

Conservatism and Christianity: The Six Political Principles of Burkean Conservatism*

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In this paper I hope to show that Edmund Burke's political thought is both consonant with, and indebted to, a series of Christian theological convictions. I will look at six practical political principles present in Burke's thought and show how they emerge from a coherent body of Christian beliefs; in particular, a Thomistic natural law tradition. In the course of the discussion I will look at the deductive methodology of the contractarian liberal tradition, which Burke opposed. I will argue that Burke's prudential reasons for resisting the contractarian tradition's approach to politics derive from his underlying theological convictions.

All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that 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. This principle ought even to be more strongly impressed upon the minds of those who compose the collective sovereignties, than upon those of single princes

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

There can be no genuine conservatism which is not founded upon a religious view of the basis of civil obligation, and there can be no true religion where the basis of civil obligation is treated as purely secular.

This has been the conclusion of so many different Conservative thinkers that I should be utterly untrue to the Conservative tradition as well as to my own conviction were I not to say so.

Baron Hailsham, *The Case for Conservatism*

Introduction

In this paper I will highlight six practical political principles which can be identified in Edmund Burke's writings and in the political tradition which followed him. I shall argue that there is a congruence between the theological claims of the Christian faith and the political principles which characterise the Burkean conservative's approach to politics. I will not be arguing that Burke and other conservatives would have articulated these principles in such overtly theological terms. Nevertheless, I will maintain that the principles are present in

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Burke's thought and that they emerge from his Christian worldview. In this paper I shall also offer a critique of contractarian liberalism, as it was in response to contractarian thinkers in his own day that Burke articulated much of his political thought. My hope is that the features of Burke's political thought which are most indebted to the Christian religion will be thrown into sharper relief when contrasted with the liberal contractarian thought he opposed.

Conservatism and Christianity

Firstly, let us be clear as to what is meant by the term 'conservative'. One might argue that to speak of the history of conservatism is too ambiguous. Burke himself was a Whig and his admirers have included Whigs, Tories, utilitarians, liberals and socialists. Furthermore, the tradition that is commonly identified as conservative is comprised of individuals with substantially divergent political views. The One Nation Conservatism of Disraeli was markedly different from the modernising and free marketeering conservatism of Robert Peel and Lord Aberdeen. Furthermore, Christian Liberals such as Gladstone were deeply influenced by Burke and would have been sympathetic to most of the principles outlined in this chapter, largely on the basis of his Christian faith. Despite the potential ambiguity in speaking of 'conservatism', I shall identify the principles that I outline as 'Burkean conservative principles'. I shall use the term 'Burkean' because Burke has articulated these principles more clearly than any other thinker and I shall use the term 'conservative' because these principles have chiefly been associated with the conservative tradition.

In this chapter I hope to show that it is not a coincidence that the political principles which define conservatism seem to resonate with the foundational assumptions of the Christian faith. Burke's Christian anthropology, eschatology and his belief in the natural law as a force of social formation was an important influence upon his politics. Similarly, notable conservatives who have followed Burke have also been heavily influenced in their political thought by their Christian faith. Lord Liverpool, Samuel Coleridge, Alexis de Tocqueville, George Canning, Robert Peel, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Salisbury, Stanley Baldwin, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson, Russell Kirk and Baron Hailsham; all of these figures held an approach to politics, which we might call conservative, on the basis of Christian convictions. This is an important point because it means that the subsequent task should not be conceived of as a quest to draw points of coincidental consonance between two distinct traditions. Rather, I shall seek to make the case that the set of political principles which characterise this conservative tradition naturally emerge from predominantly Christian presuppositions, and as a result the principles which define the tradition are hard to articulate aside from them. This is true also of the conservative critique of political liberalism. As Peter Stanlis writes, it was 'In the principles and history of Anglicanism, no less than in Catholicism, [that] Burke found much that opposed theories of primitive or "natural" society, much that nourished a system of civil manners which made possible the development of a free and just society.'¹

Conservatism as a set of political principles and not political ideology

I will begin from the premise that all approaches to politics are vitalised by a tension between what is and what ought to be the case. In other words there is an ethical consciousness at the heart of political discourse which pursues a perceived set of normative social goods. As such, from a Christian perspective, politics ought not to be conceived in purely secular terms but must always be a facet of the Christian ethical life. As William

¹ Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Lafayette: Huntington House, 1986), 204.

Temple wrote, 'If Christianity is true at all it is a truth of Universal application; all things should be done in the Christian spirit and in accordance with Christian principles.'²

The Christian gospel is charged with the tension between what is and what ought to be. For the Christian the 'ought' which drives their engagement with the world is not solely a product of reason or human imagination but the received promise of a coming kingdom which has arrived in part but will one day reign in full. The crucial implication of this belief is that for Christians there can be no utopian political solution short of the eschaton, when the King himself will rule the kingdom and 'establish it with judgement and with justice henceforth and even forever' (Is. 9:7). Until the advent of that new age all human polities will be marred by the sin and strife which are endemic to the world and the human condition. This belief is both religious and incontrovertibly political. In one breath it defies the claims of ideologies which promise salvation from our own fallenness and insists upon the contingency and imperfectability of any political system. This is explicated with the vivid Parable of the Tares in Matthew 13. Until the Coming of the Kingdom the wheat and the tares will grow side by side, good and evil will cohabit in the city of man. Political ideologies which do not begin with an admission of God's kingship are often marked by one commonality: a belief in the kingship of another who can bring right order and enduring peace to the polity. In short, idolatry paves the road to ideology. If the Christian is to have any approach to politics at all it cannot be an ideological approach, because the vision of the coming Kingdom is neither for the labourers to fully know nor to fully consummate. If Christians are to engage in politics then they must be mindful of God as the architect of the coming Kingdom. This means forfeiting pretensions to the divine mind and ultimately bowing the knee to the authority of God's rule in Christ. Practically, in the eschatological interim which we inhabit, this involves a refusal to accept political ideologies, especially those which hold out an illusory promise of enduring peace and true freedom aside from Christ. As Oliver O'Donovan writes, 'Just as there is only one true throne, so there is but one structured human community, and there can never be a second.'³ To these points we shall return.

Burke's conservatism, I shall argue, offers a *via media* between despairing pessimism at the possibility of any stable political project outside of Christ's final rule and the endeavour to instate an earthly utopia. It is at this juncture that we must draw a clear distinction between political principles and political ideology. Burke's conservatism, insofar as it is a political philosophy at all, is composed of principles; there is no grand political architecture which emerges from a set of axioms and climaxes in a prescriptive vision of how the polity ought to look. Fascism, communism and contractarian liberalism have all, at certain points in history, taken such an ideological form. Burke's conservatism offers no such universal vision.⁴ In this regard the conservative tradition has arguably been subject to a misnomer; one could make the case that at the foundation of Burke's conception of social order is not conservation but the admission that God is the sovereign founder and sustainer of the state, without whose

² William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 48.

³ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 156.

