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Marc JEANNIN et David POULIQUEN
Enseignants-chercheurs à l'Université d'Angers

Directeur de publication :

Jean-François BIANCO
Enseignant-chercheur à l'Université d'Angers

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EDMUND BURKE ON CHURCH STATUS, POLITICAL NOMINALISM AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Norbert Col
Université de Bretagne-Sud

Edmund Burke's denial that the French Revolution was his political watershed¹⁰⁵ is now widely accepted, even by those authors who might have easily chimed in with the outcry raised by the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).¹⁰⁶ He was not immune to human mutability, though, as shown by his meanderings about the political status of the Anglican Church. In 1772 and 1773, he regarded it as dependent on Parliament while *Reflections* apparently trumpeted its independence. It might be tempting to put his floating terminology down to the legacy of medieval nominalism, but evidence goes rather the opposite way; be that as it may, one can only regret that his devotion to a political career, from 1759, disabled him from working out the uneasy relationship between political practice and a philosopher's presumably more detached outlook.

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Burke travelled a narrow road. The Church, he argued in 1772, had "the prudential exercise" of a "capacity of reformation" granting it felicitous sovereignty upon itself; "fundamental laws" would conversely "for ever...prevent it from adapting itself to its opinions," "would for ever put [it] out of its own power," "put it far above the state, and erect it into that species of independency which it has been the great principle of our policy to prevent."¹⁰⁷ His illustrations, mostly based on Henry VIII and Edward VI, depict Church decisions as autonomous,¹⁰⁸ yet they dodge political constraints and merely hint that a political definition of dogma is the best, though fragile, answer to religious rifts. This made Burke something of a Hobbesian. Parliament had sanctioned Presbyterianism in 1643,¹⁰⁹ but he does not go into the circumstances of that Westminster Assembly of Divines during the Civil Wars. They endorsed the Presbyterian Directory for Public Worship of 1645, but the Restoration rejected it in favour of a new version of the Book of Common Prayer which Burke regarded as a "second idol"¹¹⁰ after the one of 1645. Did his relativistic approach to dogmatic upheavals tally with the "prudential exercise" of a "capacity of reformation?" What of the Anglican settlement itself? The Church ought not to be independent; its dependence was embarrassing, and indeed Parliament was asked to pronounce upon petty squabbles that might lead to "religious wars."¹¹¹ The Hobbesian

¹⁰⁵ Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), ed. and trans. Norbert Col (Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1996).

¹⁰⁶ The most strident early voice was Thomas Paine's (*Rights of Man*, 1791 and 1792). Isaac Kramnick (*The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* [New York: Basic Books, 1977]) offers a paradoxically consistent Burke whose permanent political ambivalence derived from just as permanent sexual ambivalence; Michel Fuchs ("Philosophie politique et droits de l'Homme chez Burke et Paine," *XVII-XVIII* 27 [1988]: 50-63) takes Burke's about-turn for granted, but his later *Edmund Burke, Ireland and the Fashioning of Self* (Oxford: Oxford Foundation, 1996) strikes the entirely different note of a consistency deeply steeped in the complexities of the Irish matrix.

¹⁰⁷ Burke, *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity* (1772), vol. 6 of *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907-1910), 93-94.

¹⁰⁸ Burke, *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity*, 6:93.

¹⁰⁹ Burke, *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity*, 6:94.

¹¹⁰ Burke, *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity*, 6:98.

¹¹¹ Burke, *Speech on the Acts of Uniformity*, 6:95.

touch, again, confirmed by Burke's avowal that, in spite of its venerability, the Bible was a "most multifarious...collection," which incidentally led to Theophilus Lindsey's imputations that he wrote "entirely like a Jesuit, and full of Popish ideas."¹¹² Had Richard Simon's (an Oratorian, by the way) *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament* (1678) and *Histoire Critique du Texte du Nouveau Testament* (1690) become so exclusively representative of Catholic exegesis that the Unitarian-to-be, Lindsey, could project it onto Burke himself? The latter merely insisted on "some security" respecting how belief should be directed, which meant, implicitly, that Parliament should decide against "dangerous fanaticism."¹¹³ Hobbes, once more.

His positions hardened a mere year later. He was still in favour of the *status quo* which alone secured Church dignity, and still in favour of toleration, "a part of establishment, as a principle favourable to Christianity, and as a part of Christianity,"¹¹⁴ but limits were stark respecting atheists. He had witnessed the potentially contagious rise of French *philosophes*; accordingly, English "infidels" ought to be "outlaws of the constitution; not of this country, but of the human race."¹¹⁵ Party claims led certain Dissenters "to raise a faction in the state,"¹¹⁶ in short atheism or Epicureanism.¹¹⁷ More, the "Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters" was presented by Methodists applying for acceptance in the Church while pressing for continued exclusion of other Dissenters.¹¹⁸ Burke's plea for "a front against the common enemy"¹¹⁹ of atheism was thus hampered by the alliance of bigoted exclusiveness and self-interested thirst for toleration voiced by those shady applicants. Unfortunately, what remains of the speech, "partly...manuscript papers of Mr. Burke" and "partly...a very imperfect" contemporary "short-hand note" in the Commons,¹²⁰ makes it a matter of conjecture what he actually thought, but Church dependence raised more issues than it solved.

