

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR?

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In this paper, I plan to address an idea in Professor Pitt's essay considered a moot point. The author never makes a distinction between scholar, intellectual, and academic. Twentieth-century historian Russell Kirk thought this distinction was so important that he dedicated numerous essays and books to explain the necessary variances. The idea of a vibrant university, Kirk warned, rested on "scholarly" values. Kirk thought that universities should prefer scholars, more than professional academics/intellecuals for three main reasons.

1. A scholar primarily recognizes her responsibility to conserve the religious moral imagination. An intellectual/academic overrates understanding and abstraction in place of religiosity.
2. The professionalization of the lettered educator has also resulted into its strange wedding to secularism. A scholar recognizes that leisure and imagination are the best ways to counteract this modern tendency.
3. A scholar understands that leisure is as important of production of monographs, articles, and so on. Kirk located this tendency in those who called themselves intellectuals and academics.

Russell Kirk earned his doctorate from the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland. The young man—soon to become the scholarly godfather of American conservatism—returned to teach in his native state of Michigan at Michigan State University.¹⁹ Kirk quickly found that he did not like life in a state university; so, he left in

¹⁹ The University of Chicago Press published *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* in 1951 before Kirk earned his doctorate in 1952. Kirk's magnum opus *The Conservative Mind* was published in 1953. This monograph is what most conservatives consider

1953.²⁰ He took up permanent residence in Mecosta, Michigan with two unwed aunts and produced a lifetime of scholarship that became the backbone of American conservatism. His work was both revelatory and inspirational to several generations that rejected a culture that took science more seriously than imagination. In addition, Kirk demonstrated that the new bohemian was a conservative.²¹

Kirk was the original American reactionary.²² He intentionally created a bohemian lifestyle in the small town of Mecosta—hiking long distances, dressing formally for dinner, entertaining international refugees, housing wanderers, etc.—which was a notable reaction in a culture ever taken with the idea of a professional.²³ Kirk’s depiction of the scholar, as a leisurely freethinking individual living is the opposite picture we are presented with today. An aspiring academic is supposed have a narrow specialization, never venture outside of their forte, and make a reputation based upon all that. Kirk’s main criticism of academics was that they lacked moral imagination. “The moral

the first comprehensive attempt to make American conservatism something more than a reactionary moment/movement.

²⁰ John J. Miller, “Russell Kirk Shaped Conservative Thought from a Northern Michigan Farm,” *Traverse Magazine* August 17, 2010 accessed December 6, 2010, <http://www.mynorth.com/My-North/August-2010/Russell-Kirk-Shaped-Conservative-Thought-from-a-Northern-Michigan-Farm/>. By 1953, Kirk already published twelve scholarly articles. He complained that Michigan State was committed to merely democratic dogma and “Growthmanship.”

²¹ John J. Miller, “Russell Kirk Shaped Conservative Thought from a Northern Michigan Farm,” *Traverse Magazine* August 17, 2010. Kirk eventually married and raised four children. He was somewhat of a Luddite too; Miller shares a story about Kirk throwing a television out of his house window because he hated that new technologies isolated individuals from the human community.

²² John Lukacs, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990), xiv. Lukacs specifies that a reactionary is not a contrarian, but someone who is a product of fin-de-siècle. “Near the end of an age there occurs a heavy accumulation of accepted ideas and institutionalized ways of thinking, against which thinking men and women must *react*.”

²³ Russell Kirk, *Confessions of a bohemian Tory; episodes and reflections of a vagrant career* (New York: Fleet Publishing Co., 1963). Russell Kirk called himself a bohemian Tory. He was one of the last scholars to survive solely on his publishing record. We can locate Kirk’s publishing success before the monograph became the prevalent form of academic publishing.

