

foundational American principles, and upon equality and individual freedom. The consequences of such insistence is that “it throws [the American] back forever on himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (99).

This collection is a strong response to the failure of academic studies of American literature to address adequately the role of religion in the culture of the United States. It informs the reading of that literature in ways that teachers of it should incorporate in their classes, but in offering a description of that American religion it does not address the prior problem—one fundamental throughout American literature and American culture. American faith, as described in its literature, is solitary. American religion, as described there, is intensely individualistic. Without ground for community, for congregation, even faith and religion must still leave each American alone, alone with God, perhaps, but—as Bloom’s description of America’s peculiar religion makes clear—nonetheless alone. Thus, while the collection renders religion visible in American literary studies, the sort of religion that one sees there remains at the root of American problems. This religion does, as Buell observes, have the power to change individual lives but seems to have little capacity to change the common and collective life of the nation for the better.

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Russell Kirk. *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*. Ed. George A. Panichas. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. 640 pp. \$30.00.

Stretching over a period of fifty-seven years (from 1937, when he published his first essay, to his death in 1994), Russell Kirk's writing efforts produced a body of work that challenged the liberal orthodoxies of its time and continues to provide insight for countless readers today. In his thirty-two published books and hundreds of critical articles, columns, prefaces, and other publications, in his years of teaching and lecturing, and in his editorship of *Modern Age* (1957–59), Kirk labored to steer society toward the traditional conservatism acquired from his upbringing and bolstered by a lifetime of reading, discussion, and thought.

As George A. Panichas, editor of *The Essential Russell Kirk: Selected Essays*, asserts in his preface to this collection, “No other figure surpasses Russell Kirk in his exposition of fundamental conservative ideas in the twentieth century” (3). The two key qualities of Kirk's mind, according to Panichas, were its “vigor” and capacity for “insight,” both serving him well in the task of “defining and evaluating the intellectual history of English and American conservatism” (3). One of the most perceptive and wide-ranging writers of the twentieth century, Kirk was at once a scholar, a literary critic, an intellectual historian, an author of fiction, a conservative columnist, a social critic, an economist, an influential editor, a memoirist, and a political philosopher. He was also a loving husband, a devoted father, a sought-after lecturer, a university professor, a friend, and a mentor to hundreds of fellow scholars. None of these, however, captures the essence of Kirk's contribution to modern intellectual history, of which his most important accomplishment was that, by the force of his enormous courage and faith, he remained steadfast to the principles and beliefs of a civilization that was increasingly called into question during his lifetime. Like Edmund Burke and T. S. Eliot, Kirk found himself in opposition to fraudulent philosophies of moral innovation. Much of his effort was spent in exposing what he saw as dangerous flaws in the modern pseudo-religions of rationalism, scientism, utilitarianism, and romanticism.

Kirk, however, was far more than a loyal member of the opposition, and he was never in any sense a reactionary. Nor was he a “radical for capitalism,” to use Brian Doherty's recent characterization of the libertarian persuasion in his book *Radicals for Capitalism* (2007). The “chirping sectaries” (372), as Kirk termed them, were not true conservatives in any sense. (In his essay on the topic, “Libertarians: Chirping Sectaries,” Kirk details six fundamental respects in which libertarianism differed from traditional conservatism.) What

Kirk did offer was a staunch but even-tempered, unpretentious, forthright defense of the central tradition of Western civilization, and a critical aspect of this defense was his instinctual respect for the past. Like Burke, Kirk understood that each generation rides on the shoulders of giants—those who previously shaped cultural tradition. Also like Burke, Kirk appreciated the intricate ways in which inherited traditions and beliefs develop and change, even though that process moves slowly and not always without cost. Finally, he cherished the variety of perspectives that have thrived and continue to thrive within the world's great civilizations and particularly within Western civilization. The existence of this fundamental tolerance was indicative of the essential humanity of the tradition that he embraced.

What Kirk was defending was a positive ideal of life, one that stressed the importance of individual virtue but also insisted on the necessity of a web of institutions and shared beliefs that makes possible a society's continuity and coherence. Kirk's ideal was, in sum, a personal society steeped in tradition and lived on a human scale, a humane society in which Christian charity was the preeminent virtue, an equitable society in which raw capitalism was not allowed to ravage those attempting to live simply and modestly. It was an ideal that had been passed down to Kirk's own devout ancestors—and, he believed, to America as a nation—by way of the pietistic religious tradition of German and British Protestantism. This was not, of course, a faith shared by all those who immigrated to America, but it was, he insisted, the defining faith of America as a nation.

Unfortunately, Kirk found this humane and life-giving tradition under attack from a number of different sides. In an age of technological prowess life was no longer lived on the human scale. In an age of universal materialism the habit of quiet reflection was everywhere in peril. More perilous still, modern strains of atheism and nihilism challenged the very assumption that human life is purposeful or meaningful. In the twentieth century communism and fascism had arisen as monstrous distortions of traditional faith. Totalitarianism insisted that the state, not the God of Judeo-Christian faith, must be the sole object of human worship. What future perversions, Kirk wondered, would arise in the twenty-first century to threaten the survival of Judeo-Christian belief?

Kirk devoted much of his effort to the task of forestalling this possible future scenario. In a number of essays on education, for example, he wrote

extensively about the dangers of thoughtless innovation in curriculum, including those changes based on the mistaken goals of relevance, self-development, and multiculturalism. What all of these approaches lack is a commitment to teaching “enduring standards of conduct [and] taste” (439). Indeed, each of these approaches in its own way appears to be intent on undermining the notion that a shared and generally acknowledged set of moral standards exists and must be defended as the foundation of civilization.

