Burke and Kirk on Radical Ideology in Modern Times

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Much was written about ideology and particularly radical or revolutionary ideology during the last century; and much continues to be written. There are those who argue, and I believe Russell Kirk would agree, that ideology, in its predominance, is radical by nature. Political radicalism denotes a commitment to altering existing social structures and transforming value systems by means that defy or undermine normal political processes through disruptive or violent acts. Or as Kirk himself has written: "The ideologue ... thinks of politics as a revolutionary instrument of transforming human nature ... [i]n his march toward Utopia."

During the past century, the discussion of ideology in Anglo-American settings had to do more often than not with the endeavor to understand and answer the challenges of Marxism and Communism during the Cold War. What is more, this inquiry looked especially to the French and Russian revolutions as forcible overthrows of government and social order that were driven by a radical ideology.

In this century, analyses of the threat of radical Islam posed by the likes of Al Qaeda and ISIS or the Islamist State have drawn on this body of scholarship. Political scientists and religionists have sought to clarify to what degree these movements are genuinely religious, which

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is to say Islamic, and to what extent they have secular sources and borrow from past forms of modern ideology, again rooted particularly in the French and Russian revolutions on the left and fascism on the right.

I will not add any more to that. My sole reason for mentioning this background is to place what I do have to say about Burke and Kirk on radical ideology in an historical context and to signal the importance of Burke's seminal thought on the subject. Kirk honored Burke's principled conservatism and prudential form of politics. Yet he was also among the first in the mid-twentieth-century revival of Burke studies to advance an appreciation for the originality of Burke's insights into ideology. In the essay "Why Edmund Burke Is Studied," which serves as the Epilogue to his eminently readable book *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, Kirk states the following:

Burke, with his prophetic gifts, perceived the shape of things to come in this bent world of ours. His passionate refutation of leveling ideology and totalistic politics has lost nothing of its force with the passing of two centuries. What he said of the Jacobins is yet more true of the Marxist ideologues of our century.²

My concern here is primarily with Burke, though I will draw liberally from Kirk's writings when they help to clarify Burke's thought. But let me start with Kirk's own enumeration of the principal characteristics of radical ideology. For, all of these elements of radical ideology show up in the course of Burke's speechifying and writing on the French Revolution from 1789 until his death in 1797.

Kirk names at least seven characteristics of radical ideology: (1) a belief in the unlimited malleability, or perfectibility, of human nature, (2) a belief in an "illimitable progress of society" which will rid the world of the human "proclivity" for conflict and violence, (3) a "[c]ontempt for tradition" in which "[r]eason, impulse, and materialistic determinism are severally preferred as guides to social welfare," (4) the rejection of "[f]ormal religion" and its replacement by ideology, (5) a preference for total democracy based on an egalitarianism that rejects all forms of social, economic, and political stratification or hierarchy, (6) an

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impetus toward centralization or consolidation of power in a singular
authority that is said to embody the people's will, and (7) a partiality for
"[e]conomic levelling"—the rejection of private property in favor of one
kind or another of collectivism.3

Burke did not have at his disposal the word ideology. He called
the French revolutionary ideas an "armed doctrine."4 Kirk explains that
Burke considered this "armed doctrine" to be "an inverted religion,
employing central political power and strength of arms to enforce con-
formity to its 'rational' creed."5

It is noteworthy that in the Napoleonic era, several decades after the
Revolution, a Frenchman by the name of Destutt de Tracy did coin the
term ideology. De Tracy's principal concern, however, was education, not
politics. He championed educational reform and claimed to be guided
by a new science of ideas based upon a strict materialist theory of psy-
chology wherein all of human knowledge derives from sense experience.

It was really not until the middle of the nineteenth century that
ideology became identified with an allegedly scientific theory of revolu-
tion envisioning an overthrow of the existing order and the advent of a
new secular order of social concord and eternal peace. This was the work
of Karl Marx. Marx prophesied that the bourgeois capitalist economic
system would gestate from within itself its own complete overthrow by
a rising proletarian class, and that this would usher in for the first time
in human history a classless society. Marx consciously looked back to
the French Revolution as a harbinger of things to come and the revolu-
tionary ideas of the Jacobin party as an incipient, though (in retrospect)
insufficiently scientific, revolutionary ideology.