⁴ In rejecting the idea that ethics and politics lay within the domain of speculative reason, Burke rejected the idea that a universally normative form of government or society could ever be deduced. Instead Burke believed that political forms and ethical questions were contingent upon circumstance.

authority it would be illegitimate.⁵ Conservation would then be but one ancillary principle that emerges from this central admission.

This idea has been clearly articulated in Anglican social thought. In *Christianity and Social Order* William Temple wrote: 'There is no such thing as a Christian social ideal, to which we should conform our actual society as closely as possible... But though Christianity supplies no ideal in this sense, it supplies something of far more value – namely, principles on which we can begin to act in every possible situation.'⁶ The Burkean tradition, I would contend, is merely a body of such principles, by no means exhaustive but nevertheless comprehensive, formulated primarily by Christians and indebted to their worldview. Burkean conservatism then is an integrated set of political principles, emerging from a Christian worldview to which the admission that God is sovereign is basic. As such, these principles actively seek to establish right order within a specific context whilst resisting any prescriptive political vision precisely because of the admission that God is sovereign.

One criticism of conservatism is that it offers no social vision, no universally normative account of what a society ought to look like. It merely affirms an arbitrary status quo and petulantly resists the tides of change. I will argue that this criticism is entirely valid if conservatism is divorced from its Christian moorings. It is of course true that conservatism is a broad church and there are conservatives who simply articulate a belief in maintaining social stability by resisting change, David Hume being the forefather of this line of conservatism. Yet this is not Burkean conservatism. Indeed one might argue that Hume's conservatism strays very close to making conservation a first principle from which a conservative ideology could feasibly arise. I shall argue that the great advantage of Burke's political thought, for the Christian, is that it offers no grand political framework and therefore allows a religious vision to occupy the heart of the ethical-political endeavour.

Conservatism, as I have defined it, is not a theocracy precisely because it limits itself to a body of political principles which emerge from a Christian's practical engagement with politics. A theocracy by contrast would seek to instate a comprehensive political vision, dragging the divine into the contingent. A Christian eschatology defies the belief that God's consummated rule could ever be reduced to a political formula which weds the New Jerusalem to Babylon. It is precisely because God's final rule will exceed the transience of the present age that theocracy cannot be an alternative for Christians. T.S. Eliot wrote that 'to identify any particular form of Government with Christianity is a dangerous error: for it confounds the permanent with the transitory, the absolute with the contingent'.⁷ At the heart of the conceptual consonance between Burkean conservatism and Christianity lies Burke's refusal to offer a political architecture which will right the wrongs of the world. The distinction between principles and ideal political systems was one which Burke himself made clear: 'When I praised the British constitution and wished it to be well studied, I did not mean that its exterior form and positive arrangement should become a model for you, or for any people servilely to copy. I meant to recommend the principles from which it has

⁵ Burke made this point clearly on several occasions: 'All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that 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. This principle ought even to be more strongly impressed upon the minds of those who compose the collective sovereignties, than upon those of single princes' (Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *The Works of The Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, sixteen volumes [London: C. and J. Rivington, 1826-27] Vol. V, 177-178); 'We know and we feel inwardly that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and all comfort' (Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 173).

⁶ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 52.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 57.

grown, and the policy on which it has been progressively improved out of elements common to you and to us'.⁸

In a similar passage he wrote: 'without the guide and light of sound, well-understood principles, all reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion'.⁹

Historically speaking it is not a coincidence that conservatism finds principles preferable to a substantive vision of an ideal political arrangement; the simple reason for this is that many conservatives already had a conception of heaven and it was not on earth. Seminal conservative thinkers have advocated conservation in the conviction that we inhabit an interim. As a result they did not strive for the eschatological fulfilment of all things but instead adopted an attitude of caution, aspiring to preserve just institutions, truth and right judgement where they found it. Burke did not resist the involvement of religious feeling in politics but actively resisted any attempt to instate heaven on earth. To the pragmatist who would say that conservatism ought to favour these principles not because of their Christian roots but because they work, the Burkean conservative might reply that they work because they are attuned to the true realities of the world which are explicated by the Christian faith. To this principle we now turn.

Principle 1. Reckoning with reality

In the 1960's the United States found its historically Christian culture challenged both internally and externally by communism and socialism. In opposition to this challenge there arose a conservative outcry. Russell Kirk was perhaps the chief trumpeter of the distinction between ideological dogma and conservative principle. Kirk wrote that 'the attitude we call conservatism is sustained by a body of sentiments, rather than by a system of ideological dogmata'.¹⁰

In Burke's critique of the liberalism in his own day we can see a sustained attack upon what he believed to be an element of fantasy in the thought of contractarian thinkers, from the state of nature, to natural rights and a belief in a political framework which could be deduced from such first principles. Burke's exasperation was centred on the fact that if such doctrines do not correspond to reality then instead of heaven on earth, the liberal society would risk declining into hell on earth no matter how benign the revolutionaries' intentions. He wrote: 'A man full of warm, speculative benevolence may wish his society otherwise constituted than he finds it, but a good patriot and a true politician always considers how he shall make the most of the existing materials of his country'.¹¹ As we have seen it was Burke's political realism which grounded his belief in the necessity of stable and legitimate governance. In this respect Burke's affinity with the common law tradition is no coincidence, as Roger Scruton notes: 'Law is constrained at every point by reality, and utopian visions have no place in it. Moreover the common law of England is proof that there is a real distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power, that power can exist without oppression, and that authority is a living force in human conduct'.¹²

⁸ Burke, 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', Works Vol. VI, 57-58.

⁹ Burke, 'Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians', Works, Vol. X, 41.

¹⁰ Russell Kirk, 'Ten Conservative Principles', <http://www.kirkcenter.org/index.php/detail/ten-conservative-principles/>, (accessed 22nd October 2013).

¹¹ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 285.

¹² Roger Scruton, 'Why I Became a Conservative', in *The New Criterion* 21 (Feb. 2003), 4.

Burke's political realism, which emerged from a Christian inheritance rooted in Thomism and Aristotelian realism brought him into opposition with the liberal doctrines which he perceived served as the justification for the revolutionaries' voluntaristic approach to politics. As Joseph Pappin III writes: 'I hold that it is irrefutable that Burke's politics adheres to a natural law foundation which permeates his thinking'; it was 'the off-spring of his theistic stance' and it grounds his 'realist understanding of human nature.'¹³

This is a critical point of conjunction between the Christian and the conservative. The realism which grounded Burke's view of human nature and the physical and spiritual world provided the basis for a gritty engagement with reality, in which the necessity for bulwarking oneself against the fact of human evil is readily apparent. C.S. Lewis famously wrote that 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else'.¹⁴ A Christian worldview has framed the political discourse of many in the conservative tradition. From a Christian perspective, this has enabled them to see reality with a more acute focus. Gerhart Niemeyer writes: 'Conservatives know each other by their intellectual openness toward reality: the immediate reality of social, economic, and political relations, and the divine reality beyond and above this world. Beyond this openness, conservatives cannot say much about themselves. They pretend no firm system of ideas about the means to deal with life's troubles'.¹⁵

As we have seen Burke held a belief in the illuminating nature of the Christian faith and it undergirded his conviction that all men, particularly those of any great influence, should consider themselves to have a religious vocation. William Temple writes: 'Christians have some clues to the understanding of human nature which may enable them to make a more accurate estimate than others of these points. But they will not, if they are true to their own tradition, approach the question with rosy-tinted spectacles. Its assertion of Original Sin should make the Church intensely realistic, and conspicuously free from Utopianism.'¹⁶ To this principle we turn.

