

MAN THE 'RELIGIOUS ANIMAL'

Presentation by Gerard Wilson

Meeting of Edmund Burke's Club, 1 May 2015

This presentation follows on from the three talks I gave at our conference on Edmund Burke on 28 February this year: 1. Practical Reason and Politics; 2. Reason and Theory; and 3. Reason and Sentiment ([here](#)). The central theme of those talks was Burke's understanding of reason in the individual's lived life – reason in human action – which included the public, as well as the private sphere. I proposed that Burke's human reason was a reason that came from 'within'. No matter how powerful the works were on epistemology by René Descartes and David Hume following the rationalistic method, they simply had no effect on the way the average person reasons in his daily life. There is a disconnection between abstract theory and the practical sphere of an individual's everyday existence. As political and social action are pre-eminently practical, then one should beware of abstract theories of social and political organization.

Burke's idea of reason appropriate to practical matters was a union – an intimate cooperation – between reason understood as mathematical mode and 'natural feeling'. Of course, Burke's concept of practical reason arose from his concept of human nature. In this talk I want to explain how his concept of human reason led to his ideas about religion in state and society.

Burke attributed a crucial role to religion in the individual's actions and the organization of state and society. Until the French Revolution, however, he had not felt the need to make a major issue of it. He had addressed the question of religion in the state in the *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity* (1772) and in the *Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters* (1773). These, however, were limited and did not warrant a vigorous defence of religion as a vital element in our human nature and as the cornerstone of state, society and human action. Even in Burke's clearest appeals to God's immutable laws in the problem of India, he was not concerned to defend religion as religion and explain its relation to the state. The French Revolution changed that.

In his previous speeches and writings, Burke strove to situate man's duties to himself, to others, and to society in his nature as God had shaped it. In this scheme, the individual's paramount duty, the duty prior to all others, was his duty to God. If Burke had no reason to make this paramount duty explicit before the French Revolution, he certainly had a reason now. He had long observed the materialist atheistic tendencies of the French intelligentsia. He now saw their signature stamped on the bestial violence of the Parisian mobs. Thus instead of following Aristotle in naming man essentially a political animal Burke faced up to

the revolution's theoretical presuppositions about man as an autonomous being by naming him a religious animal. The religious nature superseded all other denominations of man. After discussing in the *Reflections* the issues of liberty, rights, the origins of government and the place of natural feeling and manners in man's moral action, Burke broaches the discussion of church and religion as if he were making a new start in his offensive against the French and their English sympathisers.

We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort... We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

Belief in God and the activity of giving expression to that belief is *the* first principle about the nature of man and human action. It is important to understand that Burke is in this passage appealing to both reason and natural feeling, giving the priority to feeling. But in reality we are concerned with a simultaneous cognitive/affective act, simultaneous in the sense that both operate in union, and it is because of this simultaneous act of thought and feeling that no dispute can be entered into about God and the duties that flow from the recognition that God is the author of all things. In human judgments, reason and moral feeling are inextricable; their separation is merely an abstract matter serving to orientate a discussion about moral recognition and judgment. The abstract rationalistic arguments refuting claims about the existence of God, truncated as they are about the actual lived life of the human person, carry no weight because they miss the mark. Human judgments in concrete circumstances, especially the illumination of the transcendent, belong to another category of cognition.

To illustrate, Burke went on to stress that if men degenerated to the extent that they threw off that 'source of civilization', the Christian religion, then it would not be too long before 'some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition, might take the place of it.' No abstract rationalistic argument will destroy the individual's inclination towards the transcendent. There will always be something, even if it is the perversion of the goodness of the transcendent the individual is naturally seeking. He accused the French precisely of having 'made a philosophy and a religion of their hostility to' Christianity. This is a crucial point for Burke. In the theoretical apologia for the French Revolution, Britain was facing a body of what he called 'armed doctrine'. French Revolutionary discourse had the character of religious doctrine emanating from a movement that had the essential character of a religion, with a body of teaching that must be accepted on trust.

