

able in principle and redeemed at certain points and moments in fact.”

Modern tragedy, having increasingly repudiated the religious sense that radiated in and even renewed ancient tragedy by endowing it with a metaphysical yearning, registers the nothingness, the “nameless, ultimate fear, a horror of the completely negative,” that Dr. F.R. Leavis perceives in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922):

*After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the garden
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead*

*We who were living are now dying
With a little patience.*

It can be said that modern tragedy is the tragedy of experiencing “the agony in stony places” and yet learning nothing from this tragic experience: or of hearing the “ou-boum” (“utterly dull”) which, in E. M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* (1924), merely states, now and forever, in this world and in all worlds, “Everything exists, nothing has value.” Forster’s words evoke the import of tragedy in the modern world even as they severely constrict the boundaries of tragic vision. This constriction signals not only the crisis of modernity but also the tragedy of modernity as we live and experience it in the “antagonist world.”

The Political Sermons of Samuel Johnson

Andrew Sandlin

THE SUSTAINED POPULARITY of eighteenth-century luminary Samuel Johnson derives primarily from his intelligent and witty conversation recorded in the classic biography by James Boswell; from the quaint, prejudiced definitions appearing in his English dictionary, the first of its kind; from his unique and sometimes condescending literary criticism; and from his sage, practical advice written

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in the *Rambler*, the *Idler*, and the *Adventurer*.

Johnson, though, wrote more than dictionary definitions, literary criticism, and practical essays. He was a leading poet of his generation, and an accomplished playwright. He even produced an edition of Shakespeare’s plays. But he was no ivory-tower scholar oblivious of the social and political issues of his day. His reputation as something of a political progressive is partially deserved (he clamored for penal reform, but, conversely, disdained the cause of the American colonists). Donald Greene reminds

us, nonetheless, that a simple formulaic description of Johnson's political views does not do justice to their complexity and the complexity of the eighteenth century.¹ Although Johnson's political writings are fascinating in themselves, they are not the exclusive source of his political views. In the canon of the somewhat less popular sermons² which Johnson indited (at a cost!) for mainly one Anglican minister appear two distinctly political homilies that afford a unique perspective on Johnson's deepest political convictions. We should not be surprised, in fact, that it is precisely Johnson's religious views that undergird his political convictions. Boswell remarks that after reading William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, "religion was the predominant object of [Johnson's] thoughts...."³ We may not expect that the political views of a man on whom religion sustained such a dominant influence would escape that influence.

Johnson did not seem to hold that representative government or a balance of powers is a check on political rulers. He acknowledged and lamented, however, the reality of tyranny by political rulers:

That the institutions of government owe their original, like other human actions, to the desire of happiness, is not to be denied; nor is it less generally allowed, that they have been perverted to very different ends from those which they were intended to promote. This is a truth, which it would be very superfluous to prove by authorities, or illustrate by examples. Every page of history, whether sacred or profane, will furnish us abundantly with instances of rulers that have deviated from justice, and subjects that have forgotten their allegiance; of nations ruined by the tyranny of governours, and of governours overborne by the madness of the populace (249).⁴

Johnson perceived the necessity of a

respectful reciprocity between rulers and citizens, and thus excoriated both tyranny and anarchy, each of which was located at the extreme end of the pole of human government:

Thus have slavery and licentiousness succeeded one another, and anarchy and despotick power alternately prevailed.... Nor have communities suffered more, when they were exposed to the passions and caprices of one man, however cruel, ambitious, or insolent, than when all restraint has been taken off the actions of men by publick confusions, and every one left at full liberty to indulge his own desires, and comply without fear of punishment, with his wildest imaginations (250).

While he was not interested in the niceties of the checks and balances of representative government, Johnson assumed that political leaders concerned more with their obligation than the promotion of their own interests would observe the ministerial function of their office, and he recognized "how much it is the duty of those in authority to promote the happiness of the people" (251). In fact, the extent to which he perceives the relation between religion and politics is evinced in his employment of the term *magistrate* to refer to civil rulers, a patently obsolete usage to our own ears in an age bent on widening the barrier between religion and public life (274). It is primarily the interests of the citizenry, and not their own, that should occupy the discharge of their office.