Principle 2. An acute consciousness of human fallenness, human creatureliness and human sociality

One characteristic which is closely aligned with the epistemic realism inherent in Burke's thought is a political realism as to the nature of uncivilised man. For the Christian this is the most basic of doctrines at the heart of the Christian faith. In all areas of life Christians must reckon with the fallenness of man and the consequences which will arise if man's sinful nature is left utterly autonomous and unchecked. As it is articulated in the Thirty Nine Articles, 'it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is ingendered [sic] of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit'. Divorced from this most basic admission, the Mosaic Law, the incarnation, the resurrection, the church and the eschatological renewal are all rendered incomprehensible. One might question whether, at root, the contractarian tradition refuses the image of Adam shamed and banished from Eden, and shuns the image of Cain, standing bloodied over his lifeless brother. Temple again makes the point well: 'the political problem

¹³ Joseph Pappin III, 'Edmund Burke's Progeny: Recent Scholarship on Burke's Political Philosophy', *Political Science Reviewer* 35 (2006), 14.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, 'Is Theology Poetry?' in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York, NY: 1949, HarperCollins), 140.

¹⁵ Niemeyer, 'Russell Kirk and Ideology', *The Intercollegiate Review* (Fall, 1994), 36.

¹⁶ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 51.

is concerned with men as they are, not with men as they ought to be. Part of the task is so to order life as to lead them nearer to what they ought to be; but to assume that they are already this will involve in certain failure and disaster.¹⁷

Temple's voice is aligned with that of Burke's two hundred years after Burke's assessment of liberalism's basic doctrines, which he believed to be unduly optimistic about the reality of man's nature in an uncivilised world devoid of the rule of law. Burke lamented that the revolutionaries 'systematically corrupt a very corruptible race'.¹⁸ His view of man was characterised by an optimism about the place of man in God's original creation and the capacity for man to do good should he be governed properly, but a profound sobriety regarding the nature of man ungoverned and loosed from all chains of social restraint.

Beyond the fallenness of Adam's progeny, the Christian doctrine of man offers an anthropology which stands in tension with that offered by the contractarian tradition. Firstly, the Christian doctrine of man begins at a temporal point with man as a created being affirmed by God (Gen. 2). It is in God's prior affirmation that man is defined and his relations with others are defined (1 John 4:19). O'Donovan writes:

sociality itself is not a bare empirical *datum*, but a historical and eschatological destiny. It is something we cannot pretend to get behind, as though there were a pre-social individual human nature with 'basic needs' that generated society as an instrument for its own protection. When God said 'it is not good for man to be alone,' that was not an afterthought, but the determining moment in the creation of the human race.¹⁹

We shall turn shortly to the conservative understanding of man's natural affections and prejudices, but for now we can simply note that Burke was consistently clear that man is naturally a social being, always and already in community with those around him and conditioned by those who have come before him and ultimately in relation with his divine maker. Because of this conviction one of his main gripes against the 'Synagogue of Antichrist' by which he meant 'the sect which predominated in the Constituent Assembly of 1789' was that 'All their new institutions, (and with them everything is new,) strike at the root of our social nature'.²⁰ Such an understanding of the sociality of man ran deep in his intellectual bloodline from Cicero, Hooker and the Anglican divines to Coke and Blackstone. The sociality of man finds its most comprehensive articulation in Burke's redefinition of the social contract and it underlies his convictions concerning the civil tissue which binds the social body together. To these convictions we shall return.

If Burke's engagement with politics was mindful of the human person as an always already relational being, dependent from her very conception, endowed with duties by her creator and always ontologically dependent upon another, we can see a more complicated picture in the contractarian tradition. The Burke scholar Niemeyer cites the inherent sociality of man as one reason that we cannot 'fall back on Locke's human rights, the condition on which each isolated person enters human community by the gate of *quid pro quo*. These and other similar worldviews have nothing to say to the reality of living human beings with body and soul, mind and spirit'.²¹ Whilst Locke did in fact stress the importance of particular civic duties, Niemeyer might rightly point towards the social contract to illustrate a social atomism in

¹⁷ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 50.

¹⁸ Burke, 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', 36.

¹⁹ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 241.

²⁰ Edmund Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 173-174.

²¹ Niemeyer, 'Russell Kirk and Ideology', 37.

Locke's conception of society. The Christian belief that humans were from their conception social and dependent beings, militates against the liberal reductionism which draws conclusions about the normative form society should take from the alleged character of the pre-social individuals who compose the whole. Ramsay comments on this writing that liberal theories of society 'are reductionist in that they assert that the compositional units of the whole are ontologically [and chronologically] prior to the whole'.²² As a result, the polity proposed by the contractarians of Burke's day was a society which, Burke believed, had an excessive esteem for autonomy, denying the need for dependence and ultimately magnifying the aberrant excesses of man's fallen nature instead of curbing them. Burke argued that it was because of human vanity that the revolutionaries enthroned the individual; speaking of Rousseau's influence he wrote: 'under this philosophic instructor in the ethics of vanity, they have attempted in France a regeneration of the moral constitution of man';²³ as a result the revolutionaries revelled in 'absurd theory'.²⁴ In Burke's estimation such individualism would ultimately bear toxic fruit and 'the commonwealth itself would, in a few generations, crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven.'²⁵

Burke's anthropology is more closely approximated to the Christian doctrine of man than the Lockean man in the state of nature. Burke wrote of the revolutionaries: 'This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about the *Rights* of man, that they have totally forgotten his *nature*'.²⁶ Conservatives such as Russell Kirk have argued that the corroding power of sin is indifferent to the hypothetical distinctions between public and private. If sin is deemed acceptable and even encouraged in our private lives then, like a virus, it will inevitably pervade the public life of the polity. As an approach to politics which embraces reality at its most acute, conservatives from Burke to Kirk have articulated an account of man as a fallen yet inherently social, created being. As the Burke scholar Richard Hoff wrote: 'The most important questions about the human race Burke answered from the Church of England's catechism'.²⁷

Principle 3. A refusal of ideological claims

We have already noted that if Christians are to be true to the gospel proclamation of Christ's lordship then they cannot accept political ideology because the absolute cannot be assimilated to the contingent. An acknowledgment of God's Kingship and the new order of creation held together in Christ, defies the absolute pretensions of temporal authorities and demands that their judgements are subordinated to God's if they are to be legitimate. By this definition ideology does not hold the admission that 'Jesus is Lord', instead proclaiming the lordship of another, in the case of Bolshevik communism, economic equality, in the case of Nazi fascism the nation state; and, in its worst form, contractarian liberalism has enthroned a conception of the autonomous man. In what Burke referred to as a form of 'political geometry', ideologies of all stripes draw a blueprint of the polity in accordance to a governing first principle. In attempting to reorder society towards a distinctive teleology other social goods become disordered and the fabric of the nation is torn apart. As O'Donovan puts it: 'A social order based on a single principle, however fine, becomes

²² Maureen Ramsay, *What's Wrong With Liberalism? A Radical Critique of Liberal Political Philosophy* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 8.

