BURKE, ROSMINI AND THE REVOLUTION[1]

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EDMUND BURKE died in 1797, when Rosmini was born. Between their two lives fell the great blow of the French Revolution, striking fire—a fire of fury—from the aged Burke's mind and then echoing on behind all Rosmini's political thought. Burke died fighting the Revolution as an unmitigated evil. Rosmini, living through the half century that followed the great upheaval, could neither simply accept nor simply denounce it; his task, as he saw it, was to contribute to the construction of a new order such as the new age required and was confusedly clamouring for. Burke, though an Irishman, was a Protestant; and though too great a man to be a mere politician, he was on the whole a Whig and a strong upholder of the English political system set up by the Whig aristocracy at the end of the seventeenth century. Rosmini, a Catholic and an Italian, could feel no such respect for the pre-revolutionary world. For him that world meant, above all, the Austrian Empire of which he was a subject by birth; the Empire's Erastianism offended him as a Catholic, and its hold over divided Italy offended him as a patriot. If the Revolution had done nothing else it had punished the old Catholic states for oppressing the Church of which they professed themselves the defenders. To Rosmini, as to many Catholics of his generation, the open hostility of the Revolution seemed hardly more dangerous than a return to the cold suspicious patronage of the eighteenth-century governments. Freedom, they thought, even with poverty and persecution, was better than such patronizing protection.

That is one difference between Burke and Rosmini. Both were critics of the Revolution, but the Italian priest, far more than the Irish Protestant, was also a critic of the world which the Revolution destroyed. It seemed to him a world that the Church would be well rid of; not simply because it was now a thing of the past

1 *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought*. By Charles Parkin. (Cambridge University Press; 12s. 6d.)
Rosmini on Human Rights. By C. J. Emery, INST.CH. (Blackfriars Publications, Aquinas Paper, No. 28; 2s.)

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which had had its day, whereas the Church was eternal, but because its official and superficial Catholicism had come near to stifling the Church under a protection that demanded too much in return. Admittedly this point is not, for various reasons, explicitly much stressed by Rosmini, but it is certainly the implication of some of his most characteristic writings, in particular of the early 'Panegyric of Pius VII' (1823) and of that great, ill-fated book the *Five Wounds of Holy Church* (written 1832-3, published 1848). These writings, especially the latter, imply a criticism of the Catholic monarchies of the *ancien régime* as severe as that, for example, which glitters obliquely through the irony of Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi* (1827). Rosmini and Manzoni were intimate friends. It is true that they felt rather differently about the Revolution; Manzoni's early upbringing and French contacts made him a child of the movement in a way that his friend could never be, and this special influence survived his conversion; but the two men agreed at least in not cherishing regrets for what the Revolution had destroyed. And in this they agreed too with their contemporary Lammenais, who is sometimes called the father of Christian democracy. For though Rosmini never quite trusted Lammenais and half-expected his apostasy,[2] his disagreement with the French priest was at first a moral rather than an intellectual one. On the subject of the Church's relation to the old Catholic monarchies (not to that monarchy in the abstract, but to what it had proved to be in practice) these three, Rosmini, Manzoni and Lammenais, stood on much the same ground.

To return to Edmund Burke, it is good to have his onslaught on the Revolution summarized for us, succinctly and urbanely. Mr Parkin is a scholar and writes like a gentleman, but his theme has a more than academic or literary interest. Burke's 'Reflections' on the Revolution are little read nowadays, yet they are the maturest thought on human nature in politics of one whose character and experience give him a lasting authority. Burke had little experience of government but much of political debate; and, what is more important, he was a moralist deeply concerned with the permanent springs of human activity. To read him is to

2 See the latest biography of Rosmini by C. R. Leetham (Longmans, 1957), pp. 94-5, 134, 214-5. Lammenais's defection in 1834 was used as a weapon against Rosmini by his own enemies within the Church.

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become aware of a mind that speaks to our time or any time. It is not only his intelligence that can still impress one, as it impressed Dr Johnson—'that fellow calls forth all my powers. . . . His stream of mind is perpetual'—but in general his sensitive and magnanimous personality. Burke's feelings were really shocked by the Revolution, and, being the man he was, he could not rest until he had seen and stated, in classic English, exactly why this was so. The 'Reflections' are emotion recollected in tranquillity; and the emotion was scorn and hatred, but the recollection both perspicuous and humane. Burke is never mean or petty; his judgment is certainly partial, but it is often profound. He is always worth listening to, and always will be so long as men presume to attempt to frame society on a basis of universal human rights inherent in every individual, so long, that is, as they attempt democracy. The facile cult of democracy makes Burke's criticism still relevant today. What then did it amount to? Why did Burke detest the movement that gave birth to our modern western political world?

