

Faith in Twenty-First Century Scotland: the First Burke Address

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by David McLetchie MSP

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Good evening.

It is a great privilege to be able to give the first annual Scottish lecture hosted by the Conservative Christian Fellowship, entitled The Burke Address.

Tonight I will be considering the thinking of Edmund Burke and its relevance to 21st century Scotland. It is a timely opportunity to build on remarks I made to the Scottish Conservative Conference in Dundee last month, in which I stressed the enduring value of Edmund Burke's teachings. This is because there is a desperate need for new ideas in Scotland as we seek answers to the many problems which face us and that is why, at this time of change and uncertainty, the wisdom of Edmund Burke is of particular significance to us.

However, it is impossible to examine Burke's political philosophy without also examining the role of faith and its contribution in 21st century Scotland.

This is an important subject, but one which for politicians is fraught with danger. No politician or political party should claim that 'God is on their side' or use religion to secure votes. We are wise to take to heart Burke's own words that 'politics and the pulpit are terms that have little agreement.'

Burke never lost sight of the contrasting nature of politics and religion. Neither must we. The late Lord Hailsham noted 'Most political judgements are matters of degree, fact and opinion and have no bearing at all on the salvation of individual souls or the verities enshrined in the Nicene Creed.'

Politics is concerned with the governance of this world, the temporal, whereas theology's scope is wider, dealing as it does with the 'ultimate questions' of life and death.

Burke and Religion

The centrality of religion to Burke's own political philosophy is not in doubt. In his time, religion played a far greater part in people's lives than it does today. However, his own faith appears to have been deep and strong; as he wrote in the Reflections on the Revolution in France, "We know and feel inwardly that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and comfort... All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that they act in trust; and that they are to account for that conduct in that trust to the one great master, author and founder of Society."

Burke revered the historically evolved society because for him it was a spiritual phenomenon. Civil society in all its complexity was the product of a Divine Plan. It is therefore no surprise that he was particularly horrified by the Jacobin assaults on the Church in France and reference to this and the vital role of religion in the good society forms a large part of the Reflections.

He was a staunch supporter of the established church, which in England was the Anglican faith, because he recognised the importance of religion as a cornerstone of state and society. He believed that it conferred a greater legitimacy on vital functions of government, thereby acting as a unifying factor and that a prominent and strong church would act as a check on the arbitrary power of the state.

However, Burke saw no incompatibility between his support for the established church and religious tolerance. Quite the contrary, because it was his sense of the centrality of Anglicanism to the laws and constitution of England that enabled his toleration of other faiths.

Burke, whilst nominally an Anglican, was a closet Catholic: his father was probably a convert

to Protestantism from the old religion; he himself married a Catholic. Throughout his life he was a brave campaigner for the rights of Catholics - who in those days suffered systematic discrimination under the Penal Laws, which withheld from them the vote and the right of property, and barred them from the law, academia and politics. Burke was a leader of the campaign to repeal the Penal Laws and one of the authors of the Act which began this process in England in 1778.

Despite the fact that Burke was an Irishman who spent his adult life in England, his support for religious tolerance led to his becoming involved in the Scottish politics of the period - most particularly in the politics of religion.

In the 18th century Scots were associated with Jacobitism, with the exiled family of Stuart and with the Catholic religion. Burke's Party, the Whigs, were the most hostile to the Jacobites, and consequently to the Scots in general - for the Whigs were traditionally the party of Protestantism, and the Tories the party of Rome.

In 1779 moves began to extend the Act repealing the Penal Laws to Scotland. Immediately religious riots broke out in Edinburgh and much Catholic property was destroyed by the mob. To Burke's disgust the government backed off and abandoned the attempt at toleration.

As he wrote to Boswell:

'A religious war was not exactly the thing I expected in my time. I thought it possible, that even at the other side of the Tweed, a man might be allowed to say his prayers in Latin without any gross violation of the native, inherent, essential privileges and immunities of the broad Scotch. I admit, that the Ears of heaven may be more delighted with these accents; yet as the other Tongue may be as intelligible there (though not so pleasing) I think a little of it might be borne at Edinburgh without making a very serious quarrel of the matter.'

Burke drew up a petition on behalf of the Scottish Catholics which was presented to the King - but as in Ireland and England, it was decades before full Catholic Emancipation was passed.

