

The Religious Roots of Burkean Conservatism

by [Oliver Friendship](#) (August 2020)



Lord Rockingham and Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, 1766

Eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke is generally thought of as founding the modern conservative tradition in political philosophy when he published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790. Because of this, many self-styled conservatives in our own time like to invoke Burke to give their arguments an air of intellectual

ballast. However, what many of these modern, and often secular, conservatives neglect to mention, is just how much Burke's thinking was rooted in an undeniably religious understanding of the world. Indeed, Burke based his gradualism and opposition to radicalism and revolution primarily upon his conception of Christianity and Christian Natural Law; and his fine defences of tradition, custom, and measured reform all have their origins in Burke's religious convictions. By mapping out, step-by-step, how Burke's religious beliefs led to, and were the principal cause of, his conservatism, I will demonstrate that Burke cannot be read separately from his Christianity.

There can be no doubt that Burke was a pious and God-fearing man. He undoubtedly presumed that there was truth to Christian religious teaching, and argued that God was "the Author of our place in the order of existence."[\[1\]](#) For Burke, an avowed and orthodox Christian living through the early stages of the industrial revolution, religion was "the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort."[\[2\]](#) He even believed that his nation's "laws and institutions stand as upon [Christianity as] their base."[\[3\]](#)

Importantly, Burke's strong religious faith also led him to defend a conception of Christian Natural Law, which is how the man's personal religious conviction led to his political positions. To Burke, "we are all born in subjection . . . to one great immutable, pre-existent law . . . antecedent to our very existence . . . with which no human authority can dispense".[\[4\]](#) In the French revolutionaries, Burke saw contempt for this 'immutable, pre-existent' natural law;[\[5\]](#) and he was "angered by their defiance of the process of Nature."[\[6\]](#) This understanding of Christian Natural Law, as an inherent, unchallengeable, and divinely created ordering of society, appears in various forms throughout Burke's *Reflections*