

America’s War Casualties; Founding of the American Republic: Russell Kirk’s “The Roots of American Order: Chapter 2: “The Laws and the Prophets,” Moses

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The Roots of American Order

The catalyst that introduces a new era into world history is not coordinated with the Gregorian calendar but with events that alter the global status quo to such a degree that everyone is forced to orient and adjust. In 1781 Washington’s victory over Cornwallis at Yorktown signaled to the world that England would not dominate the New World. The War of 1812 sent a signal to England that the sun would not rise or set on the Union Jack in the USA. The 1914 Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to Austria’s throne, ignited World War I which was a bloody standoff of horrendous trench combat until the United States entered the picture and brought peace to the Continent and to Great Britain. The US was required again some 25 years later to bring not only German fascism to heel but also the imperial dynasty of Japan. These events established the United States and its military as a super power. That power has been tested three times over the past fifty years: Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War and the current Islamic War, the latter having begun on September 11, 2001.

In each of these conflicts, brave men have placed their lives on the line in pursuit and in defense of the freedom our Declaration of Independence affirmed and sought. The numbers are evidence of patriotic fervor that placed freedom ahead of one’s own future. Here is a listing of those killed in action in our nation’s wars:

War for Independence	4,435	8 years
War of 1812	2,260	3 years
Mexican War	13,283	2 years
War Between the States	536,833	4 years
Spanish-American War	2, 446	1 year
World War I	116,708	2 years
World War II	407,316	4 years
Korean War	36,516	4 years
Vietnam War	58, 205	9 years
Persian Gulf War	382	1 year
Islamic War : Afghanistan	292	4.5 years
Islamic War: Iraq	2,462	3 years

These totals add up to 1,165, 401 Americans who have given their lives for our freedoms. In addition to these are 2,986 civilians who perished on 11 September 2001 in New York, Arlington, and Shanksville.

There are principles that produce freedom which in turn inspires men to place their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in Harm’s Way in order to preserve them. These ideas were proved over the course of three millennia by four great systems of government: Israel, Greece, Rome, and England’s. Our Founding Fathers studied, evaluated, and included many of them in the Declaration and Constitution of the United States.

This morning we are going to observe several of these principles from the writing of Russell Kirk. Dr. Kirk was born in Plymouth, Michigan in 1916 and died at his family home of Mecosta, Michigan in 1994. He was a noted historian and social critic and was best known as the father of conservatism. His landmark book, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, published in 1953, is considered the catalyst for the conservative movement that led to the Reagan Revolution in American political affairs. It is still considered one of the most important, if not the most important, texts in twentieth-century conservative thought.

His most important books include *Eliot and his Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (1972), *The Roots of American Order* (1974), *Decadence and Renewal in the Higher Learning* (1978), and the autobiographical *Sword of the Imagination: Memoirs of a Half Century of Literary Conflict*, published posthumously in 1995.

Kirk grounded his Burkean conservatism in political philosophy and his belated but strong religious faith, rather than in free market libertarianism and economic reasoning, whose anti-conservative implications he appreciated all too well. *The Conservative Mind* hardly mentions economics at all. Late in life, he grew disenchanted with American neoconservatives as well.



The source of our study will be Dr. Kirk's *The Roots of American Order* which describes the beliefs and the institutions which have nurtured the order of the soul and the order of the commonwealth in the United States.

Kirk, Russell. *The Roots of American Order*. (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1974).

I. Chapter 2: The Laws and the Prophets

The tap-root of American order runs deep into a Levantine desert; it began to grow some thirteen centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Through Moses the moral principles that move the civilization of Europe and America and much more of the world first obtained clear expression.

By an extraordinary perception, the Israelites came to understand the human condition as it had not been understood before. Through Moses, the Hebrews learned more distinctly that there watched over them an all-powerful intelligence which gave them their moral nature.

"Revelation" means the unveiling of truths that men could not have obtained from simple experience in this world. It is a communication of knowledge from some source that transcends ordinary human perception. To the Israelites, Moses made known that there exists but one God, Jehovah; that God had made a covenant or compact with His people: that He had decreed laws by which they should live. From that revelation have grown modern ethics and modern social institutions and much besides.

"Exodus" means departure: the Israelites were departing from Egypt into Palestine. Also from the old moral order of the cosmological empires—from that old order's capricious deities and arbitrary priest-kings—into a new moral order which would be called, later, the faith of Judaism. Later still, this moral order revealed at Sinai would become the foundation of the moral order called Christianity.

Some twenty-nine centuries after Moses heard the voice from the burning bush, a smaller band of wanderers would embark upon another exodus, farther in distance but swifter in time than the exodus of the Israelites. The people of this later exodus were the Puritans, sailing for the New World.

The moral commandments revealed to Moses upon Mount Sinai were broken by the Israelites almost as soon as they were made known. Yet without knowledge of that moral order, the men of ancient Israel and Judah could not have lived in community. And so it is with the people of modern America, and of lands which inherit the moral understanding of Judaism or of Christianity.

Even the simplest human communities cannot endure without some form of laws, consciously held and enforced. Ants and bees may cooperate by instinct; men must have revelation and reason. What we call "biblical law" was not the first code of justice. Long before Moses and his brother Aaron led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, codes of law had been promulgated among the Babylonians, the Summerians, the Akkadians, the Assyrians, and the Hittites. Yet it is the Law made known to through Moses that has survived, and which still works upon the society in which we live.

In the dawn of every religion, some such figure as Moses may be discerned: the "seer" who sees what others cannot see. The seer communicates such truth to his followers, teaching them how to order their lives and to live together in community. The other creeds of the ancient world are dust and ashes now, but the Decalogue of Moses, and the understanding of man's existence under God which Moess communicated to the people remain a living power, the source of order.