²³ Burke, 'Letter to a member of the National Assembly', 36.

²⁴ Burke, 'Letter to a member of the National Assembly', 3.

²⁵ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 183.

²⁶ Burke, 'Letter to a member of the National Assembly', 130.

²⁷ Ross Hoffman and Paul Levack, *Burke's Politics* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), xiv.

ideological; and a political theology which defends freedom without filling it out with the content of the divine command and the divine redemption of society in Christ is ideologically liberal'.²⁸

Rather than men being stewards in the creative project, ideologies assert a political architecture which the labourers are so transfixed upon that they are wilfully blind and deaf to God's active voice in the polity. In Matthew's gospel, Christians are admonished to be ever vigilant against false prophets who come with messianic pretensions (Matt. 24: 3-8). During the twentieth century the church has been acutely aware of the threat of ideology. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII penned *Rerum Novarum* in which he condemned the materialism of free market liberalism as well as the ideologies of communism and socialism. In 1931 Pope Pius XI argued in *Quadragesimo Anno* that communism and socialism in all their forms could find no truce with the Christian religion precisely because they idolised the material means of production and excluded the gospel. He wrote: 'let all remember that liberalism is the father of this Socialism that is pervading morality and culture and that Bolshevism will be its heir'.²⁹ This is a critique that was strongly supported in *Mater et Magistra* by Pope John XXIII. More recently Pope Benedict XVI issued *Caritas in Veritate* in which he warned against 'merely human' utopian and ideological visions posed by technology and a blind faith in the free market.³⁰

Protestants have been no less alive to the threat. In Karl Barth's 1934 'Theological Declaration of Barmen' the point was forcefully made that ideologies of all stripes must be considered pretenders to the throne of Christ and must be rejected by Christians, whose vocation is to preach the gospel, not least to the state. As Russell Kirk pointed out: 'Ideology is inverted religion' which operates by 'denying the Christian doctrine of salvation through grace in death' instead holding the illusory promise of 'salvation here on earth'.³¹ The reality of God's sovereignty conflicts with all ideological claims, which is why Karl Rahner defined ideology as 'an erroneous system which must be rejected by a true interpretation of reality'.³²

The conservative tradition has, at its roots, a scepticism of totalising ideologies and a deep respect for creative human freedom in civil society (a theme that is also recurrent in Catholic and Anglican social thought). This lack of comprehensive political vision preserves a sanctified space for the joint operation of God and man, one site of which is in man's prayerful prudence. O'Donovan writes: 'God builds God's kingdom. But God has ordered his world in such a way that his own work would take place not least through one of his creatures in particular, namely the human beings who reflect his image... He has enlisted us to act as his stewards in the project of creation'.³³ It is for this reason that the Christian must reject an ideal form of government in favour of a system of government that seeks to conform itself to God's law. As Pope Leo XIII wrote: 'by the State we here understand, not the particular form of government prevailing in this or that nation, but the State as rightly

²⁸ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 250.

²⁹ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* [Encyclical Letter on Reconstruction of the Social Order], §122, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html, (accessed 21st January, 2015).

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas In Veritate* [Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth], §53, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, (accessed 21st January, 2015).

³¹ Kirk, 'Ten Conservative Principles', 4.

³² Karl Rahner, 'Ideology and Christianity', *Theological Investigations*, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Krueger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) Vol. VI, 43-58.

³³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 218.

apprehended; that is to say, any government conformable in its institutions to right reason and natural law'.³⁴

Burke reminds us that a healthy society consists in the gradual accumulation of a body of law which by means of prudence nurtures society as an organism, to embody the ends ordained by its creator. For Burke, the Christian gospel assists in every stage of this task furnishing society with customs and manners. He clearly believed that religion was closely associated with the 'observance of law and order' and 'honest industry'.³⁵ Burke rejected the suggestion that the complex web of human life, replete with myriad social goods which often operate in symphony, could be reduced to one governing first axiom. The one first axiom which I believe one might justifiably cite at the heart of Burke's work is that of God's sovereignty. From a Christian perspective, a foundational belief in the sovereignty of a relational God cannot be distilled into an idol and thus defies attempts at geometrical system building. To assert God's sovereignty is to defer to the untameable, ineffable and incomprehensible mystery of God's own being, moreover it is to accept that his ways are unfathomable and his thoughts untraceable. The admission that God alone is rightfully the founder, sustainer and guide of society encourages a radically different approach to the political endeavour. No longer are we political architects drawing a blueprint for the polity, but we are labourers attentive to the director's voice in each concrete circumstance by means of prayerful prudence.

In such a picture, the movement is from God to man, not man to God. The gospel narrative relates how man was unable to attain his own salvation by great works but instead the absolute plunged into the particular and met man in a set of concrete circumstances. So in their approach to politics Christians must reject any attempt to attain their own salvation, which has already been attained, instead remaining attentive to the word of God who meets them in their particular needs. With this cultural admission alone can the pre-rational intuitions and religious instincts which grasp at the divine mystery oppose a purely rational architectonic centred on the maximization of foundational axioms and the reordering of society towards those ends.

This conviction does seem to be present in Burke's writings and is implicit in such passages as the following: 'can it be imagined... that He will suffer this great gift of government, the greatest, the best, that was ever given by God to mankind, to be the plaything and the sport of the feeble will of a man, who, by a blasphemous, absurd, and petulant usurpation would place his own feeble, contemptible, ridiculous will in the place of Divine wisdom and Justice?'³⁶ In Burke's own wrestlings he found recourse in cautious prudence instead of an abstract rule: 'To enable us to correct the Constitution, the whole Constitution must be viewed together; and it must be compared with the actual state of the people, and the circumstances of the time... Please God, I will walk with caution, whenever I am not able clearly to see my way before me.'³⁷ Speaking of the Christian religion as the cornerstone of the English system of government, Burke wrote: 'The body of all true religion consists, to be sure, in obedience to the will of the Sovereign of the world, in a confidence in his

³⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, [Encyclical Letter on Capital and Labour], §32, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html, (accessed 21st January, 2015).

³⁵ Burke, 'An Abridgement of the English History', 293.

³⁶ Burke, 'Speech in the Impeachment of Warren Hastings', 166-167.

