

**Conservative Minds, Canadian and American:
Comparing George Grant and Russell Kirk**

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Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Conservatism has similar sources but has had different histories and thus has a somewhat different character today in Canada and in the United States. One purpose of this essay is to shed some light on these confusing similarities and differences by comparing and contrasting two conservative writers, a Canadian, George Grant, and an American, Russell Kirk. The similarities between them – the comparisons – may be sufficient to make their differences – the contrasts – helpful for understanding larger patterns. My immediate purpose, however, is more modest: I aim to provide no more than a quick sketch of the main similarities and differences between Grant and Kirk, with particular attention to their reliance upon or dissent from the gold standard of genuine or classical conservatism as commonly understood, namely, Edmund Burke, leaving aside, except for some brief comments at the end, any consideration of the significance of the comparison for understanding the Canadian and American parties and movements that today are called conservative. My hope is that my more limited inquiry may suggest some further lines of investigation for others that I may have failed to see or to pursue.

Similarities

Both Grant and Kirk were born in 1918 in the Great Lakes region of North America; both studied history as undergraduates before World War II; both pursued graduate degrees in Britain – Grant at Oxford, Kirk at St. Andrews – after the war; both began their university teaching careers in the 1940s; both had Scottish ancestors and both were Anglophiles, inclined to praise the British tradition of constitutional government; both soon became prominent spokesmen for some traditionally conservative views; both moved as adults from ‘lower’ (more Calvinist) to ‘higher’ (more Catholic) forms of Christianity (Grant became an Anglican, Kirk a Roman Catholic); both were controversial, out of step with the leading figures in their fields of teaching and research; but both knew how to appeal to the sentiments of their countrymen; both had a remarkable impact on the political thought of their more thoughtful readers; and although both could be called ‘Bohemian Tories’ (a phrase Kirk used to describe himself), both were eventually the recipients of numerous honorary degrees. Both men, however, were more

interested in ideas than in practical politics and coalition building, and at the end of their lives – Grant in 1988, Kirk in 1994 – the reputations of both had faded, as their views had been marginalized by the growth of a new kind of conservatism generally called neoconservatism. These external similarities will be obvious to those familiar with Grant and Kirk and they need no particular documentation.¹

It is not so obvious but nonetheless fairly easy to suggest that Grant and Kirk espoused very similar conservative views. Both objected to modern individualism; both decried the destructive effects of modern scientific rationalism; both were scathing critics of contemporary higher education; both had profound reservations about what Grant called ‘mass scientific society’; both drew attention to the destructive effects of industrial development on the natural and social environment, so both can now be regarded as proto-environmentalists. In short, both can be called serious critics of modernity.

In addition, there is a deeper similarity between them that is closely related to an important divergence in their thought. It requires closer attention and more careful statement, for it is hard to explain without employing misleading terms that may seem to prejudice basic questions.

What do we have to assume in order to make sense of – to provide the best possible account of – our experience of living and choosing and reflecting on our choices? Can we think of our highest or deepest ‘values’ as principles of choice that we ourselves have simply chosen or created? On many important matters, freedom of choice may be something we want to preserve for ourselves and others, despite the undeniable and sometimes painful responsibility for our past choices that such freedom entails. But are we not on reflection compelled to see that the pursuit of freedom must ultimately serve some end or value beyond itself? If freedom were, so to speak, ‘open-ended,’ would it not cease to be something we could choose or affirm? Must we not conclude that something beyond our own choosing – virtue or goodness – must be prior to our freedom? Do we not have to recognize, in other words, a ‘duality’ in our experience of ourselves – a contrast between our highest aspirations and our actual choices, a better and a worse or a higher and a lower self – that points to an ‘objective’ standard in terms of which we are inescapably measured and defined? Does reflection on our experience not therefore lead us inexorably into ‘religion’ with its remarkable claims about supernatural realities that limit our autonomy or power of self-creation? And does this train of thought not have great, perhaps disturbing significance for how we are to understand political authority and the modern liberal democratic conception of politics?

Rhetorical questions of this kind may be better than blunt statements as a way of introducing the deeper similarity mentioned a moment ago, which has to do with the connection that both Grant and Kirk suggest exists between religion and politics and that Burke too may have seen. Their writings may clarify what Burke may have had in mind when he wrote a key passage of his Reflections on the Revolution in France, about the piety of his compatriots:

We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and all comfort. In England we are so convinced of this, that there is no rust of superstition, with which the accumulated absurdity of the human mind might have crusted it over in the course of ages, that ninety-nine in a hundred of the people of England would not prefer it to impiety. . . . We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long.²

But what exactly did Burke mean here? What he says raises a question of interpretation, and the response to it distinguishes Grant's conservatism from that of Kirk.

