The Catholicism of Edmund Burke
Assessing recent scholarly discussions over the contested
Catholic influence on Burke
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Abstract

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This essay studies recent scholarly debates over Edmund Burke’s (1729/30-1797) relation to the Roman Catholic faith. In this essay the main arguments and considerations that have been presented in Burke scholarship since the 1990s are presented and assessed. In the light of the contemporary caricaturing of Burke as a crypto-Papist in the 18th century, and the continued debate in recent scholarship over how close Burke stood to the Roman Catholic faith, this study aims to understand what can be said about Burke’s thought as it has been presented by recent scholars. The main question posed in this essay is whether Catholicism is essential to understand Burke, and therefore a correct understanding of Burke not being possible without taking this aspect into account. The question is analysed by studying to what extent recent scholars argue for Catholicism being essential and necessary to understand Burke’s life and thought.

Keywords: Edmund Burke, Catholicism, Providence, Jacobitism, Thomism
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Introduction

Edmund Burke’s (1729/30-1797) thought has for a long time been a cause of debate among scholars. What drove the politician and pamphleteer to action? What were his sources of inspiration and why did he act the way he did? It has been suggested that Burke was, in fact and amongst other things: a liberal, a natural law theorist verging on a Thomist, and the founding father of conservatism. Interest in his influences has recently resurfaced in the form of a Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke (2012) and a biography by the UK Parliamentarian Jesse Norman (2013). As the ‘father of conservatism’, his role in contemporary conservative scholarship and debate is vital. Conservatism is, if not an ideology, at least a system of thought and/or an attitude, to which Burke’s thinking has served to influence the internal conservative discourse, a discourse that in turn aims to understand and shape society. A part of the discussion around Burke’s thinking has centred on his religious affiliation. In other words, Burke’s statement that his own ‘particular religious sentiments are not of much importance to anyone but myself’\(^1\), was a severe understatement.

This study will look at the writings on Edmund Burke in relation to Catholicism, in particular in recent scholarship. In order to fully understand Burke’s thinking - it will be argued - one has to at least take into consideration his connection to Catholicism. The object of study is therefore what others have said of Burke’s relation to the Catholic faith. Many studies have touched upon Burke and Catholicism, and therefore only a few writers have been selected for this study. The accusation of Burke being a Catholic was widespread during his lifetime, and some examples of this will be given, but what is of particular interest here is how the discussion on Burke and Catholicism has looked like in recent scholarship. By recent scholarship I mean primarily scholarship that has been published since the 1990s, but will also draw on wider 20\(^\text{th}\) century scholarship. Connor Cruise O’Brien published his biography of Edmund Burke, The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke in 1992, and it has set the tone for recent arguments around Burke and Catholicism, therefore a delimitation has been made here for our purposes, starting with O’Brien’s biography.

In order to better understand the relevance of this study, a few things must initially be pointed out. Firstly, we are dealing with a subject that has as its main protagonist a politician who was active in the 18th century. During this period, religion was far more important in the daily lives of the majority of the politicians in Britain. This will be evident by examples such as common references to the Bible in political pamphlets, the controversy surrounding David Hume’s publications denouncing the possibility of miracles, and to emphasize our study; the use Burke’s political opponents made of rumours of his secret Catholicism. It is evidenced by statistics estimating that in the 1760s 93.6% of people in England and Wales were ‘nominal Anglicans.’ As a comparison, Roman Catholics made up 1.1%. Further, religion is a motivating force in the lives of those who take their beliefs seriously, even in the political life. This is once again evident by politicians of the time making use of religious scripture to strengthen their arguments. It might not be the sole or principle motivating force for a historical actor, but this aspect should at least be taken into consideration if we want to take their own words seriously. Thirdly, the Whig party was heavily composed of members loyal to the Church of England, and therefore Burke’s Catholic ties where suspicious not only to his opponents, but also to his fellow faction members. Fourthly, scholars have since shortly after Burke’s death, up until the present day, interested themselves at least partially in the religious affiliation of, and the anti-Catholic rhetoric against Burke. It is these recent debates we will be assessing in this essay. It is also the case that Burke might have been more affected by religious considerations than he himself thought. Scholarship in the cold light of history can see surrounding contexts, which Burke was unaware of. Thus, the religious context of Burke is a relevant topic to study. A quick glance at Burke’s writing and letters tells us that he was prone to quoting Scripture, and a catalogue of his private library shows that Burke owned at least two Bibles, and commentary on Scripture, as well as classical works of theology.

The purpose of this essay is to assess the scholarly debate over Burke’s relation to Catholicism, based on the reading of modern scholarship. It will also have the wider purpose of looking at how religion can be argued to affect political thinking. Moreover, it will look at how family relations and ancestry can be seen as significant for political considerations. Burke is particularly interesting as he firmly believed in religion, society and family, as the fundamentals to life, and therefore the influence of these aspects on his own life will be

studied with a particular focus on how they relate to Catholicism. Recent scholarship states that Burke is ‘one of the most important figures in the history of modern political thought,’ and also that Burke was the ‘visionary who invented modern politics.’ Consequently, this study will also study views on the relationship between Catholicism and modern politics through the person of Edmund Burke. The main question posed by this paper is: was Catholicism essential in Burke’s life and thought? This will be studied through the specific question of; how have recent scholars assessed whether Catholicism is essential to fully understand Edmund Burke?

Since we are dealing with Burke’s influences, and the shaping of his mind, this essay will be more focused on the interpretation of his early and formative years. The argument over how Catholicism has played a role in Burke’s thinking often comes down to how one views his background, and this study is therefore not an analysis of Burke’s rhetoric during, for example, his debates concerning the emancipation of Irish Catholics. Instead, this essay reconstructs the modern debate between the key actors who have been identified by me as having contributed to the debate over whether Catholicism is essential or not to understand Burke. The scholars we will be looking at refer to Burke’s biography, therefore this study will consequently be concerned with biography as well, and focus primarily on the person Edmund Burke, his thinking being an unavoidable part of his being. This study will also draw on the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions, in order to assess what scholars assert in relation to Burke and Catholicism. A necessary condition would imply that Burke has to be understood in the light of his Catholic influences. Sufficient reasons would constitute Catholicism being one explanatory factor for Burke’s thinking, or in other words, Catholicism is sufficient for understanding Burke, but not essential. These are analytical concepts I have employed to make the analysis clearer. They are commonly used while referring to causality, but are here used to clarify scholarly understanding of Edmund Burke. In discussing Burke’s relation to Catholicism, there are three possible conclusions; either Catholicism is crucial to understand Burke, it helps to understand Burke, or, it is irrelevant.

