

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

The Conservative Mind

Guest: Brad Birzer

December 2

Brad Birzer is Professor of History and Russell Amos Kirk Chair in American Studies at Hillsdale College.

WOODS: Brad, I much respect your work, and I was particularly intrigued by this piece that you wrote on Russell Kirk on the book *The Conservative Mind*.

You know, even though I have my own criticisms of Kirk, I feel like the conservative movement would be in a lot better shape if people read him—if they read anything that even approached the level at which Kirk wrote. It would be a massive improvement.

But what you focus on here particularly are all the different editions of his classic book, *The Conservative Mind*. I didn't realize that book had sold over a million copies during his lifetime, which is an incredible, almost impossible, achievement with a book of this level.

First of all, what do you attribute that to?

BIRZER: Well, it came at the right time. And, of course, it was so beautifully written. I think there were so many people searching for some kind of heritage, just something, right after World War II. Plus, you've got a revival of Burke and de Tocqueville going on at the time. Hayek had already made his splash in 1944.

So, I think a lot of Americans wanted an American voice. They were happy to have Hayek, but they wanted to hear somebody home-grown. They wanted to know where America's position was. I think, especially vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. And I think Kirk provided that in a way that he didn't expect, and probably in a way that a lot of people in the American public didn't expect at all.

One thing that we often forget, Tom, is that Kirk was actually a real celebrity for about ten years after the Goldwater fiasco had calmed down a lot. But really, for the ten years after *The Conservative Mind*, anybody who was anybody—left, right, it didn't matter—turned to Kirk as the voice of conservatism. So, he really did have an incredible status, especially considering he was only thirty-five when that book was published, and not married. Young guy. Had quit, very publicly, Michigan State. So, a very interesting figure, but certainly a celebrity.

WOODS: Now, when that book first came out—1953?

BIRZER: Yes, that's right, in May of 1953.

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

WOODS: Okay. When that book first came out, the subtitle was *From Burke to Santayana*. Then later, it became *From Burke to Eliot*. Kirk had built up quite a friendship with T.S. Eliot. What can you tell us about his relationship with T.S. Eliot?

BIRZER: Let me backtrack just a little bit, Tom.

He had really disliked Eliot's work as a young man, and had written his first papers in college against Eliot. And in his own personal diaries and letters, Eliot was—at least up until about 1952—always a buffoon in Kirk's writings, and Kirk used him as the great big fraud that had been perpetrated against Western culture.

Then, Kirk and Eliot actually appeared together in The University of Chicago journal, *Measure*, in 1950. Eliot was writing on education—liberal education—and Kirk was pretty taken with that. It was after he read that article that he started reading some of Eliot's scholarly works, especially his cultural criticism. Then the two ended up meeting one another in the summer of 1953, after *The Conservative Mind*, and Eliot had become as big a fan of Kirk as Kirk had of Eliot.

The two really do shape each other rather dramatically over the rest of Eliot's life. He dies in January of '65. He refers to Kirk in his own work. A lot of his own work after that is very Kirkian. He's the one who asked Kirk to write that—I think probably Kirk's either first or second great book—his life of Eliot, *Eliot and His Age*. It was Eliot who asked him to write that originally. So they really did have a strong influence on one another.

One thing I wanted to say, Tom, about this. It's such a great question because Eliot becomes part of the subtitle with the third edition of *The Conservative Mind*. But the emphasis that Kirk puts on him really doesn't change in the text itself. Eliot was there from version one on, and he becomes more prominent, but he's always there, just not in the title right away.

WOODS: Oh, I didn't realize that. I thought that maybe he had added more material in the later books, and that's where—

BIRZER: He did, Tom. That's right. He did add some, but even at the end of the first book, Eliot is really strong. Much stronger than Santayana.

WOODS: Now, I can't resist jumping right into the really, really juicy thing that a lot of our listeners are going to have a particular interest in. I'm trying to restrain myself, and I just can't.

