



Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War

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In this masterful, stylish, and authoritative book, Michael Burleigh gives us an epic history of the battles over religion in modern Europe, examining the complex and often lethal ways in which politics and religion have interacted and influenced each other over the last two centuries. From the French Revolution to the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century, *Earthly Powers* is a uniquely powerful portrait of one of the great tensions of modern history—one that continues to be played out on the world stage today.

Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War Details

Date : Published February 20th 2007 by Harper Perennial (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9780060580940

Author : Michael Burleigh

Format : Paperback 560 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Religion, European History, Politics, Christianity

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From Reader Review Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War for online ebook

Mikey B. says

This is an uneven and overly verbose book which is unfortunate because the topic of a historical review of religion and secularization is always of interest.

The main focus is on the French revolution and its impact on removing religion and religious orders out of society. It was instructive to learn how some aspects of the French revolution were virulently anti-church – there were pogroms of clerics where priests were butchered and religious property was confiscated by the state. This all had long term consequences, for example France conscripted priests during World War I.

Yet Mr. Burleigh is overly sympathetic to religion. For example, prior to the revolution the Church controlled education – was not education more open after the revolution? Was not France more democratic after the revolution? One could argue that this liberation of the 1790's led to the expressive and wonderful achievements of French art, literature, and science during the 19th Century. The author seems dismissive of the scientific accomplishments that in part were due to the diminished control of the Church on French society. There is only a cursory treatment of Darwin's ground-breaking "Origin of Species".

Mr. Burleigh does score some points in showing how religion is still pervasive – particularly before the outbreak of World War I.

An additional annoyance, when reading, was the constant skipping to and fro between time periods. A chronological approach would have been more logical. Plus the book should have been condensed, making it more lucid.

Maryann MJS1228 says

No one can accuse Mr. Burleigh of being light on details although I'm sure that he's accused of many things. (He probably wouldn't have it any other way.) Burleigh sets out to explore the "clash" between religion and politics from the French Revolution to World War I. The clashing often takes the form of strange mash-ups in which religions take on distinctly political forms or issues or when the politics takes on the manifestations of religion.

It's fascinating to see the Jacobins of the French Revolution create their own cleric-free religion handily called "The Cult of the Supreme Being" or a Roman Catholic priest get kicked out of the church for creating a political role for the Holy See. Some of the collisions between religion and politics Burleigh unearths are amusing - like the utopian socialist writer who imagines a world in which "fairies" cure the jilted of their

broken-hearts. Others are just plain disturbing. Humans can't live without some sort of religion, Burleigh seems to be saying, even if we have to make up something truly bizarre to fill the gap.

Burleigh has done his research and has his views, some of which had me nodding my head such as "there is surely something mad about all-consuming political passions" and some that had me wondering what planet he inhabits. I don't care what it's "set beside", the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is not a "modest affaire". I don't know why Burleigh felt the need to do the written equivalent of a drive-by in referring to Beatrice Webb as "ghastly" but I admit to being as amused by that as by the phrase "harpy pawnbroker consort". I get the feeling that if someone declared this book "vast in perversity" (to quote the Vatican's description of a work cited here) Michael Burleigh would be pleased indeed.

Burleigh isn't shy about sharing his opinions but his quirky erudition made this worth the ride for me. I disagreed with many of Burleigh's "conclusions" but for me that's part of the enjoyment of reading a book like this - it's like having a debate with a very opinionate acquaintance. This is not an easy read and it is not for everyone. If you're interested in the topic I'd recommend you read a few pages before buying. Burleigh loves obscure verbs and occasionally presents a quote in the original language without providing translation. (Why he does this sometimes and not others in the same language is a mystery.) Hence my 3-star rating: this is an interesting book that does not transcend its topic.

Recommended for those interested in the topic.