Burke's experience of religious conflict in the Ireland of his youth taught him the value of tolerance. As he told a zealous Scottish Protestant around this time, he considered the distinctions within Christianity 'rather as divisions, made for convenience and order, than separations, from a Diversity of Nature, or from irreconcilable contradiction in principles.' He went further, in fact: having that 'degree of respect for all other religions', he said, '...I could not prevail upon myself to bestow on the synagogue, the Mosque or the Pagoda, the language which your Pulpits lavish upon a great part of the Christian world.'

But Burke's tolerance did not slide into relativism. He shared neither the Protestant exclusivity of the seventeenth century nor the sceptical humanism of many eighteenth century intellectuals. For Burke, good and comfort were not confined to one sect or another. In the Reflections he observed that 'Surely the church is a place where one day's truce ought to be allowed to the dissensions and animosities of mankind.'

Religion and Politics Today

So no one can deny the importance of faith in the formation of Edmund Burke's worldview. Nor should we underestimate its significance in Scotland today.

Superficially it would seem that Scotland in the twenty-first century is a million miles from Burke's eighteenth century world. Certainly, there is plenty of hostility to attempts by some politicians to link their faith with a political message.

An obvious example is Margaret Thatcher's use of the parable of the Good Samaritan to make the political point that he could not have helped if he hadn't had money. However, the objection was really a political one - to her and this perceived defence of Capitalist wealth creation - and not to her speaking about faith.

I certainly think that the so-called 'Sermon on the Mound' was an important contribution to

the debate. My own view has always been that it did not help us very much politically as for some tastes it was too close to the idea of social welfare being the crumbs from the rich man's table which is not particularly attractive. It ignores the fact that mutual self help, as embodied in work of the friendly societies and the co-operative movement, was historically far more important than the philanthropy of rich men, although both have a role and I certainly applaud the generosity of men such as Carnegie and his modern equivalents such as Tom Hunter.

I have always thought that the parable of the talents, stressing as it does the imperative to make the most of what is given to you and thereby helping both yourself and others, was more directly in tune with Conservative philosophy.

Hostility to religion usually reflects the prejudices of the individual expressing it. Many on the left were appalled by the idea of George Bush and Tony Blair praying together. Yet what is so wrong with two Christians praying together in private?

In questioning him about it, Jeremy Paxman was trying to stir up the hatred towards supposed right wing Christian fundamentalism felt by many on the left. The former Independent MP Martin Bell reinforced this when he transferred his campaign against sleaze in Tatton in 1997 to a campaign against religion in Brentwood and Ongar in 2001. This was a seat held by the Conservative, Eric Pickles, where the local Conservative party had supposedly been taken over by fundamentalist Christians. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant. What is of interest is the implication and motive behind Mr Bell's action namely, the implication that there is something sinister about Christians joining a local Conservative Party, or indeed any other party on the one hand and equating this in his moral calculus with the conduct of Neil Hamilton on the other. Fortunately, the voters did not share his bizarre prejudices and continued to return a Conservative MP.

However, it is interesting that such suspicion only seems to fall on Christians who are deemed to be on the political right. Contributions from Christian socialists are treated in a far more positive manner. This shows that the hostility of Martin Bell and his ilk has more to do with political correctness and prejudice than anything else. As such it should be challenged at every turn as it is stifling debate on important issues.

It ignores the fact that Christianity is central to the character of many people and the heritage that we enjoy. Our culture, laws, democratic institutions, architecture, literature, art and science have all been profoundly influenced by Christianity and cannot be understood without reference to it. The arrival of Christianity has been called the catalyst for the civilisation of Scots. On the tranquil and beautiful Isle of Iona, on the edge of Europe bounding the Irish Sea, modern Christianity was born. Iona was where St Columba fled from Ireland with 12 other monks in the year 563 and established a monastery, which led to the spread of Christianity across pagan Scotland and parts of England.

Scotland owes a great deal to its Christian history. But the contribution of faith to Scottish life is not confined to history. Contrary to the impression people often given in the media, Scotland is not a faithless country today. Faith in Scotland is neither an outdated pastime nor in terminal decline. The evidence actually points in the opposite direction.

