market economists such as Friedrich von Hayek. After all, Kirk and Hayek both esteemed that pronounced admirer of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*: the decidedly pro-market free-trader and founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke.

Kirk—like William F. Buckley, Jr.—considered it necessary for American conservatism to distinguish

itself from the “extremes of the movement.” Kirk was thus among the first on the right to excoriate the John Birch Society (in the pages of the Jesuit magazine *America*, no less). Kirk also dismissed Ayn Rand as a “freak” and argued that conservatism was damaged by “absurd simplifiers who fancy that calling everyone in Washington a communist [is] hunky-dory.” Kirk was especially censorious of anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic tendencies among segments of the American right during the 1950s and 1960s. Not only did Kirk regard such mindsets as wrong in themselves (even before he converted to Catholicism); he plainly viewed them as counterproductive, not least because so many of the American non-left's intellectual heavyweights were Jews or Catholics. Clearly, those inclined to view Kirk as naively inattentive to issues of presentation amid the complexities of American politics are mistaken.

### **Personalities and Politics**

The picture of the American conservative moment that emerges from this book is one characterized by surprisingly deep fractures that, in many respects, have never been resolved. Some may be beyond resolution. This makes it all the more ironic that one of the most revealing aspects of Birzer's book is the degree to which Kirk worked with and even promoted people with whom he had intellectual disagreements.

Traditionalists may be surprised, for example, to learn just how much Kirk admired Leo Strauss's thinking. “Even as late as 1990,” Birzer writes, “on the eve of an implosion of even a semblance of unity within intellectual conservatism, Kirk continued to praise Strauss.” Kirk was particularly taken with Strauss's conception of natural rights. Certainly, the two men disagreed in their interpretation of Burke, and Kirk strongly disapproved of some of Strauss's followers. None of this, however, impaired what Birzer describes as the positive influence exerted by Strauss on Kirk's thought.

Other friendships developed by Kirk with figures such as the sociologist Robert Nisbet, the novelist Flannery O'Connor, and the political philosopher Eric Voegelin were characterized by a similar pattern: affirmation of many points in common and recognition of a mutual seriousness of purpose, accompanied by clear but civil disagreement about other important issues.

## The Limits of Left and Right

Given Kirk's interest in helping to mold American conservatism into a movement through which many people with not always compatible positions could collaborate in a common struggle against modern liberalism and the left more generally, some may find it paradoxical that, as Birzer highlights, Kirk consistently rejected the typical right-left division of modern politics. In part, this flowed from Kirk's principled rejection of ideology.

Kirk understood ideology as "inverted religion." Here, one senses Voegelin's influence. With this phrase, Kirk rejected the tendency to think that we can realize heaven on earth through implementation of a political program. Whether such agendas were derived from socialism, libertarianism, progressivism, or even conservatism was, for Kirk, irrelevant. According to Kirk, there was a straight line between ideology in this sense and regimes willing to abandon all natural and legal restraints in order to realize political goals. Historically speaking, this has predominantly manifested itself on the left, assuming demonic form in the case of Communist governments. But there have also been instances in which ideology, in Kirk's sense of the word, has flourished among sections of the right—nationalism (as distinct from patriotism) being a prominent example.

A second reason for Kirk's rejection of the right-left paradigm was his longstanding interest in subjects that did not engage "political" questions, as such, but nonetheless were crucial in defining Western civilization. Here, Birzer's discussion of Kirk's relationship with T.S. Eliot is eye-opening. By any standard, Eliot was a man of the right and, as Birzer notes, was quite happy to discuss conservative ideas and figures in his correspondence with Kirk. Kirk was primarily interested, however, in Eliot's poetry, spirituality, and sense of the mystical. Such things were, to Kirk's mind, simply beyond politics and ought to remain so.

A third reason for Kirk's dislike for right-left paradigms was his growing commitment to what Birzer describes as a type of Christian humanism that had decidedly premodern antecedents. These ranged from Aristotle and Plutarch to Dante, Erasmus, and Thomas More. Given that the right-left political division is very much a product of a post-1789 world, Kirk's rejection of this way of looking at politics

could be seen as underscoring his commitment to the abiding relevance of schools of thought (such as natural law) and thinkers (such as Aquinas) that helped define his Christian humanism but that don't fit into the contemporary categories of right-left, conservative-liberal-socialist divisions.

### Politics and the Conservative Intellectual

In seeking to focus people's attention upon these premodern sources, Kirk was trying to develop greater ballast for conservatism in America. But this in turn points to a tension in Kirk's life and work (and modern conservatism more generally) that is subtly highlighted by Birzer's biography.