Johnson recognizes prevention and punishment of evil as the chief roles of the civil magistrate: "That the end of governments is the suppression, or as it is here expressed [in Proverbs 20:8] the dissipation of evil, and that evil is only to be suppressed or dissipated by vigilance is universally admitted..." (275). The identification of the principal evil that government is instituted to prevent and punish as the molestation of individual prop-

erty (252) shows Johnson's high regard for that institution, which he links with freedom:

That established property and inviolable freedom are the greatest political felicities, no man can be supposed likely to deny. To depend on the will of another, to labour for that, of which arbitrary power can prohibit the enjoyment, is the state to which the want of reason has subjected the brute. To be happy we must know our own rights; and we must know them to be safe (254).

The magistrate's "authority checks the progress of vice, and assists the advancement of virtue, restrains the violence of the oppressor, and asserts the cause of the injured" (253). Law is the means of implementing this ministerial authority: "No man knows any one, except himself, whom he judges fit to be set free from the coercion of laws, and to be abandoned entirely to his own choice. By this consideration have all civilized nations been induced to the enactments of penal laws, laws by which every man's danger becomes every man's safety, and by which, though all are restrained, yet all are benefitted" (250). A chief theme of sermon 26, though, is that law must be equitable: if justice is to be preserved, punishments must be commensurate with crimes.

Johnson was far from holding the Rousseauian—and modern liberal—tenet that human institutions are the root of societal evil. All to the contrary, he asserted that the source of evil is the human heart. In fact, the motivation for citizens to submit themselves willingly to civil law is the awareness of human sinfulness:

As all government is power exerted by few upon many, it is apparent, that nations cannot be governed but by their own consent. The first duty therefore of subjects is obedience to the laws; such

obedience as is the effect, not of compulsion, but of reverence, such as arises from a conviction of the instability of human virtue, and of the necessity of some coercive power, which may restrain the exorbitancies of passion, and check the career of natural desires (258, 259).

Johnson avers, nonetheless, that the fulfillment of the role of the civil government in securing property, confirming liberty, and extending commerce is insufficient to assure individual happiness. Against the secularization of what we term nowadays "democratic capitalism," he concludes that virtue must buttress freedom: "Liberty, if not regulated by virtue, can be only license to do evil; and property, if not virtuously enjoyed, can only corrupt the possessor, and give him the power to injure others. Trade may make us rich; but riches, without goodness, cannot make us happy" (254).

He is intent, indeed, to highlight the ineptitude of civil government and positive legislation to produce a just and harmonious society apart from religion:

In political, as well as natural disorders, the great error of those who commonly undertake, either cure or preservation, is, that they rest in second causes, without extending their search to the remote and original sources of evil. They therefore obviate the immediate evil, but leave the destructive principle to operate again; and have their work for ever to begin, like the husbandman who mows down the heads of noisome weeds, instead of pulling up the roots.... The only uniform and perpetual cause of publick happiness is publick virtue. The effects of all other things which are considered as advantages, will be found causal and transitory (253).

Positive legislation is necessary to restrain overt evil but powerless to ensure a just society:

Human laws, however honestly instituted, or however vigorously enforced, must be

limited in their effect, partly by our ignorance, and partly by our weakness. Daily experiences may convince us, that all the avenues by which injury and oppression may break in upon life, cannot be guarded by positive prohibitions. Every man sees, and every man feels, evils, which no law can punish. And not only will there always remain possibilities of guilt, which legislative foresight cannot discover, but the laws will be often violated by wicked men, whose subtlety eludes detection, and whom therefore vindictive justice cannot bring within the reaches of punishment (256)... [T]he best laws may strive in vain against radicated [deeply rooted] wickedness (258).

Positive legislation is only partially successful, for it cannot examine or alter the state of the human heart.

There is a solution to the impotence of civil government and positive legislation: "These deficiencies in civil life can be supplied only by religion" (256). Accordingly,

[T]he first duty of a governour is to diffuse through the community a spirit of religion, to endeavor that a sense of divine authority should prevail in all orders of men, and that the laws should be obeyed, in subordination to the universal and unchangeable edicts of the Creatour and Ruler of the world (256, 257).