This essay will look at two categories that have been identified by me as areas where there has been debate between scholars; Part I being Burke’s family and educational background,


*5 Norman, Jesse, Edmund Burke: The Visionary Who Invented Modern Politics, (William Collins, 2013).*
and Part II being sources for his later political thought. The sources refer back to Burke’s background, as that is where some scholars have identified his Catholic influences. These categories are then divided into smaller cases, the first including: Burke’s father; Burke’s mother and the Nagle family ancestry; and Burke’s early education. The second category includes: discussions on Burke’s ‘providential view of politics’; Burke and Anglican or Catholic conservatism; Burke and Quakerism, and finally Burke and the natural law.

The material for this study will be recent scholarship on Burke, in particular as it relates to his connection to Catholicism. The field of research will therefore also be our prime material. Apart from this primary material, older scholarship will be used in order to contrast and compare, as well as specific cases being illustrated by the contemporary polemics against Burke. Works by Burke will also be used as a reference, in order to compare scholarship with Burke’s own words. There will be four levels of material; Burke’s own words, contemporary polemics against Burke, early scholarship on Burke, and finally recent scholarship on Burke. Of these four, the latter is our primary material. Most of the scholarship on Burke has been led by British, Irish and American scholars, but we will also mention some Swedish scholarship briefly. The material has been narrowed down in the research process after having searched several research-databases, journals, biographies and their recommended further reading included in them, as well as with guidance from the Swedish Burke scholar Carl Johan Ljungberg. The title of this essay plays on Ljungberg’s doctoral thesis on The Liberalism of Edmund Burke: The Idea of the Constitution (1983), placing it in the research of Burke’s thought, and alludes to scholarly discussions over Burke and his alleged Catholicism.

Following Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School of Intellectual History, I take each writer as an actor in a given time, giving a view of Burke and Catholicism in their writings that are addressed to a certain intended audience. An 18th century text by a critic of Burke and a contemporary scholarly article will naturally have different intended readers, and keeping this in mind will help us to better understand what each writer is doing in writing about Burke and Catholicism. Due to substantial differences of time and context between the various texts a comparison will inevitably be subject to the limits that such a difference presents. That being said, a comparison is not without meaning as long as we are aware of contextual discrepancies.6

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Analysis

As we discussed in the introduction, religious influence was more common in the 18th century, and it can affect a historical actor's life. Therefore we will first look at Burke's background, which has been the focus of many studies that relate to Burke and Catholicism. The most significant and much contested contribution to the debate over the Catholic influence on Burke came in the 1990s when the Irish politician, Connor Cruise O'Brien, published his thematic biography of Edmund Burke. Although it is not a scholarly study of Burke by a historian or political scientist, the prominent role it has played in recent scholarship makes it a study of considerable interest to this essay. We will start with his work, especially since recent scholarship often refers to his work as we will see.

Burke’s Father

The section in O’Brien’s biography that will concern us initially is his first chapter, dealing with Burke’s Irish background. He starts with a long discussion over whether Edmund’s father, who we know was called Richard Burke, is the same Richard Burke who appears in the Convert Rolls, showing him to be a legal practitioner who conformed to the Protestant profession of faith. Burke’s father in particular is of interest. O’Brien goes to great length to try to show that Richard Burke was the same man who had converted from the Catholic, to the Protestant faith. Once having established that, he can make the claim that Burke had a thoroughly Catholic childhood that made a great impression on him and his thinking. Indeed, an essential impression. But a noble intention does not equal or supersede historical fact. What are the consequences for understanding Edmund Burke if this identification is correct? Michael W. McConnell has pointed out one of O’Brien’s central claims in a study of Burke’s view of ‘Establishment and Toleration’, as he cites O’Brien’s argument that Burke was quite possibly concerned with emancipation in Ireland as well as fighting the abuse of power in America, India and France, due to his ‘father’s having conformed out, of fear’ and ‘the realisation that his own achievement would be based on the consequences of that act of conforming’. 7 This argument will obviously depend much on whether the Richard Burke one believes to have been Burke’s father actually was the Catholic who conformed to the established church in order to practice law. If it is true, the argument seems like a plausible explanation for Burke’s actions. Catholic emancipation concerned him from very early in his

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career, and continued to be the question that occupied him the most throughout his life, always using toleration as a central argument. The Parliamentarian Jesse Norman uses a similar line of argument for the Catholic background being an explanatory factor in his recent biography. Whether it was Burke’s father, or some ancestor further back in time that conformed, it is evident that Burke was brought up in a mixed marriage, writes Norman. One potential factor, then, as to why Burke developed such an extraordinary moral imagination, was able to reach out at once in all directions and could comprehend aristocrat and revolutionary, Catholic and Protestant, underclass and hierarchy alike, argues Norman, is that Burke and his brothers Garrett and Richard had been brought up as Protestants, while his sister had been brought up as a Catholic. Protestantism was seen as belonging to the city and the future, and Catholicism symbolised rural life and the past. These divided loyalties, in Norman’s view, account for Burke’s all-round comprehension of society.\(^8\)

What is more, O’Brien links the Richard Burke, thought to be Edmund’s father, to the legal defence of one James Cotter, (1689-1720) of Ballinsperry, who was a Jacobite. We will note later on that this claim is also contested. This ancestral connection, if influential on Burke, would be significant for his later career as a Whig politician. The Whig faction was as a whole committed to the Church of England. Russell Kirk has written that Burke’s standing as a Whig naturally meant that he had accepted and approved the occurrences of 1688 and 1689, where James II had lost the throne. It would not have been suitable for him as a Whig to fail to show appraisal for the so-called Glorious Revolution, the Whig interpretation of the event being the creed of his political faction, argues Kirk. It would have meant further suspicion in regard to his actual political sympathies, since Irish Tories are found among his ancestors, and his mother, sister and wife were Catholics.\(^9\)

The *Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, published in 2012 includes a piece by Ian McBride on Burke and Ireland. McBride writes that O’Brien sketched the first image of Burke as a repressed Jacobite, and made two contentious claims, both of which we have already mentioned; Edmund’s father being a Catholic attorney who conformed to the Church of Ireland, and that the conversion followed his involvement in the case of Sir James Cotter. ‘Without endorsing the more extreme claims that have been made for the priority of Burke’s


Irish commitments,’ writes McBride about his essay, ‘it reasserts the importance of the link between Burke’s denunciation of the Irish penal codes and his response to both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.’ We see, then, that McBride acknowledges the importance of Catholicism and the commitment to the Catholics from Burke, but not as an essential reading of Burke’s political thinking. McBride also mentions the claim made by O’Brien that the ‘apostasy’ of Richard Burke accounts for Edmund’s later political involvement, a claim McBride seems to disagree with. He writes that O’Brien was a public intellectual who was a brilliant polemicist, self-righteous and ‘unusually prone to conspiracy theories’. Unfortunately, he asserts, no substantial evidence exists for O’Brien’s speculations as to whether Richard Burke was indeed the legal practitioner and convert. In one telling passage, he says that O’Brien regarded himself as a Burkean, but more appropriately Burke, as he appears in The Great Melody, emerges as an ‘ardent ‘O’Brienite’.