The French Revolution led him somewhat confusedly to revisit issues. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, passed on 12 July 1790 and reluctantly endorsed by Louis XVI on 24 August, may indeed read like an unmistakable foil for Anglicanism, but Burke's description of English cogs and wheels is hardly pellucid:

The people of England think that they have constitutional motives as well as religious, against any project of turning their independent clergy into ecclesiastical pensioners of state. They tremble for their liberty, from the influence of a clergy dependent on the crown; they tremble for the public tranquillity from the disorders of a factious clergy, if it were made to depend upon any other than the crown. They therefore made their church, like their king and their nobility, independent.¹²¹

¹¹²Burke, Speech on the Acts of Uniformity, 6:101; Theophilus Lindsey to William Turner (February 7, 1772), in F. P. Lock, Edmund Burke, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008 [1998] and 2009 [2006], 1:333.

¹¹³Burke, Speech on the Acts of Uniformity, 6:102.

¹¹⁴Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters (1773), in Works, 6:104.

¹¹⁵Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 6:112.

¹¹⁶Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 6:107.

¹¹⁷Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 6:109, 110. John Locke had already voiced such commonplace fears of atheism. This takes some of the sting from J. C. D. Clark's regrets that Burke was far from being tolerant: "Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in America (1777): or, How Did the American Revolution Relate to the French?" in *An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke*, ed. Ian Crowe (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 85-86. Locke, it must be specified, devoted rather little space to the issue of atheism: see Sophie Soccarr, "L'exclusion des athées par Locke: l'envers théorique d'une convention politique," XVII-XVIII 2008 (65):311-332, 312.

¹¹⁸Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 6:106.

¹¹⁹Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 6:113.

¹²⁰Editorial note to Burke, Speech on a Bill for the Relief of Protestant Dissenters, 6:102.

¹²¹Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (1969; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 199.

Yet he balked at combining genuine religious exteriority and the political exteriority of royal power.¹²² His was a hard-headed clarification: the English

have incorporated and identified the estate of the church with the mass of *private property*, of which the state is not the proprietor, either for use or dominion, but the guardian only and the regulator.¹²³

Obviously, this did not negate the 1772 stipulation against doctrinal “independency,” but difficulties lay elsewhere. To what extent was the French sale of Church property, decreed on 14 May 1790, alien to the English settlement? Burke knew full well about Henry VIII’s reform of the Church buttressed by the sale of abbey property with Parliamentary approval,¹²⁴ but he left out the role of Church convocations paving the way for Parliamentary decision.¹²⁵ It may be that Henry’s policies, bearing on abbeys alone, not on “all the ecclesiastics” as in France,¹²⁶ were less susceptible of breeding “ecclesiastic pensioners of state,” but Burke says nothing of Parliamentary supremacy over doctrine nor of the Oath of Supremacy for which Catholic recusants under Henry or, later on, Non Jurors who would not have William of Orange as *de jure* king paid more or less dear a price. Hence, the danger of a clergy “dependent on the crown” both echoes the rather safe indictment of Henry VIII’s policies and mostly serves to obfuscate the Church’s doctrinal dependence on political power since it would have weakened his points on its enviable status.¹²⁷

Insisting on Church economic dependence in the early times of revolutionary France, with the destitute situation of both clergy and the needy who had depended on Church aid,¹²⁸ helped him brush aside the issue of doctrinal independence: alongside embarrassing homebred reasons, he must have known that Catholic dogma was not endangered before the dechristianisation of An II, the Goddess of Reason then Robespierre as High Priest of sorts of the Supreme Being.¹²⁹ He could have accepted the Civil Constitution along his earlier Hobbesian lines, but now his main concern was not so doctrinal as economic and moral. The Anglican Church wasted less money than noblemen and did more service to the poor.¹³⁰ Clerical succour to the suffering wealthy¹³¹ implicitly harnesses George Cheyne’s *The English Malady* (1733)¹³² to the support of Church charity. However, his ridiculing clichés about “lazy” monks¹³³ fuelled Thomas Paine’s accusations that he had “shortened his journey to Rome,”¹³⁴

¹²²Col, “Edmund Burke on Monarchy: Keystone and Trials of Strength,” *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 26 (2021): 20-41.

¹²³Burke, *Reflections*, 200.

¹²⁴Henry VIII had long been controversial on that and other scores: see Bernard Cottret, *Henri VIII : le pouvoir par la force* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1999), 12-15.

¹²⁵Burke, *Reflections*, 217-218.

¹²⁶Burke, *Reflections*, 217.

¹²⁷Burke, *Reflections*, 201-203. Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men* [London: J. Johnson, 1790], 82, 90, 92-93) called to mind the contempt in which the Church was held by the nobility.

