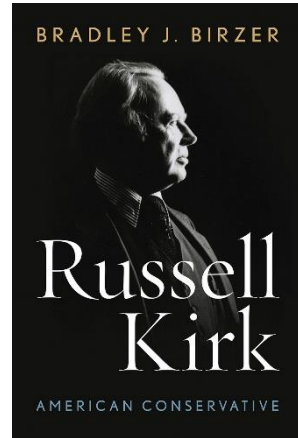


Bradley J. Birzer. *Russell Kirk: American Conservative.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. Illustrated. Pp. 574. ISBN 978-0-8131-7527-0. Paperback \$29.95.

The name of the iconic conservative man of letters Russell Kirk (1918-94) is often invoked as the conservative antithesis of libertarianism. This assessment of Kirk is generally made in direct response his two short essays critiquing libertarianism — “Libertarians: Chirping Sectarians” (1981, originally published in *Modern Age*) and “A Dispassionate Assessment of Libertarians” (a 1988 Heritage Foundation lecture). Kirk’s descriptions of libertarianism and libertarians in those essays is both problematic and instructive. “Libertarians” is far better known and more acerbic in tone. The essay asserts that, apart from their mutual opposition to “the totalist state” and “the heavy hand of bureaucracy,” conservatives and libertarians can have “nothing” in common. Calling “genuine libertarians” “metaphysically mad” and concluding with a gratuitous swipe at Murray Rothbard, Kirk’s 1981 essay paints libertarianism with broad brush strokes, failing to acknowledge the various stripes and nuances within the broader libertarian identity.

But in “A Dispassionate Assessment” —not published until 1993— Kirk is initially more cautious. He explicitly distinguishes “ideological libertarians” from “descendants of classical liberals” who call themselves libertarians but “are simply conservatives under another name.” Kirk “approves of” the latter. Regarding “ideological libertarians,” Kirk— whose increasing sympathy with Christianity culminated in his 1963 conversion to Roman Catholicism — repeats the basic criticisms of his 1981 essay, highlighting (among other things) that libertarians recognize “no transcendent moral order” and that (similar to Marxists) they “generally



believe that human nature is good, though damaged by certain social institutions” and pursue an “illusory way to Utopia.” Conservatives, on the other hand, recognize that human nature “is irremediably flawed.”

Paradoxically, readers of *CLR* might argue that Kirk’s essays misrepresent libertarianism even as they find at least some agreement with Kirk’s critiques of certain tenets of a brand of libertarianism that Christian libertarians would disavow. Indeed, at least some self-proclaimed Christian libertarians would comfortably fit among the aforementioned descendants of classical liberals of whom Kirk approved.

That being said, *CLR* readers will find much of interest in Bradley Birzer’s magisterial biography *Russell Kirk: American Conservative*. (Birzer himself is both an active Catholic and a self-identifying libertarian.) Indeed, Birzer’s presentation of Kirk suggests that Christian libertarians ought view Kirk not as an ideological nemesis but rather an ally. Drawing profusely from Kirk’s voluminous published writings and unpublished letters, Birzer’s award-winning biography has already received numerous positive reviews, and I need not repeat their well-founded praises here. Rather, I will discuss how in various chapters Birzer effectively engages Kirk’s religious understanding and Kirk’s lifelong commitment to liberty, the two subjects being inevitably intertwined throughout.

Chapter 1 describes Kirk’s most foundational youthful influences, influences that suggest the origins of Kirk’s enduring intellectual and spiritual concerns. Raised in Plymouth, Michigan in a household that practiced Christian ethics but not religious devotion, Kirk was mentored by his maternal grandfather, a descendent of Puritans whose virtues Kirk described as “more Stoic than Christian” (p. 27). Happily educated in a public school before the influence of Dewey and progressivism became ubiquitous, the boy Kirk read voraciously the fiction of Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, all of whom Kirk would later highlight in his most important book, *The Conservative Mind* (*TCM*, 1953). The writers who most influenced Kirk during his undergraduate studies at Michigan State University were the humanists

Irving Babbit and Paul Elmer More, discussed at length in *TCM*. Not religious but rather championing and embodying the thought and ethics of Socrates, Plato, and Buddha, Babbit emphasized gaining individual virtue and liberty through “rigorous self-denial and discipline” (p. 32). More’s spiritual journey—moving from a humanism in league with Babbit’s to an eventual embrace of orthodox Christianity—resembled Kirk’s, and Kirk later affirmed that More’s writings allowed him “to bring Christian hope to his Platonic and Stoic longings” (p. 42). Going on to earn an M.A. at Duke, Kirk’s master’s thesis—which later became Kirk’s first book—defended the principles of the lesser-known American founder John Randolph of Roanoke, whose agrarian, Stoic, Christian, conservative, and libertarian (all adjectives Kirk used to describe Randolph) perspective largely mirrored Kirk’s own. Upon his return to Michigan in 1941, he eventually found himself, after the U.S.’s declaration of war against the Axis powers, working in the payroll department of the Ford auto plant. The monotony of this position elicited Kirk’s disdain of “the monstrosity Ford had built,” even as Kirk reserved his greatest animosity for U.S. government that Kirk called the “Gestapo” (p. 55).