He does go to great length in asserting that Burke was moved by his sentiments for the Catholic Church, but that it does not suggest that Burke was ‘as near as makes no difference – an Irish Catholic’.

Lending the language of philosophy referred to in the introduction, McBride seems to suggest Catholicism is sufficient to understand Burke’s political reasoning, but not necessary. Or to put it in other words, it does help to explain Burke, but it is not an essential component. For O’Brien, on the other hand, Catholicism seems like a necessary condition for a correct understanding of Burke.

Since O’Brien’s argument builds so heavily on biography, it is worth looking at other recent scholarship as a comparison. For this we can turn to F. P. Lock’s (1998) and Jesse Norman’s (2013) biographies. About Richard Burke being a convert (recall that O’Brien argues this sets the stage for Burke’s later political engagement in the cause of toleration), Lock has a few things to say. He does admit that ‘If correct, this identification would have important biographical implications.’ Burke's undoubted Catholic proclivities would be doubly rooted in his ancestry. The idea that Burke was a crypto-papist, a charge made so often in his lifetime by his enemies, would gain more credence.’ But he says there is little evidence for this, as both ‘Burke’ and ‘Richard’ were common names at the time. Had Edmund’s father indeed

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11 McBride, p. 183.
12 McBride, p. 183.
13 McBride, p. 192.
15 Lock, Edmund Burke, p. 5.
have been a convert, Lock argues his opponents would surely have mentioned it. The connection between a Richard Burke and James Cotter is intriguing, says Lock, but once again we are left with too little evidence to make a statement that could have implications for the reading of Burke.16

One other recent biography is Elizabeth Lambert’s *Edmund Burke of Beaconsfield*, in which she states that Richard Burke conformed on the 13th of March 1722, but she disagrees with O’Brien’s assessment that he conformed out of fear.17 Lambert also mentions a story that apparently would confirm that Edmund was also a believing Catholic, based on one man by the name of Bowen telling Edmund’s father that he had converted to Catholicism. This story, however, does not prove conclusively that Edmund became a Catholic.18

**Burke’s Mother and the Nagle Family**

O’Brien goes on to discuss Edmund’s place of birth, and his parent’s ancestry. His mother was Mary Nagle, of the Irish Nagle family, known to be Catholics and Jacobites. By mentioning this, O’Brien tries to explain Burke’s ancestral ties to Jacobitism, the movement that declared the legitimate claim to the throne of the descendants of James II, England’s last Catholic King. One of these ties was Richard Nagle, who had been Attorney General to James II, and also Speaker of the Irish House of Commons. O’Brien does admit that it would be a mistake to assume all the Nagles subscribed to Richard Nagle’s view’s, since Stuart allegiance was more a Scottish, rather than Irish affair. Why would it matter if Burke had any Jacobite ties? For one, as was mentioned earlier, because the Whigs were based on the opposing side of the Glorious Revolution, and secondly for O’Brien this would further establish Burke’s Catholic background and family allegiances.

What does some other scholarship say about these ancestral ties? F. P. Lock writes that the Nagles were ‘Catholics and Jacobites’.19 Edmund’s grandfather, for example, is said by Lock to have fought for James II. Jesse Norman also makes the assertion that the Nagles ‘were not

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18 Lambert, p. 33.
merely Catholics but Jacobites. Whatever the full Nagle relation to Jacobitism may be, there was clearly a connection.

The ancestral ties are not new and exclusive to recent scholarship in identifying Burke’s Catholic influence. This fact was mentioned already in his lifetime in polemics. In the 19th century it was used in a review of *A History of the Penal Laws against the Irish Catholics, from the Treaty of Limerick to the Union* by Henry Parnell in the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, a journal in clear support of reform of the ‘Catholic Question’ although surprisingly with a mainly Protestant readership. The reviewer by the name ‘X,’ compared Mr. Parnell’s contribution to the debate over the Penal Laws in Ireland against Catholics with Burk’s contribution. The relevant section is worth quoting at length, as it seems indicative of this reviewers view on Burke’s religion:

> It would be much more candid for a good Protestant, as we take Mr. Parnell to be, and less like a party pamphleteer to place himself in the critical situation of the Protestants, at those truly perilous times; a translation from fancy and feeling, which, from hereditary, perhaps personal attachments, Mr. Burke was not capable of making.

It seems as if a judgement is passed on Burke by the reviewer, claiming that Burke would be unable to fully comprehend the situation people found themselves in, because of ‘hereditary, perhaps personal attachments’. Quentin Skinner, following the philosopher of language John L. Austin, speaks of ‘illocutionary acts’ or ‘force,’ which is the actor’s intention in making an utterance. We know, as mentioned above, that Burke’s family was to a large extent Catholic, and the reviewer seems to see this as a handicap. The last sentence can therefore be seen as an assertion or supposition of Burke’s Catholic inclination, used to criticise his credibility. It could of course be a mere statement of an alleged impediment on Burke’s side in trying to understand the Protestants, but the general sentiment of the review is not in Burke’s favour. This review was published just over a decade after Burke’s death.

The recent Burke biographer, Richard Bourke, points out that Burke wrote that he was not ‘deficient in natural affection to [his] kindred’, and that Burke had ties to Jacobites. None of the biographical considerations are according to Bourke indicative of any crypto-Catholicism. He argues that those who try to find explanations to Burke’s literary output by reference, to

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20 Norman, p. 11.
his origins have been tempted to ‘unsupportable extremes’, and that such psychobiographical arguments are prone to basic historical error. Firstly they assume that it is possible to determine the character of belief only by referring to the social context, and secondly they suppose that ‘a distinct and underlying set of attitudes can be surmised beneath the surface of expressed thought’. In particular, Bourke turns to O’Brien, claiming that he substitutes his own ideas for those of his subject of study, namely Burke. We have seen this claim earlier in McBride. It should be pointed out that McBride writes in the Cambridge Companion and Bourke is at Queen Mary University, both institutions being known to be of similar methodological persuasions, following the work of Quentin Skinner. This is therefore one plausible explanation. A third point Bourke mentions is that an approach based on psychology presumes that the social context one is studying is altogether more transparent than it is, meaning that just because someone has converted, it does not imply a distinctive convert ‘interest group bearing a determinate political complexion.’ For example, returning to Burke’s father briefly, he says ‘conformity does not predict political principles’. With that statement, O’Brien and McConnell’s claim that Burke’s father’s conformity explains his later political action is refuted. It is a persuasive argument, but conformity not predicting political principles does not exclude conformity affecting later political considerations. What I would contend, is that even if Richard Burke did conform and it affected Edmund’s worldview having both Protestantism and Catholicism around him as a child as Norman points out, it is not persuasive to claim Burke’s entire political career was formed by this act of conformity.