¹²⁸Burke, *Reflections*, 205-206, 262-263n.

¹²⁹Burke hardly heeded Robespierre, contenting himself with indicting the Goddess of Reason (*Letters on a Regicide Peace* [1796-1797], in *Works*, 5:207-208) against which Robespierre reacted, but he merely listed him among the victims of the juggernaut (5:397-398).

¹³⁰Burke, *Reflections*, 203.

¹³¹Burke, *Reflections*, 200-201.

¹³²On Cheyne, see Leigh Wetherall Dickson, “‘The French, alas, are happy, while the English seek to be so’: Subverting the Melancholy Stereotype in Georgiana Cavendish’s *The Sylph*,” in *Utopie, individu et société : la sociabilité en question*, ed. Norbert Col and Allan Ingram (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2015), 121-128.

¹³³Burke, *Reflections*, 271.

¹³⁴Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (1791-1792), ed. Eric Foner, notes Henry Collins (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), II, 43.

banking on a string of caricatures of a birettaed Burke¹³⁵: there had long been insinuations that he was a crypto-Jacobite and/or a crypto-Catholic, down to, perplexingly, a “Jew Jesuit.”¹³⁶

Most tellingly, Burke downplayed the role of the 1765-1768 *Commission des Réguliers*.¹³⁷ The latter testified to some similar, and indeed obtrusive, State guardianship to the one in England and remotely echoed Louis XIV’s *Mémoires*,¹³⁸ which Burke could have equally mentioned. Such silences tally with his construction of a revolutionary *tabula rasa*: “atheism by establishment”¹³⁹ was still to come, but “throwing off [the] Christian religion” must be succeeded by a “degrading superstition” since “the mind will not endure a void.”¹⁴⁰ The sale of Church property and the Civil Constitution, belittling what had been so long honoured, must negatively affect belief as against England’s admiration of her Church.¹⁴¹

However, though man, partly *contra* Aristotle’s *zōon politikon*, was a “religious animal,”¹⁴² Burke did not aver that political should be superseded by religious imperatives. He articulated a self-evident religious basis with an equally self-evident need for political checks to religious strife. The “Guises,” “Condés, and Colignis” of the French religious wars and, in later times, Richelieu, “acted in the spirit of civil war”¹⁴³ like Cromwell and sundry more or less bellicose English sectarians.¹⁴⁴ Yet, since everything ultimately came under the political tag, religion was a political leaven giving the people unexpected eminence:

When the people have emptied themselves of all the lust of selfish will, which without the help of religion it is impossible they ever should, when they are conscious that they exercise, and exercise perhaps in an higher link of the order of delegation, the power, which to be legitimate must be according to that eternal immutable law, in which will and reason are the same, they will be more careful how they place power in base and incapable hands.

Accordingly,

they will confer that power (which any man may well tremble to give or to receive) on those only, in whom they may discern that predominant proportion of active virtue and wisdom, taken together and fitted to the charge, such, as in the great and inevitable mixed mass of human imperfections and infirmities, is to be found.

There was scope for hope:

When they are habitually convinced that no evil can be acceptable, either in the act or in the permission, to him whose essence is good, they will be better able to extirpate out of the minds of

¹³⁵See William Dent, “A Learned Coalition” (July 11, 1783) and Frederick George Byron (?), “The Knight of the Woful [sic] Countenance” (November 15, 1790), in Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 48, 142.

¹³⁶The jibe is William Gerard Hamilton’s, possibly in April 1765. See O’Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke* (1992; London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 47-48.

¹³⁷Burke, *Reflections*, 356. The *Commission* is not mentioned by name. On its marked anti-monastic partiality, see Jean Meyer and André Corvisier, in Meyer, Corvisier and Jean-Pierre Poussou, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991), 1:424.

¹³⁸See Jean-Jacques Chevallier, *Histoire de la pensée politique* (1979; Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1993), 329.

¹³⁹Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, 5:207-208.

¹⁴⁰Burke, *Reflections*, 187-188.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 202-203.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 94, 95, 96, 137, 166. There is a more positive appreciation of Cromwell as statesman in *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), in *Works*, 2:526-527, 544-545.

all magistrates, civil, ecclesiastical, or military, any thing that bears the least resemblance to a proud and lawless domination.¹⁴⁵

This departed from the Enlightenment mindset where religious coercion must bear on the people while reason-cultivating philosophers did without such crutches. Yet religion emancipated only if its power was fully recognised. This was wishful thinking: the liberating potential could be adulterated by the new metaphysics of the rights of man with their universal, *hic et nunc* enforcement which repeated the fanatical Protestant Reformation's "spirit of proselytism."¹⁴⁶ In this, Henry VIII was a paltry ancestor of French revolutionaries, bound as he was, like his Roman predecessors in confiscation, to observe certain formalities, though vitiated by Parliamentary servility.¹⁴⁷ Whether Henry actually became a Protestant Burke does not consider, his object being continental Protestantism, but even so there, is hardly a slip' twist Protestant positivity and Protestant negativity.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS?

