



Ancient Paths The Guardians of the West's Wisdom and Traditions

The prophet Jeremiah preached that the faithful were to *stand by the roads and look and ask for the ancient paths where the good way is*. The West has been blessed with many modern prophets who have acted as guardians of the ancient paths and of their wisdom and traditions. The apologetic writings of Irish parliamentarian Edmund Burke and English essayist G. K. Chesterton are arguably the best the West has produced since the 13th century's St. Thomas Aquinas.

A Frontal Assault

Today Western thinking has shown little regard for the thought of any Christian thinker, let alone that of either Burke or Chesterton. Old traditions still survive but have been under a frontal assault from the progressive forces in government, education and the mainstream media that have nearly reduced them to irrelevancy. Consequently the popular interest in traditions, customs and objective morality has succumbed on many fronts to technology, relativism and intellectual fads.

Traditionalism was an 18th-century European idea that was largely a response to the English Civil War and the French Revolution. In recent times movements in favor of traditional American moral and constitutional ideas such as the Constitution Party of Howard Phillips in the 1990s and the current Tea Party phenomenon have attempted a traditionalist revival in order to regain a modicum of political power and influence.

Belief in natural law and a transcendent moral order provides the foundation for traditionalist conservative thought. Reason and Divine Revelation validate natural law and the universal truths of faith. It is these eternal truths of faith and reason that have compelled men to order themselves and the world around them. Traditionalists strongly believe that religion precedes and energizes a vibrant civilization.

A Noble Life

Edmund Burke is best remembered for his heroic support of the American colonies in their struggle against King George III during the American Revolution and also for his pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which brilliantly explained his opposition to the French Revolution. Burke was a noble and humble man whose thought often soared with the eagles of reason and wisdom. He was a passionate enemy of arbitrary power and a zealous proponent of limited government.

Burke's unswerving opposition to colonial injustice in Ireland, America and India was driven by his profound respect for culture and tradition. But by the same token his peers had difficulty understanding his opposition to the revolution in France, which he opposed because of its violent and arbitrary disregard for ancient traditions and religious faith.

With regard to America Burke recognized what few of his contemporaries did. The American Revolution was not an upheaval in the usual sense but one uniquely based on maintaining the status quo of England's inattention toward its western colonies. This was the principle of *salutary neglect* where Americans had been virtually free to establish their own traditions and customs. By contrast the French Revolution was far more radical in its demolition of the pillars of French society and their replacement with the guillotine and eventually Napoleon Bonaparte.

Burke also was a firm believer in what he called *the little platoon we belong to in society. We begin our public affections in our families...we pass on to our neighborhoods*. To Burke this was the important first link by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind. This is essentially the Catholic principle of *subsidiarity*, which states that a central authority should perform only those tasks, which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.

The First Conservative Thinker

Burke never systematized his political philosophy into an ideology. It just emerged from his writings and speeches. Despite the fact that he was an Irish Protestant Burke had a profound respect for Catholicism, though it never materialized into a conversion as it did with Chesterton and Burke's most enthusiastic modern advocate, Russell Kirk.

Many historians have regarded Burke as the *first conservative thinker* and one of the most compelling political philosophers in the English language. Like so many other traditional thinkers Burke has fallen more into disinterest than disfavor over the years. Jesse Norman, the British Conservative Member of Parliament for Hereford, has successfully resurrected the 18th-century thinker with his incisive 2013 biography, *Edmund Burke: The First Conservative*.

Norman paints Burke as the most eloquent critic of the rationalist modernism that has dominated political thinking from Burke's time to the 21st century. Burke loathed a government that centrally planned and organized everything for its people, while underscoring the necessity of the unplanned and the commonsensical. He believed that nations and states should be organic, based on blood ties and kinship.

For similar reasons Norman thinks that Burke would not have favored the neoconservative idea that now seeks the overthrow of the existing order around the world under the shibboleth of *free trade, freedom of movement and globalism*. Burke would also reject the conventional wisdom of this century that global societies are just a number of interchangeable parts and can be moved around like pawns on a chessboard without concern for the integrity of historic nations.