³⁷ Edmund Burke, 'A Letter to the Chairman of the Buckinghamshire Meeting, Held at Aylesbury, April 13, 1780 on the Subject of Parliamentary Reform' in *The Best of Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 1963), 383-384.

declarations, and in imitation of his perfections.³⁸ Burke is quite clear that the enthronement of enlightenment reason was no substitute for the guiding light of wisdom: 'Dr. Price seems rather to over value the great acquisitions of light which he has obtained and diffused in this age.'³⁹ In Burke's view it was a misplaced faith in man's reason which caused the revolutionaries to 'march from error to error, through a dry desert, unguided by the lights of heaven, or by the contrivance which wisdom has invented to supply their place.' Burke intimated that in turning away from the 'lights of heaven', the vainglorious ideology of the revolutionaries followed in the footsteps of Satan's own self apotheosis:

They endeavour to destroy that tribunal of conscience which exists independently of edicts and decrees. Your despots govern by terror. They know that he who fears God fears nothing else; and therefore they eradicate from the mind, through their Voltaire, their Helvetius, and the rest of that infamous gang, that only sort of fear which generates true courage. Their object is, that their fellow citizens may be under the dominion of no awe, but that of their committee of research, and of their lanterne.⁴⁰

If Burkean conservatism holds an admission of God's sovereignty, it is no coincidence that his political thought seems unsystematic and even inconsistent at times. Burke believed the statesmen's thought ought to be regulated by a prudence ever present of God's sovereignty in complex concrete circumstances. He made the point clearly in his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*, in which he defined the role of a statesman: 'His enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no nor from the Law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable.'⁴¹ His contractarian adversaries by contrast had, in his view, no qualms at putting prudential considerations to the altar of a governing first principle. Burke was clear that in idolising their philosophy the revolutionaries sought to abolish true religion: 'They who will not believe that the philosophical fanatics who guide in these matters entertain a design of utterly abolishing the Christian religion... are utterly ignorant of its character and proceedings.'⁴²

Burke perceived that from the admission of God's sovereignty follows the right order of the nation, political and civil. The following passage paints a graphic picture of what Burke envisaged when a nation turned its back on God in favour of human reason:

I call it *Atheism by Establishment*, when any State, as such, shall not acknowledge the existence of God as a moral Governor of the World; when it shall offer to Him no religious or moral worship: when it shall abolish the Christian religion by a regular decree; when it shall persecute with a cold, unrelenting, steady cruelty, by every mode of confiscation, imprisonment, exile, and death, all its ministers; when it shall generally shut up, or pull down, churches; when the few buildings which remain of this kind shall be opened only for the purpose of making a profane apotheosis of monsters whose vices and crimes have no parallel amongst men, and whom all other men consider as objects of general detestation, and the severest animadversion of law. When, in the place of that religion of social benevolence, and of individual self-denial, in mockery of all religion, they institute impious, blasphemous, indecent

³⁸ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 289.

³⁹ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 132.

⁴⁰ Burke, 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', 41.

⁴¹ Burke, 'Speech at Mr. Burke's Arrival at Bristol, and at the Conclusion of the Poll', *Works*, Vol. III, 18-19.

⁴² Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 270.

theatric rites, in honour of their vitiated, perverted reason, and erect altars to the personification of their own corrupted and bloody Republick; when schools and seminaries are founded at publick expence to poison mankind, from generation to generation, with the horrible maxims of this impiety; when wearied out with incessant martyrdom, and the cries of a people hungering and thirsting for religion, they permit it, only as a tolerated evil—I call this *Atheism by Establishment*.⁴³

The importance of Christianity as an active social force is prevalent in this passage. We can clearly see that beyond the guiding light of practical reason, grounded in God's natural law, Burke and subsequent conservatives have also stressed the importance of the Christian gospel in civilising the customs and manners of a society.

For some, the idea that the Christian God's sovereignty is the precondition for healthy political discourse intimates intolerance; as Temple points out, 'no one really wants to live in the ideal state as depicted by anyone else'.⁴⁴ But in this statement Temple identifies an important point. I have made the case that if Christians are to be true to the gospel then they will be very wary of the notion that we might discover a universal model for an 'ideal' state. In the absence of an ideal political architecture conservatism preserves a space for debate, plural voices and mutual enrichment in the construction of the polity, but crucially the necessary prerequisite for that space of communication is a cultural admission that God is sovereign. Following Aquinas, we might argue that only God as God can so transcend our understanding that he defies any univocal conception or appropriation as an idol; therefore it is only when transfixed upon God as our final end that our lives and our political discourse are perceived correctly.⁴⁵ Without such an admission the space for toleration and mutual enrichment insisted upon by Christian conservatives such as Burke and Disraeli, risks being usurped by an ideological vision, because as Chesterton purportedly pointed out, there is no such thing as a vacuum of belief: 'when a man stops believing in God he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything.' Burke made precisely the same point when he remonstrated against those who believed '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'. He proceeded to write 'that the mind will not endure a void' and should the nation lose its Christian faith 'some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it'.⁴⁶

Principle 4. Authority and freedom

If Burke's realism was premised on a rationally intelligible, divinely ordained order, so was his understanding of authority. An acceptance of authority be it divine, political, civil or customary is another principle of conservatism deeply indebted to the influence of Christianity. As we have seen, Burke's understanding of an intelligible world created by a God whose intellect and will were in perfect harmony led him to defend a hierarchically ordered universe, forthrightly rejecting the voluntarist notion of the legitimacy of rulers who governed by pure will. Peter Stanlis writes that because Burke believed that all authority was from God 'it was imperative, therefore, that all men, and particularly rulers, should "acknowledge the existence of God as a moral governor of the world"'.⁴⁷ It was this

⁴³ Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 170-171.

⁴⁴ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 52.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Prima Parta*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920, found at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html> (accessed 11th March 2014), Q. 13, A. 10.

⁴⁶ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 174.

⁴⁷ Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, 205.

conviction that led Burke to write of the Christian religion that 'we will have her to exalt her mitred front in courts and parliaments. We will have her mixed throughout the whole mass of life and blended with all the classes of society'.⁴⁸ It seems likely that he would have approved of William Temple's sentiment that 'All Christian thinking, and Christian thinking about society no less than any other, must begin not with man but with God'.⁴⁹

The hierarchy of authority, emanating from the divine and apportioned to individuals in office as representatives of the people is well summarised in the following passage taken from the *Reflections*. Burke's arguments show that he was profoundly concerned that those who wield any great portion of power should be deeply conscious of the source of their power and to whom they are ultimately accountable. Furthermore he once again clearly articulates the illegitimacy of rulers who do not subject themselves to the natural law:

When the people have emptied themselves of all the lust of selfish will, which without religion it is utterly impossible they ever should, when they are conscious that they exercise, and exercise perhaps in a 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. In their nomination to office, they will not appoint to the exercise of authority as to a pitiful job, but as to a holy function, not according to their sordid, selfish interest, nor to their wanton caprice, nor to their arbitrary will, but 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.⁵⁰

The exercise of authority being described as a holy function which should be received in fear and trembling is particularly striking. For Burke the political is always conceived of as the vicarious exercise of divine power. Acutely aware of the 'mass of human imperfections and infirmities', Burke commends individuals of 'active virtue and wisdom' in order that society may be ordered rightly under their prudential judgements in accordance with the 'immutable law.' For conservatives since Burke, defending the cultural primacy and the political establishment of the Christian faith has allowed legitimate political claims to be made regarding the authoritative created moral order in which any society exists. This inevitably impacts upon the way a nation is governed and the customs and manners which citizens cultivate: from the effect it has upon a legislator's understanding of the right ends of human nature, to the way it effects citizens' judgements of particular moral claims. A society which accepts the establishment of the Christian faith is free in its public discourse to overtly acknowledge a world that is animated by moral forces and ordered by a creator.

