Edmund Burke and the Dream of Cicero.

A paper presented to the Estoril Political Forum, October 20, 2021.

The means by which the western Allies achieved victory in 1945 profoundly affected their ability to implement their stated war aims. In the United States, expanding access to trade and the world's raw materials became entwined with the concern that "sovereign rights and self-government" were under threat from triumphant Soviet Communism. For the British, imperial decline in the face of worldwide movements for self-determination jeopardized ambitious plans for financing a model welfare revolution at home.

Such complications impacted postwar conservatism each side of the Atlantic, as we see in salient responses to the legacy of Edmund Burke: there was Burke the anti-ideologue and champion of Western Civilization in the States, and, in Britain, a more muted, pragmatic version of the statesman, buried in the art of the possible. While the Fordham historian Paul Levack praised Burke's "high intellectual virtue" in the defense of Christendom, the influential Cambridge historian J.H. Plumb dismissed his political philosophy as "utter rubbish." The "American" Burke came fully adaptable to the threat posed to the principles of the Atlantic Charter by an atheistic ideology: the British model, "stripped, not equipped," was fitted for the more circumstantial consequences of the peace, so long as the "R" word–*Religion*–was avoided![1]

[1] For this contrast illustrated plainly, see Ross J.S. Hoffman & Paul Levack (ed.) *Burke's Politics. Selected Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke on Reform, Revolution, and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), xxxiv: "Englishmen alive today, and facing darker prospects than any their country has confronted since Burke's age, may perhaps draw encouragement from [Burke's words in 1796] … It has been an age of doctrinaire 'planning,' or as Burke would have said, of 'scheming.' Its political leaders have forgotten the natural law, have set at defiance the abiding principles of the objective order, and fancied they could solve problems without analyzing their elements and nature. All the rationalistic errors of the age of Rousseau and Paine came coursing back with the upsurge of socialism, communism, and fascism; and hard upon them came the inevitable mad efforts of irrational will to enforce unreason in the name of reason."

There was, though, one oddity in this postwar *British* landscape that is noteworthy, I think, because, as the exception that proves the rule, it points to two roads not taken: one, a political path toward a more robust conservative defense of the social and cultural role of religion in postwar liberal democracies: the other, an academic avenue offering a more informative view of Burke's own conception of "Christendom" as an arena for the exercise of statesmanship.

The oddity itself is a slim volume entitled *Edmund Burke: Christian Statesman*, written by E.E. Reynolds, and published in 1948 by the Student Christian Movement Press.[2] There are two points of interest about this item. The first is the author: Reynolds, who was raised in the Quaker tradition, became an active proponent of the mission of the League of Nations and a parliamentary candidate for the Labour party in the interwar years.[3] During the Second World War he was received into the Roman Catholic Church, and, while few of his (numerous) published works pass beyond competent and sharp syntheses, he became a significant figure in the field of research on Thomas More, being elected first president of the "Amici Thomae Mori" on its founding in 1962, and editing its journal, *Moreana*, for some years.[4]

The second point of interest is Reynolds' defense of his biography's core theme: "No other statesman of that time," he writes, "so definitely took his stand on Christian ground, for Burke was reaffirming the traditional teaching of the Church. *Unless we grasp this fundamental conception we cannot understand Burke's thought, for it is the unifying element*."[5] In fact,

[2] The volume was part of a series "The Torch Biographies," which also included short studies of Washington, Lincoln, Smuts, and Dickens, among others.
[3] See E.E. Reynolds, *The League Experiment* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1939).
[4] Reynolds wrote the official biography of Baden-Powell during his tenure of the position of editor to the Boy Scouts Association, 1940-44. As the Second World War came to its end, his involvement with scouting turned international, as he worked within the civilian relief service on the continent in liberated Normandy.
[5] E.E. Reynolds, *Edmund Burke: Christian Statesman* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1948), 22 – 23. Reynolds continues: "Some modern admirers of Burke have tried to gloss over his religious conviction or have excused it as an

Reynolds fails to elaborate explicitly upon that theme in the book itself, and his rallying cry went largely unheeded; but this may be as good a moment as any to take a stab at asking if there is – if there ever was – any purchase in that term, "Christian statesman," for Burke studies, and, by association, for conservatism as a critical intellectual movement in postwar liberal democracy.