The literary cabal [in France] had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal which hitherto had been discovered only in the propagators of some system of piety. They were possessed with a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree; and from thence, by an easy progress, with the spirit of persecution according to their means... These atheistical fathers have a bigotry of their own, and they have learned to talk against monks with the spirit of a monk.
Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

Burke countered the abstract doctrine of the revolutionaries by explaining how the religious nature of man leads to the public expression of religious belief and the establishment of church in the cultural context of state and society. He particularizes and makes religious belief concrete in time and place. In this case, the particular and the concrete is the Church of England. Man's natural affective/cognitive processes are the primeval source of action that leads to the concrete and particular.

I beg leave to speak of our church establishment, which is the first of our prejudices, not a prejudice destitute of reason, but involving in it profound and extensive wisdom. I speak of it first. It is first, and last, and midst in our minds. For, taking ground on that religious system... we continue to act on the early received, and uniformly continued sense of mankind. That sense not only, like a wise architect, hath built up the fabric of states, but like a provident proprietor... hath solemnly and for ever consecrated the commonwealth, and all that officiate in it. This consecration is made, that all who administer in the government of men, in which they stand in the person of God himself, should have high and worthy notions of their function and destination; that their hope should be full of immortality...
Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

Burke's prohibition on considering such questions as religion solely in the abstract is clear in this passage where the account of the concrete circumstances of the established church reflects the relation of thought and feeling as a relation embedded in human activity through time. More precisely we are talking about human activity in the context of communal growth out of which government arises. For Burke English state and society are in accordance with the laws of nature. The public recognition of God concretised in the church has brought about the legitimate growth of government in which the ruler is aware of the necessary consecration of the state to God and of his function as God's temporal/secular representative in the business of life. The growth and consecration through time are brought about through society's continual affective/cognitive judgment that all is in order. State and society are then constantly legitimized in the ongoing affective/cognitive judgment that state

and society are in accordance with God's laws. The established church is the vehicle of the legitimization.

This is what Burke calls prejudice – the judgment of natural feeling ratified by reason. It is at times as much an unconscious process as a conscious one. Burke says that the ruler in such circumstances is brought to consider not just temporary advantage but to look to his duty of advancing himself and the commonwealth in the context of his permanent nature. In this way, the ruler fulfils his responsibilities towards those who are subject to him. The church as an embodiment of religious belief and duty in the state also lays before the subject his duties as a free citizen and moral agent.

The consecration of the state, by a state religious establishment, is necessary also to operate with an wholesome awe upon free citizens; because, in order to secure their freedom, they must enjoy some determinate portion of power. To them therefore a religion connected with the state, and with their duty towards it, becomes even more necessary than in such societies, where the people by their terms of subjection are confined to private sentiments, and the management of their own family concerns. All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that they act in trust; and that they are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great master, author and founder of society.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

Not only is the recognition of God by man in community (i.e. by the establishment of a church) obligatory, but the more civil freedom the system allows the citizens, the more necessary it is that the church and religion are safeguarded by the state. The higher the degree of civil freedom the more pressing it is to bring the duties imposed by God before the mind of the citizen. If democracy means a high degree of civil freedom, then that civil freedom imposes in proportion a degree of inner discipline on the citizen to obey the prescriptions of the laws of nature.

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites... Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it within, the more there must be without.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

The control of appetite within is enabled through religious conviction operating as a long established prejudice – as a prepossession, a habit developed over time. As such the concrete expression of religion is an essential part of the people's culture. It is central in a people's culture. Britain's religion is 'the grand prejudice and that which holds all the

other prejudices together (*Letter to William Smith, 1795*).’ It is the state’s duty, therefore, to protect the religion of the culture by means of the state apparatus.

Not only is Burke attempting to demonstrate the indispensability of an established church in the state as a concrete recognition of the laws of God and the duties arising from them for citizen and state, but he is also delineating what constitutes legitimate religion. That delineation is the form reflecting the laws of God and nature. True religion for Burke cannot encompass a system that constructs a body of belief and ritual around the characteristics attributed to animals, the earth, physical forces and inanimate objects.