Burke's mounting hostility to Protestantism during the French Revolution never led him, reportedly, to renege on his attachment to Anglicanism.¹⁴⁸ This calls for qualifying. Things were crystal clear in *Reflections*: "We are protestants, not from indifference but from zeal."¹⁴⁹ What then is to be made of the later quips, "A man is certainly the most perfect Protestant, who protests against the whole Christian religion,"¹⁵⁰ "the Protestant Directory in Paris," "the Protestant hero, Buonaparte" or "that true Protestant, *Hocbe*?"¹⁵¹ In these he indicted Irish Protestants' rabid anti-Catholicism and their blindness to its effect: drawing Irish Catholics to welcome French revolutionaries. An odd two decades earlier, he had already aired his misgivings about "the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion" in the northern colonies.¹⁵² Anglicanism certainly retained his favours, but, like it or not, it came under Protestantism, and his last years show growing uncertainty over Irish Catholic affairs where precious little differentiated between the Anglican subset and the Protestant set. Words, words, words? Those indeed demanded close attention, as shown by Rabaut Saint-Étienne's "changer les mots" and "changer les choses."¹⁵³ Burke never actually tried to work out to what extent he could cherish Anglicanism while baulking at its embarrassing Protestant dimension: he could regard it as safely institutionalised while also as an objectively revolutionary destabiliser of Ireland. Such indifference to minute investigation permeates much of his thinking in the 1790s, though it may also have been his own echo of the prevailing logomachia.

Henry VIII, an inhabitant of an older and better world, could have been no past master in the French incantatory claptrap of "*Philosophy, Light, Liberty, Liberality, the Rights of Men*."¹⁵⁴ But, no matter Burke's suspicion of semantic changes, as with whether "the word 'enlightened' [was to] be understood according to the new

¹⁴⁵Burke, *Reflections*, 191-192.

¹⁴⁶Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791), in *Works*, 3:350.

¹⁴⁷Burke, *Reflections*, 218.

¹⁴⁸See Ian McBride, "Burke and Ireland," in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. David Dwan and Christopher Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 192.

¹⁴⁹Burke, *Reflections*, 187.

¹⁵⁰Burke, *A Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* (1792), in *Works*, 3:313.

¹⁵¹Burke, *A Letter on the Affairs of Ireland* (1797), in *Works*, 6:86-87.

¹⁵²Burke, *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775), in *Works*, 1:466.

¹⁵³Rabaut Saint-Étienne, quoted in Burke, *Reflections*, 279n.

¹⁵⁴Burke, *Reflections*, 218.

dictionary, as it always is in your new schools,”¹⁵⁵ little is there of genuine terminological differences between him and his opponents. His attacks on the “rights of men,” preferably to “rights of man,” have led to imputations that the lover of the local and particular scorned the universality of “man.”¹⁵⁶ This does not lead a very long way,¹⁵⁷ and Mary Wollstonecraft exhibited no greater wish to abide by semantic niceties when she took it out on him in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) though, two years later, she used the singular for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In fact, Burke’s “real rights of men”¹⁵⁸ collided with those revolutionary rights to political power which were immediately curtailed by money suffrage. This elicited his jibes¹⁵⁹ before such rights were entirely drained of substance by the filter of “fear (or indifference)”¹⁶⁰ correcting male universal suffrage in 1793.

With new concepts being devised or older ones revised, it is hardly surprising that Burke should have been similarly approximate. “Public opinion”, for instance, evolved from a pre-revolutionary “power clearly separate from the official authority of royal sovereigns” to, from 1790, an invocation of “the will of the new sovereign,” the people, until, by 1795, it came to mean “crowds’ claims to speak for the people.”¹⁶¹ Closer to things Burkean are “revolution” and “counter-revolution.” To Paine, a “counter-revolution” was restoring rights from which “conquest and tyranny, at some early period, dispossessed man.”¹⁶² Even though he generally resorted to “revolution” to refer to such retrieval, his isolated, positive use of “counter-revolution” matched Burke’s hesitations between two opposite meanings of revolution.

Burkean revolution was both the classical return to the *status quo ante*, as with the Glorious Revolution, and the French blank slate dominating in Paine and holding sway ever since. Yet even that could partake of the older cycles. Paine geared Adamic rights to his Dissenting readership¹⁶³ in close fashion to his restoring “counter-revolution.” He was much more at home with those an-historical and areligious rights of man, natural and civil alike, which are his final say on the matter,¹⁶⁴ but his inroads into a religious idiom or his celebration of alleged pre-Conquest popular rights,¹⁶⁵ more than turning everything to good account, come under a reappropriation of Burke’s points that he did not bring to real fruition. Burke was equally fuzzy, meaning counter-revolution when saying, of Paris, that “even there a revolution is not likely to have anything to feed it,” while immediately adding: “no counter-revolution is to be expected in France, from internal causes only,” against the background of debates on war during the winter of 1791-1792.¹⁶⁶

At bottom, neologisms, or at least old words given new, political, even mystical twists, created an alternative world of meaning that rested on a metaphysical break

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 308-309.