Chapter 2 chronicles Kirk’s conscripted Army service during World War II, during which Kirk’s views became increasingly libertarian. Stationed in the Utah desert, Kirk read voluminously ancient Stoic writers whose ideas Kirk found profoundly similar to the Christianity he would begin earnestly pursuing the next decade. During this time Kirk also found himself increasingly hostile toward the U.S. government and its domestic allies. Kirk “viewed the government, labor, and corporations as working together to homogenize the world and remake it in the image of the United States,” and his letters and diary entries articulated both his hatred for the New Deal and his belief that Roosevelt and his minions “were worse than Nazis because they practiced oppression under the guise of liberty and equality” (p. 67). In 1945 Kirk also expressed horror at the atomic bombings of Japan, an event he considered “the logical consequence of progressivism,” a doctrine that inevitably leads to

“dehumanization” (p. 86). Also during the 1940s Kirk corresponded with the libertarians and individualists Albert Jay Nock and Isabel Patterson, whose respective 1943 publications *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* and *The God of the Machine* influenced Kirk deeply. Patterson was especially prominent in Kirk’s 1946 article against conscription. Birzer astutely observes that both Nock and Patterson (with whom Kirk had a falling out in 1951) are discussed favorably in Kirk’s first edition of *TCM* but less so in later editions. Indeed, in his 1954 second edition and subsequent editions, Patterson is omitted, and Kirk does not mention her in his posthumous 1995 autobiography *The Sword of the Imagination*. Nock is also increasingly “marginalized” in later editions of *TCM* (p. 71), although Kirk’s enduring affection for his onetime mentor continued to occasionally manifest itself, particularly in Kirk’s introduction to a 1982 edition of Nock’s biography of Thomas Jefferson.

Chapter 3 observes that Kirk’s intellectual movement away from libertarianism coincided with his doctoral studies at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where he discovered and embraced the writings of Edmund Burke, the author most influential to *TCM*—Kirk’s dissertation. Kirk’s embrace of Burke also coincided with Kirk’s increasingly Christian understanding of humanity and indeed reality:

A real understanding of the being known as “man,” he argued, presumably echoing Burke, must recognize “that original sin and aspiration toward the good” are equally parts of “God’s design.” To know one’s place in the order of existence is to embrace the classical and Christian notions of justice. But one can recognize the good in humans only by first recognizing that “sin is a terribly real and demonstrable fact, the consequence of our depravity.” (p. 108)

Kirk also believed that a rejection of the tested classical and Christian tradition in favor of a new understanding of justice and reality based on reason would inevitably lead to human isolation and tyranny: “To ignore this truth or, equally bad, to dismiss or mock it as many eighteenth-

century Enlightenment thinkers had, Kirk argued, 'leads to a wasteland of withered hopes and crying loneliness, empty of God and man.' Following Plato's argument from *The Republic* through the mind of Burke, he claimed that once reason so called has replaced tradition, the demagogue will almost certainly claim his place as society's ruler" (p. 109), exemplified by Robespierre and, more recently, in Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini. Significantly, in a 1953 letter to his publisher, Kirk referred to his libertarian views as something he had "pass[ed] beyond" (p. 83).

Clearly Kirk's acceptance of the Christian tradition, mediated through Burke, made Kirk skeptical and indeed fearful of libertarian thinking, derived as it was from the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century liberalism apart from the transcendent Christian truths and its related virtues and traditions that, by contrast, formed the foundation of the American republic. Birzer's chapter 4 discusses Kirk's increasing identification with Christian humanism. Noting Kirk's 1954 dismissal of liberalism as "a dead thing" (p. 136), Birzer writes that "Kirk saw liberalism as little more than a transitional stage between Christianity and totalitarianism" (p. 137). Quite simply, liberalism derived its defense of liberty from Christianity even as it became lifeless to defend liberty and ultimately undercut liberty itself. Kirk's critique of reason-based liberalism also extended to matters of economic liberty. Writing a year after his 1957 debate with F. A. Hayek, Kirk suggests that Hayek's reasoning is based on "the assumption that if only a perfectly free market economy could be established, all social problems would solve themselves in short order" — an idea that ignores the reality of both human fallibility and humanity's tendency to be unreasonable, and indeed fails to recognize the inextricable connection between the economic, the political, and the moral (p. 159). But Kirk's opposition to Hayek's ideas did not make him an enemy of the free market. Rather, Kirk enthusiastically embraced the writings of the free market Christian humanist economist Wilhelm Röpke, whose vision for a humane economy emphasized a Christian understanding of human nature and humanity's relationship to

God. Kirk's support of Röpke again manifested Kirk's belief that liberty could best be defended from the foundation of Christian tradition.