The Prescriptive Past

In his defense of traditions and customs Burke found it necessary to restate the position of those who have faith in a permanent order of things. Burke recognized the civilizing effect religion had on society. He fervently believed in a Supreme Being whose providential will was perceptible throughout history. Thus he expressed his concern to Parliament that the well-being of the Roman clergy in Ireland be maintained for the prevention of disorder and subversion.

Burke had a lifelong concern for justice and liberty. He defended human liberties not because they were innovations of the Age of Reason but because they were ancient prerogatives guaranteed by immemorial usage. Liberty and law were likened to a married couple that must

stand or fall together and whose limits were determined by the common success of past experience.

Burke was a steadfast champion of the prescriptive past — that is, the wisdom of his ancestors and their venerable precepts — to the day he died in 1797. Burke believed that the prescription of a nation's customs, traditions and religious faith was a more certain guarantee of social harmony than any temporary legal statute. However, Burke warned that *if prescription be once shaken, no species of property is secure, when it once becomes an object large enough to tempt the cupidity of indigent power*. This is a wise counsel for a 21st-century America, which has witnessed its cultural decline in the wake of a 100-year Marxist assault on its permanent values.

A Journey of Faith

Arguably the greatest Christian thinker of the 20th century, Gilbert Keith Chesterton was cut from the same intellectual cloth as Burke. Born in 1874 into a Unitarian household, he became a devout Anglican partly thanks to the undeniable influence of his wife Frances.

At 6'4" and tipping the scales at nearly 300 pounds, Chesterton was an arresting figure with his habitual cigar in his mouth, cape, crumpled hat, pince-nez glasses, swordstick in hand and hearty laughter blowing through his moustache. Chesterton did take Burke one step further with his conversion to the Catholic Church in 1922, whereupon he quickly became its most ardent apologist until his death in 1936.

According to American Chesterton Society President Dale Ahlquist, Chesterton *is the model evangelist. He never lets his charity contradict his truth. He always puts them together*. In his 2012 book *The Complete Thinker: The Marvelous Mind of G.K. Chesterton* Ahlquist demonstrated how Chesterton amazed the literary world not only with the prolificacy of his production—he published over 100 books, contributed to hundreds more, and wrote thousands of essays, poetry, detective stories, history and Christian apologetics—but also for the profundity of his thought.

As a young man Chesterton traveled his journey of faith down the shadowy path from skepticism to Christianity mostly by analyzing the various *freethinking* philosophies he encountered as a lecturer. His comparative religious studies uncovered so many errors and contradictions about the nature of the universe that Chesterton published a critique of several major writers of his day including Rudyard Kipling, George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, entitled *Heretics*. He read all the skeptics of Christianity until he finally concluded that Catholicism must be *an*

extraordinary religion to incite so diverse and contradictory a set of claims against it. Chesterton believed that original sin was the one Catholic doctrine that is easily verifiable and validated by human history. One merely had to read a newspaper.

Democracy of the Dead

This absent-minded, overgrown elf of a man debated many of the celebrated intellectuals of his time, including Shaw, Wells, Bertrand Russell and Clarence Darrow. According to contemporary accounts Chesterton usually emerged as the victor in these oratorical contests. Unfortunately it has been his opponents whom the secular world has baptized with fame and popular name recognition. As with Burke, Chesterton's ideas have fallen down the memory hole of indifference, leaving the world to endure the poisonous legacies of socialism, relativism, materialism and skepticism, disarmed and staggering without the two men's profound insight.

In an overly materialistic world that has isolated itself from its past, rejected its traditions and defied its religion while mortgaging its future, Chesterton is like a voice unheard among the deaf. For an unknowing and uncurious generation that has not learned how to think but only what to think, Chesterton is the perfect answer. To him thinking was *connecting the dots*. His writings are a threat to the status quo of current times because Chesterton realized the futility of constantly altering goals to achieve a predetermined notion of secular progress.

Paramount to Chesterton's thinking was tradition or what Burke called *prescription*. To Chesterton it meant *giving a vote to most obscure of all classes—ancestors*. Chesterton called this *the democracy of the dead*. While most Americans object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth, tradition *objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death*. Democracy encourages the living not to neglect a good man's opinion even if he is a janitor, while tradition asks the living not to neglect a good man's opinion even if he is an ancestor.