In the *Reflections* and the later *Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians* (1792) Burke deals with the issue of the separation of Church and state. He targets those whose religion he considers more political than religious. He makes a distinction between such as the Unitarians (in his view one of the most dangerous of the English Jacobin groups) and the dissenters whose conscience was motivated solely by religious conviction. It is significant that his statement on the separation of church and state draws some striking parallels with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Immortale Dei* (The Christian Constitution of States) issued almost 100 years later (1885).¹

An alliance between Church and State in a Christian commonwealth is, in my opinion, an idle and a fanciful speculation. An alliance is between two sovereign states. But in a Christian commonwealth the Church and State are one and the same thing, being different integral parts of the same whole. For the Church has been always divided into two parts, the clergy and the laity, – of which the laity is as much an essential integral part, and has as much its duties and privileges, as the clerical member, and in the rule, order, and government of the Church has its share. Religion is so far, in my opinion, from being out of the province or the duty of a Christian magistrate, that it is, and it ought to be, not only his care, but the principal thing in his care; because it is one of the great bonds of society, and its object the supreme, the ultimate end and object of man himself.

Speech on the Acts of Uniformity (1772)

Burke’s meaning is that religion is the great cultural bond of society. In this cultural context, whether a member of the clergy or of the laity, each individual has his duty to God and because society’s duties to God become concretized in the form of an established church, the individual’s duties to God become in their particularity duties to the church both in its spiritual and temporal capacity. Whether preserving the church’s temporal power, fulfilling sacramental duties or obeying the basic prescriptions of God’s laws, the individual’s moral action is action within and for the church. In the case of Christianity, the central theme of the revealed religion – the plan of redemption – adds a greater dimension to what should issue

from the laws of nature: God's direct intervention in the affairs of individuals and society through direct intercourse between God (in the person of Christ) and man. In this contextual environment the problem of the incommensurability between God and man – which really is an abstract issue – ceases to present a difficulty.

This is an ideal sketch of the relations between God and man, and church and society. In reality, no society is so homogeneous as to have all its members adhering to the same set of religious beliefs – let alone expecting that all members will be dutiful in their observance of religious prescription. Furthermore, it seems an empirical truth that the religious beliefs of many societies today reflect very little of the above sketch in its natural law dimension. Burke thought, however, that all traditional or primitive societies reflected this framework to greater and lesser degrees.

In the Hastings impeachment trial, Burke dismissed what he called Hastings' geographical morality (Hastings' defence rested importantly on the claim that different schemes of morality operated in India and Britain) by saying that no matter where Hastings should seek confirmation of his defence, he would find all societies reflecting the same immutable laws of the omnipotent creator. The same religious structure incorporating clergy and the laity also was to be found. If recognition of and adherence to the natural law was less than it ought to be in the manifestation of religious belief and honouring of the Divine (e.g. the deifying of animals) and if the priesthood incorporated rituals that were cruel (e.g. human sacrifice of one's enemies) then this had to do with the fallible nature of man. Man and society corrupted from their true nature could not be expected to fulfil the duties of religion arising out of the laws of nature. Nevertheless, where there was a 'spark of religion' present, this should be encouraged and should give hope to those mourning the absence or loss of true religion. It is just these sorts of points that Burke addresses in the *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity* (1772) and the *Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters* (1773).

In the *Acts of Uniformity*, Burke defended individual conscience concerning religion, but at the same time defended the state's right to establish religion and church, and to defend it against attack or inner corruption. The issue was the petition from a group of Anglican clergy to be excused from subscribing to the THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND. These clergymen had conscientious objections to the articles. Burke replied that an objection from conscience was well and good and he would not only defend their right of conscience, but would 'run before their complaints' if they were being driven to act against their conscience: 'If ever there was anything to which, from reason, nature, habit, and principle, I am totally averse, it is persecution for conscientious difference in opinion.' However, defending individual conscience or private judgement, and defending the concrete establishment of church and religion in the state were not incompatible activities. The establishment of a particular church and religion arises out of the people

being a particular people oriented towards God's laws. Church and religion, as discussed above, are the cornerstone of communal development through time. The law, generated by the people being a people, establishes the forms of the church. Indeed, in all respects a people choose this rather than that to be features of their culture. As part of the order of the community, the church reflects the liberty of the community; the establishment by law of the church is 'essential, not only to the order, but to the liberty of whole community.' It therefore amounted to an absurdity for these clergymen to 'want to be teachers in a church to which they do not belong.'