¹⁵⁶For instance, Fuchs, “Philosophie et droits de l’Homme chez Burke et Paine”, 54.

¹⁵⁷On Burke’s occasional use of the singular, without any semantic difference, see Col, Burke, le contrat social et les révolutions (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2001), 192-193.

¹⁵⁸Burke, Reflections, 149. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 288.

¹⁶⁰René Sédillot, *Le Coût de la Terreur* (Paris: Perrin, 1990), 29.

¹⁶¹Jon Cowans, *To Speak for the People: Public Opinion and the Problem of Legitimacy in the French Revolution* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 185, 198.

¹⁶²Paine, *Rights of Man*, ii, “Introduction,” 161. He also endorsed the usual meaning of “counter-revolution” (i, 118-119) that, according to Jean-Clément Martin, appeared in 1790 (*Contre-Révolution, Révolution et Nation en France : 1789-1799* [Paris: Seuil, 1998], 10).

¹⁶³Paine, *Rights of Man*, i, 65-67. See also Patrick Thierry, *Burke : le futur en héritage* (Paris: Michalon, 2010), 80-81.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., i, 68.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., i, 70, 72 (for instance); on the controversy about pre-Conquest popular rights, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (1957, 1987; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁶⁶Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs*, 3:375.

with the past. Against “*Philosophy, Light, Liberty, Liberality, the Rights of Men*” sound reason had no say. “Light” evoked the Quakers’ inner light about which Burke had his youthful doubts in a letter of 25/31 July 1746 to his Quaker friend Richard Shackleton,¹⁶⁷ and this heralds the same field of mistrust as his later quote from the sarcastic *Hudibras*: revolutionaries “Have *lights*, where better eyes are blind,/As pigs are said to see the wind.”¹⁶⁸ New Revolutionary was but old Puritan writ large.

However, Burke relied on adjectives for clarification, as, famously, in “Through just prejudice, [man’s] duty becomes a part of his reason.”¹⁶⁹ Not conceptualising anew, he trusted to common-sense effects. Epithets, or other qualifiers, protected substantives rather than altering them beyond recognition as with the paradoxes of Rousseau and revolutionary “legislators”¹⁷⁰ or, later, “atheism by establishment.” The new establishment was as privative as atheism, and Burke implicitly returned to Saint Augustine’s view of evil as deficiency or lesser being, not evil nature *strict sensu*¹⁷¹—though, for practical purposes, he usually clung to an absolutised evil.

The new linguistic perversion remotely evoked medieval nominalism: with William of Occam, the Ten Commandments could have had an utterly opposite tenor had God willed it so;¹⁷² to Burke, revolutionary rhetoric was blasphemous *fiat*. John Locke had retrieved medieval nominalism,¹⁷³ but the concept was no longer in “ordinary usage” since “virtually every philosopher was ‘nominalist,’ insofar as he rejected belief in the existence of universals.”¹⁷⁴ Burke’s dismissal of abstraction, however, allied with preservation of principles without which “reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details,”¹⁷⁵ in keeping with Aquinas for whom “sense apprehends particulars and intellect apprehends universals.”¹⁷⁶

Sublime and Beautiful (1757, 1759) hardly heralds Burke’s attack on revolutionary metaphysics, but it is where he wrote most about the Locke of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), the one whose currency, though controversial, was definitely higher than that of the *Two Treatises of Government* in the same year.¹⁷⁷ Political Locke was targeted in the slightly earlier *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756, 1757);¹⁷⁸ nor did Burke wholeheartedly accept the Locke on understanding. However, to what extent does his distribution of words into “aggregate words,” “simple abstract words” and “compounded abstract words” conflict with that of Locke, of which he says nothing, into “names of simple ideas,” “names of mixed modes and relations” and “names of substances?”¹⁷⁹ He is more specific on mind’s “far greater alacrity and satisfaction in

¹⁶⁷O’Brien, *The Great Melody*, 25.

¹⁶⁸Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, 1663-1678, III, ii, quoted in Burke, *Appeal*, 124.

¹⁶⁹Burke, *Reflections*, 183. See Col, Burke, *le contrat social et les révolutions*, 218-227.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 282-284.

¹⁷¹Marcel Neusch, “La Cité de Dieu et le sens de l’histoire”, *Liberté politique* 11 (2000): 77.

¹⁷²Michel Villey, *Le droit et les droits de l’homme* (1983; Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1990), 122.

¹⁷³Nicholas Hudson, “Locke’s Nominalism and the ‘Linguistic Turn’ of the Enlightenment,” *The European Legacy* 2:2 (1997): 223-228, 223-224. DOI:10.1080/10848779708579719

¹⁷⁴Hudson, “John Locke and the Tradition of Nominalism,” in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse*, ed. Hugo Keiper, Christoph Bode and Richard J. Utz, *Critical Studies*, 1997 (10): 283-299, 283.

¹⁷⁵Burke, *Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians* (1792), in *Works*, 6:114.