The concept of the "statesman" was, of course, pervasive in Burke's world; but it is not a term that appears with any frequency in Burke's own published writings. Such concepts were discussed and contested in the eighteenth-century largely through the *re-presentation* of earlier historical figures and controversies. Ancient debates and political hostilities were fought again, *mutatis mutandis*, with the tools of positive imitation or negative imputation. Reed Browning covered such ground in his study of the ideology of the Court Whigs, where eighteenth-century concepts of patriotism and of patriot resistance were rehearsed through figures from Cato to Ahitophel – and, increasingly, through the appropriation of "Tully," or Cicero, in polemical pamphlets and scholarly editions of his works.

Browning's study closes in the 1750s, but that is also a time when we can detect subtle shifts in the interpretation of Cicero's legacy. A figure originally weaponized against the Patriot opposition to Walpole was now being embraced by a revised patriot program aiming to reconfigure the movement of Lord Bolingbroke in line with new dynastic, political and imperial circumstances. This evolution can be traced in contemporary publication and republication of Cicero's works midcentury, just at the time when a young Edmund Burke was honing his politics and literary interests at "Tully's Head," the bookselling business of the Patriot author, poet, and playwright Robert Dodsley, in London.

---

aberration, but in so doing they destroy the very foundations of his political philosophy." He may have had in mind here the earlier biography of Burke by John Morley, or the works of Sir Lewis Namier.

And, of course, Cicero's influence upon Burke's career and self-identity has been broadly recognized: in his oratory, his historical and aesthetic writings, his critiques of British imperial policy, his self-identification as a *novus homo*, even his innovative conception of party, and in his understanding of the integral relationship between the virtuous and the active life. Yet the potential significance to Burke's thought of Cicero's approach to *religion* has received relatively little attention over the years.[6] Perhaps there is a clue to this relative neglect in an observation by the scholar Paul MacKendrick, who comments *en passant*, in a passage on the legacy of Cicero's philosophical works in the eighteenth century, that "Burke and Cicero are each representatives of that rare breed, the intelligent and reforming Conservative."[7]

I shall focus in this brief examination on Cicero's *De natura deorum*, a text that may seem to support the drift of MacKendrick's observation. Completed by Cicero in 45 BC, it comprises an imaginary discussion on the nature of the gods between an Epicurean, Velleius, a Stoic, Balbus, and Cotta, a member of the Academic school (the one favored also by the narrator, Cicero himself). Giving Velleius' "specious" arguments little of his time, Cotta launches a spirited refutation of the philosophical arguments of Balbus in Book III, demolishing Stoic proofs of the existence of the gods and their providential interventions, after which, we are told, "Velleius judged that the arguments of Cotta were truest."[8] But the work closes with an abrupt twist, as Cicero himself opines that Balbus' discourse "seem'd to me to have the greater Probability." The assumption is easily made that Cicero here is concealing his own skepticism about central features of the Roman religion in full view, as it were, behind the figure of the urbane Cotta, who has, amid swings of his wrecking ball, been careful to express his adamant

---

[6] Significant exceptions to this statement can be found in the writings of Francis Canavan and of Russell Kirk.
[7] Paul MacKendrick, *The Philosophical Books of Cicero* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1989), 282-82.
[8] Marcus Tullius Cicero and Thomas Francklin, *Of the nature of the gods. In three books. With critical, philosophical, and explanatory notes. To which is added, An enquiry into the astronomy and anatomy of the antients* (London, 1741), 268.

