



BETWEEN
— T I M E S —

Journal Edition: Tradition

Tradition, Traditionalism, and Temporal Depth

Marietta van der Tol | Summer 2026

In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor expressed concern about our moral formation: how can a sense of self be rooted in morality, community and tradition when the society in which we live is increasingly fragmenting under the pressure of secularism and individualism?¹

New forms of traditionalism appear to offer an answer to this question. There is a lot of room to talk about tradition, a newly enchanted posture that is curious about Christianity, traditional family values, and alternatives to the liberalism of the last century. Frequently cloaked in the language of ‘the good, the true and the beautiful’, new traditionalism casts a vision for how the individual can live a good life by committing to one’s family, one’s nation, and one’s God. However, the question is whether this new traditionalism is all that deeply rooted within tradition.

One of the forerunners of this new traditionalism was the philosopher Roger Scruton. His work on conservatism stands out for his neo-Burkean reframing of conservatism. He reframed conservatism as inherently anti-liberal, traditionalist, nationalist, and culturally Christian.² This was quite different from older understandings of conservatism, which explicitly build on the liberal democratic tradition, but emphasise permanence, scepticism about change, and a moderation of all too passionate politics.³

New right-wing movements tend to prefer the Scrutonian reframing of conservatism and even claim they may be the ‘true’ conservatives. The best example of this is Liz Truss, who claimed to be the only real conservative in a room full of members of a conservative party! There is some overlap between the more politically minded conservatism and the more culturally minded traditionalism, however, these days the cultural is political. But what is so traditional about this new traditionalism?

This juxtaposition of the ‘New Right’ and ‘traditionalism’ comes with several fundamental tensions:

1) A reverence for history combined with an intrinsically reactionary behaviour to recent history

This view presumes that historical processes have placed society on the wrong path and that the current generation must bring about radical change to redirect the future. In the last decades, conservatives associated the need for

‘rigorous change’ with Marxism. This appetite for radical change is often a matter of rhetoric, it can come with reckless approaches to policy-making, damage done to democracies, the unsettling of international alliances, and as both the Russian Federation and the United States of America now demonstrate, even open ‘holy’ wars.

2) Valuing religious tradition, but experiencing it mostly online

Online brokers of new traditionalism may or may not be attached to a particular church. The New Right tends to congregate around charismatic influencers who produce and share conservative or traditionalist content. Many such influencers might make significant amounts of money from advertisements and from tempting viewers into subscriptions to access a more ‘exclusive’ layer of content. This contributes to a consumerist posture towards religious tradition. It is difficult to grow deep roots in any specific religious tradition that way. It also contributes to secularisation in that it implicitly endorses Christian formation done outside of traditional church structures, possibly primarily so.

3) A communal orientation that is built on individual moral transformation

The appreciation of family and nation can be an expression of the very social fragmentation that new traditionalism contests: it ascribes moral quality to individual moral transformations, individual commitment to family and individual commitment to the nation. New communities are based on political activism rather than local cooperation, solidarity or social capital.

This juxtaposition is not entirely accidental. New traditionalism is deeply entangled with high-profile fresh converts. It is a highly complex intersection of a hunger for tradition and meaning and finding this in something external to one’s previous reference frameworks. Sarah Riccardi-Schwartz writes about this phenomenon among new converts to Russian Orthodoxy in the United States.⁴ Roger Scruton himself was a convert to Anglicanism; the current Vice-President of the United States is a recent convert to Catholicism; even British activist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon converted to Christianity while in prison.

While new conversions are generally welcomed by churches, the Christian tradition has been careful about the process of discipling. In his *Teaching Christianity*, Augustine understood this as an ongoing process, not a ‘moment’ of conversion – and many of the Church Fathers stressed the importance of mentoring and catechesis over a longer period.⁵ Anyone wanting to join a monastery would be put through a long process; it would not make sense to put a postulant in charge of an abbey.

It takes time to pass tradition down to the next generation and this process needs to be rooted in both morality and community. This is not what new traditionalism offers: it is a form of abstract, fragmented communitarianism that merges cultural with political consumerism. As Madeleine Armstrong rightly points out, the New Right appears to prioritise the nation over the family.⁶ While cloaked handsomely, new traditionalism gives expression to profound questions without offering answers that are rooted deeply within the Christian tradition.

I’m speaking here mostly of what Steven Grosby calls the temporal depth of tradition: where the past is integrated with an understanding of the present. Importantly, this understanding of the present does not choose

which part of history it remembers and which it ignores. It also does not rely on a distant history to legitimise one's criticism of the politics of the last half-century.⁷ Rather, temporal depth holds together the times one regards as 'golden' and the times one regards as 'problematic'. Even if you think of our current time as the Brussels Sprout of your Christmas dinner, it is there because it is. Temporal depth marks a difference between pubertal rejection of our recent history and the mature integration of it into our generation's historical self-consciousness.

This brings me back to the meaning of tradition. 'New traditionalism' acknowledges the paradox between a hunger for tradition and yet embodies a transformation of what tradition means. Charles Taylor emphasised the need for deep rootedness. New traditionalism does not yet have these deep roots but is already ambitious to become the biggest plant in the garden. Or the postulant thinking he should run the abbey.