In Scotland today, 11.2% of the population attend church each week. That's 600,000 Scots, compared with 300,000 who go to the cinema and 100,000 who pay to watch a football match.

Faith is also a power for good. In the aftermath of September 11, with the seemingly intractable conflict in the Middle East, the ongoing tensions in Northern Ireland and sectarianism still prevalent in many parts of Scotland, it can seem that religion is a problem to be constrained, not a good to be cherished. In reality, faith has been the source of great good, and in the vast majority of cases a champion of freedom and tolerance in the world. Overwhelmingly, it is not the historic religions that have been the major cause of evil in the world, but militant atheism, often bent on racial superiority, national interest or dynastic ambition. Consider the evil personalities of the twentieth century and their respective

ideologies - Mao Tse-Tung in China, Stalin in Russia, Hitler in Germany and Pol Pot in Cambodia - common to them all was an oppressive secularism.

Broadening Support for Burke's Philosophy

The continuing role of religion in Scotland means that many will be persuaded of the truth of Burke's arguments because of their faith and will propagate them on that basis. I welcome that. However, it is also important to recognise that, in our modern secular society, if we wish to gain support for the ideas which Burke supported we cannot simply rely on those of religious conviction.

We have to reach out to those that do not share that conviction, but who may be persuaded that Burke's political philosophy offers our best hope for the future. In this respect, the example of Friedrich Hayek is important, as the basic principles of a free society which he restated were, in all essential respects, the same as Burke's. However, he came to this view whilst maintaining religious agnosticism.

Hayek shared Burke's belief that social institutions were the product of a complex historical process characterised by trial and error experimentation. He therefore opposed attempts by political authorities to force society to go in a particular direction in order to conform to a particular blueprint. This was the 'fatal conceit' of all rationalist planners which was bound to weaken the fragile bonds of society.

However, his arguments for this undesigned and spontaneous evolutionary process were based on the fact that it had enabled particular civilisations to thrive by adopting particular traditions and institutions which they have found to be good. Hayek's argument focussed on the indispensable function which inherited moral and political principles play in generating a coherent order and is based on Hayek's love for personal freedom and belief that such a society was the best way to advance knowledge and civilisation. This functionalist argument is no doubt unsatisfactory to those who share Burke's religious conviction, but is certainly useful in winning over those unlikely to be persuaded by arguments based on religion.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that what is more important is not why people come to hold the views they do, but that they share a belief in the spontaneous evolution and growth of society as the best way forward.

The challenges confronting Scotland today

This is vital because I firmly believe that we need to apply the insights of Burke to the challenges confronting Scotland today if we are to come up with solutions.

In spite of the unparalleled wealth that we enjoy as a nation today, we still face serious social problems and a poverty of hope, opportunity and ambition in many parts of our society.

Some of these social problems were outlined by Michael Howard in his first speech as Conservative leader. He said: 'The poverty that traps generations is concentrated in inner city neighbourhoods where communities have been failing for a generation or more. So often these failing communities suffer from very high levels of crime, failing schools, poor quality housing, poor health. Breaking the cycle of failure requires concerted action and strong new local leadership with the power to force through change.'

How do we solve these problems? We will certainly not solve these problems if we rely too heavily on government action. Burke's view was that Government is limited, both in what it can do and what it should do. Government is powerless to deliver the perfect society. Burke's belief in original sin provided him with a powerful basis to be cautious about the utopian promises of some politicians. Leaders to him were not especially knowledgeable and no less imperfect and capable of improvement than the citizens. Burke did not think the Kingdom of God could be built through revolution, legislation or the decrees of government. Rather, he understood that politics has to settle for something less romantic and idealistic. Conservatives will always be realistic about what government can and cannot achieve.

Despite this, Burke believed that Government had an important role to play - positively and negatively. Government can act as a restraint and ensure that order is preserved in society. It can act to stamp out lawlessness. The disadvantaged are always disproportionately affected when crime goes unchecked.

Government has a more positive role to play as well. It should promote the common good. Government should never exist to promote the interests of a few, but the many. It should not work for the selfish ends of those who rule, nor for one class, nor merely to maximise economic growth and consumption. It should work for the benefit of all in society.