The Burke Question

Kirk's reputation was established at a relatively early age by the publication of his doctoral dissertation, The Conservative Mind, in 1953.³ It was forcefully written; it advanced an original thesis that fitted the spirit of the times; and it made a big splash. By summarizing the views of more than thirty writers and political leaders, it revealed a more or less continuous and coherent stream of conservative thought in English and American politics and letters starting with the French revolution. To be sure, the overall conservative pattern Kirk describes is better illustrated by some of his subjects than by others, but the similarities he demonstrates are sometimes striking. His basic thesis is that they show the influence of a common source, Edmund Burke, who provides Kirk's paradigm of genuine, philosophic conservatism. His reaction to the French Revolution, Kirk says, established the main themes of modern conservative thought. 'To Burke's analysis of revolutionary theories, philosophical conservatism owes its being.' (21)

The book's first and longest chapter presents Burke as a man steeped in Christian and classical wisdom, convinced that the world is governed by divine purpose. (29, 26) 'Revelation, reason, and an assurance beyond the senses tell us,' Kirk says, 'that the Author of our being exists, and that He is omniscient; and man and the state are creations of God's beneficence.' (26) This Christian orthodoxy is said to be 'the kernel of Burke's philosophy,' although that philosophy is also said to rely upon 'the unrolling of history' for knowledge of God's purposes. 'How are we to know God's mind and will? Through the prejudices and traditions which milleniums of human experience with Divine means and judgments have implanted in the mind of the species. And what is our purpose in this world? Not to indulge our appetites, but to render obedience to Divine ordinance.' (26) The key terms defining the Burkean conservatism of interest to Kirk are evidently God, providence, and tradition (or prejudice and prescription).

The negative side of Burke's positive teaching is his harsh condemnation of the modern moral philosophy that preceded and prepared the revolution. The great error of the philosophes, according to Burke, was their rejection of the traditional sources of moral guidance, which they

proposed to replace with reliance upon unassisted human reason. Writers like Voltaire and Diderot promoted a corrosively skeptical attitude towards traditional beliefs and a worldly, utilitarian morality. What unites Burke with his followers, in Kirk's presentation of them, seems to be their fear that modern reason is turning humanity away from the divine light and plunging it into such confusion that it will begin to slide backward into darkness and animality. 'The Age of Reason, Burke protested, with all the splendor of his rhetoric, was in reality an Age of Ignorance.' (27) By refusing to recognize the importance of Divine providence as a foundation for human welfare, it showed, Kirk says, a 'ridiculous presumption' and 'blindness to the effulgence of the burning bush [and] deafness to the thunder above Sinai.' (27) While insolently disavowing supernatural direction, it asserted its own infallibility – in practice, since it insisted on having things its own way.

Kirk's harsh, Burkean indictment of the Enlightenment diverges sharply from the more favourable views of it – as the triumph of human autonomy and willing (or a step along the way to that triumph), for example – that have been generally accepted for many years. It is not easy to say whether Burke and Kirk were right. 'Burke was indignant, however, at the fashion in which the philosophers of the Enlightenment casually dismissed the faith of ages and the proofs of genius with a complacent formula or a sniggering witticism.' (27) And Kirk shared his indignation.

Agnosticism – suspension of judgement in the face of the conflicting claims of tradition and enlightenment – was not, for Kirk, a satisfactory position, for he thought that one must see that 'reason' in the relevant sense is insufficient as a source of morality. Under the banner of an urbane skepticism, agnosticism promotes both a repellent democratic mediocrity (the *Vox populi* that once claimed to be the *Vox Dei*) and submission to the emotions and ambitions of those who must triumph if there is no governing supernatural purpose in the universe. 'If chaos reigns, then the fragile equalitarian doctrines and emancipating programs of the revolutionary reformers have no significance, for in a vortex of chaos, only force and appetite signify.' (27) In such a contest between good and evil, one must side with what one understands from tradition to be truly good, even if this means that one must oppose various potentially beneficial social and political experiments and serve the good of others rather than one's own immediate good.

