

BURKE'S CATHOLIC CONSERVATISM

Garrett Ward Sheldon

In perhaps his most famous observation, Edmund Burke said that the social contract is not something made in a moment in time but rather is between the past, the present, and the future.

*It is to be looked on with other reverence... it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born... a clause in the... contract of eternal society.*¹

Later in his life, Burke wrote to an Irish nobleman, Sir Hercules Langrishe, that the Christianity that had existed in England for one thousand years had been Catholic for eight hundred of those years, and so that past religion was part of the present English social contract.² That Catholic faith was also a large part of Burke's constitution.

This essay will show that Roman Catholic faith present in Burke's family and cultural background; his early and late writings (before and after he had to conceal it as a member of the British Parliament)—especially in his use of the Augustinian concept of 'divine Providence'—and his advocacy of Irish Catholic emancipation; and positive references to religion in his political thought, emphasizing its moral and civilizing qualities, reflecting Thomist notions of natural and divine law from the European Catholic past.

These Catholic historical and theological influences, then, affect Burke's political conservatism by identifying 'just' political change (or 'reform') as operating within God's providence and the moral order as defined by Catholicism, while unjust, radical change (or 'innovation'), such as that during the French Revolution, relies upon a humanist presumption, grounded in original sin and pride, that man alone can 'remake' society and human nature itself. Not only is this sinful presumption of radical revolutionaries (to assume the role of the Creator) evil; it is impossible, for Burke. Any radical reforms contrary to divine providence and God's will not only cause evil and destruction; they simply will not work in the long run and, indeed, will make the situations they claim to improve much worse.

Burke brought traditional Catholic social teaching, derived from St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, to the modern era, providing a conservatism based on the Christian understanding of human nature, society, and history. Unlike some later Catholic social thought, which compromised with modern secular ideology (most extremely in liberation theology, which adopted a Marxist perspective), Burke adhered to the Catholic theology and political thought that had guided the Church for centuries.

Most scholars have not acknowledged this underlying Catholicism in Burke because of his outward allegiance to the established Church of England, membership in which was required, at this time, to be able to attend college, enter the professions, and serve in Parliament. But it was not surprising that Burke concealed any explicit Catholicism, as the Irish had learned to conceal their religion from the English for a hundred years because of the harsh Penal Laws against Irish Catholics. Since the virtual outlawing of their Church under Cromwell, Irish Catholics had had to conceal their faith, conceal their churches, conceal their clergy, conceal their property, and conceal their native political communities for fear of persecution; exclusion from education, work, and worship; confiscation of property; and imprisonment, torture, and death. Such deception is common in all occupied and oppressed countries, and Burke's subterfuge was considered acceptable in eighteenth-century Ireland, as it was employed to help his oppressed Irish brethren.

Edmund Burke has long been considered 'the first' modern conservative (as the title of Jesse Norman's new biography reveals); but except for common references to his favorable views of religion generally, little has been recognized of the theological, and especially Catholic, foundations of that conservatism.

Burke came from 'Old English' Irish-Norman families on both sides: Catholics for hundreds of years and socially, politically, and religiously prominent in Ireland.³ His mother, Mary Nagle, came from a noble Irish family in County Cork and was a practicing Roman Catholic all her life. Her ancestry included Richard Nagle, the attorney general to the Catholic king James II, and Nano Nagel, the eighteenth-century foundress of the Presentation Order of Nuns, closely aligned with the Augustinian Friars, who kept the church alive during the persecutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During his life Edmund Burke supported this religious order financially.⁴ His father, Richard, was from a similarly old, established Anglo-Irish family, prominent in County Galway and Dublin. He converted to the Anglican Protestant church to be able to attend college and enter the legal profession. So Edmund was raised, at least nominally, in the established Church of England.⁵

Burke was born into an eighteenth-century Ireland that had been conquered and occupied by the Protestant British, and he lived under the harsh Penal Laws. Conversion to the established church was not always regarded as apostasy, especially if it led to positions that could help the oppressed Irish Catholics. As Burke biographer Conor Cruise O'Brien put it: 'Conversion helped to maintain the Catholic propertied interest... [and] converts were not fully absorbed into the established order.' Indeed, Richard Burke was described as 'a fashionable lawyer acting in the Catholic interest.'⁶