All the aspects of any civilization arise out of a people's religion: its politics, its economics, its arts, its sciences, even its simple crafts are the by-products of religious insights. For until human beings are tied together by some common faith, and share certain moral principles, they prey upon one another. In the common worship, a community forms. At the heart of every culture is a body of ethics, of distinctions between good and evil; and in the beginning, at least, those distinctions are founded upon the authority of revealed religion. Not until a people have come to share religious belief are they able to work together satisfactorily, or even to make sense of the world in which they find themselves.

Animals survive by instinct; true human beings cannot. Possessing reason, men ask questions. They find themselves, as did the Israelites in the desert of Sinai, in a condition of danger, suffering, and ignorance. Led perhaps by some man of marvelous insights, they join together in seeking answers to their questions. So the religious association comes into existence. Men try to acquire protection and knowledge from a power that is more than human. Without such communication, they cannot survive on the human level.

What Moses experienced and expressed was something more than what we call “intuition” and something more than even what we call “vision.” Moses’ perception was transcendent—that is, Moses perceived the nature of being through some means beyond the limits of human rationality and private experience. Moses was enabled to express truths about the human condition which could not have come out of this environment or even from the collective experience of the Israelites. This transcending of the five human senses and of memory, this communication with a source of wisdom more than human, is what we mean by the word “revelation.”

In the lines of T. S. Eliot, “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” Through Moses, long dead, meaning came into human existence. Our modern moral order, at least in what is called the West, runs back to the burning bush on Mt. Horeb.

The American *moral* order could not have come into existence at all, had it not been for the legacy left by Israel. In the whole of John Adams’ political writings, which draw heavily upon Greek and Roman political experience, there is no account of the states of Israel and Judah. It was not that Adams ignored the patrimony of the Hebrews: rather, he understood that the *political* experience of Israel and Judah was irrelevant to American circumstances. “I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation,” Adams wrote in 1809. “If I were an atheist, and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument of civilizing the nations.

“If I were an atheist of the other sect, who believe or pretend to believe that all is ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization.”

As Adams understood, it is the prophets of Israel and Judah, not the kings, who teach us the meaning of order. Their one clear political principle was a religious doctrine. Jehovah is King, they declared, and true laws are Jehovah’s laws. Judges, kings, and high priests, the powers of this earth, are but surrogates of Jehovah at best, indulged by Him or sometimes made instruments of His wrath.

This, then, is the high contribution of Israel to modern social order: the understanding that all true law comes from God, and that God is the source of order and justice.

But the moral order of Israel, the sanctuary of the soul, has transcended time and circumstances. It lives in the modern world. The Bible is the record of the growth of that moral order.

From the lips of Moses and of the prophets, the Hebrews became aware of eternity. This is not easy for us to understand. For modern men generally think of what we call “time” much as the Greeks thought of time: that is, time seems “linear,” extending in a kind of line from some point in remote antiquity to the present. But the Hebrews thought of time as “psychic” [ψυχῆ, *psuchē*: soul]—that is, related to the soul, to spiritual experience. For God, all things are eternally present: God is not bound by human conventions of “time.” What occurred to Moses and the prophets was a breakthrough in time, so to speak: for certain moments time and the timeless coincided, and the Hebrews were given a glimpse of God’s eternity.

God is outside of “time,” even though time is His creation: for God, all events in the history of a people are simultaneously present. God is not bound by “past” or “future” or “present.”

With the revelation to Moses, made fuller by the prophets, God had broken into time. Thereafter the Hebrews held a view of history and the human condition very different from that of other peoples.

This digression about the Hebrew concept of time is closely related to the concept of order—and, through Jewish and Christian teaching, to the idea of order which still underlies America's personal and social order. To understand the human condition, one tries to know God. If such is God's nature, then the "time" which matters is the time in which men commune with God and fulfill His purposes. Through God, man enters into eternity, redeemed from sin. If this is true, surely history takes on a new meaning: history becomes the life of a people in their search for God, or their flight from God. And accounts of the doings of captains and kings are important only so far as those events relate to God's purposes with mankind.

If one accepts the reality of a just and loving God, whose eternity is the escape from the shackles of time and the sufferings of this world, it must follow that a people should enter into the order which God has designed for them. If God has ordained an order for the soul or the person, and an order for the community, to flout that order is a destructive act of disobedience, by which a man would make himself a prisoner of time.

As Jeremiah had prophesied, Jehovah had put His law in their inward parts, and written it upon their hearts [Jer. 31:33]. In exile, their national community broken, they perceived reality of God inwardly, through their worship. Personal knowledge of God's existence, justice and love, of God's eternity, entered into their lives. But for that knowledge and that confidence, they would have perished altogether.

From the experience of the Jews in history, within the confines of time, it is possible to learn why men submit themselves to a personal order and a social order. To go to the heart of the matter, why do human beings conform to a prescribed personal order, when often their immediate pleasure and advantage would be served by disregarding that personal order? Why do they conform to a prescribed social order, when often they seem to have much to gain by breaking the laws?

The fundamental reason for such obedience is this: God has willed such an order, and that order is for man's great benefit. If a man defies that order, he becomes something less than human: he separates himself from the God who brought him into existence, and who offers him eternity. Disorder is rejection of divine wisdom and justice and love. So for the sake of sustaining that order, and of playing his part in it, a man who believes in the Law and the Prophets will sacrifice everything worldly. It is better that a man should die in time than that a people should perish for eternity.

It is the Hebraic order which has come down through the centuries to the American Republic. God, the Lord of history, the timeless One, became known at Mount Sinai. His Law still is the source of order.