Burke, for his part, pointed out the "novelty" of the cataclysmic
events that were unfolding in France and the "armed doctrine" that drove
the revolution. To my mind his selection of the locution "armed doctrine"
covered well Burke's profound insight that the ideas and ideals of the
French revolutionaries constituted a secular religion. That is to say, the
Jacobin vision was not so much a platform of political principles as a

4 Edmund Burke, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, ed. Paul Langford et al.
5 Kirk, Edmund Burke, 166.
godless dogmatic faith that projected into the future a world rid once
and for all of the unjust domination of the many by a corrupted few.

Burke would have none of this. Jacobinism is "Atheism by Establish-
ment," he declared in his Letters on a Regicide Peace (1796–97), a "mockery
of all religion." It "institute[s] impious, blasphemous, indecent theatric
rites, in honour of their vitiated, perverted reason, and erect[s] altars
to the personification of their own corrupted and bloody Republic."6
Burke had begun to reach such conclusions more than half a decade
before, in his monumental political tract Reflections on the Revolution
in France. However, it took Burke some time in observing the course of
the revolution to express full throat his conclusions about the religious
flavor of Jacobinism.

By 1797, the Jacobins had, among other things, abolished the Christ-
ian Gregorian calendar and replaced it with a calendar of the Republic
(or calendar of the Revolution) whose epochal date was the founding of
the French Republic in September of 1792. In this calendar, the Chris-
tian week of seven days, which begins on Sunday with the celebration
of Jesus's resurrection, was replaced with a ten-day week, the last day of
which was declared an official day of rest and festivity. Likewise, a Fes-
tival of Reason was instituted as the highest of "holy days." Churches
were renamed as temples of reason. In the cathedral of Notre Dame, the
Christian altar was taken down and replaced with an altar to Liberty.
"To the revolutionaries," Kirk explains,

Christianity was superstition—and an enemy. The dogmas and
doctrines of Christianity must go by the board. But in short
order, the theological dogmas were supplanted by secular dog-
mas. Christian charity was supplanted by "fraternity"—which,
in effect, led to the attitude "Be my brother, or I must kill you."
The Christian symbols of transcendence were adapted to the
new order; but in degraded form: for perfection through grace
in death, the French theorists substituted the promise of per-
feclion in this world, with every appetite satisfied.7

6 Writings and Speeches, 9:241.
7 Kirk, Edmund Burke, 165–66.
Also very much like a religious movement, Jacobinism possessed a messianic component with missiological aspirations. In *Thoughts on French Affairs*, published in 1791, Burke identified this messianic and proselytizing characteristic of Jacobin ideology. He compared it to the religious fervor and excesses of the radical Reformation. "The principle of the Reformation was such as by its essence, it could not be local or confined to the country in which it had its origin," he observed. "The present Revolution in France ... bear[s] little resemblance or analogy" to the "internal revolutions ... brought about in Europe, upon principles merely political." Instead, this "Revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma" seeks "changes which" are like those in the past "made upon religious grounds, in which a spirit of proselytism makes an essential part."  

Burke reckon[ed] this characteristic of Jacobinism to be something quite new in the history of Europe. Up until the present, when Europe divided into factions and coalitions of opposing interests, these behaviors might be explained in part by the fragmentation of Christendom that the Reformation had brought about. Catholics warring against Protestants and vice versa. But divisions and coalitions were now arising that had little or nothing to do with the Christian past. "In the modern world, before this time," Burke noted, "there has been no instance of [a] general political faction, separated from religion, pervading several countries, and forming a principle of union between the partizans in each." Now an atheistic "armed doctrine," was spreading itself through out the old body of Christendom. As religion did in the past, so this "armed doctrine" was cementing together under one cause alliances of otherwise competing and antagonistic parties.  

