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## The Conservative Mind of Russell Kirk

Lee Edwards, PhD



In the early 1950s, intellectuals on both the Right and the Left who were at odds about almost everything, agreed on one thing: Conservatism as a defined philosophy and movement scarcely existed in America.

Respected intellectuals on the Left such as Lionel Trilling argued that modern “liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” in the United States.<sup>1</sup> While conceding that a conservative or a reactionary impulse existed here and there, Trilling said that with few exceptions, conservatives expressed themselves not in ideas but in “irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.”<sup>2</sup>

Harvard historian Louis Hartz declared that “we have never had a real conservative tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Others, like Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., were pleased to foretell the political future of America: “There seems no inherent obstacle to the gradual advance of socialism in the United States through a series of New Deals.”<sup>4</sup>

On the surface, these liberal observations seemed true, especially since Progressivism and Darwinism, imported in the 19th century from Europe, had

come to dominate American intellectual life, diminishing the influence of all other traditions of thought.

Thinkers on the Right lamented the condition of conservatism and the seemingly irresistible tides against it. To many, like F. A. Hayek, it seemed as if the whole world was turning Left. Seeking support for his new conservative magazine, William F. Buckley Jr. conceded that the Left easily dominated the realm of ideas in America and that “the few spasmodic victories conservatives are winning are aimless, uncoordinated, and inconclusive.”<sup>5</sup>

There the matter might have rested, with liberals gloating and conservatives lamenting, except for the publication of a remarkable book by a young assistant professor of history at a Michigan “cow college.” The unknown historian was Russell Kirk; the book was *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (1953); and modern American conservatism has never been the same.

All serious political movements, Kirk argued, draw their strength from an earlier body of belief: 20th century socialism from Karl Marx a century earlier, radical liberalism from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Kirk’s “source of wisdom” for modern conservatism was the 18th century British politician and philosopher Edmund Burke.<sup>6</sup> *The Conservative Mind* described the existence of a coherent, connected tradition of conservative thinking, going back at least two hundred years.

The modern understanding that the “great problem of politics” is the maintenance of a balance

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/MAPT-13>

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## Russell Kirk

### *Born*

October 19, 1918, in Plymouth, Michigan.

### *Education*

Bachelor of Arts, Michigan State College (now Michigan State University), 1940.

Master of Arts, Duke University, 1941.

Doctor of Letters, University of St. Andrews in Scotland, 1952.

### *Religion*

Born into a non-practicing Protestant family; converted to Catholicism as an adult.

### *Family*

Married Annette Courtemanche in 1964. Together they had four daughters:

Monica Rachel, Cecilia Abigail, Felicia Annette, and Andrea Seton.

### *Highlights*

- Served in the U.S. Army during World War II, attaining the rank of staff sergeant.
- Senior Fellow, American Council of Learned Societies (1950–1951).
- Published *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (1953).
- Guggenheim Fellow (1956).
- Founded *Modern Age* (1957) and *The University Bookman* (1960).
- Distinguished Fellow, The Heritage Foundation (1978–1994).
- Constitutional Fellowship, National Endowment for the Humanities (1985).
- Honorary doctorates conferred by 12 American colleges and universities.
- Received the Presidential Citizens Medal from Ronald Reagan (1989).
- Published 26 non-fiction books, 9 volumes of novels and short stories, and hundreds of essays.

### *Died*

April 29, 1994, at his home in Mecosta, Michigan.

### *Notable Quote*

“We cannot make a heaven on earth, though we may make a hell.” (*The Essence of Conservatism*, 1957.)

between freedom and order begins with Edmund Burke.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Kirk hoped that *The Conservative Mind* would “open eyes to a central concept of politics, not born yesterday, by which the claims of freedom and the claims of order may be kept in a healthy tension.”<sup>8</sup> Fearing that the Left was prepared to exchange order for liberty, Kirk made the defense of ordered liberty his lifelong intellectual mission.

*The Conservative Mind* altered the popular political landscape as well. Popular praise from the Left as well as the Right was nearly unanimous. *Time* magazine, for example, devoted its entire book section to *The Conservative Mind*, calling it a “wonder of conservative intuition and prophecy.”<sup>9</sup>

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Furthermore, many conservatives who would shape American politics rethought their understanding of conservatism. William Buckley, for example, abandoned the term “individualist” (from his 1951 book, *God and Man at Yale*) and adopted “conservative” in 1955 when describing himself and his new magazine, *National Review*. Buckley consciously sought to build a coalition of traditional conservatives, libertarians, and anti-Communists under the rubric of “conservatism,” which he knew would not be possible under an “individualist” banner.