¹⁷⁶Norman Kretzmann, “Philosophy of Mind,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (1993; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 147.

¹⁷⁷See J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles: The Politics of Party 1689-1720* (1977; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-2.

¹⁷⁸Col, Burke, *le contrat social et les révolutions*, 30-37, 40-45, 48-50.

¹⁷⁹Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, 1759), in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Essays*, ed. David Womersley (London:

tracing resemblances than in searching for differences,” since the former activity generates “*new images*” while the latter produces a “pleasure” of “something of a negative and indirect nature.” He does praise Locke for “observ[ing] of wit, that it is chiefly conversant in tracing resemblances;” yet Locke “remarks at the same time, that the business of judgment is rather in finding differences.” As for Burke, he brings both wit and judgment together under the “mind of man.”¹⁸⁰ He may also have been embarrassed by that central feature in Locke where induction helps the mind move from the senses to what objects really are¹⁸¹: to him, “we are bound by the condition of our nature to ascend to these pure and intellectual ideas [like “the idea of God himself”] through the medium of sensible images,”¹⁸² but he dodges the issue of induction, skips Aquinas’s reflections on the matter¹⁸³ and apparently leaves out the latter’s concern about God’s unattainability by philosophy alone,¹⁸⁴ contenting himself with insisting on divine power.

One of Burke’s most telling passages deflates mechanistic connections of senses and intellect. As he puts it, respecting an account of the course of the Danube that does seem to be his own,

In this description many things are mentioned, as mountains, rivers, cities, the sea, &c. But let anybody examine himself, and see whether he has had impressed on his imagination any pictures of a river, mountain, watery soil, Germany, &c. Indeed it is impossible, in the rapidity and quick succession of words in conversation, to have ideas both of the sound of the word, and of the thing represented; besides, some words expressing real essences, are so mixed with others of a general and nominal import, that it is impracticable to jump from sense to thought, from particulars to generals, from things to words, in such a manner as to answer the purposes of life; nor is it necessary that we should.¹⁸⁵

He may well have been, implicitly, taking Locke’s awareness of the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified¹⁸⁶ to the limit, though without, any more than Locke did, casting doubt on the veracity of either signifier or signified. In other words, “Locke...would not say that one perceives Vienna when one is only thinking of it and not actually seeing it.”¹⁸⁷ Burke was also going beyond Socrates’ connection of naming and action¹⁸⁸ and, in this, was indirectly drawing attention to that centrality of habits that came to be his distinctive feature in the revolutionary years. This is where his early, inchoate, possibly half-baked differences with Locke were supplemented by misgivings that no longer had much to do with whatever Locke had had in mind.

Penguin, 1998), v, ii, 187-188; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690; Pennsylvania State University: Electronic Classics Series, 1999), III, IV-VI, 406-459.

¹⁸⁰Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, “Introduction on Taste” (1759), 69 (emphasis in the original); see Locke, *Essay*, II, XI, 138-140.

¹⁸¹Locke, *Essay*, II, IX, 128-132.

¹⁸²Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, II, v, 110.

¹⁸³On Aquinas and induction, see Scott MacDonald, “Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 183-184.

¹⁸⁴Jan V. Aertsen, “Aquinas’s philosophy in its historical setting,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 32.

¹⁸⁵Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, v, iv, 191.

¹⁸⁶Locke, *Essay*, III, ii, 390.

¹⁸⁷Vere Chappell, “Locke’s theory of ideas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 30.

¹⁸⁸Plato, *Cratylus*, 387c.

PHILOSOPHY AND/OR POLITICS?

At bottom, was Burke comfortable with Locke's anti-innatist contention that "the vast differences between men" depended on knowledge alone?¹⁸⁹ He could have jibed at it if Locke's view of the mind as *tabula rasa* had indeed been the most revolutionary doctrine identified by Alfred Cobban, whereby "it is possible to change the whole face of society in a single generation."¹⁹⁰ However, what Cobban makes Locke's hallmark was already in Aristotle, Richard Hooker, perhaps John Donne and several others,¹⁹¹ and also in Aquinas's rejection of innatism;¹⁹² unfortunately, *Sublime and Beautiful* is silent on both Locke and Aquinas on the matter. If Locke's mind as *tabula rasa* is hardly revolutionary, could his politics be just as traditional? This is definitely not what *Vindication* suggests but, though Burke finds fault with both facets of Locke, he never constructs a coherent whipping boy.