**Burke’s Education**

Is education, besides the family and ancestral background mentioned, a possible necessary explanatory factor for Burke’s later thought? O’Brien suggests that it is. He states that Edmund’s mother, Mary Burke, would likely have wanted her son to get the basics of a Catholic education, adding ‘indeed it would be extremely surprising if he had not privately baptized a Catholic over and above his public Anglican baptism’. Burke moved to Ballyduff and received an education at a hedge school; a Catholic institution in their general ethos, and the only place a Catholic could get an education. Since they were illegal the education was conducted outside in the open air. O’Brien addresses the influence this
education might have had on Burke when he mentions that Owen Dudley Edwards of Edinburgh University held that some of Burke’s education might have been by a Franciscan or a Dominican friar, and this would have affected his thinking. O’Brien adds that pursuing this question would lead to too much speculation, but states nevertheless ‘I wish the reader to be aware of the existence of such possibilities, with a bearing on the Burkean psyche’. The family background and education point towards Catholic influence on Burke, argues O’Brien while adding that it is possible that while at Ballyduff, Burke would have attended Mass with his Catholic uncle.

Not only McBride maintains a reserved attitude towards O’Brien’s biography, as we saw in the section on Burke’s father. F. P. Lock, in his essay on Burke and Religion for the anthology *An Imaginative Whig*, writes that O’Brien was the one who most vigorously advanced the idea that Burke was a crypto-Catholic. Moreover, O’Brien painted such a grand picture of the Catholic influences that a reader may well be excused for failing to observe how much of the work is ‘purely speculative’. For example, the statement that Burke went to a hedge school lacks evidence. Had he gone to such a school, the lesson he most likely would have learned would have been the association between ‘Roman Catholicism, poverty and underprivilege’. This is a direct response to Dudley Edmunds, who claimed Burke would have learned the ‘fear of damnation, associated with schism or apostasy’ and that this would in times of darkness, doubt, depression, and disorder rise high in the imagination. Of what relevance is the education to the identification of Catholicism as influential to Burke? If both the family background and the early education of Burke as claimed by O’Brien are false, O’Brien’s case for Catholic influences on Burke is looking increasingly dim. Lock writes that no modern scholar has claimed Burke as a Catholic, while there are some who have mentioned Burke’s Catholic proclivities. More importantly for Lock is that ‘no credible interpretation of Burke can ignore religion.’

Considering the hedge school, Lambert simply states that tradition holds that Burke went to a hedge school in the ruined Castle of Monanimy. While some of the issues raised and the discussion presented in Lambert’s work could serve to reinforce O’Brien’s argument, she

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27 O’Brien, p. 22.
29 O’Brien, p. 22.
31 Lambert, p. 25.
does not claim Catholicism is essential for an understanding of Burke herself. But she does admit that one of the facets of Burke’s search for identity could have been reconsideration of his religious faith. Consequently, religion plays a role in the shaping of a person's identity and intellectual life, but Lambert does not believe such a conversion took place for Burke.

Concerning Burke’s early education, we must focus on the debate over the Catholic ‘hedge school’ education of Burke. Lock stated in the article referred to earlier that this statement lacks evidence. In his biography of Burke, there is no mention of a hedge school when talking about Burke’s early schooling. Instead, Burke is likely to have learned to read from his mother, and he went to a ‘dame-school’ lead by an ill-tempered mistress, whose role was to teach young Burke the basics of reading and writing, and perhaps give some religious instruction as well. Norman on the other hand does mention the hedge school in Ballyduff as a place where Burke studied while he visited his cousins in the Blackwater Valley in County Cork. ‘The Valley,’ writes Norman, ‘was a beautiful country, which had made a profound impression on him; it may also have laid the foundations for his understandings of Gaelic culture, and his lifelong sympathy with the plight of the Irish Catholics under the penal laws’. Why does Norman associate the beautiful countryside with Burke’s later Catholic lifelong sympathy for Irish Catholics? Norman being a conservative, writing about the man who has become known as the founding father of conservatism, surely accounts in part for this quote. For conservatives the country, place and home, play a significant role. Conservatives believe people have an attachment to a place and can find inspiration in the lands that have slowly developed throughout the ages. This is apparent in the quote, where ‘beautiful country’ is associated with Burke’s later thinking. It is also typical of the conservative attitude towards family, where family plays a significant role in shaping the individual (something Norman himself touches upon where he deals with Burke as seeing the individual being a ‘social self’, formed by institutions, traditions and manners). Burke was spending time with cousins in a setting where he was likely to grow in understanding of Gaelic culture (through the country landscapes and the way of life), and Catholicism (through his Catholic cousins). Perhaps seeing his Catholic cousins being free in the Irish countryside, as opposed to later thinking of these cousins being barred from owning property of their own, is what Norman is referring to.

32 Norman, p. 12.
33 Norman, pp. 192-214.
Norman’s own affiliations are not uninteresting here, since they might shed light on why he writes what he writes about Burke. Both Norman and O’Brien are associated with political careers, while the other biographers of Burke that have been mentioned are scholars. Norman is, unlike O’Brien, not a Catholic, and therefore we might not assume he is biased when pointing out Catholic influences on Burke. O’Brien on the other hand goes at great length to show the Catholic and Irish background of Burke, without citing any sources as to Burke’s attendance of a hedge school. Norman mentions the hedge schools, probably following O’Brien, but once again we have no source. Thomas H. D. Mahoney, who on the other hand was a scholar, does mention the hedge school as a reviewer of his biography on Burke and Ireland notes. The source is, however, unclear. The most plausible explanation is that the statement that Burke went to a hedge school has been passed down through local tradition. As O’Brien wrote, this question can lead to much speculation, but he asks the reader to have this possibility in mind as it affects an understanding of Burke’s psyche. His source for Burke’s education was as mentioned Owen Dudley Edmonds from Edinburgh University, who claimed Burke must have learned about Catholicism. We will see later on that Burke did know a lot about Catholicism, but he might just as well have read Catholic theology later in life, as it is at least agreed that he had a good and well rounded understanding of Christianity. One scholar, for example, who has summarized a generation of Burke scholarship writes that: ‘There can be no doubt that Burke the politician and Burke the writer stood upon a firm ground of traditional Christian religion and morality humanized by a background of Catholic, Protestant, and Quaker influence’.  