Similarly, when Barry Goldwater first ran for the U.S. Senate in 1952, he called himself a Jeffersonian Republican and even a progressive, but not a conser-

vative. By the time of his 1958 reelection bid, having absorbed Kirk’s thought, he proclaimed his conservatism, and two years later, he titled his best-selling political manifesto *The Conscience of a Conservative*.

### Life

Born on October 19, 1918, in the town of Plymouth, Michigan, some 20 miles from Detroit, Russell Amos Kirk grew up in a two-story bungalow next to the railway station. “Day and night, the steam locomotives puffed and hooted a few rods distant.”<sup>10</sup> His father, Russell Andrew Kirk, was a railroad engineer who left school before the sixth grade and limited his reading to newspapers. His mother, Marjorie Pierce Kirk, had been a waitress at her father’s railroad restaurant and loved to read poetry, often to her young son.

However, it was Frank Pierce, Russell’s grandfather, who did more than any other to form the young Kirk’s mind and character. Self-educated and well-read, Frank Pierce filled his living room with sets of Thomas Babington Macaulay, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, and Mark Twain. On his library table were copies of the leading journals of the day, *The Bookman* and *The Literary Digest*. Russell had ready access to all of them. Grandfather and grandson would often go for long walks discussing life, the idea of Progress, and the desire for immortality, among other things.<sup>11</sup>

Young Russell’s imagination was also shaped by the visits he made with his mother to the village of Mecosta, located in Michigan’s “stump country.” There lived his great-grandmother, Estella Russell Johnson (widow of Amos), with her two spinster daughters, Norma and Frances, who introduced Russell to the twilight world of séances and spiritualism. In that “haunted” house at Mecosta, which

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1. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), p. ix.
  2. Ibid.
  3. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1955), p. 57.
  4. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Future of Socialism, III—The Perspective Now,” *Partisan Review*, May–June 1947.
  5. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 140.
  6. Ibid., p. 147.
  7. Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 148.
  8. Ibid., p. 146.
  9. Ibid., p. 149.
  10. Ibid., p. 2.
  11. Ibid., p. 10.
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would later become the home of the mature Kirk and his wife Annette and their four daughters, Russell spent his boyhood summers. Estella Johnson provided another bookish model: She read constantly, Willa Cather being her favorite author.

In his memoirs, Kirk summed up his early years as “a childhood of wonder and love, mystery and familial memories.” He never knew the tyranny of the “age-peer group,” having always “the counsel and companionship of family, especially of [my] grandfather.”<sup>12</sup>

This domestic literary education meant that by the time Kirk entered junior high school, he could write well and seriously. He later speculated that he probably acquired the skill through his critical study of how Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Sir Walter Scott, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and other novelists “went about their business.”<sup>13</sup> At 16, he won first prize in a national essay competition sponsored by *Scholastic*, the American high school weekly. His essay “Mementos” used remarkably mature language to describe the social and historical significance of both sides of his family.

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After graduating from Plymouth High School in 1936, Kirk applied for and won a scholarship to Michigan State College, a land-grant institution best known for its agricultural instruction. Despite the college’s bovine indifference to the liberal arts, Kirk managed, through certain professors “possessed of learning and common sense” and his own reading, to obtain a tolerable education.<sup>14</sup>

Because his scholarship covered only tuition (then \$90 a year) and his parents could not help, he entered every possible writing contest to make ends meet—an independent man of letters in the making. *The South Atlantic Journal* published his first

serious political essay, “Jefferson and the Faithless,” addressing him as “Dr. Kirk” on the assumption that so accomplished a writer must be a professor.

In 1940, he graduated from Michigan State with a Bachelor of Arts degree. The Roosevelt Recession was still on, and World War II was engulfing Europe. What place was there for liberal arts in an exploding world? Graduate study was a possibility, and Kirk applied to Penn State and Duke University, which offered him an assistantship in history and a stipend of \$200, “wealth beyond the dreams of avarice” for the impecunious young scholar.<sup>15</sup>

Amid the tall Gothic buildings of Duke and under the guidance of two leading professors in Southern history and literature, Russell Kirk wrote his master’s thesis on John Randolph of Roanoke, one of the most eloquent and conservative Members of Congress in the 19th century. Randolph, wrote Kirk, was “devoted to states’ rights, the agricultural interest, economy in government, and freedom from foreign entanglements.” He cherished personal liberty and perceived slavery “to be a cancer.” In a heated debate over a new Virginia constitution, Randolph argued: “This was a great cardinal principle that should govern all wise statesmen—never without the strongest necessity to disturb that which was at rest.”<sup>16</sup>

While at Duke, Kirk read extensively about the South and traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, and Richmond, Virginia, encountering a society he liked far better than that of industrialized Detroit. In later years, he would often call himself a Northern Agrarian, inspired by the Southern Agrarians who had contributed to the famous 1930 anthology *I’ll Take My Stand*.