Even if individual freedom and economic prosperity could engender happiness and satisfaction, Johnson demonstrates that civil government would be unfit to ensure them:

Let us, however, suppose that these external goods have power which wisdom cannot believe, and which experience never could confirm; let us suppose that riches and liberty could make us happy. It then remains to be considered, how riches and liberty can be secured. To this the politician has a ready answer, that they are to be secured by laws wisely formed, and vigorously executed. But, as laws can

be made only by a small part of an extensive empire, and must be executed by a part yet far smaller, what shall protect us against the laws themselves? And how shall we be certain, that they shall not be made without regard to the publick good, or shall not be perverted to oppression by the ministers of justice (254, 255)?... Thus, in all human affairs, when prudence and industry have done their utmost, the work is left to be compleated by superior agency; and in the security of peace, and stability of possession, our policy must at last call for help upon religion (256).

Nonetheless, the magistrate has at his disposal means of eradicating many of the effects of evil, which foster additional evil. Johnson therefore urges the magistrate to destroy houses of vice, drunkenness, and prostitution: "Those houses are the pitfalls of our youth, from which those that are once trepaned into them rarely escape, [sic] they ought to be demolished as the dens of savages that prey upon mankind, and he that shall contribute to suppress them will have the satisfaction of breaking the most fatal snares of vice.... If the weeds are to be extirpated from the fields of society, let not our governours be satisfied with lopping the shoots, let them penetrate to idleness the root of vice, and remove the soil in which it chiefly flourishes" (284, 285).

Are the sentiments expressed in Johnson's sermons, by an admittedly prejudiced man in a prodemocratic, preindustrial, and pretechnological age, of any relevance to us moderns on the verge a new millennium? In response we may recall the comment by C. S. Lewis, in his introduction to a new edition of Athanasius's *The Incarnation of the Word of God*:

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our

own period.... Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.⁵

We know, indeed, the mistakes of Johnson's age (have they not been trumpeted in our hearing for nearly two centuries?): religious and political oppression, social injustice, and enforced inequality. We are less inclined to acknowledge the mistakes of our own age, which Johnson would clearly have observed and to which his writings provide almost prescient witness.

For instance, Johnson knew, as many in our antinomian age do not, that unlimited individual freedom is as pernicious as unlimited governmental authority. Our democratic moderns grasp the dangers inherent in the consolidation of power in civil government and incessantly remind us of the tyrannies of Johnson's age as representative of that consolidation of power. They are less likely, however, to perceive the dangers posed by the consolidation of power in the hands of an unrestrained and, especially, irreligious, populace. The scourge of state tyranny is rivalled only by that of social anarchy, fueled by high-sounding theories of human rights unaccompanied by prudent recognition of human responsibility.

Johnson, too, saw that the deepest

problems of human society derive from the depravity of the human heart. The prime tenet of Enlightenment anthropology and consequently liberal social theory is that unjust social structures must be dismantled to eradicate human misery. Johnson held just the opposite view: it is the human condition itself that generates unjust social practices and must be tempered (it can never be eradicated) by the faithful practice of virtue springing from Christianity. A society without virtue is an evil society, no matter how it may conform to abstract patterns of egalitarianism and human justice.

It follows then, according to Johnson, that civil government cannot do everything. It cannot even do the main things. It can secure property against molestation. It can protect and promote measured individual freedom. It can encourage virtue. But it cannot produce human happiness or satisfaction, both of which are effects of individual virtue. Virtue, in turn, is the province of religion, specifically orthodox Christianity. Johnson would detect in modern womb-to-tomb government an alternative religion. While Johnson constantly urged charity and benevolence,⁶

he held the individual, not the state, responsible for charitable action. Society poses many problems, but religion and the virtue it engenders, not government, must solve most of them. Government is not suited to religious ends. It can foster—but never replace—religion. Indeed, without religion, it cannot be successful. A religious void, moreover, threatens government itself, for religion is the safeguard against unjust and tyrannical laws. Far from the contempo-



rary sentiment that religion exists as functional to government and society, Johnson believed that society and government cannot exist without religion.

Johnson urges that it is in the interests of civil government to encourage ordered religious practice. Devotees of modern democracy would not eagerly hear this suggestion. The wall separating church and state—by which they increasingly mean separating the state from *religion*—is today inviolate. It has perhaps not occurred to them that there may be a connection between the most acute problems of modern society they lament and their refusal to accord religion a place in public life. Johnson was less naïve. He held it was in the interests of government to foster religion, and as a good Church of England man supported the state church. To those who object that state religion is an imposition on individual freedom, Johnson replies that the effects of a disestablishment of religion are more baneful than those of a limitation of individual freedom.