Providential politics  

An obvious attempt to show Burke’s Catholic influence is found in a recent article, published in 2014 by Garrett Ward Sheldon. It is not an academic article, but appears in Modern Age, an American conservative magazine published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. It is interesting for this study, and the main arguments will be mentioned, precisely because it is so clearly intended to show the connection of Catholicism and Burke. It might also be added that although it is not a scholarly examination of Burke, the author is a Professor of Political Science, and what the author is in fact doing is contributing to the scholarly study of Burke by making such bold claims as those presented in the article. The article mentions Burke’s family  

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relations but makes the observation that most of Burke’s overtly pro-Catholic statements come from the time before and after he was in Parliament, when it would have been unwise for him to be too favourable to Catholics. One reason the author gives for Burke concealing any explicit Catholicism was that the Irish had learned to conceal their religion from the English for a hundred years.\(^{36}\)

One of Sheldon’s main arguments is that Burke based a lot of his politics on the political theology of St Augustine. Sheldon argues that it may have been the Irish Augustinian friars who kept the Church going in Ireland during the persecution that taught Burke the Augustinian worldview. One example of this mentioned by Sheldon is exemplified by Burke who says: “those rulers, who make complaints of the temper of their people, . . . ought rather to lament their own want of genius, which blinds them to the use of an instrument purposely put into their hands by Providence.”\(^{37}\) This, says Sheldon, is an example of Burke’s providential view of politics and history. The second Augustinian theme Sheldon identifies in Burke is the idea that God can bring good out of evil political events. This he enforces with the quote, “Providence, and a great minister who should imitate Providence, often gain their ends by means that seem most contrary to them.”\(^{38}\) Both these quotes come from an early work by Burke together with Will Burke from 1757 titled *An Account of the European Settlements in America*.

The theme of Burke and providential politics has been studied elsewhere, one example dating from 1987, and therefore just prior to our definition of recent scholarship, is found in the book by Francis Canavan, a Jesuit priest, on *Edmund Burk: Prescription and Providence*. Peter J. Stanlis reviewed the book in 1988, and he is also one example of an author who has written about the ‘theistic metaphysics’ behind Burke’s politics. In the review, Stanlis notes that Canavan has based his book on a reading of Burke that takes it starting point in Burke’s knowledge of Anglican theology.\(^{39}\) Nowhere in the review is Catholicism even mentioned, but instead it is asserted that Anglican Christianity provided Burke with an ontological view of the world. This is a prime example of two, or in this case several, authors studying the same thing (Burke and providence), but finding different sources as an explanation.

\(^{37}\) Sheldon, p. 18.
\(^{38}\) Sheldon, p. 20.
(Catholicism and Anglicanism). De Bruyn has argued that Burke’s reluctance to argue from first principles might help understand Burke’s disinclination to invoke theological or doctrinal tenets. However, for Burke the instinct for religion is a universal psychological fact that belongs to humans, and this implies for Burke an ‘underlying providential order that has ordained this state of things.’ For De Bruyn this is an example of natural theology that leaves little rooms for doctrinal disputes. In favour of this interpretation is Burke’s early work from the 1750s found in his notebook. In it there is a short article on religion, in which Burke argues that religion is natural to all humans.

Russell Kirk wrote one study on ‘Burke and Providence’, in 1961. In the article, Kirk makes claims that can shed more light on Burke. Roman Catholicism must have seemed a lost cause in the 18th century he says, and a century later one of Burke’s pupils made the claim that the Church seemed doomed. Kirk then states that ‘himself an Anglican, Burke had little to gain by his advocacy of Catholic emancipation, and considerable to lose even in the Whig party that was “invincibly suspicious of parsons.”’ So why would Burke devote himself to such a lost cause? Why, knowing that he had Catholic relations, would he risk his standing in the Whig faction? Kirk offers a potential answer when he says that he did so from a sense of justice and of tradition’s claims, and he thereby took upon himself the unpopular cause that only remotely was his own cause. The remoteness might very well be a reference to his Catholic ancestry. As Kirk says, Burke held that if mankind neglects the laws for human conduct that are made known through revelation, prescription and the study of history, ‘then a vengeful Providence may begin to operate.’ The removal of the penal laws was in no small measure thanks to Burke, and his determination to see the emancipation of Catholics occupied him in his later years more than his ‘crusade against the French Revolution’, writes Kirk citing Mahoney. It is obvious that Kirk has an admiration for Burke. Kirk was himself a convert to Catholicism, and has been accused of setting the tone for the discussion of Burke in America through his ‘apocalyptic populism’ and ‘crusade on behalf of his version of Burke’. Although Kirk raises the point that Burke did a lot for Catholicism, he never takes the step to claim it as an essential component in Burke’s thinking. He says Burke was an

41 Kirk, p. 182.
42 Kirk, p. 184.
44 Deane, p. 224.
Anglican, that he was active in a case that was remotely his, and in the essay cited here, Kirk describes Burke as an heir of Cicero and the old natural law tradition, rather than in the modern ‘rights of man’ sense: well versed in Christian doctrine, not an empiricist or irrationalist or pre-Hegelian, but a champion of Tradition. This comes close to the Catholic and High Anglican tradition, but Kirk does not emphasize Catholicism. And the article being from 1961, just before our main timeframe, serves to further show that a discussion of Burke and providence has been present for a long period in Burke-studies.

What lessons can be drawn from an understanding of this providential view? Although not providing conclusive proof of Burke’s Catholicism, it does tell us something important. Burke was not a fatalist or a determinist, as he believed in free will, that virtue cannot exist without liberty, and that our actions here on earth decide where we end up after death. This would exclude Calvinism or any other form of predetermination doctrine. Burke may have had a broad understanding of Christianity, as it has been pointed out, but it still had certain boundaries.