Burke recognised that the best way to ensure this was through a strong civil society operating within a clear legal framework. Burke's support for the intermediary institutions between the state and the individual is well known. It was the attacks on the institutions of private property, the family and the Church by the French Revolutionaries which he found most appalling because he recognised that well-constructed institutions, i.e those that have stood the test of time, were the key to social progress in all areas of human endeavour.

This is the message that is most relevant for our own time. Strengthening civil society at the expense of government will lead to our obligations towards one another being fulfilled more effectively. That is because families, friends, local communities, churches, charities and voluntary organisations provide services more effectively because they provide them more personally.

It is why we have advocated looking at different models for the running of our schools and hospitals. Such institutions should be rooted in their local communities which would help to restore civic pride and so rebuild the social fabric as rich and poor come together to meet the needs of their neighbours. Historically, hospitals in this country were voluntary institutions run by local committees inspired by the idea of serving the local public. The same was true of schools which were set up by churches or idealists who sought to provide a good education for the poor or opportunities for the less well off. They did a good job in this with almost universal attendance and high levels of literacy being achieved well before the state nationalised education in 1872.

In the USA and elsewhere in Europe non-profit hospitals still play a large role in their health services and we believe that genuinely autonomous foundation hospitals should be introduced here in Scotland.

Examples of how voluntary organisations are changing people's lives are all around us and many of these are run by people of faith. One of the great benefits of the type of pluralist civil society envisaged by Burke is that it offers the greatest opportunity for people of faith to make a contribution.

I have witnessed at first hand the work of churches and charities dealing with complex social problems. Communities of faith are very much alive and making a real difference to the lives of thousands of people in some of our most deprived communities.

Bethany Christian Trust

For example, there is the work of the Bethany Christian Trust

Bethany is a homeless charity based here in Edinburgh. It deals with addiction issues. Its stated aim is 'to relieve the suffering and meet the long term needs of homeless and vulnerable people.' It does this in a truly holistic way. Driven forward by a desire to show Christian love in action within the community, Bethany has grown dramatically over the years, in both the range and the quality of the care services it provides. Today, it offers seven levels of care: street work, emergency accommodation, specialist units, supported housing, alcohol and drug misuse services, homemaking and furniture help, employment and life skills. The needs of the people they work with are diverse and often complex. To respond effectively they have to be constantly in touch with those needs and be flexible, professional and caring in the way in which they address them.

It was St. Francis of Assisi who said, 'Preach the gospel always. If necessary, use words.' Bethany Christian Trust is an example of an organisation that does precisely this.

Scottish Churches Housing Action

There is the work of Scottish Churches Housing Action. It is impossible not to be impressed by their work. Homelessness is a major social problem, affecting some 80,000 people in Scotland each year. Scottish Churches Housing Action brings together the widest group of Christian Churches in Scotland; develops projects that help homeless people under local management; mobilises volunteers; links practical work to try to avoid people becoming homeless in the first place; encourages national policy makers to learn from local experience and connects the values of the Church with action to help homeless people.

The approach of Scottish Churches Housing Action is truly joined up. It links local problems of homelessness with national means of tackling them.

It brings together people of faith giving their money, time and commitment to the disadvantaged and dispossessed.

Unity Enterprise

My final example is Unity Enterprise. It was established in 1989 as an inter-church initiative offering training and personal development to young unemployed people. Since its foundation, it has expanded considerably. Its client groups include 14-16 year olds with school attendance problems or who have been excluded from school, 16-18 year olds who wish to attain formal vocational qualifications, physically disabled people, offenders serving a custodial sentence and those who have been released from prison, people who are long-term unemployed, people with learning difficulties and people with mental health issues and carers.

Scotland has no idea how lucky it is to have these groups, 'little platoons' as Burke referred to them, working tirelessly for the common good of society.

Imagine what would happen if these faith-inspired initiatives ever shut up shop. The cost to Scotland, whether measured in social or economic terms would be immense. Faith is a power for good for everyone in society - the faithless and the faithful.

Supporting the Voluntary Sector

However, the importance of the voluntary sector is not just its ability to provide services which meet local needs more effectively. Because voluntary organisations are motivated by a sense of responsibility to those around us they help to develop the civic virtues necessary for a decent society. In effect, they are schools of citizenship.

