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Francis Canavan, S.J.

Kirk and the Burke Revival

Edmund Burke is widely regarded as the founder of modern conservatism, not least by the late Dr. Russell Kirk. Since the publication of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, Kirk said, "the principal conservatives in the Western world have been conscious or unconscious disciples of Burke."

Kirk, in turn, was an early member of the generation of scholars that gave new life to Burke studies in the years following World War II. To him all students of Burke, and conservatives in particular, whether they are students or not, owe a great debt. Writing on Burke had never ceased, of course, but much of it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in England, was hampered by an empiricist and utilitarian tradition that kept the writers from seeing the breadth and depth of Burke's thought. Russell Kirk was one of the first to break that mold, with his *Conservative Mind* in 1953.

I myself was first introduced to Burke when I studied at Fordham in the mid-1940s and encountered Ross Hoffman, Paul Levack, and Moorhouse Millar, S.J. But *The Conservative Mind* was a bestseller and had a greater impact on the public than their publications did. Kirk's book (and his numerous later articles and books) made him a pioneer in Burke studies and the

renaissance of conservatism in post-war America.

He was followed in close order by several writers who emphasized the role that natural law and a God-given moral order in the world played in Burke's thought. Kirk acknowledged them in a later work where he said, "Recent studies by Peter Stanlis, Francis Canavan, Charles Parkin, and other scholars have undone earlier notions about Burke's first principles." Kirk knew, and said, that Burke's thought had a metaphysical foundation, and that his metaphysics was not mysticism or mere rhetoric, as many previous writers had called it. Yet the bent of Kirk's mind was to stress another side of Burke, one which in no way contradicted the so-called "natural-law thesis" but was fully in harmony with it, as the above-named scholars readily agree.

Kirk was most attracted by the historical, experiential, traditional, and anti-ideological cast of Burke's mind. Burke did not reject principles. On the contrary, he believed in a universal human nature, he asserted that "the principles of true politics

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are those of morality enlarged," and held that human laws "may alter the mode of application, but have no power over the substance of original justice." That, in Charles Parkins's words, is the moral basis of Burke's political thought.

But it certainly is not the whole of it, nor is it what makes Burke a main source of modern conservatism. Conservative and conservatism are terms that became political labels only after Burke's time. But when a party that called itself Conservative arose on the British political scene, it inherited from him, not a fully-worked out philosophy, still less an ideology proposed for adoption everywhere and always, but a certain way of looking at and understanding political life and institutions.

Like Burke, conservatives generally acknowledge a transcendent moral order, to which men should try to conform the political order. "The laws of morality are the same everywhere," said Burke, and what is extortionate and unjust in England is so in India as well. But the moral order must be incorporated into and take on flesh and blood, so to speak, in an existing society with its history and experience. A moral social order may therefore assume different, though not radically different, forms in different countries, and still more in cultures as diverse as those of England and India.

Concepts of justice and realizations of what it demands develop in the course of history. They do not spring into being all at once in some revolutionary era, nor can they be deduced from abstract concepts in the manner of geometry. Instead, they are the fruit of long and varied historical experience. It is important therefore that a society understand its past and respect the wisdom of its ancestors. Progress is indeed possible and should be striven for. But it should grow out of and seek to improve the culture's tradition through a process of

gradual adaptation of customs, laws, and institutions, not by a sweeping effort to wipe out the past and make all things new.

For this reason Burke insisted upon what he called prescription. He took the term from the law of property, which respected even an unjust title to property if it had been held in good faith for a sufficient number of decades. This, he thought, was required by natural law in order to safeguard property, which was a major bulwark against the overweening power of government, and to protect it from the instability caused by the threat of litigation. He also applied prescription to a country's political constitution. If the people had long existed and flourished under it, they had a right and a duty to maintain it. A government's title to authority could not be annulled by arguments derived from the original right of men to govern themselves in a hypothetical state of nature. Similarly a people's religion and morals were prescriptive. People inherited all these good things and had a right to enjoy them; they did not have to rethink them every generation. While they could indeed change them if need be, the need must be a very great and urgent one before it could be justified.

Social and cultural change therefore must be gradual and guided by prudence, which Burke called "the first of all the virtues, as well as the supreme director of them all." A statesman knows that a large human society is complex and that simple solutions to its problems are likely to be wrong and self-defeating. Knowing this, he proceeds with caution, building on good results if they are obtained, but willing to abandon policies if they do not succeed.

For the same reason, he does not strive for an ideal society or try to press the society he has to govern into a uniform mold. "There is a tyranny in the womb of every utopia," as the French political scientist Bertrand de Jouvenel has said. Burke always knew that,

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A developed society, he said, necessarily articulates itself in classes, all equal in the eyes of God, but not in the roles and functions they perform in this world. Such a society also develops traditional ways of thinking, acting, and mores, comprising social relationships, institutions, and laws of its own. These distinguish it from other societies with whom it may share a general culture, as the nations of Europe did and still do. There are thus varieties among societies and within societies, which generate affection and loyalty to the communities that men regard as distinctively their own, without denying their obligations to the larger society and larger culture which they share with others. Emphasis on this element of affection, moral imagination, loyalty, and love is, I believe, a principal characteristic of Kirk's interpretation of Burke and conservatism.

Burke was a traditionalist, for whom men lived largely on traditional beliefs and customs. He avoided the obvious objection to traditionalism, however—namely, that if tradition is its own highest norm, there is no standard above it by which we may distinguish a good tradition from a bad one. Our common human nature, created by God, but recognizable by reason and, in Europe, by a common Christian faith, furnished the ultimate standard of judgment.

Burke well knew that man is neither an angel nor a devil. Human nature is not perfect, nor can any human devices or social reforms make it perfect. We must take it as it is and work with it: "He censures God, who quarrels with the imperfections of man." Our political and social expectations

must therefore be modest, lest we destroy the good in the fanatical quest for the best.

It does not follow that Burke therefore rejected reason in politics. On the contrary, it is impossible to read what he wrote without noticing his constant appeals to reason as the statesman's guide. Burke is antirational only to those who reduce reason to the truncated and mathematicized version of it that became the supreme mode of human thought with the triumphant rise of physical science in the seventeenth century. Rather, he was anti-rationalist and strenuously opposed to importing into the conduct of human life and politics the method that worked well enough in mathematics and physics. A sound moral and political tradition, according to Burke, was the slow and patient product of reason dealing with the evolving complexity of human affairs. As he said of jurisprudence, tradition is "the collected reason of ages, combining the principles of original justice with the infinite variety of human concerns."

All of this is very Burkean and, if one may say so, very Kirkian. It is what constitutes conservatism as Russell Kirk understood and admired it. There is, he said, a "shop-and-till" conservatism, which he described as "mere attachment to one's little property, out of fear that radical political measures would injure or destroy the material interests of anyone possessing property." Its characteristic vice is selfishness, as radicalism's vice is envy. Dr. Kirk admired neither of these. His conservatism was that of a society guided by a sound tradition and maintained by the moral character of good men and women. America had had such a society, whose tradition he elaborated in his book *The Roots of American Order*, and he devoted his life to conserving and reviving it.