Now, a lot of people will be familiar with F. A. Hayek's essay "Why I Am Not A Conservative." And I guess I probably realized that he gave that at the Mont Pelerin Society, which was an organization started after World War II for classical liberal economists and other people working in that tradition. But, he gave that, according to what I read in your article "Seven Conservative Minds," as implicitly an attack on Kirk, who was sitting there in the room, who then apparently delivered an extemporaneous reply to Hayek. Do we have his remarks to Hayek? Or is that lost forever? Can you tell us something about this whole exchange?

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

BIRZER: As far as I know, it's lost forever. I've done a lot of searching, trying to find what Kirk said, and I can't find it in any work. Of course he kind of has a little piece, "Why I Am A Conservative," that comes out in 1963, but it's not really an answer, and I can't imagine that's what Kirk said.

We do have a couple—Let me give you the background to this, Tom.

Kirk had really, really liked Hayek's work. Kirk as a younger man was much more open to libertarianism and individualism back in the '40s and '50s. He was very open to it to the point where Kirk, in some of his private letters, especially in the 1940s, comes across as pretty close to an anarchist. He's not friendly towards the government in any way. So there has been a connection with Albert Jay Nock, Isabel Paterson, and some others. He liked Hayek. He was suspicious of Mises from the beginning. He did like Hayek right away. They had met a number of times at the University of Chicago. Kirk had been offered a position in the committee on social thought at least two or three times while Hayek was there. I tried hard, and I have not been able to figure out who was against Kirk, and who was for him, on that committee. The letters seem to indicate that Hayek was the one who was trying to stop the hiring of Kirk.

WOODS: Wow!

BIRZER: That's what Kirk believed. I haven't found a smoking gun there.

The interesting thing, I think, for our modern debate is that his biggest proponent at Chicago was Leo Strauss. That is Kirk's biggest proponent. And that, of course, that's pretty amazing. They ended up—they had a pretty strong friendship in the '50s and early '60s. Kirk never liked Strauss's students, but he liked Strauss quite a bit. He used to go over and have coffee with him and visit him.

So, the Hayek relationship is very strange, and I can't figure it out. But Kirk also had his best friend in graduate school end up getting his Ph.D. under Hayek, and that was all because of Kirk's influence. That was in the '50s. So, it's a mixed bag. I can't quite figure out what's going on.

But in 1957, Hayek gave that address, "Why I'm Not A Conservative," and Kirk went to that. And he did give a spontaneous rebuttal; spontaneous to the point he hadn't written anything, but he knew he was going to do this. Almost a month before the Mont Pelerin Society, he had been telling friends, "I'm going to challenge Hayek at the end of his speech, and we'll see what happens." So he'd been thinking about this. It wasn't a spur of the moment thing. But his response may have been spur of the moment, and insofar as I know, it was.

WOODS: You know what's interesting about all of this, of course, is that Hayek, in some of his later work, particularly in his work in the 1970s with his trilogy—the *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* trilogy—he's talking about the value of tradition. And he's talking about it, not from the

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

point of view of a conservative, but from the point of view of somebody who recognizes the perils of what he called 'constructivism,' of trying to build a society artificially from scratch.

There are certain aspects of society that seem to have been selected for, in the fact that societies that lacked certain attributes fell away, and societies that have certain attributes have survived. So we shouldn't just carelessly and thoughtlessly make radical changes to society.

Now, even though he's not coming at this from a religious perspective, he is coming at it with a real sympathy for tradition, broadly conceived. So, why wouldn't there have been more sympathy then? As you say, Kirk liked him for some time, even before he got into this work. Why wouldn't Hayek, do you think, have found, at least, a kind of *simpatico*? I mean, why wouldn't he have found a friend in Kirk, and why would he have thought, "It's important now for me to differentiate myself from Kirk"?

BIRZER: That's such a great question, and I wish I could answer that. There are a couple of things going on, I think, one in the background, and one in the foreground, that really matter.