Back in Michigan and uncertain as to his future, Kirk (like millions of other young Americans) found his future decided by Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor. In the summer of 1942, the Army came calling and sent him to the Dugway Proving Ground in the Great Salt Lake Desert, where he spent the next three years typing and keeping track of classified documents.

Never overtaxed by his military responsibilities, Sergeant Kirk wrote essays and short stories at his

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12. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

16. Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1978), pp. 217–219.

desk, with no one questioning what he was doing because he was in charge of secret documents. There was plenty of time to read the classics: Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca. He also read *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* by Albert Jay Nock and started a correspondence with the witty libertarian.

A shadow of faith began to stir within the nominally agnostic young scholar-soldier. “By what authority,” Kirk asked himself, “did [he] presume to doubt?” If the minds of Edmund Burke and Samuel Johnson, Kirk speculated, “gave credence to revealed religion, must not [he] in mere toleration open his mind to the possibility of religion’s truth?”<sup>17</sup>

Discharged from the Army in 1946, Kirk returned to Michigan, where fate in the guise of a former history professor again intervened. “What are you doing these days?” asked Professor Harry Kimber. “Nothing, sir,” replied Russell. Within 24 hours, Russell Kirk had agreed to teach history at Michigan State College to the incoming veterans.<sup>18</sup>

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## **Kirk uncovered what others on the Right had passed over: Since its founding, America had possessed a conservative patrimony that was the equal of the liberalism that was said to be the “only” intellectual tradition in America.**

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For the next two years, Kirk taught “the history of civilization” to mostly indifferent students; started the Red Cedar Bookshop with a friend; and founded the George Ade Society, named after the Indiana humorist, which became an intellectual oasis for him and friends in the East Lansing desert. But he had traveled too far and read too much to be satisfied with life at what he called Behemoth University.

After considering and rejecting the possibility of law school—he lacked the necessary funds—Kirk decided that he would continue his studies not at an American graduate school, considering them “pedantic, bureaucratic, and given to excessive super-

vision,” but at the oldest university in Scotland, St. Andrews University.<sup>19</sup> With a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies and the benefits of the G.I. Bill, Russell Kirk enrolled at St. Andrews in September 1948 as a PhD candidate. He would be the first American ever to receive the Doctor of Letters degree from that university.

From the autumn of 1948 through the spring of 1952, Kirk wrote the chapters of the book that would become *The Conservative Mind*. In the beginning of his studies, he declared his intention to write a dissertation about the conservative thought of Edmund Burke, whom he had admired since his days at Duke, but as he read and wrote, he encountered an impressive company of British and American conservatives about whom little had been written in a systematic way.

The need for a serious book about the conservative tradition in Britain and America seemed so obvious that Kirk assumed such a work would soon appear, but it never did, so he undertook the task of connecting the thought of a philosophically consistent group of statesmen, novelists, philosophers, and poets. He uncovered what others on the Right had passed over: Since its founding, America had possessed a conservative patrimony that was the equal of the liberalism said to be the “only” intellectual tradition in America. While conservatives from John Adams to Nathaniel Hawthorne to Orestes Brownson to T. S. Eliot seemed to be acting in splendid isolation from each other, they were in fact joined in their preference “for the old and tried against the new and untried.”<sup>20</sup> It took Kirk four years of research and writing to connect the dots of the seemingly disparate thinkers and writers.

Emboldened by the critical and financial success of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk happily resigned from the faculty of Michigan State and moved permanently to the family home in Mecosta. Although he occasionally accepted a teaching post of short duration, he remained an independent man of letters until his death in 1994 at the age of 75. He appeared on hundreds of college campuses, lecturing on conservatism and debating prominent liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; Norman Thomas, the peren-

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17. Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, pp. 67–68.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

nial Socialist Party candidate for president; and Senators Hubert H. Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy.