A short (and hardly original) answer to this question is that Burke saw the Revolution as an effort to do something absolutely new; to scrap the past and start afresh; to *invent* human society as if it had never before existed. The Revolutionaries had begun, he protested, by mentally separating human nature from society—actual and historical society. This was a mental destruction of the latter, leaving them only with the abstraction 'natural Man'; to fit which they then proceeded to invent society. Against this procedure the Aristotelian objection was obvious, and Burke makes it: 'The state of civil society *is* a state of nature' (my italics). And again: 'Art is man's nature. We are as much, at least, in a state of nature in formed manhood as in . . . infancy'. More characteristic however is the way Burke expands the argument in terms of his vision of 'the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the higher with the lower natures, . . . the visible and invisible world', the past and present and future. It is by no act of choice that we are in society; we are in it by being born. Our mind is subject to reality prior to any act of conscious will; and reality is a vast co-ordinated system ruled by 'a stupendous wisdom' which far transcends our understanding. And the little we can understand of reality imposes itself on us inflexibly, through our physical nature, then through our natural affections

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and finally through our reason. Burke stresses the role of reason in government, 'where only a sovereign reason . . . should dictate. Government is made for the very purpose of opposing that reason to will and caprice . . .' But the reason he speaks of, unlike the reason the Revolution appealed to, is what Mr Parkin calls 'concrete', a reason controlled and responsible precisely because it recognizes 'a higher reason on which it is dependent and of which it can have only an imperfect awareness'. Here we touch the religious ground of Burke's thought, and also, implicitly, another consideration worth noting.

For besides insisting, against the revolutionaries' abstract naturalism, that society is natural, that our nature is formed by 'art', that human civilization is an integral part of a pre-existing and transcending order—besides this Burke stresses another and more immediately practical point. If—he says in effect—you begin your social constructions by scrapping the past, by wiping out of your mind all but the bare idea of a 'humanity' which is the same in all and for all (young and old, male and female, etc.), then inevitably you will tend to leave nothing standing between the individual and the collectivity. Reduce concrete human being to bare 'human nature', and then (and *only* then) add social obligations to it on the pretence that only thus will society be rational—and need you be surprised if the result is inhuman? The result, in short, will consist of two units only, the individual and the State. Insisting on an absolute rational perfection, you are compelled to destroy mankind in your attempt to get this, and sacrifice not only the past but the present to an imaginary perfected future. Insisting on a social order freely accepted by the conscious choice of all its members (which is to exclude *a priori* the most natural of all societies, the family) you can only leave each individual with, at best, the illusion that his will determines the State, that *it* is the General Will. And thus the commonwealth itself is 'disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality'. All men are equal because there is nothing to compare them with except the State; whose law is now the sole object of respect because the State is now the only authority.

Perhaps the ruthlessness of the Revolution was what shocked Burke most—as our generation has been shocked by the same thing in Nazism and Communism. And he traced it back to the presumptuously abstract principle which, in one form or another,

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is the everlasting root of collectivist State-worship. 'To them (the revolutionaries) the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals is as nothing. The state is all in all. Everything is referred to the production of force; . . . everything is trusted to the use of it. . . . Their humanity is at their horizon, and, like the horizon, it always flies before them.' How intelligently eloquent that last phrase is!

Surely something very like what Burke dreaded is the menace today; and not only across the Iron Curtain. With the whole world talking about democracy, there is something to be learnt from the first great critic of post-Christian democracy. It hardly matters that he was a trifle too comfortable in aristocratic England. In his judgment of what he feared he is wonderfully discerning; and the remedy he called for was, at bottom, not any form of political reaction but simply (and yet what delicacy it requires in practice!) the cardinal virtue of Prudence. This is nowhere named, yet, reading Mr Parkin's final chapters, I was constantly reminded of St Thomas's treatise on that virtue. Burke called it 'practicable virtue', and he meant a progressive and unpretentious extension of reason, little by little, through the affections, through family and civic life, gradually outwards. 'We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen.'

That is a practical moralist's judgment. If it needs to be grounded in a clearer metaphysic than Burke was capable of, we should, I suppose, turn to the concept of the person as this has since been drawn out, largely under the threat of collectivism, by Christian philosophers re-thinking their own tradition. And here Rosmini comes in, with his careful discrimination between moral and juridical rights and his fertile wedding of the concepts of person and property. Father Emery's paper is a useful introduction to his master's thought on this matter; but I have no space to do more than recommend it.

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