The one in the background is that Hayek is already a very established senior scholar with an incredible reputation throughout the Western world, and Kirk is still in college. So Kirk is always—and he will always have been—we think of him as an old guy. I think you and I are about the same age, Tom, and he's two generations ahead of us. So we always think of him as the "older" Kirk. But it's important to remember that, when he challenged Hayek, he was what? Thirty-seven. Hayek was probably in his sixties at that point. So there had to have been a bit of generational rivalry. I'm sure Hayek thought, in a sense, "Who's this upstart coming at me? This young guy who's kind of blustery, coming from Michigan, of all places. He's not even a Yale guy or a Harvard guy."

So I think that was probably part of it. I also think that Hayek just bristled at the term "conservative," because he thought in terms of German conservatives. And, I think that was such a different tradition coming out of central Europe versus coming out of middle America, coming out of Michigan and the Great Lakes area.

But the thing that's in the forefront of this debate, that I find really interesting—and, again, I love your question, Tom. They both loved Burke. They both loved de Tocqueville. Kirk comes to love Acton. Of course, Hayek always loved Acton. Kirk is moving toward Catholicism; Hayek is moving away from Catholicism. So they would have, at some point in their own faith, they would have had to overlap as they were moving in different directions with one another.

But Kirk always had that profound respect for the common law, and for the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which Hayek did, too. They really were both old Whigs, in a very important sense. But I do think, in the end, it probably comes down to the American versus the central European. I don't mean to historicize them, but I did think that there is an element of that, and the generational difference is significant, as well.

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

WOODS: Apart from *The Conservative Mind*, have you been able to gather from your reading of Kirk what he considered to be his most important works?

BIRZER: Yeah. There are a number of things he wrote in the '50s that have been neglected, that I think are unfortunate, that I think are better than *The Conservative Mind*.

I love *The Conservative Mind*; I think it's great. I love seeing the evolution of it. But there are other books he wrote with a bit more of what I call a "white heat." There's an anger and a righteousness that I find quite compelling in his book *Program for Conservatives*, which was 1954. His book on academic freedom in '55.

And then he had a book that has been almost completely forgotten called *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism*, and it is a deeply personal—I would say it could have easily come out of the best of Vatican II. It's an incredible look at Christian humanism. I should say it's an incredible Christian humanist look at the world. And Kirk had thought, after *The Conservative Mind* came out he really thought, that he would go in the direction of writing about Christian humanism, and that would be his direction.

He was very suspicious at the time that conservatism would not provide any answers for the future. It was a great achievable task, but it didn't allow for any kind of solutions for future problems, and he had really outlined the whole comprehensive guide to Christian humanism that I think has a lot more in common with people like Romano Guardini and Gabriel Marcel at the time, Christopher Dawson—than really it has with some of the other conservatives like Peter Viereck, who were writing.

I think Kirk just had a sense, especially as he was moving toward Catholicism, he had a sense that somehow there had to be a philosophy of the human person. That, of course, we would see later. I don't want to make this hint he anticipated John Paul II, but in a lot of ways, he really did. And, of course, a lot of writers of the '50s did, and Carroll. He was very influenced by writers from that time, so I think there is a connection.

WOODS: My personal—well, maybe not my favorite, but one that I like, and that's overlooked a lot, is his book on Randolph of Roanoke, which I thought was a nice work, a biography. And if anybody doesn't know, John Randolph of Roanoke was the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee in the early nineteenth century. He was more Jefferson than Jefferson. He really was the conscience of those people at that time.

BIRZER: Absolutely. That's such a great book, and, of course, Tom, remember he was 22 when he wrote that book.

WOODS: Yeah, I know. It makes me feel like a lazy bum. I wasn't anywhere near considering writing a book when I was twenty-two years old.

BIRZER: Yeah, well, you've made up for it since.

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

WOODS: I appreciate that. Now I do want to talk more about the libertarian thing, because Kirk did have a period where he was highly, highly critical of libertarians, and I think that's why people like Rothbard didn't think much of him. But somebody like Frank Meyer at *National Review* I think straddled both camps and could see value in both. But what was the nature of the Kirkian critique of libertarianism, and did he ever back off from it?