This is the daunting challenge of a genuine conservatism today, as Kirk presents it, relying upon Burke for the most striking formulations of his position. It elevates piety over progress and self-restraint over self-expression or self-promotion. It is a flexible posture in practice and not dogmatically Christian. Kirk cites with approval Burke's dictum that it is sometimes necessary to change in order to conserve: 'a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.'⁴ He also points to the principle of toleration illustrated by the one of the greatest practical actions of Burke's long political career, his prosecution of Warren Hastings, in part because of Hastings' foolishly contemptuous attitude towards the religious traditions of India. 'Every state is the creation of Providence, whether or not its religion is Christianity,' Kirk says. 'Christianity is the highest of religions; but every sincere

creed is a recognition of Divine purpose in the universe, and all mundane order is dependent upon reverence for the religious creed which a people have inherited from their fathers. This conviction redoubled Burke's detestation of Hastings: the Governor-General had ridden roughshod over native religious tradition and ceremonial in India.' (29-30)

For Kirk, 'the essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity.' (7) Its antithesis is 'innovation' (5, 57), and the more practical principles that conservatives embrace vary with their circumstances, since they are relative, discouraging responses to whatever innovations are being promoted in their different times and places.⁵ Kirk is therefore reluctant to say very much about any conservative 'articles of belief,' but he does spell out six 'canons of conservative thought,' which are frequently quoted, despite being somewhat misleading as an epitome of his argument.⁶ The most important of these 'canons' are the first, fourth, and sixth.

'(1) Belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead.

'(4) Persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected, and that economic levelling is not economic progress.

'(6) Recognition that change and reform are not identical, and that innovation is a devouring conflagration more often than it is a torch of progress.' (7-8)

The first and most distinctive of the six canons pits the religious faith of conservatives against the autonomous reason of modern social and political innovators. For the conservative, according to Burke, 'political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems. . . . Politics is the art of apprehending and applying the Justice which is above nature.' (7-8) This implies, as becomes clearer in Kirk's subsequent unfolding of the Anglo-American conservative tradition, respect for religious establishments, that is, for those who have been authorized to apprehend and apply the divine standard of justice. Neither they nor the other privileged strata of society should be deprived of their property and status in the vain hope of erasing the natural differences between leaders and led. To be sure, society must sometimes change, 'for slow change is the means of its conservation, like the human body's perpetual renewal,' but the 'proper instrument' for change is 'Providence,' Kirk says, not the 'sophisters and calculators' who advance imprudent schemes of radical reform. For Kirk, following Burke, 'the test of a statesman is his cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces.' (8)

Now Grant, by contrast, never surveyed conservative political thought and never really tried to define conservatism, beyond contrasting it with progressivism.⁷ Nonetheless, much of what Kirk says that I have been summarizing, he would surely have accepted – that conservation is necessarily relative to innovation; that modern Anglo-American conservatism has been shaped

and defined by its opposition to the secularizing projects of modern liberal philosophers that stem from their view that ‘man’s essence is his freedom’; that the conservative’s acceptance of permanent evils contrasts with the liberal’s promises of rapid improvement; and that conservative politics means in practice deference to established authorities and religious traditions. An important divergence becomes apparent, however, not just from Grant’s silence about Burke but also from his occasional dismissive comments about him. Rather than crediting him with the creation of a modern philosophical conservatism, Grant was inclined to deny his significance as a source of genuinely conservative thought.

The difference between Grant and Kirk with respect to Burke can be explained by focussing on strictly scholarly questions. Was Kirk aligning himself with Burke on the basis of an accurate interpretation of the latter’s thought? He sides with those who see in Burke an exponent of traditional natural law, rejecting out of hand the claim sometimes made that Burke was a utilitarian and just a ‘political Christian’ (25), aware of the political importance of any people’s religious superstitions, no matter how absurd they may be, but respecting those of his countrymen only because they provided him, as a true statesman, with one of his most important tools. Was Burke really saying that the prudent statesman will neither believe nor attack ‘religion’ but simply use it ‘to make improvements’? Some passages of the Reflections suggest this somewhat impious interpretation of what he says he knows about religion.⁸

The basic difference between Grant and Kirk may derive from a different understanding of divine providence. Very simply, is it understandable? That is, is it within the power of human reason to grasp, as Kirk put it, ‘the real tendency of Providential social forces’? Or should the divine will not be regarded as something essentially inscrutable, that is, as an impenetrable mystery to unassisted human reason? For practical purposes, should one not attend to divine revelation in Holy Scripture rather than trying to decipher the ‘divine intent’ in ‘the unrolling of history’? These questions, which seem to have only a narrowly theological import, may reveal a profound disjuncture, separating two kinds of conservative thought, and they may help to throw light on the differences between practical conservative politics in Canada and the United States.