The conservative emphasis on institutional authority is paradoxically inspired by a deep concern for the preservation of freedom. Winston Churchill captured this apparent paradox in Burke's thought well when he wrote: 'on the one hand he is revealed as a foremost apostle of Liberty, on the other as the redoubtable champion of Authority'. Churchill drew the correct conclusion when he wrote that 'No one can read the Burke of Liberty and the Burke of Authority without feeling that here was the same man pursuing the same ends, seeking

⁴⁸ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 197.

⁴⁹ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 52.

⁵⁰ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 180.

the same ideals of society and Government'.⁵¹ The species of freedom which Burke spoke of is the freedom which is only found in the exercise of one's duty in communion with others; as duty implies authority the two operate in unison and are paramount to Burke's thought. Again, this conviction emerged from a Christian anthropology which rejects the exercise of unrestrained will in the belief that true freedom was to be found under the divine law and within a community conceived by God. Such an understanding of freedom under the law was present in all of Burke's major influences, from Cicero to the common lawyers, and indirectly Aquinas and Aristotle. In the face of a radical redefinition of freedom, Burke harked back to the pre-modern conception of freedom inspired by conformity to law. A contemporary conservative rendering of the dynamic between authority and freedom is offered by Roger Scruton who captures well the freedom found in the common law:

Liberal thinkers... have seen the constraints on freedom as arising only negatively and in response to individual rights. Freedom should be qualified only by the possibility that someone might suffer through its exercise. For the conservative constraint should be upheld, until it can be shown that society is not damaged by its removal. Thus the constraints on freedom arise through the law's attempts to embody (as for a conservative it must embody) the fundamental values of the society which it aims to rule.⁵²

I have argued that it is out of the creative freedom bestowed by the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty that customs, traditions and institutions will flourish. To these we turn.

Principle 5. An emphasis on customs, tradition and institutions, in particular the Church

The conservative emphasis on customs (often embodied in law), traditions and institutions is deeply attuned to the principles we have already noted, namely a belief in the creatureliness of man, a rejection of abstract ideology and a belief in the authority of the natural law which brings right order to a polity through prudential judgements. The historical point of convergence between Christianity and this aspect of conservatism is in the common lawyers and ultimately Thomas Aquinas. In this regard Burke's conservatism is more aligned with the Thomistic tradition than the Augustinian. Burke's conservatism seems to be less well captured by Augustine's doctrine of the two cities than it is by Aquinas' polity of divinely ordained natural ends in which the good is realised in community with others. Michael Banner articulates Aquinas' political thought well:

For the Thomist tradition, which thinks of society as existing outside the church in virtue of the claims made upon human life by its natural ends, it is the common good that serves to unite its parts. The classical organic image of society thus maintains its naturalistic quality, with a special emphasis, however, on the need for the head to identify the common good and coordinate its pursuit.⁵³

This image of the social body directed towards the common good by a political head is one which was employed by Aristotle and Cicero before Aquinas. After Aquinas, John of Salisbury and common lawyers such as Fortescue and Blackstone employed the same metaphor. The metaphor certainly resonates with Burke's thought. Yet it is important to note

⁵¹ Winston Churchill, 'Consistency in Politics' [1932] in James W. Muller, ed., *Thoughts and Adventures: Churchill Reflects on Spies, Cartoons, Flying and the Future* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2009), 40.

⁵² Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 15.

⁵³ Michael Banner, 'Christianity and Civil Society', in *Christian Political Ethics*, John A. Coleman, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 9.

that Burke's understanding of the polity was not authoritarian, ordering society from the top down. Rather, the importance of the directing influence of the head lay in the fact that, by means of right judgements, it was able to reflect the constitution of the body of which it was a natural extension. Defending the integrity of the particular character of individual societies and embracing this difference as part of God's created order are aspirations which have a natural place in the conservative tradition. It is a principle which finds strong biblical precedent. The story of the tower of Babel militates against a belief in the univocal reason of humanity, corporately summing the heights of heaven by virtue of their own will. It is a story which haunts an unshakeable belief in the efficacy of a universal reason to construct the polity without conceding Christ's sovereignty.

It is also worth noting that Aquinas' polity has less rupture between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian than Augustine's. For example, Aquinas sees man as naturally social and political and does not therefore regard political power as a necessary evil. One commentator put it well:

Under Aristotelian influence St. Thomas exchanged the Augustinian conception of a conflictual and disjunctive social order for a more organically harmonious one. His minimising of the spiritual distance between the traditionally 'pre-lapsarian' institutions such as marriage and family and the post-lapsarian institutions such as private property and political rule enabled him to weave social life into a unified moral texture. He viewed sinful society as retaining the inherent harmony of a hierarchy of natural ends and functions, each part having its appointed place within the teleological whole. With no disjunctive division between different communities, especially between political and non-political communities, all together constituted a real social totality, a common will directed toward a common good.⁵⁴

Burke shared this organic vision of society. In Burke's thought the civil and the political were not distinct but two interpenetrating spheres. Political society and the laws of the nation emerge from the accumulated customs of the people and naturally reflect them.

Burke's description of customary manners conveys well the bottom-up formation of society; laws are derived from manners and customs, not the other way round:

Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or sooth, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in. They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.⁵⁵

Equally important are customs, described as 'obligations written in the heart. They approximate men to men, without their knowledge, and sometimes against their intentions. The secret, unseen, but irrefragable bond of habitual intercourse, holds them together, even when their perverse and litigious nature sets them to equivocate, scuffle, and fight about the terms of their written obligations'.⁵⁶

An emphasis on custom has a long heritage in Christian thought. As Aquinas wrote: 'custom has the force of law, and abolishes a law, and is the interpreter of laws.' He is careful,

⁵⁴ Joan O'Donovan, quoted in Banner, 'Christianity and Civil Society', 9.

⁵⁵ Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 172.

⁵⁶ Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 181.

however, to note that 'no custom can acquire the force of law against divine or natural law' but must be subordinate to both.⁵⁷

Aside from the Thomistic heritage of the idea, the conservative emphasis on customs and traditions seems to resonate deeply with the Christian belief that we are situated, historical creatures and as such we are subject to the influences of the world around us, benign and malign. The early church was acutely aware of this fact, envisaging themselves, like Israel, as a community set apart by their righteous conduct and filial care for each other in order to witness to the new life that they had received in Christ. St. Paul's letters are filled with admonitions to right conduct and the cultivation of good habits, most notably in his exhortation to the Philippians: 'Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things' (Phil. 4:8).

