

A Time to Stand: A Faithful Presence Amid the Ruins

Introduction

- demographic challenge (last year)
- antichristian culture
- cruciform calling of Christ's church

I. The Shape of the Crisis

- Consequences of dismantled Foundational Structures
- Moral Imagination, Idyllic Imagination, Diabolic Imagination
- Normal Condition of the Church Militant
- Neither isolation nor surrender, but faithful endurance (speak, suffer & hope)

II. Faithful Presence in Vocation

- Vocation is sacred (Commanded by God, Love of Neighbor)
- 1. Family, children, etc. resists selfish individualism
- Work is a gift and a means God uses
- 2. Citizenship
- 3. Church

III. Worship as Resistance

- Witness to Reality of Divine Action transcendent and immanent.
- Not: Personal, Consumeristic, therapeutic, entertainment-driven, emotional, fragmentation, trends
- Corporate Church, divine actions (absolved, fed, sanctified), pedagogy, shapes, evangelizes, preserves sanity, reverence, Christ presence, truth

IV. Memory and Hope

- We live in the middle-between the unchanging acts of God in history and the promises yet to fulfilled.
- Not Modernity (perpetual present, tyranny of the moment) Cultural Dominance nor Political Victory for future, nor a Museum for the past.
- Not Panic, nor despair nor forgetfulness, with confident hope

V. Theology for Dark Times

- Doctrine (justification, means of grace, life of church) enables the church to stand firm
- Error is harmful
- Pastors to be shepherds and stewards of doctrine

Conclusion: A Time to Stand

- Faithful in this time and place
- Not passive but active And without despair

Russell Amos Kirk (October 19, 1918 – April 29, 1994) was an American political philosopher, moralist, historian, social critic, literary critic, author, and novelist who influenced 20th century American conservatism. In 1953, he authored *The Conservative Mind*, which traced the development of conservative thought in the Anglo-American tradition and Edmund Burke. The book helped influence the post-World War II American conservative movement.¹

Kirk on Moral Imagination, Mar 19, 2007

The moral imagination is the principal possession that man does not share with the beasts. It is man's power to perceive ethical truth, abiding law, in the seeming chaos of many events. Without the moral imagination, man would live merely day to day, or rather moment to moment, as dogs do. It is the strange faculty—inexplicable if men are assumed to have an animal nature only—of discerning greatness, justice, and order, beyond the bars of appetite and self-interest.²

Russell Kirk and the Moral Imagination by Robert Stacey April 16th, 2018

The “moral imagination” goes beyond our personal, individual experiences to help us fathom the depths of human dignity in light of God's creation.

In November 2013, my students and I had the honor of a visit from Annette Kirk, widow of Russell Kirk. Mrs. Kirk led us in a discussion of her husband's classic essay “The Moral Imagination.”³ The term **moral imagination** actually comes from Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and father of modern conservatism. Burke believed that the French revolutionaries were systematically destroying the critical, civilizing influences that are necessary to preserve valuable culture.

All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a *moral imagination*, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

Kirk elaborated on the moral imagination brilliantly. “The moral imagination,” he wrote, “aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth.” It goes beyond our personal, individual experiences to help us fathom the depths of human dignity in light of God's creation. It “instructs us that we are more than naked apes.” It has been practiced by a diverse pantheon of great artists, from Virgil and Dante to Eliot and Tolkien. Our lives are all much richer for it.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell_Kirk

² <https://kirkcenter.org/by-kirk/kirk-on-moral-imagination/>

³ The entire article is found here: <https://kirkcenter.org/imagination/the-moral-imagination/>

What Kirk feared, and what we today experience more and more as Unlightenment grips our country, is the eclipse of moral imagination by the idyllic imagination, first spun out by Jean Jacques Rousseau—the “insane Socrates of the National Assembly” as Burke called him. **Idyllic imagination** “rejects old dogmas and old manners and rejoices in the notion of emancipation from duty and convention.” It breaks down tried and true existing orders for the sake of dangerous and untested new ones. America witnessed an idyllic wave in the 1960s and 70s, but the idyllic imagination has plagued us more or less since the Progressive Movement of the early 1900s.