“belief [in] the immortal gods … inherited from our forefathers.” Conyers Middleton, in his influential *Life of Cicero* (1744), commented on the strength of this text that “there was not a man of liberal education, who did not consider [religion] as an engine of state, or political system; contrived for the uses of government, and to keep the people in order …”[9] It is an assumption that might fit well with accepted notions of Burke’s imitative Ciceronian statesmanship, grounded upon skepticism and prudence.[10]

But is there an alternative reading of the close of Cicero’s text that we are overlooking in our willingness to affirm Burke’s intelligent, reforming Conservative credentials? Cotta’s attacks on Balbus’ reasoned, philosophical theology are vehemently conclusive as counter-argument; but they do not render religion “insubstantial” or false: in *separating* religion from the authority of philosophical systems as he does, Cotta affirms the reality of the gods: “You adduce all these arguments,” he tells Balbus at one point, “to prove that the gods exist, and by arguing *you render doubtful a matter which in my opinion admits of no doubt at all*.”[11] Seen from this perspective, Cicero’s final words in the *De natura deorum* do not convey closet, utilitarian truth about religion but – quite the opposite – advise that, in the ultimate incompatibility of rational inquiry with religious belief, a well-ordered state is defined by its capacity to absorb in its customs and institutions the tension that exists naturally between man’s temporal and transcendent existence. The ability to absorb this paradoxical awareness in the performance of public service may be considered essential to the statesman’s craft precisely because it embraces the realization that the state itself can never be the final arbiter of what is just or true.[12]

---

[9] Conyers Middleton, *The History of the Life of M. Tullius Cicero* (London, 1741), 344-45.
[10] Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods. Academics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1951), 383.
[11] Loeb, 295 [italics added].
[12] That perception is the root of Cicero’s famous definition of wisdom, the foremost of all virtues, as “the knowledge of things human and divine … and [of] the bonds of union between gods and men and the relation of man to man.” See Cicero, *De officiis* (Loeb), 151-53. It is this central insight, surely, that explains the enduring power of the allegoric “Dream of Scipio,” in that passage, for example, where the young Scipio’s father, Paulus, rejects his son’s

That Burke may have understood Cicero's religious statesmanship in this way is suggested by a short essay to be found in his Note-Book, entitled "Religion of no efficacy as a state engine" (note the echo of Middleton's quotation above). Here, Burke argues that, if "we confine the ends of religion to this world, we naturally annihilate its Operation, which must wholly depend on the Consideration of another."[13] In a kind of logical inversion, the argument can also be read in Burke's *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), a merciless parody of a free-thinker's carefully-reasoned condemnation of civil society in the name of natural reason. "[I]f we were to examine the divine fabricks by our ideas of reason and fitness," Burke writes in his preface to the piece, "and to use the same method of attack by which some men have assaulted Revealed Religion, we might with as good colour, and with the same success make the wisdom and power of god in his creation appear to many no better than foolishness."[14]

To conclude, Burke's conception of Christendom may be found as deeply in his own imitation or re-presentation of Cicero as a religious statesman as in his rhetoric, his conception of empire, or his social self-identification. That might seem a rather insipid claim, except that Cicero's thought has too readily been coopted into a modern conception of secularized liberal democracy, in line with the deeper currents of conservative thought in Britain, and the accompanying polarization of views of Burke; but religion was central to Cicero's idea of statesmanship precisely in its immunity to rational and philosophic systematization. The aspirations of the most "advanced" civilizations, he seems to warn, cannot be realized through any human construction that excludes the transcendent reality and mystery of mankind's existence.

---

passionate wish to join him in the temple of God: "all good men, must leave [their] soul in the custody of the body, and must not abandon human life except at the behest of him by whom it was given … lest they appear to have shirked the duty imposed upon man by God." See Cicero, *The Republic*, VI.15 (Loeb), 267-69.

[13] H.V.F Somerset, *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1957), 68.

[14] Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1: 135.

The American intellectual Camille Paglia observed a few years ago that, "All the great world religions contain a complex system of beliefs regarding the nature of the universe and human life that is far more profound than anything that liberalism has produced." Perhaps, then, that "commonwealth" of Western nations shaped by the liberal aspirations of the Atlantic Charter could still benefit from the rallying cry of that slim oddity: Edmund Burke, "Christian Statesman."

Ian Crowe

October 19, 2021