Asking what conservatives should do, if they wish to follow Burke’s lead, is a way of clarifying the theoretical question I have in mind. Thus should practical conservatives try to ride the progressive, individualist, egalitarian, liberal, and democratic wave of recent centuries, as something so huge that God must have intended it, but skimming along its crest more prudently or cautiously than its more complacent or enthusiastic advocates? Should conservatives see ‘a real tendency of providential social forces’ in the gradual development (already visible in Burke’s time) of an affluent urban-industrial society with mass scientific education and a utilitarian moral culture? What about the vast and apparently inexorable changes comprehended under the term ‘globalization’? Should conservatives share the hopes and faith of those who see the growth of a worldwide economy and society as the key to a peaceful, free and democratic world order? More pointedly, should conservatives see the hand of God in the advances in

surgery and pharmacology – not to mention the processing of rubber – that have made possible the sexual liberation of the recent past? Or should they stubbornly try to uphold the old beliefs and standards of value, digging in their heels, so to speak, while pointing to the burning bush? Does political philosophy, if not genuine biblical piety, not somehow have to escape the grip of a standard as changeable and ambiguous as our evolving tradition?

To understand these difficult questions, it may be helpful to put the sharp difference between Grant and Kirk regarding Burke in the context of a broader survey of some of the other differences between them.

Differences

Grant was a Canadian, Kirk an American, and the impact of this elementary difference seems to have been affected by another difference in their circumstances. Grant was the product of a distinguished family which placed him, so to speak, in a high pulpit at the centre of English Canadian society, while Kirk, the son of a locomotive engineer, growing up and living most of his life in small towns in the bush country of Michigan, was always on the fringes of American wealth and glamour and easy to spot as a dissenter. Grant, by contrast, was often mistakenly seen as the nostalgic spokesman of a dying provincial establishment. The academic training of Grant and Kirk, though similar in some respects, as noted earlier, was quite different in others. Neither Grant nor Kirk had the benefit of a rigorous, contemporary graduate education, with core courses to steep them in the most recent major contributions to some narrowly defined field of research, so both were free to read more eclectically, but Grant's topic at Oxford required that he concentrate on philosophy and theology, while Kirk at St. Andrews was freer to indulge his taste for history and literature. Both later published more than most academic writers and university teachers, but Kirk published much more than Grant – about twice as many large volumes as Grant's six short ones, plus another dozen shorter books and edited collections as well as innumerable articles and columns. As noted earlier, Kirk's second book, The Conservative Mind, made him a public figure at a relatively young age, and he maintained an engagement with practical politics throughout his life, while Grant was little known until the publication of Lament for a Nation in 1965 and played little part in practical politics after about 1970.

These differences, like the obvious similarities noted earlier, are easily seen. Only a little more familiarity with the two men's writings is needed to see some further differences. Grant had a greater interest in and respect for both ancient philosophy, particularly Plato, and modern German philosophy, particularly Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, while Kirk seems to have had only a conventional piety about the Greeks and he either ignored the Germans altogether or dismissed them (Hegel, in particular) with a few stock objections. This difference parallels another: Grant tended to focus on the contemporary thinkers with whom he disagreed fundamentally, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, while Kirk showed little interest in the detailed arguments of the liberals and socialists he excoriated.

The deeper dissimilarity indicated by these more superficial differences is perhaps best introduced by recalling two of the main themes of Grant's first book, Philosophy in the Mass Age. The book began as a series of radio lectures designed to introduce a general audience to the study of moral philosophy. Grant's introduction consists essentially of an extended contrast between the ancient and modern ways of thinking about moral norms – between, in other words, the ancient understanding of natural law and the modern conception of human freedom. The most important source of this difference – the basic cause of the shift from thinking of ourselves as part of a natural order and as subordinate to divine law, on the one hand, to seeing ourselves rather as authentically free, the makers of our own laws, because nothing beyond us limits what we should do, on the other hand – is, Grant claims, Christianity.⁹ In short, our deepest and most important religious tradition is the primary source, according to Grant, of our contemporary secular, liberal, progressive politics and culture. The result, if one accepts Grant's paradoxical but nonetheless plausible claim, must be an ambivalent reaction to the deeply ambiguous idea of respect for tradition or traditional values. Conservative invocations of tradition, like that of Kirk, are attempts to express what Grant calls 'the truth of order and limit . . . that gives form to persons, to families, to education, to worship, to politics, and to the economic system.'¹⁰ But given the 'historical' character of our religious tradition (as a story of redemption), such appeals are also implicitly calls for the overcoming of whatever imperfect conventions and social structures we find ourselves within. How is one to reconcile these two sides – the conservative and the progressive – of our tradition? With prudence, in practice, one hopes, but can one say anything more 'theoretically'? The resolution is to be found, if it can be found at all, Grant says, in a more adequate doctrine of God.