According to Kirk, “The idyllic imagination ordinarily terminates in disillusion and boredom.” This is because 1) the radical novelties seldom meet expectations and are always accompanied by unintended consequences. And 2) a narrative that is all about breaking down the prevailing order usually has nothing more to offer once the proposed deconstruction has been more or less accomplished.

The idyllic imagination is bad enough, but unfortunately, when disillusion and boredom set in, the idyllic often gives way to the **diabolic imagination**. The diabolic imagination, says Kirk, “delights in the perverse and subhuman.” He points us to T.S. Eliot who discussed it in his classic work, *After Strange Gods*:

The number of people in possession of any criteria for discriminating between good and evil is very small; the number of the half-alive hungry for any form of spiritual experience, or for what offers itself as spiritual experience, high or low, good or bad, is considerable. My own generation has not served them very well. Never has the printing press been so busy, and never have such varieties of buncombe and false doctrine come from it. *Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!*

Sadly, we are very much in the grip of the diabolic imagination today. Kirk thought so in 1981, and his concerns are even more pressing now. And the consequences are profound. “As literature sinks into the perverse, so modern civilization falls to its ruin.” This is precisely what we mean here by Unlightenment—the sinking into ruin by the very choices we ourselves make. Nobody the perverse and the subhuman upon us. We choose it for ourselves.

But we ought not fall into despair. As Mrs. Kirk reminded me and my students, the best way to counter a bad story is a good story. Russell Kirk did exactly that, and we can look to his example. Let each of us use the art, the wit, the comeliness, and the imagination God gave us to tell stories of redemption rather than corruption. And in so doing, we can roll back the darkness of Unlightenment. (*This essay was first published here in November 2013.*)⁴

⁴ <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/04/russell-kirk-moral-imagination-robert-stacey-timeless.html>

T.S. Eliot (born September 26, 1888, St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.—died January 4, 1965, London, England) was an American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor who became a leader of the Modernist movement in poetry with such works as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). Eliot exercised a strong influence on Anglo-American culture from the 1920s until late in the 20th century. In 1948 he was awarded both the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature.⁵ (shortened)

T.S. Eliot, Russell Kirk and the Moral Imagination April 9, 2009 By [Bruce Edward Walker](#)

(Note: The [following](#) is adapted from a speech on the occasion of the republication of Russell Kirk's "Eliot and His Age," given to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute student group at Central Michigan University in September 2008 and edited for the Acton Institute's "Religion and Liberty.")

What makes T. S. Eliot and Russell Kirk so important that we should be here tonight to discuss them? Well, for one, both fathered "ages." **The 20th century was, according to Kirk, "The Age of Eliot,"** and Kirk himself inaugurated the contemporary Conservative Age with the publication of *"The Conservative Mind"* in the early 1950s.

As an essayist, particularly writing for the magazine he launched and edited, "The Criterion," Eliot revealed himself a protector of what Kirk came to call "the permanent things." And, to Kirk, that's what a true conservative was — someone who protects important ideas from revolutionary fervor. James Person quoted Kirk from a 1993 interview: **"There are permanent things in society: the health of a family, inherited political institutions that insure a measure of order and justice and freedom, a life of diversity and independence, a life marked by widespread possession of private property. These permanent things guarantee against arbitrary interference by the state"**

Both Eliot and Kirk agreed that a worldview is only viable inasmuch as it reflects what Edmund Burke called the moral imagination, which he defined as, **"the power of ethical perception** which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and events of the moment — especially the higher form of this power exercised in poetry and art."

Eliot and Kirk believed that in a world devoid of moral imagination, all systems — political, social, economic, familial and spiritual — are bound to fail. True conservatives, both men believed, place moral considerations ahead of ideology. In fact, both held that true conservatism is the negation of ideology.

