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Religious Mystery and Edmund Burke's Untraveled Modernity

Edmund Burke has been read primarily as a defender of aristocratic traditions, as a fellow traveler of the Scottish Enlightenment, or as a theorist of classical natural law. However, we can read Burke as an advocate of liberties of thought and conscience in recognizably modern terms, moved by his own spiritual sensitivity. This peculiar approach to political modernity suggests an unusual relationship to a broader modernity born from a political understanding rooted in a deep appreciation of mystery. Burke's speeches and writings emphasized the apophatic character of tradition whose "primeval" origins were as elusive as their Providence was inescapable. Mixing modern liberties with this religious understanding, Burke sketched the outlines of a different path through modernity, one at home with the existential modernity described by David Walsh where "there is no stepping back to secure a vantage point of theoretical penetration"(462). For Burke, as for Walsh, to be modern does not call us to stand apart from the reality we seek to understand, and neither does that search for understanding result in a false mastery of self or nature. Instead, in full possession only of our responsibility to past and future, our debt to the luminous mystery of being disclosed by our participation in temporal reality, we engage the "questions that cannot be avoided" that arise in the course of political life (61). As Burke put it, we tend to our "obligations to mankind at large, which are not in consequence of any special voluntary pact," but instead "arise from the relation of man to man, and the relation of man to God, which relations are not matters of choice."