To Chesterton faith was reasonable and its orthodoxy created a guarded freedom that afforded it an endurance that spanned generations of the faithful. As the subtitle to his book *Orthodoxy*, he chose *The Romance of Faith* because he thought *romance, mystery, fairy tales keep men sane and connect them with eternal truth*. To the contrary, Chesterton believed the unreal expectations and promises that characterized the Marxism and liberalism of his day appeared more like the delusions of a man who thought he was God. To him theirs was the deity of a madman.

A Sexual Tyrant

Chesterton opposed all intellectual and social fads, especially those designed to destroy the institution of marriage. He anticipated the attack on marriage with his prediction that *the next great heresy will be an attack on morality, especially sexual morality*. He also predicted there would be a *fanatical hatred of morality, especially of Christian morality*. He believed the teaching and understanding of traditional sexual morality *will be difficult even to discuss because immorality will purposely be made muddled and indefinite*.

The childless Chesterton spoke out against not only eugenics and contraception but also divorce and *free love*. He believed birth control was a misnomer because neither birth nor personal self-control was involved. Chesterton believed couples were chaining themselves *to the most servile and mechanical system yet tolerated by men*. As Chesterton wrote in his book *St. Francis of Assisi*, *the minute sex ceases to be a servant it becomes a tyrant*.

While the salient moral issue in Chesterton's day was divorce, same-sex marriage can be viewed in a similar light. Thanks to *no fault divorce* the sorry state of traditional marriage today has had the residual effect of making the acceptance of same-sex marriage even greater. Those who have tried to speak out against the normalization of the abnormal have been met with *either slinging or silence*. To Chesterton, homosexuals were *slaves to sex* who were trying to *pervert the future and unmake the past*.

A Dogmatic Animal

Historians and philosophers alike have tried for millennia to differentiate human beings from lower animals. Historian Thomas Carlyle said men were *animals who made tools*. Chesterton called man *an animal that makes dogma*. His dots connected to the deep-seated moral sense in man or what Burke called the *moral imagination*. By this Burke underscored the power of ethical perception, which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and momentary events.

The moral imagination has emanated from the ancient paths of wisdom and culture that have characterized Western Civilization since the days of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. Drawn from the well of centuries of human consciousness, the moral imagination flowed from Plato, Virgil and Dante and countless acolytes throughout history. Each new generation of thinkers, poets, philosophers and historians expresses this human trait anew and afresh. The moral imagination aspires to produce the right order in the soul and consequently the right order in a nation.

The ideas of *permanent things, democracy of the dead and the small platoons* have dotted the ancient paths of the West for centuries. Because of their contribution to America's moral imagination these ideas have been under fire from cultural Marxism for generations. Russian author Igor Shafarevich reduced *The Communist Manifesto's* ten planks to three specific targets, which were private property, the Christian religion and the family.

With regard to the French, Burke mourned the time when *all the decent drapery of life was rudely torn off* and sacrificed on their pagan altar of progress and change. It was precisely the wardrobe of the moral imagination that had tailored the principled ideas *which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of man's naked shivering nature and to raise it to dignity.*

Both Burke and Chesterton have been faithful guardians of the ancient paths of wisdom and tradition that have energized Western Civilization. Many of their ideas with regard to the United States comprise what historian Daniel Boorstin called the *American givenness* that grew from its unique geography and history. The American givenness was not an ideology but more an embedded attitude that prompted Chesterton to call America *the only nation ever founded on a creed.*

It has been America's creed of freedom, individual initiative and belief in God's Divine Providence that progressive reformers have targeted since the early 20th

century. In a nation that has nearly severed its connections with its history and religious traditions, Burke's and Chesterton's ideas resonate with the melodious sounds of rebirth, rejuvenation and a return to the America of old. If Americans ever start dancing to their music again they can silence the cacophony of a century of progressive decline.



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Veterans' Day – November 11

If you have ever witnessed a veteran's burial with military honors, you know what a beautiful and moving ceremony it is, especially the folding and presenting of the American Flag to the surviving loved one. You probably noticed that the Honor Guard meticulously folds the Flag 13 times. Each fold symbolizes a profound belief in God, eternal life, allegiance to our republic and armed forces, motherhood and fatherhood. The 21-gun salute stands for the sum of the numbers of the year 1776. If you would like a copy of *The Folding of the U.S. Flag*, contact your local or state V.F.W.

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