In his struggle to make sense of this new, threatening phenomenon, Burke looked back into the history of Europe and identified several Christian sectarian messianic movements which he thought the Jacobin ideology and behavior strongly resembled. In *Reflections*, he recalls the Münster Rebellion of the sixteenth century in Germany when, in 1534, radical Anabaptists sought to impose by force their belief in an absolute egalitarianism which they claimed the Bible commands. For  

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9 Ibid., 209–10.
a brief time, they established a communitarian regime in the German
city of Münster. Private property was abolished, a theocratic govern-
ment was installed, as the New Jerusalem was to be rung in and spread
throughout Europe. “When the Anabaptists of Munster ... had filled
Germany with confusion by their system of levelling and their wild
opinions concerning property,” Burke reminded his readers, “to what
country in Europe did not the progress of their fury furnish just cause
of alarm?”

And again, in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* published one
year later, in 1791, Burke likened the behavior and goals of the Jacobins to
the leadership of the English priest, the Abbé John Ball, in the English
Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. That “reverend patriarch of sedition,” Burke
remarked, preached that “all the evils which have fallen upon men had
been caused by an ignorance of their ‘having been born and continued
equal as to their rights.’” And Ball believed that when the poor at last
grasped this simple truth about the source of their wretched condition
and their claim to justice, there would be, as Burke put it, “[n]o tyranny,
no vexation, no oppression, no care, no sorrow ... in the world.”

Thus, by 1791, Burke had not just identified the levelling propensity
of the Jacobin creed, he also had begun to trace a genealogy of political
radicalism that historians and political theorists have since filled out and
analyzed thoroughly. Kirk believed that Burke was correct to claim that
there was a connection between the older Christian radical and millenni-
alist sects that sought to hasten a thousand year reign of Christ on earth
and the Jacobins who believed that a perfect Republic of Virtue would be
brought into existence when all of those who opposed their vision were
extirpated. Eric Voegelin has described this inversion of biblical eschatol-
ogy (doctrine of the last things) as an “immanentization of the eschaton,”
a secularized belief that man by his own powers or with the help of deter-
minate forces of history might bring about what biblical faith reserved for
God, providence, and a transcendent heavenly kingdom.

Viewed from a different perspective and interest, the Jacobin ide-
ology was utopian. Utopian, as I am employing it here, should be dis-
tinguished from the imaginative presentation of a perfectly harmonious

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society of unhindered human flourishing that may or may not seek to instigate reform. Burke would have been familiar with this notion of utopia as it well describes Thomas More’s *Utopia*. More named his little book “utopia” because the word means “no place.” More did not intend *Utopia* to be a blueprint for revolution. Even in Burke’s day, utopian had not quite yet become linked in the common mind with radical or revolutionary politics.

Utopianism in the latter, more modern sense arose in the nineteenth century. This included the belief that utopia is indeed a real possibility for some time and place in the future, if only enlightened people would take the right action. Thus the philosopher Hans-Herbert Kogler defines utopianism as the goal of overcoming “social inequality, economic exploitation,” and the like, “and other forms of domination that make well-being and happiness in this life impossible.”¹² Kirk adds that, “The twentieth-century ideologue after the manner of [that philosopher of Jacobinism] Robespierre, thinks that his secular dogmas are sustained by the Goddess Reason; he prides himself inordinately upon being ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’; and he is convinced that all opposition to his particular wave of the future is selfish obscurantism, when it is not direct vested interest.”¹³ “In his march toward Utopia, the ideologue is merciless.”¹⁴

Robespierre thought that anyone who stood in the way of the path to the perfect Republic of Virtue should not be spared the guillotine. Burke abhorred the slaughter and the destruction that Jacobinism with its utopian fantasies was unleashing. He realized how antithetical this was to the beliefs and manners that had sustained Christendom. And, most important, he espied the totalitarian impetus of this utopianism, though, once again he lacked the exact terminology to describe it.

