

Gerald Russello  
Philadelphia Society  
Atlanta, Georgia  
October 5, 2013

---

I am greatly honored to speak before the society this weekend on such an important topic and among such distinguished company, including many old friends, and I want to thank Bill Campbell and the Society's trustees for the invitation. In particular, it was a great pleasure to hear yesterday and meet in person for the first time, Brad Birzer, who has contributed enormously to our understanding of Russell Kirk and his importance. I would commend to you all his forthcoming book on Kirk, a wonderful taste of which we had last night.

I am grateful for the Society's decision to devote this conference to Russell Kirk and his work, especially his book *The Conservative Mind*. I too drafted a letter to Kirk after reading *The Conservative Mind* in my freshmen year of college; more brazenly than Brad, I actually sent it, and Dr. Kirk was kind enough to respond. I first met Dr. Kirk in 1991 at the Heritage Foundation, where he signed my copy of his book on John Randolph of Roanoke. Through the good graces of the Heritage Foundation I was able to spend some time in 1995 at Piety Hill researching his work, and I currently have the privilege of editing his journal, *The University Bookman* and working closely with Annette Kirk, who has done more than anyone else in keeping Kirk's work alive; Kirk has been one of my formative intellectual influences, not only through his own work but through an introduction to the wider Western tradition that I know many of you also have experienced because of him.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak briefly to you today on America and the Permanent Things before I introduce our lunch speaker, Dr. Hancock.

As this audience well knows, for Kirk the Permanent Things were those enduring truths of human existence, which directs both the order of the soul and the order of the commonwealth. There are, he wrote, “certain permanent things in society: the health of the family, inherited political institutions that insure a measure of order and justice and freedom, a life of diversity and independence, a life marked by widespread possession of private property. These permanent things guarantee against arbitrary interference by the state.” But they do more than this. Quoting Eliot, Kirk wrote that these Permanent Things were “those elements in the human condition that give us our nature, without which we are as the beasts that perish.”

These Permanent Things are reflected in different political and social arrangements. In America, we have a tradition of ordered liberty, whose bases stretch back in an institutional sense to the British experience of government. The American colonies were steeped in British practice, not least the strong tradition of common law and the use of British precedent and legal treatises. These still hold true in many ways. There are also structural features like the bicameral legislature, political parties, the presidential cabinet, and the primary system. And of course there was the written Constitution itself, with its guarantee of traditional British liberties. But there was also the contribution of the new political science as espoused in the Federalist. Kirk recognized that the tripartite federal system, with its division of powers, extended over such a large republic, was new in political science, without clear British or classical models.

But such political arrangements are not sufficient for Kirk. Political structures or economic systems do not last forever; they change, and often change in response to underlying changes in the values and customs of the people. Being wedded to old political or cultural forms just for their own sake is not a viable strategy for political or cultural success. And although the degeneration of politics – perhaps what we have been seeing in DC these past few days – can be visible evidence of decline, a political solution to that decline can by its nature only be temporary.

One of the lessons I think we can learn from the new Kirk scholarship, from people like Brad, Wes McDonald, James Person and others, is that Kirk was showing conservatives must go deeper, into what the American Catholic Orestes Brownson, whom Kirk quoted on this point, called the “unwritten Constitution.” Indeed, Kirk was so convinced of the superiority of this unwritten constitution to the written that he wrote that “no matter how admirable a constitution may look upon paper, it will be ineffectual unless the unwritten constitution, the web of custom and convention, affirms an enduring moral order of obligation and personal responsibility.”

The most important source of that unwritten Constitution in America is Christianity. In a 1983 lecture, Kirk claimed that the particular forms of Anglo-American law reflect, even if opaquely, Christian assumptions. Without those assumptions, the most important of which is a recognition that politics cannot control the entirety of human existence and experience, the legal system will be used merely as a tool for social engineering and “judicial metaphysics.”

The more that judges ignore Christian assumptions about human nature and justice, the more are they thrown back upon their private resources as abstract metaphysicians – and the more the laws of the land fall into confusion and inconsistency.