Kirk also wrote extensively about what he and other conservatives perceived as the decadence of modern consumer culture. “Great states with good constitutions develop when most people think of their duties and restrain their appetites,” he observes in “The Constitution and the Antagonist World” (470). To be sure, the “antagonist world” of which Kirk speaks encompasses more than consumer culture, including, as it does, assaults by the courts on religious expression, the extension of new “rights” and entitlements, and the general suspicion of and restraint placed upon the natural aristocracy of merit—that educated and selfless segment of the population that has always provided leadership in all aspects of society. In place of the virtuous society that Kirk held up as an ideal, modern society is clearly one in which materialism and self-interest have run rampant. The unwritten laws prescribing civic duty, self-restraint, and personal responsibility seem all but forgotten. In their place Kirk identified the rise of a deadly social primitivism finding expression in an appetitive and self-absorbed culture with a ruling principle of personal gratification.

For much of his life Kirk was an independent scholar, working in relative isolation far from cosmopolitan centers of learning, and yet he singly confronted many of today’s central problems in fields as wide-ranging as history, literature, politics, education, philosophy, and religion. Kirk’s body of work is a testament to the enormous potential of one human life, though he would likely insist that he had merely been a humble scholar contributing his small sum to the great civilization he had inherited. This may be so, but his effort is nonetheless remarkable in an age in which so many intellectuals spend their lives attempting to debunk and undermine the very civilization that provides them with freedom of inquiry and expression. In an age of intellectual sterility Kirk’s life was more fruitful because he was working within a living tradition of thought and belief. He did not set himself against civilization, nor did he imagine that intellectuals should be isolated from the ordinary affairs

of their community.

In "The American Scholar and the American Intellectual," Kirk quotes one of his heroes, Orestes Brownson: "The scholar is not one who stands above the people and looks down on people with contempt" (417). Rather, the scholar inspires by an example of lifelong and humble service and aims to speak to the general public, not just to specialists or colleagues. This was Kirk's ideal as well, and a careful reading of his essays reveals just how crucial it was. The conception of a broadly educated public, informed by the selfless labor of scholars (more accurately, perhaps, sages or philosophers) like Kirk himself, was what for him distinguished the American idea of democracy from European autocracy. It was what differentiated his own more advanced civilization, as he understood it to be, from those in which human liberties were not and ought not to be granted. The implicit contract underpinning this civilization elicited selflessness from the natural aristocracy of scholars, statesmen, and professional leaders but also required a degree of acquiescence from a general public well educated enough to know when its interests were being protected. It also entailed respect for the traditions, belief, and learning that constitute the precious legacy of the past.

The Essential Russell Kirk supplies a representative selection of Kirk's writing, enough to suggest the breadth of his interests, the range and precision of his learning, and the force of his mind. Panichas has labored for a decade in the preparation of this collection, and the result is a suitable tribute to one of the twentieth century's great conservative minds. The volume includes an informative preface, epilogue, chronology, notes, and index. The collection is effectively divided into nine major sections, each of which consists of anywhere from four to six chapters and contains in most cases complete essays or chapters from Kirk's oeuvre. Each section is introduced by a brief preface and each chapter by an explanatory paragraph. This restrained but elegant organization allows readers to peruse Kirk's essays without distraction while at the same time supplying necessary context and documentation.

For some readers *The Essential Russell Kirk* will serve as a first introduction to Kirk's mind; from there, however, it will surely lead to further exploration of his thought. For those already well acquainted with his work, this carefully prepared volume will serve as a useful reference and, with its judicious selection of a broad range of representative essays, a reminder of the scale of Kirk's achievement. For all readers it should afford many hours of reflection

and delight, for in this superb volume of selected essays they will find themselves in the company of one of the most thoughtful, courageous, and humane writers of the past century.

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Lundin, Roger. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, 2nd edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004. 318 pp. \$24.00.

Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief is a biography that focuses on the interplay of religion, science, and other cultural trends in the life and works of the poet. Roger Lundin uses both textual interpretation and historical analysis for his exploration of Emily Dickinson's unique belief system in the context of nineteenth-century New England: "The key to Emily Dickinson's life and art lies not behind some hidden biographical door but before us in the remarkable body of poems and letters she left behind, as well as in the rich, complex history of the extraordinary period in which she lived" (xvi). Lundin's style is cogent and sometimes lyrical, with just enough alliterative pairs in the prose to suggest that he himself may be a poet or, if not, that he loves poetic expression.

The chief argument of the book is that Dickinson practiced an "art of belief" that "made her the greatest of all American poets and one of the most brilliantly enigmatic religious thinkers this country has ever known" (5-6). By "art of belief" Lundin means that she tested religious doctrines and intellectual theories in order to invent a personalized understanding of truth in daily life and an individualized representation of reality through creative writing.

Instead of relying on stereotypical dichotomies, Lundin confirms his argument by collating concepts that other scholars might present as antithetical. For example, instead of claiming that Dickinson totally rejected Edward Hitchcock's creation by design in order to accept Darwin's evolution by selection wholeheartedly, Lundin suggests that she was intrigued by and disillusioned with both ideas at different stages in her life. Instead of abandoning faith in order to embrace skepticism, she courageously challenged and continually examined multiple options. In other words, when faced with seem-