Burke also recognized that the regime the Jacobins were putting in place, forged in the heat of a bloody terror, was unlike any government, thus far known to man, that claimed to be democratic. “The political dogma, which, upon the new French system, is to unite the factions of different nations, is this,” wrote Burke in *Thoughts on French Affairs*. “That

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the majority ... is the perpetual, natural, unceasing, indefeasible sovereign; that the majority is perfectly master of the form as well as the administration of the state, and that the magistrates, under whatever names they are called, are only functionaries to obey the orders (general as laws or particular as decrees) which that majority might make; that this is the only natural government; that all others are tyranny and usurpation.”

In his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, several years later, Burke at last found the language to describe the spectacle he beheld. He began with a comparison of Great Britain’s constitutional monarchy and the new “democracy” that the Jacobins had established. “The British state is,” Burke argued, “that which pursues the greatest variety of ends, and is the least disposed to sacrifice any one of them to another, or to the whole.” This characteristic of respect and value for the plurality of life and diversity of interests within a healthy commonwealth, he explains, is nourished by a “system of manners and the habitudes of life” precedent to and independent of “the laws of the state.” In such a pluralistic social and political order, room exists for the flourishing of personal liberty and for the various actors in the commonwealth to pursue those functions necessary to secure the well-being of individual and community. This new France, however, exhibited nothing of the sort. Instead, Burke exclaimed:

What now stands as Government in France is struck out at heat. The design is wicked, immoral, impious, oppressive; but it is spirited and daring; it is systematick; it is simple in its principle; it has unity and consistency in perfection.... The state is all in all. Every thing is referred to the production of force; afterwards every thing is trusted to the use of it.... The state has dominion and conquest for its sole objects; dominion over minds by proselytism, over bodies by arms.

Burke lived to see how the Jacobin democracy swiftly evolved into a one-party dictatorship, as “the ‘total revolution’ gave birth to a ‘total state.’” The Jacobins had “made a schism with the whole universe.”

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15 *Burke, Works, IV, 322–23.*
16 *Writings and Speeches, 9:287.*
17 Ibid., 9:288.
18 Ibid., 9:249.
is not a revolution of government. It is not the victory of party over party” as in ordinary politics, Burke declared. Rather, “[i]t is a destruction and decomposition of the whole society; which never can be made of right by any faction, however powerful, nor without terrible consequences to all about it.”

Burke could find no good example from the past that would account in full for what was being played out in France. Nonetheless, in his struggle to make sense of it, Burke hit upon the heart of the matter, the truly monstrous thing about it. The new Jacobin order lacked both the “riches of convention” that make power mild and the “advantages of nature” that are necessary for what is truly human.

As Kirk concludes: “At bottom the difference of Burke from the revolutionaries ... was theological.” Burke had a Christian understanding of human nature and human destiny. He believed in a common grace and God’s providential care of the human race such that politics, or for that matter economics or any other human science, is not itself adequate to account for and respect all that is genuinely human. Burke, Kirk explains, believed that the revolutionists in France made a mistake of homicidal consequence. They believed that they “could perfect man and society by a neat ‘rational’ scheme” that, if not readily agreed to by the population, must be forced upon it at whatever cost in bloodshed and violence. In other words, they would destroy an imperfect humanity in order that they might perfect humanity. This, ultimately, is what the Reign of Terror was all about, to sweep the streets clean of all those imperfections, all those imperfect human beings, that obstructed the birth of a new humanity.

In his Letter to a Noble Lord (1796), Burke was prepared to state that the spectacle in France was the first instance in human history of “a compleat revolution” that extends “even to the constitution of the mind of man.” The “philosophers [of this revolution] are fanatics,” he declared, answerable to no one but themselves, who “would sacrifice the whole of the human race to the slightest of their experiments.” He adds:

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19 Ibid., 9:253.
20 Ibid., 9:288.
21 Kirk, Edmund Burke, 165.
22 Ibid.
23 Writings and Speeches, 9:147.
24 Ibid., 9:176.
Their humanity is at their horizon—and, like the horizon, it always flies before them. The geometricians, and the chymists bring, the one from the dry bones of their diagrams, and the other [the chemists] from the soot of their furnaces, dispositions that make them worse than indifferent about those feelings and habitudes, which are the supports of the moral world ... These philosophers, consider men in their experiments, no more than they do mice in an air pump, or in a recipient of mephitick gas.  

