

Why Chesterton Despised Thanksgiving Day

Did you know that England also has a Thanksgiving Day? Well, actually it doesn't. But G. K. Chesterton did propose such a day for his England. And therein lies a tale, or at least a few thoughts for a Thanksgiving Day conversation.

Chesterton's thoughts on thanksgiving with a small "t" are not at issue here. But they are important. He thought that a sense of gratitude was crucial for human happiness. For him, that sense should begin with thanks for this world and one's very existence in it. Even in his darkest days, days of unbelief that were touched with thoughts of suicide, Chesterton always held on to some sense of belief—and his life—by "one thin thread of thanks."

But his thoughts about an official Thanksgiving Day for England were more directly tied to the origins of the first thanksgiving feast in the New World and its perpetrators, the American Puritans.

Chesterton, to put it mildly, was not a fan of Puritanism in any of its guises. Theologically, Puritanism is rooted in Calvinism, and the determinism of Calvinistic predestination was anathema to Chesterton. But at issue here is another aspect of Puritanism, namely the temptation of Puritans, then and now, to promote—and enforce—prohibitions.

Oh well, you say, those prohibition-minded Puritans are long gone. Not so, countered Chesterton, who could point to the brief success of the movement to prohibit the sale of alcohol in America.

Oh well, you respond, *that* foray into prohibitionism has been thoroughly discredited and is now nearly a century behind us.

Maybe so. But during the heyday of the 18th amendment Chesterton was on hand to point to the follies—and dangers—of the prohibitionist mind set. He was also on hand to ask us to remember to thank God for “beer and burgundy by not drinking too much of them.”

Today Chesterton’s words remain on hand to remind us that there are links between the Puritan mind of the 17th century and what he has termed the “Modern Mind.” It is a cast of mind that still “cries aloud with a voice of thunder” that there are always things that must be “forbidden.”

This cry could come from prohibitionists declaring that “there must be no wine.” Or it could come from pacifists who insist that “there must be no war.” Or from communists who stipulate that “there must be no private property.” Or from the “secularist” who decrees that “there must be no religious worship.”

All of these prohibitionists, and more besides, remain determined to ride roughshod over Chesterton’s “ordinary man.” That would be the “ordinary man” who had a right to live—and order—his own life as he saw fit. Those rights included the right to “judge about his own health,” the right to “bring up children to the best of his ability,” and the right to “rule other animals within reason” among many other ordinary rights.

In sum, G. K. Chesterton was far from convinced that Puritanism was dead and gone. In fact, it was all too alive in the “Modern Mind.” That was the mind that could not accept what Chesterton regarded as the “Catholic doctrine that human life is a battle.” More often than not, these are the battles that one fights with oneself, which is to say battles that should be fought without benefit of official—and officious—prohibitions.

Having come to the United States twice while the 18th amendment

held legal sway, Chesterton experienced a direct encounter with this version of prohibitionism. Teetotaler that he wasn't, G. K. Chesterton had reason to object to the powers of prohibitionist thinking over the modern American mind (even if he occasionally benefited from home brew in professors' homes while lecturing at Notre Dame in the fall of 1930).

When back home in England, Chesterton's objections gave way to thanks. That would be thankfulness that his country had not taken a similar step. In fact, it was this very sense of thankfulness that led him to propose a Thanksgiving Day for England. It would be a day to "celebrate the departure of those dour Puritans, the Pilgrim fathers." Once here, they gave thanks and feasted (probably without beer or burgundy).

But if Chesterton is right, they also left their mark on America and the modern American mind, a mark that had lingered here long after their departure not just from England, but from this world.

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