Like the early church, Burke recognised that an acknowledgement of Christianity's truths exercised a profound influence upon the manners and customs of a society. By 1790 Burke had noticed what he perceived to be a concomitant decline in morality alongside the decline of the Christian religion's influence in France. In the name of reason the French revolutionaries had completely altered the institution of marriage, denying its divine origin and making it a civil contract. Burke wrote: 'The Christian religion, by confining marriage to pairs, and rendering the relation indissoluble, has by these two things done more toward the peace, happiness, settlement, and civilization of the world, than by any other part in this whole scheme of divine wisdom'.⁵⁸ In an age in which traditional social mores are scrutinised by an establishment which aims to reform in accordance to equality and human rights, Burke's defence of distinctively Christian institutions, which emerge from theological beliefs, seems particularly pertinent and reminds us that a society which is governed by a Christian culture looks distinctly different to that which emerges from the anthropological premises of the contractarian tradition.

This relationship between the institutional church and the state has been also been elaborated by a figure greatly influenced by Burke, namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his *On the Constitution of Church and State*.⁵⁹ For Coleridge, the role of the church included the diffusion of civil manners in all parts of society. Although Coleridge and Burke were both clear that a functional separation between the church and state was requisite they nevertheless believed that the church had a central role to play in society. Such a belief was hardly novel. The Country Party championed by Bolingbroke in the 1740s, and supported by Swift and Samuel Johnson, inspired a conception of the church as an important third estate which should maintain an independent revenue so as to maintain its freedom. This was a belief which both Burke and Coleridge advocated strongly. Burke helped to inspire a strong Anglican tradition which echoed these beliefs, especially following the reform act of the 1830s. At the same time that Coleridge wrote his deeply Burkean work on the church and state, Thomas Arnold authored *Principles of Church Reform* and political figures such as Disraeli (and indeed Gladstone) championed the moral influence of the Church of England upon the nation. In the twentieth century such an understanding of the church as the cultural centre of gravity for society was echoed by T. S. Eliot who saw 'culture [as] being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people'.⁶⁰ All of these individuals

⁵⁷ Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 181.

⁵⁸ Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 174.

⁵⁹ Samuel T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State* [1826] (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 2nd Ed., 1962), 28.

emphasised the importance of the church institution in the belief that man was not an autonomous agent governed only by legislation, but rather a social creature shaped by customs, manners and institutions. For Burke, the healthy customs and manners of Britain emerged from the natural law and were supplemented by the civilising message of the Christian gospel as narrated by the church.

Principle 6. An emphasis on the role of civil society and subordinate affections, as well as the nation state as a legitimate locus for such affections

The great British conservative George Canning wrote: ‘It is idle, it is mere pedantry... to overlook the affections of nature’.⁶¹ This principle of conservatism is related to, yet distinct from, the conservative emphasis on customs. Once again this principle springs from an acknowledgement of our creatureliness and the conviction that the natural bonds of civil society are integral to human flourishing. Nigel Biggar offers a helpful theological account of the natural affections towards community and in particular the nation as a locus of community:

Christians should base their view of the nation on their understanding of human being as creaturely. This involves distinguishing it sharply from the universal and eternal being of God and taking seriously its historicity— that is, its boundedness by time and space. Humans come into being and grow up in a particular time, and if not in one particular place and community then in a limited number of them. Human individuals are normally nurtured, inducted into social life, and encouraged in certain self-understandings by their family and by other institutions— educational, religious, recreational, economic, and political— that mediate the history and ethos of their local and national communities. It is natural, therefore, that individuals should feel special affection for, and loyalty toward, those communities that have cared for them and given them so much that is beneficial; and, since beneficiaries ought to be grateful to benefactors, it is right that they should.⁶²

Such an account would certainly have been agreeable to Burke who continually sought to reassert the humanity and creatureliness of human beings against the rationalism of the *philosophes*. It certainly resonates with Burke’s own statements concerning our natural prejudices and seems to be implicit in his admonitions to accept our nature as social creatures in a community with others. Burke perceived that in taking a conception of humanity as rational, equal and free, to be axiomatic, the philosophy of the revolutionaries resulted in an inhumane and cold polity. Commenting on the relation between parents and their children Burke wrote: ‘Your masters reject the duties of this vulgar relation, as contrary to liberty; as not founded in the social compact; and not binding according to the rights of men; because the relation is not, of course, the result of *free election*; never so on the side of the children, not always on the part of the parents’.⁶³ Given his ostensible emphasis on feelings, it is perhaps surprising that Rousseau in particular, whom Burke called ‘a lover of his kind but a hater of his kindred’,⁶⁴ came into Burke’s firing line for a complete lack of feeling: ‘It is that new invented virtue which your masters canonize, that led their moral hero

⁶¹ George Canning in ‘The Anti-Jacobin Review and True Churchman’s Magazine’, Vol. XLVI (January to June 1814), 614.

⁶² Nigel Biggar, ‘The Value of Limited Loyalty: Christianity, the Nation and Territorial Boundaries’ in John A. Coleman, ed., *Christian Political Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 93.

⁶³ Burke, ‘Letter to a member of the National Assembly’, 35.

⁶⁴ Burke, ‘Letter to a member of the National Assembly’, 35.

constantly to exhaust the stores of his powerful rhetoric in the expression of universal benevolence; whilst his heart was incapable of harbouring one spark of common parental affection. Benevolence to the whole species, and want of feeling for every individual with whom the professors come in contact.’⁶⁵

Burke was equally clear in identifying the roots of this unfeeling in the same vain esteem for human reason: ‘The bear loves, licks, and forms her young; but bears are not philosophers. Vanity, however, finds its account in reversing the train of natural feelings. Thousands admire the sentimental writer; the affectionate father is hardly known in his parish’.⁶⁶

In Joshua Hordern’s recent work *Political Affections*, he aims to approach ‘the question of affections’ role in political relations from an explicitly theological direction’⁶⁷ and thus helps us to dissect the theological importance of such parochial affections. In chapter three of the book Hordern explicitly cites Burke’s statement that the rampant individualism of the revolutionaries is no basis for the construction of society:

Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons, so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place. These public affections, combined with manners, are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law.⁶⁸

Hordern laments the fact that Burke is ‘imprecise’ about the way in which such public affections are ‘somehow vital to the personal, representative embodiment of institutions and the workings of law.’⁶⁹ Hordern is correct insofar as Burke does not offer an explicit account of the theological significance of the affections. For Burke natural prejudices were part of what it was to be a created being and as we have seen he reasserts their importance in the face of cold enlightenment rationalism. Burke did not, however, believe that prejudices and affections should be followed blindly. He believed them to be the glue which binds man to his fellow man and ultimately to God.