It is as if Burke had foreseen in his description of Jacobinism and the revolution in France events of the twentieth and twenty-first century in which radical ideology on the march has left untold suffering and massive societal wreckage in its wake.

Conclusion: Burke and the Imago Dei

This, however, is not where I wish to end. Rather, in concluding, I turn briefly to a Burkean theme to which Kirk, above all others, directs our attention. This is Burke on the moral imagination; for, in returning after a hiatus of more than three decades to a deep reading into Burke, it strike me that a complete comprehension and appreciation of Burke on the moral imagination and its importance for a cultured and civilized life cannot be gained apart from consideration of his religious beliefs. No one who reads Burke with care can ignore his belief in a divine providence. Furthermore, the arguments of previous generations that Burke's invocations of a moral natural law were expedient rhetorical embellishments and not sincere have been answered. Burke himself was morally serious and not a utilitarian.

Yet I believe there is more to be said. Burke's moral imagination is built upon a theological conviction at least as important as his belief in divine providence. Rarely does Burke name this conviction: it is a belief that mortal human beings have been created in the image of the immortal God.

25 Ibid., 9:177.
In 1786, whilst defending his untiring efforts to end the corruption of British rule in India, in a letter to one Mary Palmer, Burke declares that all human beings possess the image of their Creator, whatever the color of their skin or wherever they live on earth. He writes:

I have no party in this business, my dear Miss Palmer, but among a set of people, who have none of your Lilies and Roses in their faces; but who are the images of the great Pattern as well as you and I. I know what I am doing whether the white people like it or not.26

If we look for mention of the *imago Dei* in his speeches and writings on the French Revolution, so far as I am aware there is but one. Yet, once again it is critical to his understanding of what has gone awry in France. Speaking of the Jacobin’s atheistic creed, he is moved to say:

They who do not love religion, hate it. The rebels to God perfectly abhor the Author of their being. They hate Him “with all their heart, with all their mind, with all their soul, and with all their strength.” He never presents himself to their thoughts, but to menace and alarm them. They cannot strike the Sun out of Heaven, but they are able to raise a smoldering smoke that obscures him from their own eyes. Not being able to revenge themselves on God, they have a delight in vicariously defacing, degrading, torturing, and tearing in pieces his image in man.27

As an aside, here in Burke we have the burning judgment that the Jacobin ideology is not only homicidal but deicidal.

Still, my immediate interest is in Burke’s Christian anthropology. I am persuaded that we must understand this Christian anthropology—and I emphasize Christian—in order to grasp fully what lay behind Burke’s warnings in *Reflections* that the moral imagination of man is under siege. Russell Kirk, more than any other modern interpreter of Burke, brings to our attention those passages from *Reflections* that I have in mind. These read as follows:

26 Edmund Burke to Mary Palmer on January 19, 1786, regarding the trial for the impeachment of Warren Hastings for crimes committed against the people of India.
27 *Writings and Speeches*, 9:278–79.
But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order.... Regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity.\(^{28}\)

Here we have it, Burke’s famous apologia for the moral imagination and his melancholic judgment that all the great artifices of human manners, art, custom, and tradition that the moral imagination brings into existence, and that support it, are being destroyed. Yet these are the very things that give us the power, which reason alone has not, to interpret the world with a reverence for its Creator and respect for the dignity that belongs to each and every human being.

Kirk has written that for Burke the moral imagination “signifies that power of ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and momentary events—‘especially’ as the dictionary has it, ‘the higher form of power exercised in poetry and art.’ The moral imagination,” Kirk concludes, “aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order of the commonwealth.”\(^{29}\)

All of this seems right, except that there may be more. This more, I maintain, owes to Burke’s specifically Christian convictions about God and man. What is “this scheme of things” on which Burke lays

\(^{28}\) Burke, *Reflections*, 240.

blame for a blindness that sees a king as but a man, a queen as but a woman, and a woman but an animal? It is an anti-Christian ideology in which human beings are no longer related to God as their creator and redeemer and in whose own image he has made them. *Above all else, the moral imagination is a special capacity to see this image in every human being.* That reason which Jacobinism deifies cannot solely by its power grasp or follow out this mystery of the *imago Dei* to the truth which it reveals: that the meaning and value in all things, and especially human beings, transcends mere usefulness to self or means to the arbitrary ends of a fallen human will.