Edmund Burke's early childhood was spent in his father's house in the English-dominated capital of Dublin. But at age six he was sent to live with his mother's family in

rural County Cork. Father Francis Canavan, S.J., notes that the child's frail health may have been one excuse for the move, but it also allowed easier observance of the families' ancient Catholic faith in a remote area of Ireland.⁷ There he attended "Hedge Schools" taught by Catholic friars (who kept the Church operative during the persecution), attended Mass regularly (technically outlawed in Ireland), and learned the basics of (especially Augustinian) theology. At age twelve Burke was sent to the necessary legal school, prefatory to Trinity College, albeit a Quaker one that approached education in a non-sectarian, and therefore less anti-Catholic, manner.⁸ This prepared him for Trinity College, Dublin, the 'Harvard' of Ireland and avenue to English-Irish society and politics.

Burke married Jane Nugent, a lifelong observant Catholic, in the established Anglican church, Roman Catholic weddings being illegal. Still, Burke subscribed to the Anglican oath required to serve in the British Parliament and publically denied being of the Catholic faith. Yet throughout his political career, he was suspected of being a secret Catholic; his parliamentary opponents accused him of being a closet 'papist' and referred to him as 'Edmund Bonny clapper' (a derogatory term for the Irish, and probably Burke's oratory), and political cartoons portrayed him wearing a Jesuit's biretta or sitting at his desk with a huge crucifix (atop a barrel of whiskey), candle and incense burning, dressed in a monk's habit and sandals, with picture of friars preaching in open air (Irish) services and saints' portraits.⁹ That Burke destroyed many of his personal papers, and with rumors persisting that he had, on his deathbed (like the Restoration king Charles II) requested a priest to administer last rites, only contributed to doubts about his Anglican identity.¹⁰

A key indicator of Burke's Catholic perspective comes in his earliest writing, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, composed with his friend Will Burke and published in 1757 (the period between his graduation from Trinity College and active political career). This book, which went into several editions, summarized the prevailing knowledge of Europeans' encounters with North America, including history, ethnography, geography, economics, and culture.¹¹ But most significant for Burke's political theory and political theology is the book's approach to these subjects through the Augustinian view of God's plan and workings in history, or divine providence. For example, its examination of government policy and political leadership concludes with the lesson that 'those rulers, who make complaints of the temper of their people,... ought rather to lament their own want of genius, which blinds them to the use of an instrument purposely put into their hands by Providence.'¹²

This providential view of politics and history permeates St. Augustine's classic work on religion and politics, the *City of God*, and its perspective was probably taught him by the Irish Augustinian friars who largely kept the Catholic Church going during the persecution. St. Augustine expresses the classical Christian view of God in history and politics: 'Thus God is the supreme reality.... From Him defines every mode of being, every species, every order... It is beyond anything incredible that He should have willed

the kingdoms of men, their dominions and their servitudes, to be outside the range of the laws of his providence.’ And Burke expresses the essential Augustinian providential teaching that God can bring good out of evil political events (‘Now God foreknew everything... [so we] must take into account God’s... providential design... and foreknowledge of the Creator can turn even those very evils to good account’).¹³ Burke’s view of the European history in North America echoes this Augustinian view by holding that ‘Providence, and a great minister who should imitate Providence, often gain their ends by means that seem most contrary to them.’¹⁴

Burke’s providential view of history and politics realistically saw many examples of evil triumphing temporarily, but God’s goodness and blessings overcoming that human evil, especially for those following Him.

It is significant that Burke’s most explicit pro-Catholic writings occur early and late in his adult life: before and after his active political life in the British Parliament (where any overt Catholicism would have disabled him from effective politics and possibly barred him from them altogether). The eighteenth-century oaths required to serve in Parliament specifically barred observant Roman Catholics. These included making a declaration against the doctrines of transubstantiation, the invocation of saints, and the sacrifice of the Mass; and receiving communion in the established church.