Needless to say, there is no such doctrine or even any clear indication of the need for such a doctrine in Burke, and Grant was pointing to this gap when he said, in Lament for a Nation, that Burke offers 'less a clear view of existence than an appeal to an ill-defined past.'¹¹

Grant's reservations about Burkean conservatism were greatly clarified when he began to read Leo Strauss around 1960. In the final chapter of Nature Right and History, Strauss argues that Burke, despite his antipathy to Rousseau and his scorn for 'imaginary rights' and more generally his contempt for political 'metaphysicians' with their abstract theorizing about politics, and despite his reverence for tradition, including his apparent deference to natural law, is best understood as 'a preparation for Hegel.'¹² He carried the 'secularization' of earlier religious and political thought, and in particular, the modern reinterpretation of the idea of providence, further than had the radicals he opposed.¹³ So his intransigent opposition to the French Revolution must not blind us, Strauss says, 'to the fact that, in opposing the French Revolution, he has recourse to the same fundamental principle which is at the bottom of the revolutionary theorems and which is alien to all earlier thought.'¹⁴ In short, Burke should be seen as a primary source of the historicism (or relativism) that conservatives such as Kirk decry.

Grant neither appealed to the authority of Burke, as Kirk did, nor did he deplore his influence, as Strauss seemed to be doing, but he looked elsewhere for illumination – not just to

Strauss, but also, in particular, to Heidegger and to Simone Weil.¹⁵

Perhaps the most revealing difference between Grant and Kirk is suggested by the presence of Heidegger in Grant's intellectual pantheon and his absence from Kirk's. Heidegger's brief but undeniable association with Hitler gives him some credibility as a man of the Right, if not as a conservative, but his reputation as a source of the postmodernism popular on the Left during the past generation has made him anathema to most North American conservatives. For Grant, however, Heidegger and Nietzsche were the most perceptive observers and revealers of modernity, and he found Heidegger's analysis of technology (Technik) the most illuminating explanation of his own belief in its fundamental importance. In Kirk's writings, by contrast, not only is there no mention of Heidegger, but more significantly, there is nothing comparable to what Grant says about technology – no suggestion, in other words, that not just abstract or 'metaphysical' theorizing about politics, but scientific reason itself as currently understood is the deepest intellectual source of our social and political perplexities.¹⁶

The most easily seen and demonstrated of the important differences between Grant and Kirk is, however, simply their difference with respect to Strauss. Grant praised Strauss's writings, followed his lead, and acknowledged his debts. Kirk, who cannot have been unaware of Strauss's writings and of the effect they were having on the shaping of 'the neoconservative mind' in the United States, almost never mentions him and never, so far as I know, says anything of any significance about him.¹⁷

In Conclusions

Grant and Kirk were almost exact contemporaries in roughly similar circumstances who had essentially the same reservations about the liberal democratic political thought of their nominally different compatriots, English Canadians and Americans. Their fundamental similarity, which distinguishes them from many other conservatives, is the place they give religion in the explanation of conservative principles. Other conservatives, particularly neoconservatives, are more willing to accept the now deeply rooted and apparently beneficial modern conception of autonomous human reason as a satisfactory basis for political life. Grant and Kirk turned instead to tradition, using that term in their most popular works without great precision, to designate earlier British political thought. They both recognized, of course, that traditions are mixtures of good and bad and that tradition alone is hardly more satisfactory as a guide than autonomous reason. Because of their different nationalities, they faced different challenges making their claims for tradition intelligible and acceptable to their compatriots. They explained their basic ideas in different ways and had different relations to the practical politics of their time and place. But they both raised the awkward question – assuming that religion in general is important politically – of which religion in particular should be recognized as the source of authority by the opponents of secular, progressive visions and doctrines.