“I venture that something must be done about the Knowledge Class. Either we must endeavor to restore right reason and imagination among them—among their successors, I should say for there is a small hope of altering the intellectuals characters of most of the present members of the Knowledge Class—or else we must take measures to restrain their influence. The Knowledge Class, neglecting or defying the realm of spirit, would convert us into a spiritless people, impoverished morally and economically, unable to take our own side in a quarrel.”³⁴

In the process of mining for knowledge and in the quest to master specialized knowledge Kirk asked, but who was to train the soul of the student? “Higher learning is meant to develop order in the soul, for the human persons own sake,” Kirk wrote. “I am saying that the higher learning is meant to develop order in the commonwealth, for the republic’s sake.”³⁵ Success, in academia today, means publishing in largely unknown journals (not only are these journals not read by the public, but most academics only read journals and articles in their specialization) and cranking out cryptic monographs. The mission of the university is most always to obtain more federal grant monies and bolster the research ranking. Training the soul is rarely a priority.

Intellectuals destroyed the idea of the university because the secularism and professional filled the gap previously filled by the religious moral imagination. The Cold War made this partnership stick because to be a professional, in something, was one more victory over the Communists. A professional academic was valued on her ability to master a niche.³⁶ Within these happenings, a wall erected. Academics eventually said big questions such as Truth, Justice, Freedom, Love, Meaning, were metanarratives unavailable to any one person; speculation was even out of the question. The scholar

dissertation director, Richard Hofstadter, thought that provincialism was located in the middle-class populists not within academia. By the 1990s, Lasch and Kirk agree that the state of the university is in poor shape.

³⁴ Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999), 304.

³⁵ Russell Kirk, *Redeeming the Time*, 46.

³⁶ Wilfred McClay, “The Illusion of Mastery: Man and Authority,” *The City* 4 (2011): 20-30.

though, Kirk posited, had to choose the path of leisure outside of the research university in order to keep the imagination alive.

This was what he found at Michigan State, secularized professionals competing for tenure at “Behemoth University.”³⁷ Kirk rejected this in favor of imaginative scholarship. As many of his students attest, Kirk chose a life of imagination and wonderment. “On the shelves of Kirk’s library rest a good many books he never found time to read through,” wrote Kirk of himself before his death. “How many thousands of hours had he wasted in dreamy reverie, after the fashion of the Little Tree?”³⁸ Professor Pitt hints at the necessary place of imagination in his conclusion, “there is research that generally brings in no external funding but which is crucial to making a university a university and not just a trade school.”³⁹ The recognition of research that does not signify funding and dollar is a crucial step. The next step needs to be an intentional move to broaden the community to scholars who take the religious imagination seriously. Kirk would have us re-envision the university, not only as a place of research, but also as a community of souls where life and research are of equal importance.⁴⁰ Kirk left us with a plan to accomplish this task of creating an alternative life of the mind in his insight that

The education of yesteryear was founded upon certain postulates. One of these is that much truth is ascertainable; another, that religious truth is the source of all good; a third, that we may profit by the wisdom of our ancestors; a fourth, that the individual is foolish, but the species is wise; a fifth, that wisdom

³⁷ Kirk, *The Essential Kirk*, 409.

³⁸ Kirk, *The Essential Kirk*, 565.

³⁹ Joseph Pitt, “The Idea of University.”

⁴⁰ This distinction is not just a prophetic call to religious humanism, but for Kirk this meant an understanding of ideas that did not seem to be that important (scientific importance). Reading Aristotle, Milton, TS Eliot, and others are not necessary for creating engineers, scientists, medical doctors, and so on. Mastering knowledge of a history of religious literature, for example, seems unnecessary for professors who want to compete with the scientific community for funds.

is sought for its own sake; a sixth, that for the sake of the commonwealth, schooling should quicken the moral imagination. These postulates have not ceased to be true; it is only that they have been forgotten in our century's obsession with power and money, and our century's illusion that ideology is a ready and satisfactory substitute for thought.⁴¹

Kirk believed that what we term “unnecessary” and “superfluous” is what is missing from the university.

⁴¹ Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence*, 251.