Thus, before and after his active political life, Burke’s writings could be more favorable toward Catholicism, if not entirely open about his personal faith. That Ireland, and the harsh Penal Laws against Catholics there, are the focal point of these little-known writings does not diminish their relevance to Burke’s own religious faith. They consist of an unfinished essay entitled ‘Tract Relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland,’ written shortly after his graduation from Trinity College (1765), and a long public letter to the Irish nobleman Sir Hercules Langrishe, ‘On the Catholics of Ireland’ (1792), which revisits the identical themes almost thirty years later.

Burke’s youthful ‘Tract’ begins with possibly a personal lament that the English anti-Catholic laws in Ireland on property have reduced the Old Families to ‘obscurity and indigence.’ But he immediately turns to the religious clauses of the Penal Laws. Provisions that all Catholic clergy (parsons, monks, friars) must be expelled (with a twenty-pound reward to anyone exposing them) and death by hanging if they return seem particularly barbaric to Burke. He proclaims these anti-Catholic laws to be ‘singular’ and ‘to its disadvantage, from any scheme of religious persecution now existing, or which has prevailed in any time or nation with which history has made us acquainted.’¹⁵

Such an extreme statement, along with its characterization of the Penal Laws as ‘unjust, impolitic, and inefficacious,’ hardly shows a mere ‘sympathy’ with an oppressed religious minority, but rather likely shows a revulsion over the violation of a precious

Catholicism itself. This unjust treatment of the vast majority (two-thirds) of the population is not just wrong as discrimination, but, for Burke, this crippling of the Catholic Church in Ireland has ‘the most unhappy influence on the prosperity, the morals and the safety of that country.’ Hardly a neutral or merely legal tolerance and egalitarian non-discrimination is shown here. The Catholic faith, teachings, and culture, for Burke, advance morality, prosperity and social stability, and their suppression leads to immorality, poverty, and chaos. And when that suppression is also carried on with a ‘cruelty’ and ‘fury and bigotry’ that amounts to a ‘persecuting spirit,’ it is even more destructive of religion and social order.’¹⁶

Burke here makes a telling remark, revealing his Catholic affinities by affirming the ‘truth of our common Christianity,’ Catholic and Protestant (with which he speaks ‘with reverence, I am sure’), and that the majority of (Irish) society should ‘enjoy the common advantage of it.’ The forced conversions from Catholicism do not involve only ‘renunciation of conscience’ for Burke but loss of ‘eternal happiness’ as well. Besides, on a prudential historical note, the political or legal suppression is of a church that for centuries had ‘received the countenance and sanctions of the laws.’ And with an obvious slur on the Anglican faith and ethics, Burke asserts that only to ‘a mind not thoroughly saturated with the tolerant maxims of the gospel’ is such persecution justified.¹⁷

‘Was there no civil society... before the Reformation?’ Burke asks. He answers that, of course, Ireland enjoyed civilization under the Catholic Church and ‘to the advantage of a very great part of society,’ unlike the minority who now have ‘profited’ from the change. Indeed, Burke notes, the early Irish (Celtic) Catholic Church was not so remote from the Protestant in being loosely tied to the papacy. It was then largely forced to be more strictly controlled by Rome by the English government, then compelled by that same state to be separated from the papacy, and so ‘inflicted and suffered the worst evils,’ tragically ‘harassed both for Popery and Protestation.’ The British state has treated Ireland the way a psychotic parent would treat an unfortunate child, ordering it to do something and then punishing it for doing that very thing.

*They have compelled the people to submit by the forfeiture of all their civil rights, to the Pope’s authority, in its most extravagant and unbounded sense, as a giver of kingdoms, and now they refuse even to tolerate them in the most moderate and chastised sentiments concerning it.*¹⁸

No doubt Burke's adherence to the Catholic faith was of this ‘moderate and chastised’ character, and he was compelled to conceal it, even in this advocacy prior to his years of service in British public office.