The question that emerges immediately from the comparison I have sketched above is

whether Burke provides a satisfactory explanation of the thinking that leads one to say that there must be a close relation between religion and politics – or as Burke put it, ‘that religion is the basis of civil [i.e. civilized] society.’ Kirk treats Burke as an authority; Grant does not. They would presumably agree, however, that since there is (or should be) such a relation, our increasingly ‘traditional’ but also increasingly contested notions of a ‘strict separation of Church and State’ and ‘official neutrality’ with respect to religious differences have to be considered a bad or misleading part of our tradition.¹⁸

Grant and Kirk differed not just in the style and substance of their thinking and writing, but also in their relations to practical politics. Grant as a writer was evidently briefer, clearer, and more intransigently philosophical. He may have seen more clearly and he certainly leads his readers to see more deeply what is questionable in any appeal (such as Burke’s) to tradition alone as a basis for opposition to the reforming and revolutionary politics of the past two centuries. If the reformers and revolutionaries have been on the wrong track, so was Burke. To see our current social and political situation in a clear light and to understand the ‘malaise of modernity’ it is said to create, it may be necessary to gain a much deeper understanding than Burke provides of the classical and existential alternatives to modern scientific reason, that is, ‘instrumental reason’ or ‘technology.’ But Grant’s superiority as a political philosopher was perhaps his weakness as a political thinker, that is to say, as a public intellectual who could engage in a practical way with his contemporaries. Kirk’s looser and longer historical narratives offered a more accommodating basis for engagement in the rough and tumble of practical politics. In fact, as noted earlier, he played for many years a more prominent and more influential role in American politics than Grant played in Canadian politics. Yet Kirk had the more difficult challenge, recommending pre-revolutionary British traditions to an American readership than Grant had lamenting the abandonment of such traditions by Canadians. Kirk had to oppose a conventional patriotic narrative while Grant could appeal to one.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Kirk plainly had the greater immediate impact on practical politics. What, if anything, does this difference reveal about practical conservatism in Canada and the United States?

A proper answer to this question would require a lengthy discussion of the rancorous and confusing factional struggles among conservative politicians and intellectuals (isolationists, populists, libertarians, neocons, theocons, paleocons, etc.) on both sides of the border during the past fifty to sixty years. It would have to begin by considering the deficiencies of ‘conservative’ as a comprehensive designation for all those on the ‘negative’ side of our contemporary liberal democratic politics. Like the other terms used to describe political positions – such as Left and Right or moderate and extremist – liberal and conservative are terms of contrast that acquire their only significant meanings from practically important conflicts in particular historical circumstances, which are always changing. Needless to say, the conflicts and circumstances of today are not exactly those of the Whig-and-Tory world that gave rise to what we now call classical, Burkean conservatism. What purpose is served by continuing to speak of Burke’s conservatism as the only true or genuine conservatism? Other popular terms – populist and

fascist, for example – may be no better, and to confuse matters further, liberalism and even socialism can now claim to be forms of conservatism, but insight depends upon seeing that conventional political terms can conceal as well as reveal the relevant facts.²⁰

To illustrate my point, let me refer very briefly to a well-known interpretation of our liberal-conservative-socialist politics. According to this interpretation, the major differences in the history and present tendencies of conservatism in Canada and the United States can be explained by the presence of Toryism in Canada's past and its absence from 'the American mind' since the expulsion of the Tories following the American revolution more than 200 years ago.²¹ To be sure, it may be conceded, this basic difference has become less important in recent years because of global cultural homogenization, particularly the collapse of socialism into an amorphous 'third way,' and the growing American influence over Canadian education and the media, which has been washing away Canada's cultural distinctiveness since at least 1960. Nonetheless, it may be claimed, Canada's Tory past gives its present-day conservatives a moderate, pinkish, collectivist tinge that one cannot find among the ruthlessly individualistic Hamiltonian 'business liberals' who call themselves conservatives in the United States. In short, there is more genuine, classical or Burkean conservatism in Canada than in the United States.

It is not my purpose to challenge this interpretation directly. A generation ago it became the basis for the standard academic accounts of our party politics and a staple of our political education because it has some important merits. But like many good interpretations, it simplifies a more complex reality and has difficulty accommodating all the curious details of the historical record.