BIRZER: I have all kinds of Kirkian friends who would disagree with me very strongly on this, and Annette Kirk would disagree with me on this, too.

I don't think Kirk ever actually lost his libertarian views. I just don't think he liked the label, and I don't think he liked a lot of people who were associated with libertarianism. He had been—as I mentioned earlier, as a young man, he had had a nice correspondence with Albert Jay Nock, and with Isabel Paterson. Paterson especially liked him and was writing articles about him even when he was—it was World War II and he hadn't published anything. She had featured him a number of times in her own articles in the *Herald Tribune*, and they had had a strong friendship.

Nock, of course, died in 1945, just right after Kirk had started writing him, and so they had a nice correspondence, but it didn't last that long. It was certainly only about a year long. But Kirk had read everything of Nock and been very influenced by him. And he'd been really interested in Paterson's ideas, too.

In fact, I'm pretty convinced that a lot of Kirk's own religious understanding and his mysticism are deeply related to Paterson's own understanding of energy. And, we could get into that topic. Paterson in *The God in the Machine* has this very interesting notion about how energy—it almost sounds New-Agey, I think now in 2013—But she had an interesting idea about energy coming together. It was very Epicurean, and Kirk was really taken with that. He applied that later to the Shroud of Turin and his own understanding of what had happened there.

But the point I want to make is that Kirk had really been strongly what we would call libertarian. And something in 1953 changed. He had a falling out with Paterson, and, of course, Nock was now dead. But Kirk was also writing for *The Freeman*, and he wrote some interesting things in the earliest part of *The Freeman*, or at least the revival of *The Freeman*.

But then, there was that attack on him by Frank Meyer, first in *The American Mercury*, and then in *The Freeman*, in 1953, and then again in 1955. I think for Kirk this was very personal, and he was not forgiving about those kinds of things. In fact, the most vitriolic thing Kirk ever wrote, even more so than what he wrote of libertarians later, was a piece he wrote about Frank Meyer in *The Sewanee Review* in 1964. It is so scathing, and so unlike anything else Kirk ever wrote, that it's actually a little awkward to read.

WOODS: Wow! I didn't know anything about this.

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

BIRZER: Oh, it's only a two-page piece. It's called "Ideologue's Folly." I'll send it to you, Tom, and you're welcome to post it.

WOODS: Oh, my gosh. Okay.

BIRZER: You can just tell that this is so personal. It has almost nothing to do with ideas; it has everything to do with Kirk being really ticked off. And I think Kirk was overall an incredibly humane man. If you go back and read his letters, you get a feeling and especially concern. He is a man of the '30s and the '40s. There's no prejudice there at all. You'd have to dig like mad to find anything that would be remotely anti-black, or anti-Jewish. He was an incredibly tolerant person, but when it came to certain personal attacks, he was a bear. I would not want to be on his bad side, and I think, for Meyer and Rothbard—and we know this now for certain—that Meyer and Rothbard both undermined Kirk when Kirk was applying for Volker.

WOODS: Wow!

BIRZER: I think, personally, there's a lot in Meyer and Rothbard I really like, and I have no problem being called a libertarian. I've got a very strong libertarian background. But I think Kirk—for him, it was deeply personal, and so even, if you remember, Tom, at the beginning, one of those two bitter pieces he wrote on libertarians, I can't remember which one right now. But he puts himself with Hayek; at one of those he says, "Look, I'm with Hayek. We're not libertarians." And it's very interesting that he would say—and this was in the '80s or '90s—probably mid-'80s when he was writing. So, he's identifying himself with Hayek, but he's clearly taking on people like Rothbard.