Burke had shown himself to be cognizant of the necessity of the natural affections from an early age. He had reviewed Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* whilst working for Dodsley’s *Annual Register* and, whilst expressing doubts as to the completeness of Smith’s theory, Burke nevertheless believed it to be ‘one of the most beautiful fabrics of moral theory, that has perhaps ever appeared.’⁷⁰ Similarly, in his *Vindication* he satirises the view that reason alone is sufficient for social order. For Burke, the affections should only be followed to the extent that they lead us to act in a manner which is in keeping with God’s created order and subordinate to the divine law. As Stanlis puts it: the ‘invisible tissue of loyalties and prejudices... gave cohesion and concreteness to the divine contract, which connected man in the eternal frame of the universe’.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Burke, ‘Letter to a member of the National Assembly’, 33.

⁶⁶ Burke, ‘Letter to a member of the National Assembly’, 34.

⁶⁷ Joshua Hordern, *Political Affections: Civic Participation and Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

⁶⁸ Burke, quoted in Hordern, *Political Affections*, 132.

⁶⁹ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 132.

⁷⁰ Burke, quoted in David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), 40.

⁷¹ Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, 84.

Burke does in fact provide an account of the way in which our affections are linked to effective participation and ultimately representative embodiment in institutions. We have seen that the natural law is what links subordinate affections to the nation at large, drawing us into expanding circles of communication and affection. For Burke the benign effect of the natural law is the right ordering of society, as such a well-ordered society naturally leads humans from proximate affections to distant affections: 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind'.⁷²

Hordern helpfully describes such affections as 'the participative beginnings of understanding',⁷³ involving an acknowledgement that we are contingent beings with situated backgrounds; in short we are from somewhere. The admission of this basic fact is helpful not least because it 'is directly opposed to an autarchic or self-sufficient view of life'.⁷⁴ Drawing on Lacoste, Hordern speaks of 'intentional, affective recognitions of value';⁷⁵ in this account affections are not blind sentimentality, but the 'half-light of ethics' which identify values as 'the first ethical facts'.⁷⁶ In such a conception affections are 'the beginning of a process by which moral norms are disclosed'. As the half light of ethics and the beginning of ethical understanding Hordern suggests that within political communities the affections should be subject to a process of 'intersubjective verification'.⁷⁷ Moreover, 'through them we are drawn into a close attentiveness to what the world is like and to what we should do about it'; they are a 'deeply human way of... being attentive to reality'.⁷⁸ Hordern describes the affections as a 'creaturely, participatory form of knowing', arguing that these first affective 'recognitions of value' are the beginnings of us 'being knit into all that there is, when "all that there is" is interpreted as 'the moral order vindicated in Christ'.⁷⁹ Such an account seems to hold much common ground with Burke's view of affections as the first link in the series of a divinely ordained order by which we are knit together with man and God.

In Burke's criticism of the revolutionary establishment he too draws this link between instinctive affections and virtue: 'The whole drift of their institution is contrary to that of the wise Legislators of all countries, who aimed at improving instincts into morals, and at grafting the virtues on the stock of the natural affections.'⁸⁰ It is significant that Burke laments that 'they dispose of all the family relations of parents and children, husbands and wives' arguing that in so doing 'they corrupt the morals' of the people.⁸¹ The following passage is particularly helpful in understanding the way in which Burke sees affections as ultimately leading us to God. It should be noted that the church (and its message) is not incidental in this process:

First, 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 of which we are now in possession, we

⁷² Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', 100.

⁷³ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 62.

⁷⁴ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 62.

⁷⁵ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 73.

⁷⁶ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 77.

⁷⁷ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 78.

⁷⁸ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 80.

⁷⁹ Hordern, *Political Affections*, 90.

⁸⁰ Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', 173.

⁸¹ Burke 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', 38.

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 august fabric of states, but, like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from profanation and ruin, as a sacred temple purged from all the impurities of fraud and violence and injustice and tyranny, hath solemnly and forever consecrated the commonwealth and all that officiate in it. This consecration is made that all who administer 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, that they should not look to the paltry pelf of the moment nor to the temporary and transient praise of the vulgar, but to a solid, permanent existence in the permanent part of their nature, and to a permanent fame and glory in the example they leave as a rich inheritance to the world.

Such sublime principles ought to be infused into persons of exalted situations, and religious establishments provided that may continually revive and enforce them. Every sort of moral, every sort of civil, every sort of politic institution, aiding the rational and natural ties that connect the human understanding and affections to the divine, are not more than necessary in order to build up that wonderful structure Man, whose prerogative it is to be in a great degree a creature of his own making, and who, when made as he ought to be made, is destined to hold no trivial place in the creation. But whenever man is put over men, as the better nature ought ever to preside, in that case more particularly, he should as nearly as possible be approximated to his perfection.⁸²

This passage could attract a wealth of commentary, but we might highlight three main points in relation to the present topic. Firstly, the church is seen as 'the first of our prejudices' and Burke is careful to note that the esteem attributed to the church is 'not destitute of reason'. In this account the church plays an integral role in the right ordering of society, building up the august fabric of states and consecrating society. The natural law exercised through prudential judgements may be central to Burke but so is the church's message. Secondly, Burke is clear that society should be consecrated by the church's benign influence in order that those who administer the government of men, which is 'in the person of God himself', should be full of the hope of immortality. Burke's account of the function of hope is interwoven with the affections, directing man towards God in order that man should become what he ought to be. If they are invigorated by the hope afforded by such an eternal perspective then they will 'leave a rich inheritance to the world'. Finally, Burke is clear that in a rightly ordered society, moral, civil and political institutions work harmoniously to connect the natural human affections and understanding to the divine. It is notable in itself that affections and understanding are coupled. For Burke, affections are not blind and senseless but directed towards natural ends and thus, when rightly ordered, harmonious with reason and understanding.

For Burke then there is a clear link and a mutually enriching harmony between the natural affections of created beings, the gospel message as disseminated by the church and the common grace of the natural law which informs our practical reason and our moral intuitions.

⁸² Burke 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', 38.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that we can identify six intersecting political principles in Burke's thought which emerge from his Christian faith. I have tried to make the case that these political principles offer Christians one way of engaging with politics which avoids the dangers of ideology and preserves a space for God to act in the midst of difficult political questions through the prayerful prudence of human beings. I have not argued that conservatism is the only body of political principles which might viably guide a Christian's approach to politics; however, I have defended the view that the core doctrinal commitments of the Christian faith are deeply woven into the Burkean conservative's worldview. As such, I believe Burkean conservatism to be an approach to politics which has much to offer a society which seems increasingly riven by a lack of corporate identity and moral clarity. Burke's natural law based constitutionalism offers an approach to politics which operates within a robust Christian framework while still advocating tolerance and epistemological humility. Such an approach allows us to remain humble and cautious as we discern a path through perilous political issues, yet it offers us clear reference points from which we must take our bearings. Without such a robust Christian framework in which to ground our ethical beliefs and adjudicate upon our cultural values, our contemporary society may soon discover that the rights based reason of secular liberalism is not sufficient to engender a common concord amongst competing traditions.

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