One such detail is the presence of 'genuine conservatism,' represented by Kirk, in 'the American mind' more than fifty years ago. The genuineness of this conservatism is shown by Kirk's reliance upon the authority of Burke, who provides the generally accepted standard of classically conservative principles for English Canadians and Americans. Indeed, the most striking difference between Grant and Kirk – their difference with respect to Burke – suggests that Kirk may have been a better representative than Grant of the ideas and sentiments of 'classical conservatism.' As noted above, Grant found his most important intellectual nourishment both further back in time – in the ancient world, particularly in the Platonic dialogues – and closer to the present – in postmodern writers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. If, as this suggests, there was at least as much 'toryism' in the American as in the Canadian mind fifty years ago, then whatever differences may be observed at the level of practical politics in the two countries since that time must be explained by other factors, such as differences in their economies or their immigration histories and ethnic demographics or their roles and responsibilities in international politics, because of their differences in size and power.

The insights suggested by this line of thought may be sharpened by considering Grant and Kirk in relation to the neoconservatism that is now said to be the dominant form of conservatism in both Canada and the United States. What exactly is this neoconservatism? Grant and Kirk are similar enough in their opinions and careers to provide useful landmarks, as it

were, for locating this new brand of conservatism in ‘ideological space.’ In Canada, neoconservatism appears to be a harder, tougher, more rustic, more intense, more doctrinaire, more individualist, and less compassionate ‘right wing ideology’ by comparison with the older ‘progressive conservatism’ it has displaced.²² Grant, as the ideal-typical ‘red tory,’ can be used as a foil to reveal the ‘extremism’ of the local neoconservative ‘cowboy capitalists.’ American neoconservatives, by contrast, are commonly thought to occupy the ideological space adjacent to the older American conservatives but to their left, because they are said to be more moderate, more urbane, more communitarian, more compassionate, and much less doctrinaire than their Gothic rivals, now called paleoconservatives, in the broad American conservative movement. Of course, ‘neoconservatism’ has been a response to quite different practical problems in Canada and in the United States. In Canada, the Reform party and today’s Conservative Party of Canada have been distinguished from the outset from other varieties of liberalism and conservatism more by their economic policies – their ‘business liberalism’ – and their espousal of regional grievances than by their positions on questions of race, religion, culture, social morality, or foreign policy and foreign military commitments.²³ Their most troublesome enemies have been on their left flank, accusing them of not being progressive enough. In the United States, the neoconservatism that became the dominant strain of American conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s has been distinctly softer and ‘pinker’ – more egalitarian and internationalist or cosmopolitan, and less religious or individualist and libertarian – than the older style American conservatism that provided the background to Kirk’s ascendancy as a theorist of American conservatism.²⁴ The American neoconservative ‘persuasion’ took shape in the 1960s and 1970s around issues that had to do, domestically, with civil rights and the counterculture and, internationally, with the promotion of democracy in distant lands by military support for allies in South-East Asia and the Middle East. Its most interesting enemies, including Kirk, have been to its right. To say that American neocons are Burkean while their Canadian fellow travellers are more Hamiltonian would be an oversimplification, but like other good simplifications, it might have more than just the merits of being easily remembered and practically useful, for it would direct attention away from the confusing historical reasons why ‘Toryism’ had more appeal in the remote past to Canadians than to Americans and instead point towards some of the currently more relevant differences in demography and circumstances noted a moment ago.

Endnotes

1. For basic information about Kirk, I have relied upon W. Wesley McDonald, Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004). For Grant, see William Christian, George Grant: A Biography (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
2. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford University Press, 1993), 90-1.
3. Russell Kirk, The Conservative Mind from Burke to Santayana (Chicago: Regnery, 1953). Subsequent references to this source will be my means of parenthetical page numbers. The book went through seven editions, the last in 1986. It was Kirk's second book, the first being his Master's thesis on John Randolph of Roanoke which was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1951.
4. Burke, Reflections, 21. Or as Kirk says, 'the perceptive reformer combines an ability to reform with a disposition to preserve.' (40)
5. Hence the possibility that communists, too, can become conservatives, nostalgic about the past, as shown by the development of 'Ostalgie' in former East Germany. Cf. Terence Ball et al., Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal, Second Canadian Edition (Toronto: Pearson Canada, 2010), 161.
6. Similar lists can be found in Kirk, A Program for Conservatives (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954), 41-3, and in 'What Is Conservatism?' in The Essential Russell Kirk, ed. George A. Panichas (ISI Books, 2007), 7-9.
7. See George Grant, English-Speaking Justice (Toronto: Anansi, 1985), 3-12.
8. See especially the passage on the French revolutionaries' misuse of the monasteries. Burke, Reflections, 158-59. The much larger and more difficult problem suggested by 'the Burke question' is whether the truth is ultimately the same everywhere, always. If it is, then one of the clever ways of dismissing Kirk, which could also be used to brush Grant aside – 'born one hundred and fifty years too late and in the wrong country' – should itself be brushed aside, for it would evidently be just a way of begging the question. The unspoken assumption behind the taunt is that Kirk's conservative position would have been true in Britain around 1800 but was false in America in 1950. In other words, not just minor social conventions change with time and place but also fundamental principles of politics and morality. All is 'historically relative,' except perhaps this generalization ('historicism') itself, which would seem to be claiming eternal truth. Cf. Clinton Rossiter, Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 222.