**Burke, Rome, and the Established Church**

Perhaps there is a synthesis between understanding Burke as an Anglican or as a Catholic. A study from 1958 by Thomas H. D. Mahoney could be of some initial help. In his study on ‘Edmund Burke and Rome’ for The Catholic Historical Review, Mahoney claims that Burke had very good knowledge of the Catholic faith. But, although it is understandable that Burke was often accused of being a Catholic, it is also recognised that he never became one himself. Instead, he stayed in the religion he had been brought up with after having read widely on Christianity, because it seemed to him the most reasonable thing to do, and the Church of England having been in communion with the Catholic Church gave some consolation to him, along with the fact that his Church retained many of the Catholic doctrines. Mahoney also points out that Burke’s nationalism played an important part, something I agree with; after all, as we shall see, Burke put Crown over the Supreme Pontiff as the authority of the Church.

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48 Mahoney, p. 425.
although he had great admiration for Pope Pius VI. Burke knew a lot about both Catholic and Anglican theology, yet stayed in the Anglican Church, possibly out of comfort rather than conviction. As the Swedish Burke scholar Carl Johan Ljungberg has pointed out, for Burke religion is true if it is in agreement with what the great majority of the Irish citizens have long believed.\(^{49}\) In other words, what Burke calls the prejudices of the time, or tradition, defines the significance of religion for society. I would amend the sentence to say that for Burke religion was beneficial to society if it was in agreement with tradition and truth, since he clearly identified Christianity as true, while emphasizing toleration of other faiths.

The last reflection, that tradition defined the social use of religion, is also found in the *Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, in an essay by Ian Harris on Burke and Religion. Harris touches upon Catholicism very briefly, and when he does it is in relation to what we are now discussing. Harris writes that Burke’s friendliness to the oppressed in Ireland may sound like he is an advocate for Roman Catholicism, ‘Yet one should not suppose that Burke endorsed this in its civil aspects.’ He goes on to quote Burke, who argued for Catholic clergy being controlled, since if they are not ‘restrained by the most austere subordination, [they] will become a Nuisance, a real publick Grievance of the heaviest kind in any Country that entertains them.’ This, writes Harris, means that Burke’s yardstick for judging the effects of religion on civil society ‘remained social benefit or the reverse.’\(^{50}\) Burke judges a religion — according to this reading of him — by the social benefits it brings through tradition. This would be more in line with an Anglican mentality, since religion is seen as an entirely private matter. But an even better explanation is that Burke held some sort of a natural theology referred to earlier. Canavan and Harris have appeared as being of the view that Catholicism is not a necessary or essential component to understand Burke’s thinking.

Following the claim that Burke’s pro-Catholic writing is found in his early and late life, Sheldon makes the case that Burke was often criticising Protestantism while cautiously arguing in favour of the Catholic faith. ‘The Catholic faith,’ writes Sheldon, ‘teachings, and culture, for Burke, advance morality, prosperity and social stability, and their suppression leads to immorality, poverty, and chaos’.\(^{51}\) It is interesting that Sheldon writes that for Burke Magna Carta had required the Church to be ‘free’ from the authority of the Monarch. The

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\(^{49}\) Ljungberg, Johan Carl, *Edmund Burke*, (SNS Förlag, No.34, 2006) p. 34.


\(^{51}\) Sheldon, p. 22.
laws denying various rights to Catholics are therefore unconstitutional, writes Sheldon. In 1869, J. B. Robertson, professor of Modern History and English Literature at the Catholic University of Dublin, published his *Lectures on the Life, Writings, and Times of Edmund Burke*. In this work, Robertson admits that Burke held many distinctively Protestant beliefs, such as the ecclesiastical supremacy of the Crown. On the whole, however, Robertson claims, paraphrasing Tertullian, that Burke may be called ‘anima naturaliter Catholica’, and that he at times came ‘very near to the threshold of the sanctuary of truth, and, under more favourable circumstances, would in all probability have received the grace to enter within it’. 52 What are we to think of this apparent contradiction? Either Burke was for the supremacy of the Crown over the Church, or he was not. Quentin Skinner has pointed out that one should not be concerned in the study of intellectual history with what he calls ‘the mythology of coherence.’ This means that the historian is attempting to find a logical and coherent reading of a given author, when it may just be the case that the subject one is studying in fact did change his mind. That could naturally be the case here. But this case is extra intriguing, since Sheldon claims Burke was more overtly Catholic in his early and later life. Sheldon cites Burke’s selected works as a source, and Robertson who made the claim that Burke maintained the authority of the Crown mentions it in passing. Sheldon also shows that Burke was highly critical of Henry VIII, the first monarch to be head of the Church of England. It could be the case that Burke was more inclined to the Catholic view in his early and later life, as Sheldon claims, and that his more Anglican view were presented during his time in Parliament. However, the cited work is from volume 4 of Burke’s Selected Works, edited by E. J. Payne, and this tells us that the quoted letter is from 1792, towards the end of Burke’s life, but when he was still in Parliament. It could also be the case that he simply held that for the Church of England the monarch should be the head, but that he should recognise that it was not always so, and should therefore succeed rights to his Catholic subjects. This seems to me the more plausible explanation. In addition to this, Burke held that it would be wrong for the Church of England to reject most of the doctrines of Catholicism that are not contrary to Anglicanism, and as stated previously, Mahoney claimed that Burke saw many of the doctrines of the Catholic Church in the Church of England. Sheldon also writes that the Catholicism of Burke would account for his views on ‘reform’ rather than ‘revolution’ or ‘innovation.’ They fit well in line with, and reflect the views of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Sheldon summarizes it as follows:

In sum, the problem with extreme, radical social change is not only that it tends to be violent and destructive, or even that it will not really improve social conditions (but in fact will make them worse); it is that such inordinate attempts to alter the prevailing culture stem from a prideful human presumption that man, rather than God’s providence, makes history.\(^\text{53}\)

Sheldon’s work is sure to provoke some readers, at the very least in the sense that it will lead them to take the proposition of Burke being influenced by Catholicism into consideration. What is Sheldon doing by writing the text that is now under discussion? He is turning to a conservative crowd, and may in a sense be said to be preaching to those who are already self-identified Burkean conservative aficionados. His somewhat provocative take may be explained by this fact, as a wish to bring a clear case for an already studied hypothesis. However interesting and compelling the case may be, there still seems to be some further clarification needed if the case for Catholicism being essential to Burke’s thinking is to be accepted.