Kirk regularly stressed that conservatism is, among other things, a matter of outlook and habits. He also noted that it involves awareness of certain constants in human nature, a respect for inherited wisdom, and a willingness to take religion very seriously. Nevertheless, for all its insistence that some things are beyond politics (something that modern liberalism seems incapable of appreciating), conservatism is also a modern political phenomenon with clear implications for political actors in the modern world, including the sphere of policy. Indeed, the two thinkers whom Birzer identifies as exerting the most influence upon not just Kirk but twentieth-century American conservatism more generally—Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville—were themselves heavily involved in politics and the business of lawmaking.

Birzer demonstrates that Kirk often oscillated uneasily between being a detached observer/critic and an active participant in political affairs. In the latter vein, Kirk was involved in Goldwater's presidential campaign and publicly endorsed Pat Buchanan's 1992 presidential run. From the 1950s onward, Birzer stresses, Kirk felt himself pulled in two directions:

Although [Kirk] never lost his profound love of Christian humanism, that side of him would experience serious competition from the side that he had often labelled foolish because it was involved in practical politics for the "quarter-educated"—a conservatism of a different sort.

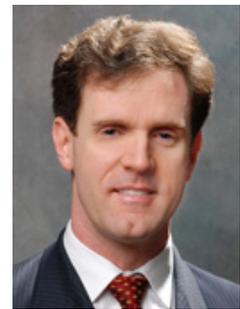
Such "practical politics" inevitably involves building alliances with people with whom you disagree. Birzer's exploration of Kirk's interactions with neoconservatives, classical liberals, and libertarians underlines the unfortunate extent to which intellectuals identified with the American right

have eschewed the politics of prudence and turned their swords upon each other.

Sometimes significant principles have been at stake, and particular fights have been more than necessary. Buckley's effort to exorcize anti-Semites from the American right in the 1950s is a good example. But Birzer also illustrates that Zeus-sized egos, careerism, petty jealousies, and the making of hyperbolic overstatements have significantly contributed to periodic fractures of American conservatism. Some might say that little has changed.

None of this, however, would have surprised Kirk. For him, consciousness of human fallibility was an integral part of being a conservative. In reminding us of this and many other conservative themes through his study of Kirk's life and thought, Birzer has performed a great service to the world of ideas.

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Even among the odd, Russell Amos Kirk was unusual. Perhaps only in America could such an eccentric and anti-individualist individual have arisen. And arise he did. One hundred years ago, Kirk entered the world. Born to poverty-stricken but bookish Anglo-Saxon Celts on the wrong side of the tracks in Plymouth, Michigan, probably very few looked at his young parents and believed them capable of producing a genius. Kirk's mother was a quiet saint, but his father was a ne'er-do-well who never quite got his life together and certainly never earned any respect from his only son. He holds the Russell Amos Kirk chair in history at Hillsdale College and is the author, most recently, of *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*. [leave a comment](#). [Latest Articles](#). [Ten Conservative Principles](#). by Russell Kirk. Being neither a religion nor an ideology, the body of opinion termed conservatism possesses no Holy Writ and no Das Kapital to provide dogmata. So far as it is possible to determine what conservatives believe, the first principles of the conservative persuasion are derived from what leading conservative writers and public men have professed during the past two centuries. Although Americans have been attached strongly to privacy and private rights, they also have been a people conspicuous for a successful spirit of community. In a genuine community, the decisions most directly affecting the lives of citizens are made locally and voluntarily. Russell Kirk has long been a polarizing figure. Many hold him to be a great American writer, fundamental to establishing conservatism "as a valid intellectual enterprise," while others believe him to be an anti-Semite, a wannabe aristocrat, or a phony. Birzer's 400-page biography shows a different Kirk—a Kirk that is sometimes whiny, sometimes a curmudgeon, and always eccentric, but also genuine, a family man, and brilliant. For Kirk, conservatism was not an ideology but an understanding. The conservative believes not in revolution but in the careful preservation of the "permanent things"—the traditions and institutions left behind by one's ancestors, as well as the prudent (in other words, possible, rather than idealistic), gradual reform of imperfect things. *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* provides readers with an opportunity to consider anew one of the most insightful thinkers of the previous century, and to learn both from his scholarship and personal piety something of the essence of what it means to be a traditional conservative. [Category Book Reviews](#). [Education Malpractice](#). Real education reform is doomed unless Americans expose and oppose the subversive schemes of the elite educators in our top universities and government [Bill Jasper](#) April 17, 2015 0 Comment. [Reviving the Constitution](#).