9. See George Grant, Philosophy in the Mass Age, ed. William Christian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 38-48. Christianity is said to be the most important cause of the change in question because of its 'absolute historicity.' Time has a beginning, with the creation, and an end, when God's redemptive purposes will be achieved. Events in time are not endless repetitions of natural cycles but rather unique and irreversible steps directed to a definite end. (Christ dies on the cross only once.) Under the new covenant, fidelity to divine law and trust in divine providence is gradually overwhelmed by the freedom and responsibility of every follower of Christ to play a part – his own part – in the divinely ordained process of salvation. 'Conscious of themselves as free, men came to believe that history could be shaped to their own ends. . . . Time is still oriented to the future, but it is a future that will be dominated by man's activity. . . . The idea of progress crushes the idea of providence.' (44, 46)
10. Grant, Philosophy in the Mass Age, 100-101.
11. George Grant, Lament for a Nation (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), 70.
12. Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (University of Chicago Press, 1953), 319.
13. 'Secularization' here means 'the "temporalization" of the spiritual or of the eternal' culminating in the view that 'the ways of God are scrutable to sufficiently enlightened men' and therefore that man can take his bearings from God's providence rather than God's law. 'In proportion as the providential order came to be regarded as intelligible to man, and therefore evil came to be regarded as evidently necessary or useful, the prohibition against doing evil lost its evidence.' Strauss, Natural Right and History, 317.
14. Stauss, Natural Right and History, 316.
15. Cf. H. D. Forbes, George Grant: A Guide to His Thought (University of Toronto Press, 2007).
16. I have not checked all of Kirk's voluminous writings for relevant references, but none are to be found where I would most expect to find them, in Kirk's large volume on The Roots of American Order, 3rd ed. (Regnery Gateway, 1991). For an exemplary conservative condemnation of Heidegger, see Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
17. See Kirk, Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1967), 184-5, for a brief explanation of an explicit disagreement with Strauss regarding Burke. Whatever the merits of what Kirk says there about the larger context of a passage Strauss uses to support his interpretation, Kirk fails to address the underlying question about 'historicism' that Strauss was raising.
18. Cf. Grant, Technology and Empire (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 43-60. The question Grant points to, at the end of his reflections on 'Religion and the State,' is whether philosophy can take

the place of religion as a basis for politics without itself becoming religious.

19. Kirk had to maintain, against the scholarly consensus about the liberal and/or democratic radicalism of the rebels, that ‘the American Revolution, substantially, had been a conservative reaction, in the English political tradition, against royal innovation.’ (6) Cf. Grant, Lament for a Nation, 60-87.

20. Cf. Paul Edward Gottfried, Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), who makes a strong case for the view that ‘conservatism’ is obsolete because of the contradiction it involves between ‘an idealized tradition and social realities that are utterly different.’ (40) Bob Rae, The Three Questions: Prosperity and the Public Good (Toronto: Viking, 1998), shows how Burke can be invoked on behalf of Canadian social democracy, a possibility suggested by Grant, Lament for a Nation, 59.

21. Gad Horowitz, ‘Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada: An Interpretation,’ Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, 32 (1966), 143-71, and Ball et al., Political Ideologies, 26-7 and 97-109.

22. Trevor Harrison, Of Passionate Intensity: Right-Wing Populism and the Reform Party of Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), and Brooke Jeffrey, Hard Right Turn: The New Face of Neo-conservatism in Canada (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1999).

23. See for example Preston Manning, The New Canada (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1992), 102-9, 271-73, 293-95, 300-51, and the ‘Statement of Principles’ at the end (360-61).

24. Cf. Murray Friedman, The Neoconservative Revolution: Jewish Intellectuals and the Shaping of Public Policy (Cambridge University Press, 2005), which provides a balanced and detailed account of the origins of American neoconservatism out of the mix of Trotskyism and cold war liberalism among New York intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s.