Then late in his life, after retirement from Parliament, Burke returned to this favorite theme of Catholic Emancipation in a long letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe. This pro-

Catholic letter not just criticizing discrimination against Irish Catholics but the very defects of Protestantism itself, its role in the British Constitution, and even the Monarch's Oath to support it, led to the political cartoon depicting Burke in monk's robe and sandals. This cartoon is entitled 'Cincinnatus in Retirement,' after the Roman ruler who, after great public service, returned to his humble previous life on a farm.

Burke refers to this retirement in his letter to Sir Hercules as involving life in 'nightgown and slippers' and as 'almost a cripple.' In such infirm retirement, near death, Burke is able to be the most honest about his Catholic faith, while remaining a crypto or secret believer owing to the legal and social penalties still attending Catholicism in Britain.

The term Protestant Christianity, Burke writes, is 'too general' a term to describe the myriad churches expressing non-Catholic Christianity and is not even a 'fundamental' part of the British Constitution.¹⁹

It is 'irrational' and 'impious,' Burke states, for the Church of England, so long before the Reformation 'connected with the See of Rome,' to reject most of the doctrines of Catholicism that are not contrary to Anglicanism. Besides, the Glorious Revolution (1688) establishing the current British government did not intend to establish Protestantism 'indefinitely.' Even the King's Oath to the Constitution in its 'most valuable and essential' features, to maintain 'the laws of God' and 'the gospel' of Christ, are not inconsistent with the Catholic faith. Burke notes that the ancient English Constitution of the Magna Carta (written when the Catholic Church prevailed in the nation) specifically requires the Church to be 'free' from the monarch's authority. Thus the laws denying the franchise to Catholics, legally forbidding property ownership or education, are clearly unconstitutional. This 'conquest' violates the 'principles' of the British Constitution by 'the deprivation of some millions of people of the rights of citizens and all interest in the constitution, in which they were born.' Such 'theological hatred' of 'fellow [Catholic] Christians' by the Anglican state has produced 'alienation on one side and pride and insolence on the other.' He concludes that the British government has afforded French Catholics in Canada jurisdiction of their own church.²⁰

In an even later letter, just a year before his death, Burke rails against the tyranny of Henry VIII and his 'plunder of the church,' the 'pillage of' a body of 'unoffending men' in the dissolution and confiscation of the English Catholic monasteries and colleges. This was a 'fury on everything that was great and noble,' the despoiling of 'the national church of his time and country.'²¹

Burke's familiar conservatism is not changed by its Catholic background, but it is illuminated and expanded by that underlying theological perspective. His famous view on political change—against sudden, radical revolution or 'innovation' and for gradual 'reform' respecting past traditions (a key component of St. Thomas Aquinas's political

philosophy)—reflect these Catholic teachings. They clarify Burke's critique of the French Revolution but endorsement of the British (1688) and American revolutions as well as his endorsement of more humane British rule over Ireland and India. In sum, the problem with extreme, radical social change is not only that it tends to be violent and destructive, or even that it will not really improve social conditions (but in fact will make them worse); it is that such inordinate attempts to alter the prevailing culture stem from a prideful human presumption that man, rather than God's providence, makes history. This flows from the original sin of Adam and Eve to 'be like God' (Genesis 3:5), creating their own world and defining themselves, rather than seeking and obeying God's will. Thus, the radical political 'innovation' Burke so despises is rooted in a devilish delusion that humanity can 'remake' the world and even create a 'new man.' Such flagrant violation of God's truth and law always ends in disaster, pain, and loss.

But, Burke writes in his 'Letter to a Noble Lord,' 'a Disposer whose power we are little able to resist, and whose wisdom it behooves us not at all to dispute, has ordained it in another manner.' God's way to social improvement, according to his will and revealed by the Church, is the only safe and stable form of social change. When divine providence is disregarded by radical reformers, 'when they have once thrown off the fear of God... a more dreadful calamity cannot arise out of hell to scourge mankind.' It comes out, for Burke, from 'the cold malignity of a wicked spirit... It is like that of the principle of evil himself, incorporeal, pure, unmixed, dilapidated, defecated evil.'²²