The more people are trusted with responsibility, the more likely they are to act responsibly, so lessening the need for coercion by government. And the more people practised responsibility, the more their moral faculties developed so that the sphere of coercion could diminish still further. No less important, this allows the moral order to change by a process of piecemeal adaptation in accordance with the views of people and not politically-correct elites.

So the voluntary institutions of civil society are a means of restraining men without having to resort to law so that our different interests can be reconciled. That is why despite what many of our political opponents would have you believe, Conservatism has never equated to individualism. Our real alternative to collectivism is voluntarism.

So one of the ways government can promote the common good is by supporting the voluntary sector. In ensuring that government does this, it is important that voluntary organisations continue to make the arguments as to why this is so important. Scotland's faith communities play a large role in this already in seeking to shape the thinking of politicians. I pay tribute to organisations such as CARE, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Alliance and the Church of Scotland for their sterling efforts in informing, supporting and challenging Scotland's politicians. It is easy, especially at a time of political apathy and low-turnouts, to imagine that

such organisations don't change anything. But nothing could be further from the truth.

So how can government support the voluntary sector and faith groups?

In his first major speech as Conservative leader, Michael Howard spoke to the Charities Aid Foundation Conference. Michael argued that Government can encourage the voluntary sector in two principal ways: First, it can encourage people to be responsible for others through voluntary activity, by donating their time or their energy or their money to voluntary organisations. Second, it can give voluntary organisations themselves more freedom, and more opportunity, to serve the communities they were established to serve.

In 2000, the Government extended the Gift Aid scheme introduced by the Conservatives in 1990 to boost charitable giving and create a 'new civic patriotism'. The changes ensured tax relief for direct cash donations - large or small, regular or one-off - to charities. Conservatives supported this policy at the time and are exploring ways to build on this.

It is vital that the funding of the voluntary sector reaches innovative, neighbourhood-based groups involving local people, so vital in finding innovative solutions to our social problems.

Fairness for Faith-based organisations

There must also be fair treatment for faith-based organisations. It is wrong for faith-based organisations to be discriminated against in terms of state funding on the basis of their religious ethos. Government money should not be used to support evangelism by any faith or denomination, nor should faith-based initiatives receive an unfair advantage in applying for money. But it is both unfair and counter-productive to tell a faith-based organisation that the only way to win official support is to suppress all mention of the faith that inspires and sustains its works. It was his faith that spurred William Wilberforce on in his relentless campaign against slavery, and faith is the engine that drives the unstinting work of great numbers of people today.

Faith-based schools

And Government should support faith-based schools. Scottish parents support denominational schools and want to send their children to such schools. Local authorities provide these schools to help meet this demand and Conservatives support them in their choice. Some politicians and commentators try to blame such schools for sectarianism. I disagree. Surely it is only right that, where there is a demand, parents, teachers and communities should be allowed to set up their own schools with state funding as happens in Denmark and the Netherlands.

Denominational schools contribute to diversity and high standards in education. Catholic schools, for example, are popular in Scotland, not just because of their religious affiliation, but also because of their strong emphasis on moral education and high standards of discipline. Clearly, they're doing something right. Studies show that their pupils, particularly those from less well off backgrounds, achieve better results than those at non-denominational schools with comparable intakes.

I am increasingly convinced that it is the ethos of a school that is the most important factor in providing good education and in promoting the values of self-discipline, personal responsibility, respect and tolerance.

Burke understood that Government had an important role in supporting the order, tradition and the institutions underpinning society. Conservatives today remain committed to this principle.

Faith - past, present and future

Scotland is a great nation, built as it is on Christian foundations. Faith has played a vital role in shaping our nation and we must never forget this. But faith is not simply an ancient Scottish relic; it is alive and well in present day Scotland. The contribution of faith-based groups to our society is immense and our national life is richer as a result.

So I want to thank Scotland's churches for all that they are doing.

Today, the UK has the fourth largest economy in the world but society seems more troubled than ever. Today's social challenges - breakdown, alienation, drugs, and intergenerational poverty - are at least as great as the economic challenges that confronted the UK and the new Conservative Government back in 1979.

Scotland has never needed the contribution of communities of faith more that it does today.

For Burke himself is reported as saying that 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.'

Thank you.