This conviction about the *imago Dei* and its relation to the moral imagination is in the immediate background of Burke’s analogy of the Jacobin ideologues to “geometricians” and “chemists” who experiment on people as if they are mice. Each time I read this passage, I think of the Nazi doctors who quite literally used human beings in their experiments like mice in the laboratory. It is as if Burke, like the Hebrew prophets, was looking into the future through his percipient metaphors.

Burke is being ironic and satirical when he speaks of the virtues of human nature and the *imago Dei* as “illusions.” These virtues that make “power gentle” and “obedience liberal,” harmonize “the different shades of life,” and incorporate “into politics” those “sentiments that beautify” and ennoble “private society” are not at all illusions in Burke’s mind. They are illusions, however, to minds bereft of belief in the *imago Dei* and that vainly elevate their own reason, which itself sin has desiccated, to the rank of deity.

In his landmark essay *Rationalism in Politics*, the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott observes that the rationalist in politics replaces tradition with ideology. For Oakeshott, tradition can be considered apart from a belief in God. Burke—and Kirk—disagree. Burke was a Christian humanist. Tradition for Burke includes a memory of God that reaches back to sacred Scripture. Tradition is the milieu in which the image of God in humanity grows out into the world as culture. This is the wardrobe of the moral imagination. But is it any surprise that ideology, which denies the *imago Dei*, should also seek to destroy a cultural inheritance that humanizes life? Modern revolutions that have been
driven by such ideologies have not only been political upheavals, they also have been revolutions that sought to destroy an existing culture.

Burke understood the meaning of sin, whereas his Jacobin antagonists did not. Timely reform in the political sphere is one way of remedying sin’s corruptive effects. Tradition is not inviolate nor, even at its best, wholly consistent with what God wills. Tradition is only a proximate guide to a rightly ordered soul and society. Burke understood this. But the guidance that prescription and tradition provide is a far shot better than unaided reason operating in a world shorn of humanity’s cultural inheritance, “that decent drapery of life and all the superadded—ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination” of which Burke spoke. Burke said that, “Art is man’s nature.”30 André Gushurst-Moore, in his absorbing book *The Common Mind*, explains Burke’s epigram: “[T]hus, the integration of art and nature in the mind of Burke, reflective of the complexity of human nature, is the basis of the ‘moral imagination’ that underwrites a healthy politics, as it does a healthy general culture.”31 To deprive human beings of this inheritance of the moral imagination and all its works, whether in manners, customs or laws, or of literature and the fine arts, is to strip them naked. Then, indeed, “a Queen is just a woman, a woman is but an animal—and an animal not of the highest order.” Then regicide, and parricide, and sacrilege, are mere “fictions of superstition.” This is the terrifying legacy of all the radical ideologies of modernity that humankind has endured, right up until this very moment.

In conclusion, I return to André Gushurst-Moore, writing on Burke:

> Without a conception of evil, for which we need a system of dogmatic religion, we flounder. The inhumanity of ideology is one of the defining features of late modernity, and it is of this that Burke is prophetic. The “age of chivalry” descends into the cold but sanguinary modernity of “sophists, economists, and calculators”—the scientific advocates of a new and heartless world. Whether in communism, fascism, Nazism, or

the more recent Islamist terror nurtured by fundamentalism, late modernity continues to imitate the sanguinary ideology established in the French Revolution. The political response of the West (now a mixture of Christian and post-Christian secular liberalism), insofar as it must oppose "armed doctrine[s]," with global aims, should heed the perennial wisdom in the Christian humanism of Edmund Burke.\(^{32}\)