One of his clearest divergences from Locke was with the latter's association of ideas, and this led him towards some form of innatism since "nature" offered a far more convincing explanation for mankind's response to darkness than any association of ideas.¹⁹³ This may make him some belated disciple of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (*De Veritate*, 1624),¹⁹⁴ or a forerunner of Thomas Reid's innatism in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), a book that was indeed "advertised in Burke's *Annual Register*, where Reid's introductory chapter was reproduced in full."¹⁹⁵ It translated into the revolt of "the inborn feelings of [his] nature" respecting Marie Antoinette's treatment during the October Days.¹⁹⁶ Whether this relates to Aquinas's "infused virtues," otherwise the theological virtues¹⁹⁷ the highest of which is charity, or to Aquinas's synderesis or "natural habitus" directing to good, not to evil,¹⁹⁸ or whether it is just a cliché meant to elicit compassion,¹⁹⁹ is not crystal clear. Crucially, Aquinas's synderesis pertains to practice which, in Burke's world, is that of politics. Hence, possibly, Burke's anti-nominalist pronouncement where laws are, strictly speaking, only "declaratory," and his brief remark on Hobbes, who "seems" to have held that "any body of men have a right to make what laws they please," suggesting that Hobbes might not have been too much of a nominalist.²⁰⁰

No genuine explorer of such issues, Burke may nonetheless have felt the lure of nominalist metaphysics. *Sublime and Beautiful* offers two stages with, firstly, the "darkness" of "almost all the heathen temples," "the barbarous temples of the

189Kenneth MacLean, *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (1936; New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 44; see Locke, *Essay*, I, iii, 74.

190Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century* (1929; London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), 24.

191MacLean, *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, 32-33.

192Aertsen, "Aquinas's philosophy in its historical setting," 21; see Francis P. Canavan, SJ, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, NC: The Duke University Press, 1960), 198-211, for an assessment of the Trinity College, Dublin syllabus and its plausible impact on Burke.

193Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, iv, ii, 160-161; xiv, 171-173 where Locke is explicitly incriminated; see also xv, 173. Locke, in fact, differentiated between the potential madness of "association" as against the far more positive "connection" (Hans Aarsleff, "Locke's influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, 269).

194On Herbert of Cherbury, see Kevin Cope, *John Locke Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 41.

195Ian Crowe, "The Whig Imagination of Edmund Burke," in *An Imaginative Whig*, 12.

196Burke, *Reflections*, 168.

197Mark D. Jordan, "Theology and philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 239.

198Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I qu. 79 art. 12.

199Some contemporaries presented Burke as ludicrous lover: see Frederick George Byron (?), "Don Dismallo, After an Absence of Sixteen Years, Embracing his Beautiful Vision!" November 18, 1790, in Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature*, 143.

200Burke, *Tracts on the Popery Laws* (ca. 1765), in *Works*, 6:21. For coinciding remarks, see Franck Lessay, *Souveraineté et légitimité chez Hobbes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), 255n.

Americans of the day” and “the darkest woods” of druidic “ceremonies;”²⁰¹ the second edition has an afterthought where the sublimity of most religions has been rooted out by Christianity which, “as it were, humanised the idea of the divinity.”²⁰² Did that parallel Parliamentary control over Anglicanism, bringing into line disruptive religious forces? Burke provides no illustration for the Christian exception, and the revision simply hammers on the equation of sublime and terror for which the first edition had been blamed.²⁰³ Shortly later, druids again came under darkness and terror, though the sublime went unmentioned just like the beautiful,²⁰⁴ as if these ideal types were irrelevant to event history. The October Days reshuffled cards: again, there was nothing specific about the two concepts, but Marie Antoinette, who could have been consummate beautiful, implicitly came under the monstrosity of the lawless sublime, while subdued French noblemen inhabited, just as implicitly, the passive beautiful.²⁰⁵ All that had been more or less chartered territory was giving way to the incipient revolutionary juggernaut, and Burke’s account of divine ways may echo God’s arbitrary will in nominalism. *Reflections*’ thorough defence of a traditional order is eye-catching indeed, but *Thoughts on French Affairs*, the year after, has quasi nominalist doubts about the feasibility of such a defence:

If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it, the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they, who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the demands of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm but perverse and obstinate.²⁰⁶

Reflections offered a similar conclusion: France was “in all its transmigrations to be purified by fire and blood,”²⁰⁷ but there remained a glimmer of hope in a return to normality. Not so in 1791 if, as occasionally alleged, Burke bracketed Providence and the French Revolution.²⁰⁸ But such readings do not heed the deflation, in “will appear,” of whatever might point to “political” nominalism. Nor had God, though “Supreme Director” of the revolutionary “great drama,”²⁰⁹ any place in Burke’s 1793 stress on property and the conditions for a monarchical restoration.²¹⁰ God might be free to punish or test humans, but it was their duty to pass on what they had received, and mentioning Providence might have suggested nominalist arbitrariness or, in a desacralised world, the historicism that Strauss thought he could identify in Burke.

God’s obscure plan in history was already illustrated by the possible impiety of exclusive belief in “hereditary royalty,”²¹¹ which was analogous to the later “will seem to be.” How could God be ever harnessed to political strife? What of his plans and on

201Burke, *Sublime and Beautiful*, ii, iii, 103.

202Ibid., ii, v, 112.

203T. O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton, ed., *The Early Writings*, vol. 1 of *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 185.

204Burke, *An Abridgment of English History* (unfinished), in *Works*, 6:202-206.