So I think there is that element, and so when you have this—of course, you and I were pretty young at this point; we were right out of college when this was happening. But when you start getting meetings like the John Randolph Club that were trying to bridge, to go past some of the mainstream groups like Philly Soc and try and bridge some of those traditional libertarians. Kirk was invited, but he didn't go. But, one of his closest friends, Peter Stanlis, went. And Peter was doing stuff with IHS, he was doing stuff with Rothbard. And Kirk didn't have a problem with that at all. Peter was still his great friend. So I think it wasn't even personal in the sense—you can still be friends with that guy, but I'm not going to. So, if that makes sense, Tom, I think for Kirk these guys were just—especially Rothbard—they had undermined him, and he thought they were trying to create conservatives that were akin to something, as he would have thought, ideological.

WOODS: For the sake of my transcriber, and anybody who is not into the inside baseball, Philly Soc is the Philadelphia Society. That's how we talk around here.

All right, now we're getting into the '80s and '90s, and this is going to bring up the ascendancy of the neoconservatives. How did Kirk fit into that? By and large, how did the neoconservatives think of him? As sort of an educated elder statesman? Of course, he gets into some trouble because of his foreign policy views in the early '90s. So what happened then?

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

BIRZER: Yeah, that—that's a sticky story. Kirk, of course—

Just to give a little bit of background here, Thomas, if you don't mind.

Kirk had originally founded *Modern Age* as a way of actually defending Strauss. It's more complicated than that, but there had been some attacks on Strauss that Kirk thought were unfair in the early '50s. He thought it had a lot to do with the Jewish background with Strauss. And Kirk hated it. It offended his sensibilities, and part of *Modern Age* was to defend that.

And when *Modern Age*—he founded it actually in '57; he'd been trying since '54. He actually got the first issue out in '57, and then he was the editor up until '60. He had had an agreement with Regnery in Chicago. Regnery didn't want Kirk spending his time doing the day-to-day editing of the journal, so he hired a board and some people. For Kirk, for his part, this was personal. He didn't like losing control, but he also thought that so much of what was going on in the editorial board was anti-Semitic.

So Kirk was never rah-rah Arab or rah-rah Israel, even though there were a lot of people in the '50s and '60s who were taking sides on that. But Kirk just wasn't that concerned with the issues. He was much more concerned with a broader foreign policy—what do we do? His foreign policy would be, I guess, pretty similar to what yours and mine is. You know, we need a military, but it doesn't have to be everywhere around the world at all times. So, he had, I think, what we would call at this point a very traditionalist understanding of foreign policy, but it wasn't pro-Israel or anti-Israel in any way.

He liked the neocons in the '60s, and he liked them in the '70s, for their actual good social science they were doing domestically. So Peter Berger and some others who were doing things on crime and family—he was pretty interested in that. But when they became really powerful in the Reagan administration, and especially in the second term, with foreign policy, Kirk was pretty upset about that. And, of course, I saw the interview with you and Rockwell, Tom—with Lew Rockwell—where he said he had gotten a letter from Kirk in '91, how Kirk thought that George Bush should be strung up on the flagpole. [Laughter] I laughed so hard.

WOODS: Does that sound like him to you?

BIRZER: Well, being funny, of course.

WOODS: But I mean something like that in private correspondence. I've never read any of Kirk's letters. Are they filled with unexpected things like this?

BIRZER: Oh, so funny. He was unbelievably funny on those kinds of things, and stuff you might be surprised about. He was quite curious.

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

For example, in 1973, he was debating whether he should go to Wounded Knee, South Dakota to help the Indians. I think it's all part of his being not only anti-government but also very pro-humanity. Which side would I be on? Would it be worth it to get in jail for a bit? What would happen to Annette? My daughters? You know? But the thing about Bush, I'm sure was just a joke.

WOODS: Of course, but it shows what his sympathies were at that point. Where he came down.

BIRZER: Yeah, and he had a great love of Reagan, from the beginning to the end. He knew Reagan had his flaws. It wasn't the love he had for Goldwater. Kirk was a Goldwater man, inside and out. Reagan was not Goldwater, but he was still great to Kirk.

I think that Kirk thought one of the things Reagan did so well that Bush did not do, is that Reagan always had self-restraint. Not with Iran-Contra, but with his overall presidency. He knew when to back down; he knew when to be strong, and he thought Bush lacked that. He thought that Bush was very dangerous, and he thought Clinton was the same. The two were very dangerous because they were going to get us into a war very easily, in large part because of ego.