He published some 25 books, including *Eliot and His Age*, a literary biography of T. S. Eliot, and *The Roots of American Order*, an intellectual history of America told through the tales of five cities: Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, London, and Philadelphia. He emphasized the importance of poetry for its ability to inspire the imagination and cultivate sensibilities in readers that were impossible to conceive through rational argument alone. Believing that history was moved principally by great men and great thinkers rather than by abstract forces, he organized both *The Conservative Mind* and *The Roots of American Order* around the contributions of individuals and their shaping of society. In the latter work, to the surprise of Southern Agrarians, he praised Lincoln for preserving the Union.

Not merely a scholar, but an activist, Kirk founded two conservative journals, *Modern Age* and the *University Bookman*, which continue to publish some of the most insightful conservative writing in America. His forays into politics included campaigning for Barry Goldwater in 1964 (even ghostwriting a 1962 Goldwater speech at Notre Dame); counseling a pessimistic President Richard Nixon in 1972 to read T. S. Eliot's *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*; and serving in 1992 as general chairman of paleoconservative Patrick Buchanan's campaign in the Michigan Republican primary. In 1989, he received the Presidential Citizens Medal, the nation's second highest honor for its citizens, from a President he much admired—Ronald Reagan.

At the age of 45, Russell Kirk fell in love with and married the devoutly Roman Catholic Annette Courtemanche, 20 years his junior. For some years, he had thought about converting to Catholicism, attracted by its 2,000-year-old history and intellectual progeny. He was baptized and received into the Church prior to his wedding. Russell and Annette would have four daughters: Monica Rachel, Cecilia Abigail, Felicia Annette, and Andrea Seton.

The financial demands of marriage and family made him increase his literary production and lectures while continuing to write a syndicated five-times-a-week newspaper column and a column on

higher education that appeared in *National Review* for a quarter of a century. Many of his essays and talks—more than 50 of them at The Heritage Foundation, making him the think tank's most frequent lecturer—have been collected in such volumes as *Enemies of the Permanent Things* and *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written on the Sky*.

The doors of his residence, Piety Hill—dubbed the “Last Homely House” by Kirk, borrowing from J. R. R. Tolkien—were ever open to “Vietnamese families, waves of Ethiopians, Poles fled from martial law, freedom-seeking Croats, students disgusted with their colleges, and a diversity of waifs and strays from Progress.”<sup>21</sup> Also in residence were unwed mothers, a reflection of the Kirks' strong pro-life beliefs.

Of all the denizens, the “most pathetic, gigantic, irritating, and (after his fashion) lovable” was the white-haired, blue-eyed burglar-hobo Clinton Wallace, who had spent most of his life in prisons or tramping the roads. He lived with the Kirks, off and on, for six years and is buried in the family plot next to Kirk.

### ***The Conservative Mind***

Kirk's trailblazing book was a feat of scholarship—a synthesis of the ideas of leading British and American conservatives of the late 18th century through the mid-20th century, including Edmund Burke, John Adams, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Benjamin Disraeli, Orestes Brownson, Paul Elmer More, George Santayana, and T. S. Eliot. *The Conservative Mind* demonstrates convincingly that there had been a significant conservative tradition in America since the founding of the Republic.

First among these redoubtable writers and thinkers in Kirk's mind was the Anglo-Irish parliamentarian and political philosopher Edmund Burke, of whom Kirk wrote: “Burke's ideas did more than establish islands in the sea of radical thought: they provided the defenses of conservatism, on a great scale, that still stand and are not liable to fall in our time.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, *The Conservative Mind* challenged every liberal nostrum from the idea of human perfectibility to economic egalitarianism and offered conservatism as a prudential alternative to modernity

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21. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

22. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 61.

run amok. The intelligent conservative, Kirk wrote, knows that many of the popular slogans of the past 150 years are fallacies, but “he does not intend to substitute for them the twentieth century fallacies of centralization, standardization, plebiscitary democracy, and the cult of the omniscient secular social planner.”<sup>23</sup> The book carefully examined all plausible political and social alternatives and systematically dismissed them.