Johnson knew that while government cannot produce happiness, it can pre-

vent evil. Therefore he saw it in the interest of the state to uproot obvious moral blights. This today means today pornography and other public vice. Johnson (and no doubt the framers of our own Constitution) would find not merely crass but also pernicious the modern interpretation of the First Amendment to protect pornography and blasphemy. Contrarily, Johnson would encourage the suppression of both, since they rip at the very fabric of a virtuous society. The magistrate should indeed secure freedom, but not free actions that will eventually undermine society.

This vision of politics undergirded by religion is anathema, of course, to secular moderns, both liberal and libertarian, the former of whose political goal is absolute egalitarian justice and the latter of whose political ideal is maximum individual freedom. Both cannot conceive what Johnson saw so clearly—all the equality and freedom in the world are for naught if they are shorn of virtue, which is spawned by religion.

For Johnson, impiety is the most dangerous social crime of all.

1. Donald J. Greene, "Introduction," in Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed., Donald J. Greene, Vol. 10, *Political Writings* (New Haven, 1977), xiii-xxxv. 2. For discussion and evaluation of Johnson's sermons, see James Gray, *Johnson's Sermons: A Study* (Oxford, 1972); J. H. Hagstrum, "The Sermons of Samuel Johnson," *Modern Philology*, February, 1943, 255-266; Thomas George Kass, "Samuel Johnson's *Sermons*: Consolations for the Vacuity of Life," Ph. D. dissertation, Loyola University of Chicago, 1988; Jordan P. Richman, "The Political Sermons of Johnson and Swift," *New Rambler*, 110:27-41; Peter Andrew Sandlin, "The Soteriology of Samuel Johnson," M. A. dissertation, University of South Africa, 1993; Will-

iam R. Siebenschuh, "On the Locus of Faith in Johnson's Sermons," *Studies in Burke and His Time*, Spring, 1976, 103-117. 3. James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (Chicago, 1952), 14. 4. Samuel Johnson, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed., Jean Hagstrum and James Gray, Vol. xiv, *Sermons* (New Haven, 1978). Page numbers for all citations from or references to the sermons appear in the text in parenthesis at the conclusion of the citation or reference. 5. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, 1970), 202. Emphasis in original. 6. See Maurice Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (Madison, 1964), 101 ff.

Edmund Burke on Manners

Ian Crowe

IT TOOK EDMUND BURKE a very little time to decide that French Revolutionary philosophy posed a massive threat to civilization and social stability throughout Europe. By the end of his life, eight years after the storming of the Bastille, his fears of Jacobin contagion had led him to ask for a secret grave, removed from his family sepulchre and hidden from those—the English Jacobins—who would plunder the lead from tombs for bullets to assassinate the living. In 1796 he wrote: "...out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man." He demanded nothing short of a war of extermination against this "armed doctrine."

It is somewhat surprising, then, to find that this enormous threat brought out Burke's most urgent defense of an aspect of civilization as trivial as "manners." Of course, the very fact that we consider manners "trivial" was all part of the problem from the start, as far as Burke was concerned, and he felt driven to state his case unambiguously in his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796):

"Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend." How can this apparent inversion of common sense be justified?

Manners are clearly not the same as laws. They are generally unwritten (unless we are talking about *ritual*), and they lack the regular, codified sanctions that support institutes and decrees. However, they have a similar function: in our small social communities and informal relationships they lay down expectations of behavior that facilitate the smooth-running and therefore expedite the purpose of these various bodies from the nuclear family to the shopping mall. These very circumstances which make sense of our manners mean that they cannot be constituted and implemented like laws and they should not; but we commit a serious mistake if we allow the institutionalized power of the latter to diminish our respect for the former. It is the very superficial weakness of manners that actually constitutes their crucial importance in our lives.

There are two further points of definition to note here. First, Burke points out, manners are always with us and, in their nature, they are quickly adaptable to changing circumstances in a way that written laws can never be, however firm or enthusiastic the backing for those laws might be. The very strength of

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