When gentlemen complain of the subscription as matter of grievance, the complaint arises from confounding private judgment, whose rights are anterior to law, and the qualifications which the law creates for its own magistracies, whether civil or religious.

Speech on the Acts of Uniformity (1772)

Burke made an important point here which he applied not only to the rights of religious establishment but to the rights of government in general. It was the confusion of the rights of private conscience or judgment with the rights of the members of a community to set up and maintain a particular sort of government. Burke explained that although all forms of government have their duty to God, the actual formation of government is arbitrary. It is arbitrary in the sense that it is an artifice arising out of man's choice and inclinations ('art is man's nature') whose concrete signs, marks and regulations are directed by the 'necessity' of the time and circumstances. But because men in community are exercising and embodying their freedom in the choice and development of their particular form of government (including church establishment), then exercising the 'anterior right' of conscience against public arrangements would be to 'take away the liberty of the elector, which is the people, that is, the state.' Changes to the actual arrangements of church establishment must come from the members of a community acting as a 'people' in regard to their duties – not from the assertion of abstract individual rights which do not include those benefits 'for the protection of which society was introduced.' Otherwise the liberty and the order of the community are undermined. In this regard, a people may legitimately choose to adjust their established church to reflect a different understanding of Christian doctrine. It is an indication of how essential Burke thought religious establishment to the state that in his discussion he drifted from religious establishment to the state when explaining the underlying principles of the former.

A little more than a year later, Burke, in a *Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters* (March 17, 1773), spoke to excuse a group of Protestant dissenting ministers from subscribing to the same thirty-nine articles. The grounds for Burke's action were toleration of private conscience. Excusing dissenting clergy from subscription to the Articles

of the Church of England in order to teach in their own dissenting churches was a question of toleration and not of religious establishment as the previous case had been. But Burke had more on his mind than the anterior rights of conscience of a group of dissenting ministers. He had returned recently from France where his consternation at the atheistic and anti-church tendencies of the French had been immeasurable. Toleration of private conscience could not extend towards the permitting of any public utterance of atheistic tendency both as regards conscience itself and religious establishment. The state may not persecute a particular state of conscience, but a state of conscience would be the absolute limit for atheistic belief; liberty of religion may not provide traps that would deliver men into ‘the bondage of impiety.’ For Burke, the full force of the law could be brought to bear on any public manifestation of atheism.

point your arms against men who, not contented with endeavouring to turn your eyes from the blaze and effulgence of light by which life and immortality is so gloriously demonstrated by the Gospel, would even extinguish that faint glimmering of Nature, that only comfort supplied to ignorant man before this great illumination, – them who, by attacking even the possibility of all revelation, arraign all the dispensations of Providence to man. These are the wicked Dissenters you ought to fear... these men, who would take away whatever ennobles the rank or consoles the misfortunes of human nature, by breaking off that connection of observances, affections, of hopes and fears, which bind us to the Divinity, and constitute the glorious and distinguishing prerogative of humanity, that of being a religious creature: against these I would have the laws rise in all their majesty of terrors, to fulminate such vain and impious wretches...