**Burke, Quakerism and the critique of Reason**

The suggestion that Burke was influenced by Quakerism is, according to Steven P. Millies in his study on Burke and Quakerism, unexplored territory. We will not concern ourselves with the full argument presented by Millies on what influence Quakerism had on Burke, since our focus is on Burke’s relation to Catholicism. But it will serve as a contrast to the view of Burke as influenced by Catholicism, especially since Millies mentions Catholicism in his study. It will be noted that Millies states in the article that ‘there is much controversy in claiming Burke as a Catholic’,\(^\text{54}\) when discussing O’Brien’s work on Burke. Millies says that O’Brien has been unfair to Burke’s feelings about mystical or non-rational encounter with the divine, when he claims that Burke was distrustful of human nature and people who are too confident in their own virtue, which favours O’Brien’s reading of Burke as influenced by Catholicism.\(^\text{55}\) How does Millies assess Catholicism as an influence on Burke? A first point worth making is that Millies sees the reading of Burke as influenced by Catholicism as lacking as an interpretation, due to its exclusion of Burke’s understanding of non-rational encounters with the divine, which are common to the Quaker doctrine of the ‘Inner Light’. Be that as it may, O’Brien has already addressed the issue of Quakerism in his biography, when he points out that Burke wrote in his letter to the Quaker Richard Shackleton, that

\(^\text{53}\) Sheldon, p. 22.


\(^\text{55}\) Millies, p. 111.
I don’t like that part of your letter wherein you say you had the Testimonies of well doing in your Breast, whenever such motions rise again endeavour to suppress em, it is one of the Subtilest Strategems that the Enemy of mankind uses to delude us, that by lulling us into a false peace his conquest may be the easier [sic].

This, O’Brien argues, is a clear example of Burke’s ‘deposit’ of Catholic instruction at Ballyduff. It is also clear that Burke favoured a suppression of the passions in society, as he argues in his Reflections:

Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.

The essay by Millies and its initial claim that it is ‘controversial’ to claim Burke as a Catholic is not enforced by the actual study presented to the reader. If the strongest claim is that Burke was sceptical towards unaided reason, seeing enthusiasm as elevating and expanding our reasoning, then I am afraid the reader will be left unconvinced and feel that Quakerism and Burke has been ‘unexplored territory’ for a reason. Burke was sceptical to unaided reason, and Quakerism may be one explanatory factor, but the case can be equally made by reference to Catholic traditional teaching on the relationship between faith and reason. Indeed, it is for this reason that Mary Wollstonecraft criticised Edmund Burke. Whether it was essentially Quaker, Catholic, or other influences that led Burke to be sceptical towards unaided reason we might not know for sure, but to claim that Quakerism would be a more reliable source than Catholicism seems highly unlikely, or at least equally unlikely as an essential source of influence. Burke does, however, concern himself with the passions in his aesthetical work on the sublime and beautiful, but more precisely on how art and the aesthetic in general moves our passions. And indeed, he is once again concerned with reason’s insufficiency as a guide to public morality.

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56 O’Brien, p. 25.
Natural Law

A more traditional line of argument that has been made in favour of a Catholic influence on Burke is based on the identification of Burke as a natural law theorist in the Catholic tradition. Peter J. Stanlis presented this line of argument for the case of Catholicism being essential for a full understanding of Burke in his book on *Burke and the Natural Law*. In the book, Stanlis makes the case that Burke was influenced by the old Natural Law tradition. We met this argument with Russell Kirk earlier, and he did not make the claim that it was therefore essential to understand Burke as a Catholic. Stanlis, on the other hand, does place Burke in the Catholic tradition, since ‘Catholicism had long been the premier repository of natural law doctrine.’ Burke, as a conservative constitutionalist serving as a surrogate for the natural law tradition, must at heart have been a philosophical Catholic, as a review of Stanlis phrases it. The relation can be summarized with Stanlis's words that ‘Burke’s own convictions might well be described as Catholicism qualified by British nationalism’, or as the reviewer writes: Burke was ‘Anglican in political form and Catholic in moral substance’. 58

We have looked at the relation between Burke and the two denominations previously, and seen that one plausible interpretation is that Burke was happy to be an Anglican as it had according to him retained much of the Catholic tradition. This assessment of Burke as having one foot in the Catholic tradition, and the other in the Anglican can be compared to Burke’s friend Richard Shackleton’s statement that Burke believes ‘Papists are wrong; he doubts if Protestants are altogether right’. 59 It is important to stress that Shackleton wrote referring to Protestantism, and not Anglicanism. For Burke there was a distinction between them. Anglicanism does not exclude natural law theory or Thomism, and so it may be the case that claiming a direct link to Catholicism is stretching the evidence a bit too much. If Burke could find the natural law theory in both Anglicanism and Catholicism, why should it be assumed that it was the one over the other? It would be hard to make the claim that Catholicism was essential for Burke. Stanlis makes an important historical note, reminding the reader that in the 18th century there was confusion as to the natural law, some being influenced by Hobbes rather than Cicero, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. 60 Kirk also pointed out this

distinction between old and modern natural law theory. The point still remains, that it may very well have been the case that the Catholic Church more forcefully retained the old natural law theory, but if Burke could have learned it elsewhere, it makes the claim vulnerable. Further, Burke was deeply immersed in classical literature, and the influence from natural law theories may have come primarily from classical thought.

Sheldon mentions the natural law theory in his article on Burke and Catholic Conservatism, albeit only briefly. He writes that Burke’s positive writings on religion emphasized its moral and civilizing aspects, reflecting ‘Thomist notions of natural and divine law from the European Catholic past.’ What would the consequences be of this? If Burke was indeed educated at a Catholic school at an early age, perhaps by a friar, it would be reasonable to draw the conclusion that his natural law theory was in line with his education, and therefore the Catholic influence was real. But as we have seen, there is much division as to whether he actually attended such a school, if the natural law tradition is exclusive to Catholicism, and moreover there is no consensus as to whether Burke fits into the natural law tradition. Some maintain that he is rather a utilitarian, although more recent scholarship tends to overlook this debate, agreeing that Burke's work is distorted by using the lens of a single philosophical system when studying Burke. For this essay it has however been important to mention this debate, as it relates to how scholars have seen the relation between Burke and a potential Catholic influence. Insole himself concludes by stating that Burke is in fact ‘closer to the classical sources than he is to the early modern innovators’, by which he mean Cicero and St Thomas. Sheldon, writing later than when it was claimed that scholars tend to overlook the natural law-utilitarian dichotomy, shows the debate is not settled.