Kirk is not saying the United States is a “Christian commonwealth,” or one whose legal code need match the Christian moral code (indeed, he stated in a lecture given at the Heritage Foundation that the “state is unconcerned with sins unless they lead to beaches of the peace, or menace the social order.”) And certainly much of the practice of the modern administrative state is quite removed from the postulates of human nature Kirk believed should inform lawmaking; rather Kirk is making an historical point that our legal system comes from a very specific tradition that should not be ignored. Echoing Christopher Dawson Kirk knew that every society has beliefs and taboos, acts that are honored and those that bring shame. But a culture is rooted in the transcendent knows the limits of politics. Without such a view, there is no limit to the power of the state upon its subjects.

But what about the other pieces of that web of custom and convention?

Conservatives need to spend more time focused on identifying and nurturing that those pieces, in addition to efforts at practical political reform. This many not be easy; first, as Brad said last night, Kirk was not a speculative or systematic thinker, and we has opposed to ideological uniformity of any kind. His own writing, I believe, was constructed in the discursive, narrative style that so enraged some of his critics precisely because he knew the heart of life was mystery and the attempt to reduce that mystery to a party platform or set of theses was doomed to failure, and to much misery. Second, to preserve tradition, while not anti-political, has little connection to politics; he wrote that That web of custom and convention we may want to call tradition, and the defense of tradition, while not perhaps anti-political, is not a political act. Kirk wrote that “traditions are not created by political authority, and ought not to be debased into party slogans.”

Kirk’s call in *The Conservative Mind* was to renew the moral imagination in order to plumb that mystery, and all of his work is an effort toward that goal.

It is important in that context, I think, to note the person who bookends the later editions of *The Conservative Mind*. Of course, I mean TS Eliot, about whom Kirk wrote a separate, frankly thrilling, book. Eliot was no politician, and in traditional poetic terms was a revolutionary. He burst a literature that had gone stale and opened a window into a new way to write poetry, all in the service of the Permanent Things. Conservatives need to identify our Eliots today – who are the filmmakers, writers, and artists redeeming the time?

That process of identification and nurture may not deliver clear political rewards, but nor will it convert the lived American experience into an ideology. Instead, it can provide the foundation for a true diversity of diversity and freedom of choice, words debased by abstract ideology now but which Kirk himself identified as American traditions. Indeed, Kirk went so far as to say that “I have not the slightest idea of what the American way of life in the abstract may be.” Shocking words, perhaps, but Kirk was signaling something important. Conservatives need to foster and create those particulars, in our own communities and through our own individual stories; they can protect us against the brutal uniformity of ideology, no matter who is in control of Congress or the White House. In this vein I would recommend the work of Bill Kauffman, who has been leading a one-man crusade for the revival of a true American regionalism.

For Kirk therefore political problems - not simply disputes over particular policies but deep disagreements about how to order our common life - reflect deeper philosophical and theological problems. I have called Kirk’s approach to this problem a “post modern” one, not in the sense of moral relativism but rather an approach that recognized that the rationalism of the Enlightenment and its current,

descendent could not solve the most important social or political problems. Instead Kirk looked to an age that he wrote “may also be a time of renewed poetic imagination, and of the reflection of poetry in politics,” of a “reaffirmed poetic vision of the splendor and misery of the human condition.”

Kirk’s stress on recognizing the transcendent and the limits this places on the political order brings us to our lunch speaker. Dr. Hancock teaches political science at Brigham Young University and is the author of numerous articles and books, including *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age*. He is also President, The John Adams Center for the Study of Faith, Philosophy and Public Affairs

In some postings on the First Things website, Dr. Hancock wrote that reason must confront “the problematic articulations of transcendence generated in man’s practical existence, religious, familial, and political.” He goes on to say that reason “will have to learn to show the connections between the indefinable freedom of the human spirit and the humbler necessities of our natures as beings dependent upon family, community, and polity. But to do this, to take responsibility for ... connecting our theoretical freedom with our practical belonging, reason would first have somehow to learn to see its own goodness in the light of a transcendence it can never adequately name.” The elevation of reason derived from a kind of Lockeanism, to the detriment of those loyalties of family and community, has been most prominent here in the United States, and I hope that Dr. Hancock can enlighten us today on a way out of that dilemma.

Please join me in welcoming Dr. Hancock to the podium.