In this regard, Kirk places Eliot in the tradition begun by Plato, continued by Virgil and Dante and into the 20th century by Robert Frost, Evelyn Waugh, William Faulkner and William Butler Yeats. But while Yeats will forever be remembered as the greatest poet of the 20th century simply by the sheer volume of impressive verse he created, Eliot throughout his career avoided the occultism that obsessed Yeats, the nationalism of Yeats and the early hopes for political solutions that Yeats endorsed. In fact, Eliot is singular among the great poets of his era in a

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/T-S-Eliot>

rejection of political solutions. He considered himself a royalist, but only inasmuch as he identified a royalist as a "temperate conservative."

Eliot witnessed the results of catastrophically destructive ideologies. He saw nationalistic fervor ignite the conflagration of world wars; he saw the passion for "social justice" strip whole populations from nations; he witnessed members of his own generation embrace fascism and members of the succeeding generation embrace Marxist solutions; he witnessed the tremendous sway of Freud and Jung, which pointed the way to so many blind alleys for so many writers of so-called Modernist sensibilities.

Revisiting Eliot's works, and being able to do so with Kirk's invaluable guidance, serves to remind readers that nurturing one's mind also nurtures one's character — or moral imagination.

Lacking this, we find ourselves **morally bankrupt, enslaved by our own appetites, greed and desires; subject to not only the bankruptcy of our financial and business institutions, but cultural bankruptcy as well.**

Lacking this, we are Eliot's "Hollow Men," manifested in the evils of socialism espoused by George Bernard Shaw, Lenin and Marx; the atheism proudly defended by Bertrand Russell; the dystopian visions of H.G. Wells, and for the rest of us the myriad of social and political correctives and their unforeseen consequences generations later. And, as Eliot concluded in that poem: "This is how the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper." For, when the moral compass is bent, it no longer serves as a trusted guide through the troubles that demand a moral response.

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Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn (11 December 1918 – 3 August 2008) While serving as a captain in the Red Army during World War II, Solzhenitsyn was arrested and sentenced to eight years in the Gulag and then internal exile for criticizing Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in a private letter. As a result of his experience in prison and the camps, he gradually became **a philosophically minded Eastern Orthodox Christian**. He wrote *The Gulag Archipelago*—which outraged the Soviet authorities—in 1973. In 1974, he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship and flown to West Germany. He initially moved to Switzerland and then moved to Vermont in the United States with his family in 1976 and continued to write there. His Soviet citizenship was restored in 1990. He returned to Russia four years later and remained there until his death in 2008. (Wikipedia, shortened.)

"We are now experiencing the consequences of mistakes which had not been noticed at the beginning of the journey. On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life. In the East, it is destroyed by the dealings and machinations of the ruling party. In the West, commercial interests suffocate it. This is the real crisis."

The Hollow Men

by T. S. Eliot 1888 – 1965

Mistah Kurtz-he dead

A penny for the Old Guy

I

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without
colour.
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other
Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises

Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer—

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.

IV

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

V

*Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.*

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the
*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

*This poem is in the public domain.
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Some commentary helps:

1. Mistah Kurtz: a character in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."
2. A...Old Guy: a cry of English children on the streets on Guy Fawkes Day, November 5, when they carry straw effigies of Guy Fawkes and beg for money for fireworks to celebrate the day. Fawkes was a traitor who attempted with conspirators to blow up both houses of Parliament in 1605; the "gunpowder plot" failed.
3. Those...Kingdom: Those who have represented something positive and direct are blessed in Paradise. The reference is to Dante's "Paradiso".
4. Eyes: eyes of those in eternity who had faith and confidence and were a force that acted and were not paralyzed.
5. crossed stave: refers to scarecrows
6. tumid river: swollen river. The River Acheron in Hell in Dante's "Inferno". The damned must cross this river to get to the land of the dead.
7. Multifoliate rose: in dante's "Divine Comedy" paradise is described as a rose of many leaves.
8. prickly pear: cactus
9. Between...act: a reference to "Julius Caesar" "Between the acting of a dreadful thing/And the first motion, all the interim is/Like a phantasma or a hideous dream."
10. For...Kingdom: the beginning of the closing words of the Lord's Prayer.⁶

⁶ <https://allpoetry.com/The-Hollow-Men>