And he felt what the neocons were doing was fueling that ego. They were playing into it for their own agenda, in terms of foreign policy, and it's really hard, Tom, I think. I'm with a lot of these people all the time, especially at Hillsdale, and I like them very much, but you look at a lot of these neocons, and I think that what—almost exactly what—Kirk predicted would happen with the first Gulf War and our involvement in that area of the world has really played itself out. I'm quite sympathetic, but at the time, I was pretty hardcore pro-Reagan.

WOODS: Yeah. Me, too!

BIRZER: I wouldn't call myself a hawk, but I have no problem with a strong military, I just—as my friend Winston Elliott likes to say, “It's one thing to knock someone around when they've knocked you around first; it's another to try to move into their house and tell them how to live.” Looking back at Reagan, I think that was kind of what Reagan was doing. Whatever errors he made.

So I think Kirk appreciated the kind of foreign policy that came out of a Coolidge, or an Eisenhower, or a Reagan, though he didn't like Reagan's millennial language. But other than that, I think he was very fearful of what Bush would do, and what Clinton would do. And I think he was right about it, frankly.

WOODS: In *The Conservative Mind*, what is the criticism, a very Burkean criticism, that Kirk has of ideology, as he understands that term? What's wrong with ideology?

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

BIRZER: Yeah, his view of ideology—and it's very similar to Adam Smith's in the second edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where Smith is criticizing the whole idea of a "man of system" and most likely was influenced by Burke on that because of their friendship—

Kirk was very convinced, with I think Hayek to a certain degree as well, that there has to be—that anyone who is right-thinking, anyone who believes in first principles, right reason, that there has to be a humility involved in that, that we have to be willing to recognize. And this is, of course, a very traditional liberal arts view, but we have to be willing to recognize what we don't know, and not just what we know, and not be titillated by what we know, and also to realize that there are things we just don't know.

And Kirk's criticism of ideology was that it was essentially a modern religion, and it could be on the left or right. Kirk didn't actually like those terms. He never talked in terms of left and right. It was always man/anti-man, God/anti-God.

Only a few times was he explicit about, "there's no such thing as right-wing," but Kirk was pretty concerned with that. But he thought that, like Dawson and some of these other Christian humanists of the era—Guardini and some others—this was really a kind of a duping of a population by claiming that there is a left/right, and that ideology played into that idea of making us look at the horizon rather than at the vertical, looking up toward the transcendent. So there's an arrogance and a false religion in the belief that you or I or you and I together or you and I and some other people get together and somehow systematically figure out the world, and plan it accordingly, and that is for Kirk.

I think it was probably more religious for Hayek. It was not religious, it was more rational. But the belief for both of them was we just can't plan these things and the idea that we can sit around and—even if it's democratic capitalism or communism—that we could just plan it out and fit all these people into a little square peg or whatever it may be, some kind of slot. It's unhealthy. It's hubristic, ultimately, but it's also just going to fail. There's ancient Stoicism in that. I hear when I'm reading—Kirk, of course, loved the Stoics. I know Hayek did, too. But there's a lot of Marcus Aurelius in that. There's a lot of fear of just putting yourself at the center of things. So, Kirk—he read that in Burke. And he didn't come to Burke until he was in his late twenties. He had been introduced to Burke by reading the new humanists, by reading Irving Babbitt and Toliver Moore, but he, himself, had not read a lot of Burke until he started writing his dissertation. So, in the late '40s, when he was in his late twenties, early thirties, that, I think, just resonated with him. And he uses it pretty strongly, but I understand that a lot of it for Kirk was just an anti-arrogance, and anti-hubristic device.

