

Justice, Law, and Religion

Russell Kirk

NOWADAYS, NEAR THE CLOSE of the twentieth century of the Christian era, moral and political disorders bring on sorry confusion about the meanings of old words. As T. S. Eliot wrote in "Burnt Norton" –

*Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them.*

Conspicuous among such venerable words, often abused and distorted in our era, is that necessary word *Justice*. Intending to help purify the dialect of the tribe – to borrow another phrase from Eliot – I essay here to set down some desultory reflections on the relationships among justice, law, and religion, somewhat in the manner of the American Humanists of six decades ago.

In the ancient world, the most just of men was Solon, Athens' lawgiver, poet and hero. As Solon wrote of his reform of the Athenian constitution –

*Such power I gave the people as might do,
Abridged not what they had, nor lavished new;
Those that were great in wealth and high in place
My counsel likewise kept from all disgrace.
Before them both I kept my shield of might,
And let not either touch the other's right.*

To each class, that is, Solon assigned the rights and duties

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properly appertaining to that class, so preserving the peace: that is true social justice.

Yet we need not turn to the pages of Plutarch to discover just men: they are not an extinct species, although perhaps an endangered one. I think of my grandfather, Frank Pierce, a bank manager in Plymouth, twenty miles outside Detroit. He was the leading man of the Lower Town (now called Old Town), near the railroad yards – not because he was either rich or charismatic, but because he was just.

The virtue of justice, like the other cardinal virtues, is said to be its own reward – which is well, the virtue of justice seldom earning large material rewards. When a member of the town council, my grandfather refused to allow the supplying of the town's water, free of charge, to the town's chief factory – on the ground that if the factory's owners couldn't pay water bills, who could? For that offense, the

"How do just men and women apprehend the meaning of justice? From tradition, I maintain: from habits and beliefs that have long persisted within family and within local community."

firm's president swore he would have Pierce discharged by his bank; but the bank's president also happening to be a just man, my grandfather's livelihood was not swept away.

My grandfather's counsel was sought by many in the Lower Town who needed advice; and his kindness even moved him on occasion to extend interest-free personal loans, from his own pocket, to young married couples who could not meet the requirements for borrowing money from the bank. (His salary was two hundred dollars per month.)

I do not mean that he was indiscriminately sentimental; not at all. On the several occasions when robbers invaded his branch bank, he repelled them successfully, at high risk: for the just man defends whatever is entrusted to his charge, and sets his face against the lawless.