Similarly, chapter 7 notes that even Kirk's efforts as an unofficial advisor to Senator and eventual 1964 Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater were grounded in Kirk's belief that Goldwater shunned "ideologues" and "ideology," rather "taking his 'first principles of morality' from the Judeo-Christian tradition and his 'first principles of politics' from the U.S. Constitution" (p. 274); moreover, Kirk sought "to infuse Christian humanism into Goldwater's ideas" (p. 277). But Kirk's association with Goldwater—not to mention with William F. Buckley's *National Review*—also suggested a Kirk whose views on foreign policy had grown "increasingly hawkish" during the 1960s. In a 1962 speech that Kirk wrote, Goldwater spoke words that reflected "many conservatives' anti-Communist hawkishness at the time" (p. 279). Warning against pacifism, Goldwater's speech supported the development of the atom bomb, implicitly defending the 1945 bombings of Japan that Kirk once cursed.

In any event, in 1963 Kirk was effectively pushed out of his advisory role and his influence on Goldwater decreased dramatically, and Kirk eventually commenced in writing his second most important book, *The Roots of American Order* (1974). The book was a hefty tome that, following the pattern of T. S. Eliot and Eric Voegelin, "rooted the American order in the symbolic cities of Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London" (p. 265). Herein, Kirk wrote that "the most valuable thing in our common inheritance is the Christian religion" (p. 266). By contrast, the greatness of ancient Greece, despite Plato and Aristotle, "failed because as a culture it never really understood the concept of a transcendent, a failure that led to the worship of individual city-states above all things. Their sin was the sin of statism and often the glorification of humans as the highest end of the universe" (p. 266). Here Kirk restates his ubiquitous concern regarding the loss of liberty that must result from rejection of transcendent truth.

Chapter 9 discusses Kirk's ideological and sometimes personal quarrels with both libertarians and neoconservatives. Birzer writes that

Kirk's arguments against libertarians could be "at once detailed and scholarly as well as vindictive and savage" (p. 325). Significantly, Kirk enjoyed friendships and worked closely with prominent libertarians Peter Stanlis and Lawrence Reed, to say nothing of his aforementioned study of the "aristocratic libertarian" Randolph of Roanoke (p. 326). But all these men, we should note, shared Kirk's Christian convictions. By contrast, Kirk believed that "little if anything separated the utilitarian libertarian from the wanton liberal" (p. 326). Kirk's differences with the libertarian fusionist Frank Meyer turned bitter, with Meyer savaging Kirk in a 1955 article in the *Freeman*, calling Kirk's writings "another guise for the collectivist spirit of the age" (p. 327), whereas Kirk himself antagonized Meyer in the pages of *National Review*, for which Meyer also wrote. One may sadly note the irony of the conflict between Kirk and a man whose advocacy of the fusion between traditionalism and libertarianism had perhaps more in common with Kirk's views than Kirk would admit. Adding to this sad irony is the formerly secular Meyer's conversion to Roman Catholicism shortly before his untimely 1972 death. Kirk also clashed with Murray Rothbard. Curiously, however, the two reached a rapprochement in the early 1990s with their mutual opposition to the Iraq Conflict and support of Patrick Buchanan's run for president.

Kirk's positions on these matters coincided with the "increasingly anti-militaristic and anti-interventionist" views of his later years (p. 354). In *The Sword of the Imagination*, Kirk denies that "a single American war—even the war for independence—had been absolutely necessary" (p. 354). He lambasted neoconservative foreign policy and argued that George H. W. Bush, whose 1988 candidacy Kirk supported, was continuing a destructive interventionist progressivism in the vein of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson. Kirk lamented that Bush's "'new world order' would impose a 'religion of democracy'" that would waste resources and incite hatred against the U. S. Warning against imposing "democratic capitalism," Kirk reminded his audiences that

“[c]apitalism was an economic system, not an originator of virtue or vice that had a transcendent source” (p. 356).

Birzer’s wide-ranging book implicitly analyzes Kirk’s thought with relation to libertarianism, and it invites a libertarian, and certainly a Christian libertarian, reevaluation of Kirk’s writings and ideas. The work pays special attention to how Kirk grounded his views on individual liberty and the state on his convictions regarding the transcendent truths of Christianity, including his regular emphases on human imperfection and sinfulness. Indeed, if a legitimate criticism of Kirk’s critiques of libertarianism is that they are guilty of hasty generalizations that suggest an inadequate understanding and appreciation of broader strains of libertarian thought, perhaps an equally valid criticism of libertarians is that they haven’t read Kirk’s writings closely enough, if at all. (Indeed, Kirk reasonably speculated that Meyer had never actually read *TCM*.) For Christian libertarians especially, such a neglect would be indeed unfortunate, for Kirk’s writings offer a well-developed rationale, based on Christian tradition, for limited government, the illegitimacy of war and imperialistic adventures, a critique of socialism, and the ever-present threat of totalitarianism in the guise of democracy at home. Birzer offers a generous and expertly presented discussion of Kirk’s various writings within a context that provides the Christian libertarian a profitable perspective on these writings. Birzer inspires a deeper investigation of Kirk’s works, an investigation that will not elicit full agreement throughout but will, I dare suggest, call to mind Jesus’ admonition that “the one who is not against us is for us.”

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