WOODS: Okay. Now the flip side of this thing, then, is that, for Kirk it would be horrendously wrong to think of conservatism as just a counter-ideology: you've got your systematic overview of the world, and we have ours. But, just to play devil's advocate here, it seems to me—now maybe I'm being unfair, and if so, I want you to tell me—that this could be one of the reasons that today it's so hard to nail down who's a real conservative. Is that guy a real conservative? "Look, no, I'm a real conservative, so I'm against the war." "No, I'm a real conservative, so I'm

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

for the war.” And it’s like nailing jelly to a wall precisely because it’s not like libertarianism where there’s one principle—non-aggression. And yeah, we have libertarians who say, “You’re not a real libertarian,” but we have much less of that than we do among conservatives. Does this come back to the fact that conservatism itself doesn’t want to be a series of propositions?

BIRZER: Well, I’m like Kirk. I’m very convinced that libertarianism is just as anti-ideological because of the Hayekian strain, and the reliance upon the discovery process. We can never predict what’s going to be discovered next. We might have a guess; we might have a clue, and we might work at it, but we have to allow that process to take its place. Kirk, I think, he was so—this fits into so many questions, Tom, and I’m glad you’re asking it. But it really does come down again to that personal element we talked about with Meyer and Rothbard for Kirk, but he certainly did not think conservatism was a counter-ideology. It was always to be based on a set of principles. Those principles, however, varied and the kind of conservatism that we might find in Iraq would not be necessarily the kind of conservatism we would find here.

You know I grew up in Kansas. And even in Kansas and Michigan, there would be different ways that it would be playing out. And I think Kirk knew. I think there was a suspicion in him that especially in the ’50s after *The Conservative Mind*, he was worried that, with his own popularity, and with the popularity of the term “conservatism,” that it would become rigid in some way. It would not be organic and flowing, and that’s why I think he thought we needed to go toward more of a Christian humanism than an actual looking at left/right, conservative/liberal, whatever it may be.

But, for what it’s worth, Tom—and this is a hard topic for me because I don’t think libertarians are ideologues. In fact, I think they are very, very strongly anti-ideological and are principled. I’ve met libertarians who, of course, are ideologues in the same way conservatives can be, too—But I think libertarians carry out that Kirkian principle better than most conservatives do.

WOODS: Brad, I’ve already kept you longer than I’ve ever kept anybody in the history of the program, but I do want to ask you a couple more things, if that’s okay.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: I remember reading—I had to dig through microfilm to find it—a newspaper column in which Kirk referred to the automobile as a—do you know?

BIRZER: As a modern Jacobin?

WOODS: Exactly. It was a mechanical Jacobin.

BIRZER: It was a mechanical—a mechanical Jacobin.

WOODS: Because it would uproot you from your traditional community. Now, I’m not sure that’s a kind of—I mean, there was a time in my intellectual development when I wouldn’t have

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

said, “I don’t want a car,” but I would have said, “Man, that’s hardcore. This guy’s hardcore.” But now, I’ve gotten to a point where I say, “Well, you know, some communities are crummy and I do want to get away from them.”

BIRZER: Yeah, that’s like you again, growing up in the ’80s in Kansas. Cars were everything, so I have a hard time with that one, too, and I love my car. But I think Kirk’s argument, I understand it. It’s this desire and—and he did live it; that’s one thing you can say about Kirk.

WOODS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. He never learned how to drive.

BIRZER: He did drive in the military. He drove a Jeep during World War II.

WOODS: Oh, okay. But in civilian life, people drove him around.

BIRZER: No, that’s right. He wouldn’t use interstates ever. He would not allow people to ride on an interstate, if he was in the car. He had strict rules about these things.

WOODS: [Laughing] That’s awesome.