Positive, constructive change or 'reform,' in accordance with God's ways, 'is not a change in the substance' of man as a created being existing within natural and divine limits. But, Burke warns, 'to innovate is not to reform.'²³ As he says famously in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, innovation, sprung from a prideful presumption, is a 'barbarous philosophy' from 'cold hearts and muddy understandings,' a 'coarseness and vulgarity' of the angry revolutionary who, self-deceived, thinks he can correct all injustice with his 'metaphysical' schemes. Such self-righteous claims to 'justice' and 'liberation' always lead to greater oppression and enslavement, or as Burke puts it: 'In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows.'²⁴ Such revolutionaries 'spring from night and hell... deck themselves in... divine attributes... [and] the face of heaven glows with horror.'²⁵

Healthy reform, by contrast, respects and conforms to the valuable lessons and traditions of the past, which, especially for Burke, is the Christian, Catholic civilization of Europe. We 'derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers. Upon that body and stock of inheritance... all the reformations we have hither unto made have proceeded upon the principle of reverence to antiquity.' The main 'antiquity' to 'reverence' was the Catholic faith and Church, for

*nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners and civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for AGES upon ... the spirit of religion.*²⁶

Thus, for Burke's political philosophy, adherence to divine truth and providence, explained by the Catholic faith and preserved by the Church, is the only way to have justice in this world. The temptation for some Catholic social thought to accept contemporary ideology in place of this perennial truth, should be resisted, from Burke's perspective, in order to preserve the light of Catholic teaching in this dark world.

As I walked down Dame Street from the Cathedral in Dublin, I stopped in a small shop to pick up some groceries before retiring to my rooms at Trinity College. The shopkeeper, an older Irishman, struck up a conversation, as often happens, enquiring as to where I was from, what I was doing in Ireland, etc. Explaining my research on Burke, he said he knew of him generally but asked for details. I gave a brief description of Burke and his philosophy. The old man squinted his eyes and said, 'Was he Irish or English?!' I explained he grew up in Dublin but spent most of his adult life in London, in Parliament. More eye squinting: 'Was he Catholic or Protestant?!' 'Well,' I said, 'his mother was Catholic and his wife was Catholic, so what do you think?' The squint turned into a smile and a wink, 'he was Catholic,' the shopkeeper replied.

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Collier, 1909), 232-33. For this essay, the author is grateful for a sabbatical leave at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, and especially the gracious hospitality of Dean Patrick Geoghegan and the archivists at the Old Library.

² Edmund Burke, 'A Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe on the Catholics of Ireland,' in *Selected Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 4, ed., E.J. Payne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1990), 21.

³ Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: The First Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 1-12.

⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 15-18.

⁵ Norman, *Edmund Burke*, 11.

⁶ O'Brien, *The Great Melody*, 4, 6.

⁷ Fr. Francis Canavan, S.J., 'Edmund Burke: Christian Statesman,' *University Bookman* 43.1 (2003).

⁸ O'Brien, *The Great Melody*, 19.

⁹ Norman, *Edmund Burke*, 89.

¹⁰ O'Brien, *The Great Melody*, 5, 590-1.

¹¹ Norman, *Edmund Burke*, 30.

¹² Edmund Burke, *William Burke, An Account of the European Settlements in America* (London: R, and J. Dodsley, 1757).

¹³ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 5.11.1, 14.11.4. trini. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin. 1972) 196, 568-69.

¹⁴ Burke. *William Burke*, 109.

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *Jhr Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, vol. 6 (London. 1887), 302, 317. 318.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.329.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 334. 335. 336

¹⁸ *Ibid.*. 341,342-44.

¹⁹ Edmund Burke, *Selected Work: of Edmund Burke*, vol. 4, ed. E.J. Payne (Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1990), 20-21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*. 21.35, 72.61,77.

²¹ Edmund Burke. 'A Letter to a Noble Lord,' *Harvard Classics*, vol. 24 (New York: Collier and Son). 422-23.

²² *Ibid.*. 427,433.

²³ *Ibid.*, 411.

²⁴ Burke. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 216. 214.

²⁵ Burke. 'Letter 10 a Noble Lord,' 412.

²⁶ Burke. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, I70, 215 (emphasis mine).