Speech on a Bill for Relief of Protestant Dissenters (1772)

These are powerful measures supported by tough, uncompromising language, hardly to be understood by the modern democratic mind. The central feature of Burke’s argument is the nature of man as a religious creature and the way that nature finds expression in the concrete circumstances of the community. Man as a religious creature never remains an isolated abstract notion for Burke. The individual is always in the concrete – the concrete forms of the society in which he lives. Atheistic materialist theory by destroying religion and its concrete expression causes a fatal rupture in man’s nature, and thus in the society of which he is a member. Man and society are set adrift with no control outside man’s will. The rise and influence of Marxism, the savage revolutions under the Marxist banner, and the building of the grim gulags yet again shows how prescient Burke was in his warning.

The following passages were not included in my presentation. They are included here because they expand on the above analysis. They are either the full passage in which some of the quotations above appeared or they are additional passages.

WE KNOW, AND WHAT IS BETTER, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort. In England we are so convinced of this, that there is no rust of superstition with which the accumulated absurdity of the human mind might have crusted it over in the course of ages, that ninety-nine in a hundred of the people of England would not prefer to impiety. We shall never be such fools as to call in an enemy to the substance of any system to remove its corruptions, to supply its defects, or to perfect its construction. If our religious tenets should ever want a further elucidation, we shall not call on atheism to explain them. We shall not light up our temple from that unhallowed fire. It will be illuminated with other lights. It will be perfumed with other incense than the infectious stuff which is imported by the smugglers of adulterated metaphysics. If our ecclesiastical establishment should want a revision, it is not avarice or rapacity, public or private, that we shall employ for the audit, or receipt, or application of its consecrated revenue. Violently condemning neither the Greek nor the Armenian, nor, since heats are subsided, the Roman system of religion, we prefer the Protestant, not because we think it has less of the Christian religion in it, but because, in our judgment, it has more. We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us and amongst many other nations, we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure avoid) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

We are but too apt to consider things in the state in which we find them, without sufficiently adverting to the causes by which they have been produced and possibly may be upheld. Nothing is more certain than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners and with civilization have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles and were, indeed, the result of both combined: I mean the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion. The nobility and the clergy, the one by profession, the other by patronage, kept learning in existence, even in the midst of arms and confusions, and whilst governments were rather

in their causes than formed. Learning paid back what it received to nobility and to priesthood, and paid it with usury, by enlarging their ideas and by furnishing their minds. Happy if they had all continued to know their indissoluble union and their proper place! Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master! Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

The 'swinish' reference is to a verse in the Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 7:6): 'You must not give that which is holy to dogs. Do not cast your pearls before swine, or the swine may trample them underfoot, and then turn on you and tear you to pieces.' Burke was roundly criticized for the swinish allusion on the basis of a (often) deliberate misrepresentation of his meaning. His meaning was that with the destruction of civilization a people will degenerate.

In the following passage from the Reflections, Burke claims that (true) religion is never the cause of war. It is only ever a pretext.

We do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind. It may, in the perversion, serve for a magazine furnishing offensive and defensive weapons for parties in church and state, and supplying the means of keeping alive or reviving dissensions and animosities, and adding fuel to civil fury. History consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites which shake the public...

These vices are the causes of those storms. Religion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, liberties, rights of men are the pretexts. The pretexts are always found in some specious appearance of a real good. You would not secure men from tyranny and sedition by rooting out of the mind the principles to which these fraudulent pretexts apply? If you did, you would root out everything that is valuable in the human breast... Wise men will apply the irremedies to vices, not to names; to the causes of evil which are permanent, not to the occasional organs by which they act, and the transitory modes in which they appear.

Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)

ⁱ In his introductory comments on *Immortale Dei*, Etienne Gilson writes with regard to the central doctrine of the encyclical that '[t]he state holds its authority from God. From this fact Leo XIII deduces two series of consequences. First, this divine origin of the temporal power confers upon it a sacred character which is the most powerful guarantee such power can be given in the sight of men. This is why Leo XIII ceaselessly repeats that all States should consider the Church the safest of their allies. Secondly, for the very same reason, the state must recognise its indebtedness to the source of its power by making public profession of religion (ART. 6), or, more precisely still, of the true religion (art. 7).' Leo XIII. *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XIII*, Etienne Gilson ed. New York, Image Books, 1954, pp.157/186.