BIRZER: Well, no, it’s so eccentric. But you know he was also—he didn’t like TVs, and I’ve got stories about how he came across one of his daughters who had a Metallica album and he burned it. I mean he didn’t like any of this modern stuff, but he also—this is a guy who hated writing longhand, and almost every single thing he wrote was typewritten. And I think he would probably have been one of the first to have embraced a laptop or an iPad. So I think there are certain technologies he’s totally fine with. It’s not an anti-technological argument as much as it is a kind of—and I’m not; you can tell I’m talking to you on my cell phone, and I’ve got my Mac right in front of me. You know, I don’t know how many albums I have in iTunes, so I’m not the right guy necessarily to defend this—but I do understand that he thought there were certain technologies that were humane, and others that were not, and he wasn’t necessarily willing to employ socialized authority to stop those, but he thought that we could get enough people to buy into whole milk. He was really environmental in the ’50s and ’60s and ’70s. Do organic farming, and he was really into that, and planting trees. And that was all voluntary. It was all stuff he wanted to do on his own, and he wanted to encourage other people to do, but he was certainly reluctant about technology, there’s no question about that.

WOODS: All right. Before I let you go, I want to know why do you think somebody in the year 2013, whether conservative, libertarian, or whatever, why should somebody read *The Conservative Mind*? What are the valuable sorts of things that you’ll be impressed by as you read it?

BIRZER: Well, I’ll give you three answers. I’m just thinking of this spontaneously. I hadn’t planned on your asking this, Tom, so I’ll give you three answers.

WOODS: Well, we won’t declare this as your final, for-all-time response.

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

BIRZER: Thank you. This is not like *Jeopardy*. [Laughter]

I would say, number one, it's beautifully written. There's nothing Kirk writes that's not beautifully written. I mean, he's got his own style, a very archaic style, I think, but he was raised on Gibbon and Sir Walter Scott, and it shows. There's a quality to his writing that's just lacking from most people today. So, every time you read him, I think you get a good liberal education in and of itself. I realize that's not specific to *The Conservative Mind*. But I do think he does that really well in *The Conservative Mind*.

The second thing I would say, and this, to me, is the most important aspect of *The Conservative Mind*—he shows that there is a humanity that is not just political, and I think that this is where he and Nisbet are so great in the '50s, by really demonstrating that if you want to understand what conservatism is or what we believe, it's not something that's just going to happen in D.C., or in Topeka, or in any of these governments. It might happen in La Costa. Or it might happen in Hillsdale. It's going to happen with private associations. That, I think, is critical. So Kirk, he knew right away, as a young man, we can't just stress the political. It has to be more than that. So, I think that's really good.

But the other reason I would say, Tom—my final reason—would be that you're really introduced to a lot of fascinating people. So how many of us really remember Irving Babbitt anymore? And, yet, there he is. Or Paul Elmer More, who, I think, is tragically forgotten. I think we—those of us who are not liberals—the fact that we don't read Paul Elmer More more often is really to our shame. This is one of the great American cultural critics of the last hundred years. And Kirk, I think Kirk got that. I think he knew there was this kind of lineage that we needed to tap into. So there's a beauty in *The Conservative Mind*, but, you know, I tell students when I lecture or I go and I do something with say the Fund For American Studies, Roger Ream's group—I love them. Of course, they're mostly dealing with politicians in D.C. I tell them, if you're a policy wonk and you're expecting to find answers, you're not going to find them here. That's not what Kirk is providing at all.

WOODS: Well, Brad, we're going to put a link to your article on *The Conservative Mind* in the show notes, but then, tell me, what else? If people want to follow your writing, or your other activities, where would you direct them?

BIRZER: Thanks, Tom. That's a nice question. I've got a couple books out, almost all intellectual biographies, on J.R.R. Tolkien, on Christopher Dawson, on Charles Carroll of Carrollton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and I'm currently working on this book on Russell Kirk, an intellectual biography which will be out, hopefully, next fall, a year from now, with the University of Kentucky Press. So you can find anything on Amazon, or ISI Books has a lot of my stuff. My current writing, and things where I've talked about you and some of your ideas as well, most of my current writing I do for Winston Elliott's theimaginativeconservative.org, which he and I founded about three years ago, and I'm proud of what we've done with that. It's Winston who's done all the marketing and the business

The Tom WOODS: Show

December 2, 2013

aspect, and I've done a lot of the writing. So, if people are interested, Tom, that's where I would turn them, to theimaginativeconservative.org. That would be the place.