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61 Sheldon, p. 16.
63 Insole, p 129.
Conclusion & Results

This study set out to assess recent scholarly debates over Edmund Burke’s relation to the Roman Catholic faith. We have followed a debate that has been reconstructed, through a biographical account, leading us on to how scholars have interpreted this biography to have influenced Burke’s thought. It has been clear that there are several positions that have been taken in this debate. On the one hand we have O’Brien, Sheldon, Mahoney and Stanlis, who argue that Catholicism, or central aspects of the Catholic doctrine, are essential to understand Burke. On the other hand, we have Lock, Lambert, the authors in the Cambridge Companion, Kirk, Canavan, Millies, Ljungberg, and Bourke who maintain Catholicism may be one factor among many that led to the development of Burke’s thought. Norman and McConnell can be included to the latter list, although they present more favourable arguments in favour of a Catholic reading of Burke, albeit not as essential for a study of Burke. As was also mentioned in the introduction, there are three potential positions to take: that Catholicism is essential to understand Burke; that it helps to understand Burke; or, it is irrelevant for an understanding of Burke. None of the authors we have looked at claim that it is completely irrelevant. There are essays on Burke and religion, which do not mention Catholicism. Those articles have not been looked at here, as we are studying the arguments presented for and against a Catholic influence on Burke, therefore the lack of arguments has been excluded from this study. All our sources acknowledge Burke’s Catholic ancestry to some degree, but maintain that it should not be blown out of proportion. Most suggest it helps to understand Burke, in the sense that it is a part of his biography and may or may not have affected him. A few go to great length to try to show Burke must be understood as a Catholic on account of his background, but lacking historical evidence challenges their ambition.

What Burke really believed from the bottom of his heart will never be answered in a historical study, but here we have looked partially at how his alleged Catholic background and influence has affected his later political actions, his thinking, and Burke as a person in general. It is true that a historical actor’s actions will never be solely determined by his religious, political or moral viewpoints. They must be taken into account as one factor among many, but the question here has been if Catholicism was essential. In other words, while it is true that historical actors are not only understood by their religious and moral viewpoints, an exclusion of that aspect would leave a great vacuum. That is why this study has tried to
identify if Catholicism was essential to Burke, as it would have the implication that Catholicism must be taken into account when explaining Burke. It can be claimed that Burke furthered many Catholic causes, and had a Catholic influence that played an important role in shaping him as a person. However, this role should not be exaggerated. Catholicism was an essential component of Burke, but only as one source among many influences that moulded him into the specific historical actor that he was.

Family, tradition, and religion have been mentioned as potentially formative of a person's mind. In this case we have looked at Edmund Burke, who himself thought these aspects ideal for an understanding of humankind. Skinner has cited other historians as explaining that within the field of intellectual history, while discussing motives for historical actors, moral and political ideals are ‘rarely in themselves the determinants of human action’. This seems to me to be a reasonable statement in relation to religion. But although they may rarely be the determinants in themselves, they are undoubtedly a part of the historical actors psyche, if the person in question is known to have professed belief in a particular doctrine. In the case of Burke, it is known – and it has been shown in this study – that he held a Christian worldview, and it often figured in his own writing and in his speeches. Lambert mentioned religion as being potentially formative of Burke, but held that Burke never became a Catholic himself, and therefore that aspect is not essential. For O’Brien the act of conforming from the part of Burke’s father would be enough to account for Burke’s later political motivation, a leap that takes us well into the darkness of uncertainty. Moreover, the biographical accounts we have looked at often centre on Burke’s family background. For Burke, the individual does not emerge from the abyss, but is formed by a social context, the first of these being the family. Norman used this as an explanatory factor of Burke’s broad understanding of Gaelic culture, and the differences between Ireland and England, Catholicism and Protestantism. Lock said it would have important biographical implications if Burke’s father was a convert, but that the lacking evidence leaves this important biographical note questionable. Once again, family may not be the sole determinant of historical motives, but we are studying a time in which family was considered of more social import to society, and a man who came from a Christian background that held family values in high regard. Family, then, can either shape a historical actor by way of imparting knowledge, traditions and moral norms, or serve as an actor’s frame of reference as to what the actor wishes to distance him- or herself from. In either case, the actor is to a certain degree formed by the social context, and Burke was shaped by his
circumstances, while retaining the free will to act independently, most likely trying to make a synthesis from the multiple Christian influences he was surrounded by.

We began by asking the question of how scholars have argued as to whether Catholicism is essential to understand Burke? Throughout this study we have looked at the arguments presented by scholars since the 1990s, and seen that different positions have been taken regarding the same historical issue at hand, whether it has been Burke’s father or his education. One interesting observation is that the claims of Burke’s Catholicism often come down to historical uncertainties, or ideas that can be found from multiple sources, as in the case with Burke’s hedge school education, or providential view of politics. Authors who are not acting as scholars, but are directed towards a conservative, or at least Burke-aficionado audience have more often than not made these claims. In the case of missing evidence in historical studies, the job of the historian is to present the case that is most plausible. O’Brien’s arguments could very well be reasonable, and Catholicism may have been of crucial importance to Burke in his childhood, but since the evidence is lacking, more recent scholarship is right to take a more sceptical approach. In other words, it is an interesting case that has intrigued many scholars, but it is based on loose ends. Psychobiographical accounts rest on the assumption that we can look into the heart and mind of a person, making such an account prone to the limits those assumptions present. Based on what has been presented in this analysis, it seems to me that Norman’s claim that Burke had both a Protestant and Catholic background, which represented different things also in politics during Burke’s lifetime, Canavan’s claim that Burke studied Anglican theology thoroughly, and De Bruyn’s argument that Burke was close to a natural theology, along with Ljungberg’s statement that Burke saw religion as being important for it’s traditional values, speaks in favour of Burke having held a sort of ‘mere Christianity’ position, to borrow the concept coined by C. S. Lewis. For Burke Christianity was evidently important, but he rarely made distinctions between what was Catholic, Anglican or non-conformist himself. When he did, it has been clear that he stood on the side of an Established Church, with the supremacy of the Crown, that for him resembled this ‘mere Christianity,’ since it retained many Catholic doctrines. Keeping the Catholic background in mind, however, as in the case of Norman’s argument just mentioned, I believe helps reach this understanding of Burke’s broad Christian worldview. In a word, Burke’s ‘mere Christianity’ is a result of his Catholic, Protestant, and to a certain degree non-conformist, background. Thus, Catholicism is a sufficient component in understanding Burke, as it was one of many sources, but at the same time necessary as only
Catholicism can have given him the specific influences he received at an early age, which would lay the foundations for his thought, albeit in the company of other Christian denominations. These other denominations were, however, not arbitrary, as he came in contact with them in his early life, while certain other obvious denominations, such as but not limited to Calvinism, did not influence Burke’s thought. This seems to me to be the most reasonable account one can make of the Catholicism of Edmund Burke.
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