205Burke, *Reflections*, 169-170; Col, “Burke’s Sublime and Beautiful in Political Sociability: from *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) to the French Revolution,” in *Les Lumières en France et en Grande-Bretagne : les vecteurs d’une nouvelle sociabilité – entre ludique et politique*, ed. Annick Cossic-Péricarpin and Allan Ingram (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2012), 215-222.

206Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs*, 3:393.

207Burke, *Reflections*, 376.

208Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1950, 1953; Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 318-319; Michel Ganzin, *La pensée politique d’Edmund Burke* (Paris: Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence, 1971), 149; Claude Polin, “Edmond [sic] Burke, témoin de son temps, ou un paradigme de la modernité,” *Actes Augustin Cochon*, Avrillé, Nouvelle Aurore, 1975 (1): 101-116, 111.

209Burke, *Reflections*, 175.

210Burke, *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* (1793), in *Works*, 3:416-417, 444-445, 450-452.

211Burke, *Reflections*, 111.

what basis were they made? There was no real answer in Aquinas, if indeed Burke was looking for one there, since Aquinas looked upon wisdom as engendered like the Son²¹²: hence Burke's political adaptation of that other hallmark of Aquinas's, apophatic theology,²¹³ which he turned to his own agonising statements about God's presence in, or absence from, the political chaos of his own time. But his acknowledgement of divine intervention, even *in absentia*, while human landmarks were liable to error, opened onto dangerous vistas in his world of practicality.

The French Revolution perverted language; what of Burkean veracity? Pious frauds, underpinning writing under persecution, had been endorsed at least from Plato.²¹⁴ Burke hardly resorted to them, even undermined them rather than making a one-sided point. Common lawyers' "powerful prepossession towards antiquity"²¹⁵ ennobled the tampering behind the coronation of William and Mary with its deviation from strict hereditary succession the better to adhere to the overriding imperative of Protestantism.²¹⁶ However, legitimising the Revolution Settlement made history a manual for present-day concerns, as with the "politic, well-wrought veil" cast around the shady circumstances of the hallowed episode.²¹⁷

The 1688 Settlement was somewhat Thomistic²¹⁸: there had been no civil war, let alone a protracted one, lawful checks to James II had brought about a satisfactory conclusion, but it all rested on obfuscating the role of self-interested Anglicans and William of Orange. Burke's apologia of the sailing Dutchman draws from the latter's sedative Declarations of 30 September/10 October and 14/24 October 1688;²¹⁹ *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, eulogising the same William for unflaggingly leading the country into defensive wars against Louis XIV, hold him up for imitation against the French Revolution;²²⁰ but Burke leaves out the contentious point of England and the other two kingdoms being dragged into support of William's native United Provinces. He was writing sketchy, moral, practical Whig history where the ways of Providence boiled down to a defence and illustration of England as God's elect.²²¹

It took a strong degree of retrospective, patriotic imagination to imbibe that God willed the shedding of English blood on the altar of the enemy of 1652-1654, 1665-1667 and 1672-1674. It could, hopefully, work again in the late 1790s. But there had also been the Treaty of Utrecht of which Burke says nothing, though it may have lurked at the back of his mind: what the Whigs regarded as Tory treason could inspire peace with the Directory, but Burke's tactical silence on the 1713 precedent seems to write it off as a potential paradigm. God might will the momentary success of the French Revolution; after the hour of trial, there could be scope for a more acceptable order repudiating political nominalism. Even such hope, however, limited God's omnipotence to personal preferences way away from *Sublime and Beautiful's* obscure

212Aquinas 2a2ae, Summa Theologica qu. 45, art. 6, solution 1. One ought to remember that the King James Version was what Burke had at his disposal. Proverbs 8:22 suggests co-eternity of God and wisdom. However, the following verse, with wisdom being "set vp," seems to differ, though this may be corrected by "from euerlasting, from the beginning, or euer the earth was," in keeping with the Son himself.

213See M. D. Chenu, *St Thomas d'Aquin et la Théologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 115.

214Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 34-35.

215Burke, *Reflections*, 118.

216Ibid., 106.

217Ibid., 103.

218Ibid., 104-105; see Aquinas, *De Regno (1265-1267)*, ed. and trans. Fr. Marie-Martin Cottier (Paris: Egloff, 1947), 29, 59, 61-62.

219Burke, *Appeal*, 120-122.

220Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, 5:200.

221See Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931; London: George Bell and Sons, 1951) on the shortcuts of Whig history.

Deity. Both those for whom the French Revolution was a divine bounty to mankind and those who, like Burke, argued to the contrary were harnessing God's will to human claims.

The marvel of 1689 could backfire when reduced to mere cant: Burke had indeed exposed the sedateness of otherwise strident supporters of "our true Saxon constitution" when faced with present-day onslaughts on liberties.²²² There remained hope, but this meant oblivion of an earlier, indomitable, quasi nominalist Deity: preserving a realistic alliance of divine omnipotence and divine wisdom neglected that the ways of God were hardly reducible to human expectations.

²²²Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), in *Works*, 1:312.