Third, Kirk argued that conservatism as a philosophy is based on six canons, condensed here:

1. A divine intent as well as personal conscience rules society, “forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead.”
2. Traditional life, as distinguished from “the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism ... of most radical systems,” is filled with variety and mystery.
3. Civilized society requires orders and hierarchy—“if a people destroy natural distinctions among men, presently Buonaparte fills the vacuum.”
4. “Property and freedom are inseparably connected.”
5. “Man must put a control upon his will and his appetite,” knowing that he is governed more by emotion than reason.
6. “Society must alter ... but Providence is the proper instrument for change.”<sup>24</sup>

A final reason for the continuing appeal of *The Conservative Mind* to conservatives was its surprising yet measured concluding optimism. While not denying that Progressivism in America was far advanced, Kirk argued that Americans possessed those things that made a conservative counterrevolution possible: “the best written constitution in the world, the safest division of powers, the widest diffusion of property, the strongest sense of common interest, the most prosperous economy, an elevated

intellectual and moral tradition, and a spirit of self-reliance unequalled in modern times.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, by providing a penetrating critique of modern liberalism, he freed conservatives from despairing that liberal dominance was inevitable: “[The] consolidation of power and uniformity of existence are not irresistible forces beyond the control of will and reason,” he insisted. “Men have it in their power to preserve and strengthen voluntary associations, local enterprises, and local and private rights.”<sup>26</sup> Men, in other words, are not beings controlled by impersonal, abstract forces.

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### **The Conservative Mind challenged every liberal nostrum from the idea of human perfectibility to economic egalitarianism and offered conservatism as a prudential alternative to modernity run amok.**

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Kirk laid down an outline for rejuvenating and preserving a conservative social order. First, conservatives, he said, need to revive the classical definition of justice: “to every man the things which are his due.” This, Kirk believed, should be the animating moral principle of a people. Moreover, conservatives need to remind themselves that to love our country, “our country ought to be lovely.” In addition, conservatives need to teach themselves and their nation “humility in the performance” of their duties, to realize that “diversity is better than uniformity” and that the task of the United States “as the greatest of powers” is “the preservation of justice and peace.” The last endeavor, Kirk wrote, may be the most difficult undertaking because “national vanity is as difficult for states to subdue as spiritual pride is rebellious within man.”<sup>27</sup>

Once asked to evaluate the impact of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk replied that through a kind of “intellectual osmosis” and a popularization by the mass media, the work helped to alter “the climate

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23. *Ibid.*, p. 443.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 431–432.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 429.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 436.

of political and moral opinion” in America.<sup>28</sup> It has never been out of print.

### **Lasting Influence**

How important has Russell Kirk been to the modern conservative movement? You can no more separate the two than you can separate the vine from the branches. Among the many who have declared their indebtedness is Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who said, “No one had a greater role in the formation of American conservative thought. And no more courteous (indeed, courtly) a gentleman, nor one devoted to the United States of America, could be imagined.”<sup>29</sup>

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**George Will once remarked that before there was Ronald Reagan, there was Barry Goldwater; and before there was Barry Goldwater, there was National Review; and before there was National Review, there was Bill Buckley. One might add that before there was Bill Buckley, there was Russell Kirk.**

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In summing up American conservatism, George Will once remarked that before there was Ronald Reagan, there was Barry Goldwater; and before there was Barry Goldwater, there was *National Review*; and before there was *National Review*, there was Bill Buckley. One might add that before there

was Bill Buckley, there was Russell Kirk. In order to carry forth his legacy, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute has trained generations of conservatives in seminars on Kirk’s thought. Several thousand young and not-so-young people have benefitted from these programs over the years.

In the last chapter of his last book, *The Sword of Imagination*, Russell Kirk, who had received honors and achieved fame (although not fortune) beyond the reach of most men, asked a fundamental question: “Is life worth living?” He suggested that in our age, many would shrug or shake their heads. Contrary to this modern atmosphere of moral ambiguity, Kirk offered an alternative, writing that life “ought to be lived with honor, charity, and prudence.”<sup>30</sup>

Looking back over his life at the age of 75, Kirk saw that he had sought three ends: to conserve “a patrimony of order, justice, and freedom” and a respectable moral order; to lead “a life of decent independence,” necessary for kindling a rigorous mind and making his voice heard; and “to marry for love” and rear children who “would come to know that the service of God is perfect freedom.”<sup>31</sup>

By the grace of God and his own talents, Russell Kirk achieved all three goals and provided a *raison d’être* for those who reject the modern existential argument that life is without meaning and who joyfully honor the permanent things.

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28. Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, p. 152.

29. Antonin Scalia, Letter to Annette Kirk, October 24, 2003, Russell Kirk Center, *Permanent Things*, No. 16 (Spring 2010), p. 2, [http://www.kirkcenter.org/images/uploads/Kirk\\_Newsletter\\_Spring\\_2010.pdf](http://www.kirkcenter.org/images/uploads/Kirk_Newsletter_Spring_2010.pdf) (accessed September 22, 2014).

30. Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, p. 473.

31. *Ibid.*

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