There is also a political caveat: the language of new traditionalism meaningfully overlaps with Russian discourses on 'traditional values'.⁸ This overlap is eagerly exploited by a range of foreign actors, as explored in *The Next Wave* report by Neil Datta.⁹ This comes in the shape of think tanks, funding streams, and policy engagement. But it also comes as content produced by foreign actors and just making something that already exists domestically go viral. When a particular post goes 'viral', it is not always possible to tell who is behind it. What we do know, is that these foreign actors are invested in destabilisation, polarisation, and that they seek to undermine democracy to suit their own ends.¹⁰

The present political challenges require careful reflection on morality, community and tradition. This includes careful reflection on the web of relationships that have come to form our common life, including the tradition of democracy and the rule of law that offers baseline legal security within all these relationships.¹¹ It may not be impossible to think up another form of government than our democracies, but currently, the New Right offers a gospel of strength, even exploitation, with strong social Darwinian overtones.¹²

Crucially, the consumerist posture of new traditionalism makes the self both the source and adjudicator of tradition. Sometimes this is the individual self in one's engagement with Scripture, tradition and reason; sometimes it is being part of communities that centre on charismatic influences; sometimes it is by invoking God haphazardly in matters of nation and state. These amount to self-referential, collective imaginations of the self: culturally, nationally and politically.¹³ Only rarely is this new traditionalism truly connected to both morality and community. Perhaps this is simply a juncture in the processes of secularisation and individualisation, much as it seeks to understand itself as an alternative to it.

To treasure tradition today is to deal carefully with the bonds that form our social life. This is a common, shared life to which people bring different political and religious commitments. Whereas the culture wars rip our societies in right versus left, perhaps the true traditionalists will further the truly shared and common dimensions of social life, which are the aspects that bring people together. That does not mean new traditionalism in its entirety needs to be rejected, but it needs to be understood for what it is: interesting and new, but not temporally deep.

For Charles Taylor, it was important that horizons of meaning were not entirely self-referential, but in fact external to us. For him, this is ultimately grounded in God. That seemed countercultural in the context of secularisation occurring during his lifetime, but perhaps it remains countercultural regarding the new traditionalism

of today. It is no coincidence that many proponents of new traditionalism and the New Right seek the legitimization of sacred tradition, but churches do not owe this to what are essentially cultural and political movements.

For Christians, the temporal depth of its sacred tradition should be much deeper, and not primarily cultural or political – though many times in history, churches have rallied behind essentially cultural or political movements, even fascist movements. For Taylor, it is essential that the self is formed *within* a tradition, which means engaging with the historical depth of the tradition. This formation *within the tradition* is perhaps more about seeking wisdom than about fighting culture wars, or indeed actual wars. After all, like King David was told, those who fight ought not to oversee the building of the temple.¹⁴

References

¹ Taylor, Charles. "Sources of the Self." (1989): 202011-08.

² Scruton, Roger. *The meaning of conservatism*. Vol. 21. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980; Scruton, Roger. *How to be a Conservative*. A&C Black, 2014.

³ For example, Oakeshott, Michael, 'Rationalism in Politics', 'Political Education' and 'On Being Conservative', in his *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, new and exp. edn (1991).

⁴ Riccardi-Swartz, Sarah. "American conservatives and the allure of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy." *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 1036.

⁵ Augustine, Saint. *On Christian Teaching*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1999.

⁶ Armstrong, Madeleine. 'The Right, Edmund Burke, and Family Policy: Misappropriations of the "Little Platoon"'. <https://canopyforum.org/2024/11/13/the-right-edmund-burke-and-family-policy-misappropriations-of-the-little-platoon/>.

⁷ Grosby, Steven Elliott. *Nationalism: A very short introduction*. Vol. 134. Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁸ Stoeckl, Kristina, and Dmitry Uzlaner. *The moralist international: Russia in the global culture wars*. Fordham University Press, 2022. See also, Elsner, Regina. 'Gender, Russian Orthodoxy and the invention of traditional values'. <https://canopyforum.org/2024/10/31/gender-russian-orthodoxy-and-the-invention-of-traditional-values/>.

⁹ Datta, Neil. *The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism Is Regaining Power* (report, 2025), <https://www.epfweb.org/node/1147>.

¹⁰ See various reports by Justice for Prosperity, <https://justiceforprosperity.org/investigations/>.

¹¹ Bretherton, Luke. *Christ and the common life: Political theology and the case for democracy*. Eerdmans, 2019.

¹² Field, Laura K. *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right*. Princeton University Press, USA, 2025.

¹³ See also Van der Tol, Marietta, and Philip Gorski. "Secularisation as the Fragmentation of the Sacred and of Sacred Space." *Religion, state & society* 50, no. 5 (2022): 495-512.

¹⁴ Comp. 1 Chronicles 28:3.



BETWEEN
— T I M E S —

Between Times is a new online journal in the UK exploring the relevance of Christian faith in today's world. Rooted in historic orthodoxy yet open to dialogue across traditions, we publish thoughtful, accessible articles that bring theology into conversation with the pressing cultural, political and spiritual questions of our age. Our aim is to provide a space where rigorous scholarship meets charitable discussion — serious without being inaccessible, grounded without being partisan.

Between Times is a partnership of:



CHALMERS INSTITUTE



Quo Vadis
INSTITUTE

For more articles, visit:

www.between-times.co.uk

Other links: [Chalmers Institute](#) [Quo Vadis Institute](#) [Article URL](#)