Bevan Lewis says

The period covered by Michael Burleigh's book is a fascinating one. Eric Hobsbawm's works described it as the Ages Of Revolution, Capital and Empire, reflecting the startling economic, social and political changes of the period. This book zooms in on the conflicts and alliances between politics and religion, and the way that religion was challenged and to some extent usurped by post Enlightenment ideas. There are some fascinating ideas within. The main problems with the book are the sometimes turgid prose, and (perhaps a reflection of the scope of subject) the assumptions of prior knowledge about terms and events which are sometimes not fully explained. Additionally Burleigh does tend to wander around without a central thesis or strong structure, and in a few sections the reader is left wondering how the material relates to the story as a whole.

As Burleigh explains in the introduction the starting point in writing the book was as a study of political religions. Initially he planned to follow the breadcrumbs from the Jacobins of the French Revolution through the rise of Marxism, Bolshevism, Fascism and National Socialism. Somewhere along the way the scope broadened and the discussion of the twentieth century totalitarianisms was deferred to the next volume. Some precursors, in the form of Marxism and the extreme rightists Charles Maurras and Paul Anton de Lagarde.

Burleigh does well in keeping some structure and enough specific interest - often intellectual and philosophical history can be a bit dry. He evokes some of the background of the key individuals along the way which prevents things becoming too esoteric. We learn of Wagner's "remorseless quest for money, best symbolised by his wife Cosima hauling off bags of coins when banknotes were not forthcoming" and that the abbe Claude Fauchet was the "proud owner of a soutane [a cassock] rent by shot during the storming of the Bastille". Yet at times the book was hard going. Often issues and events are mentioned with insufficient background. Burleigh claims that "The Chartist crisis contributed to the formation of an Anglican grouplet" without ever explaining what the Chartist crisis was. My Kindle was extremely useful in explaining the wide variety of anachronistic and non-English terms invoked without explanation, however this did disrupt the

flow of the book. The main area for improvement in readability would be in trimming and reorganising some of his sentences. Sentences such as “Since Roman Catholics were primarily attached to the universal Church, they had difficulties in regarding the nation as the highest form of human community that God had established, something which they had in common with an Enlightenment belief in human universality, however much they may have despised and feared other aspects of that variegated project” just contain too many ideas. I often had to reread to remind myself where we had started.

I did gain some valuable insights however, and enjoyed Burleigh’s opinion gently sprinkled through the book. He takes a fairly dim view of the reality of the French revolution as well as anticlericalist movements such as the Kulturkampf. His diversion into the sectarian terrorist violence in tsarist Russia has “assumed ghastly saliency in a world where religions fanatics crash hijacked aircraft into skyscrapers”. This diversion - he himself admits that it could be seen as an “eccentric digression” does come across as one. Although the discussion in chapter 7 of Sacred Violence in Russia is fascinating I struggled to find anything especially ‘religious’ or antireligious in the examples in the chapter. I did enjoy his exposition of the contradictions and idiosyncrasies of Russian revolutionaries, mostly evoked by Burleigh through literature. His wonderful quote from Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* neatly captures the arrogance of the utopian idealist who wants to overthrow the old order; ‘I am perplexed by my own data,’ he says at one point, ‘and my conclusion is a direct contradiction of the original idea with which I start. Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine.’ The section on the Industrial age is interesting, with discussion ranging from utopian movements such as Robert Owen’s integration of home, spiritual and working life to Methodism (“never simply a creed designed to discipline an industrial workforce, a charge routinely made by modern British academic apologists for a political religion that preferred to discipline workers by means of Arctic concentration camps”). One senses a certain intolerance of Marxism!

One of the central themes of the book is the conflict between Nationalism and the more ‘Internationalist’ Catholicism. Burleigh points out that “Nationalism was the most pervasive and potent Church to emerge during the nineteenth century”. Politics is full of contradictions however. Burleigh states that “since Roman Catholics were primarily attached to the universal Church, they had difficulties in regarding the nation as the highest form of human community that God had established, something which they had in common with an Enlightenment belief in human universality, however much they may have despised and feared other aspects of that variegated project”. Yet often the French republic was very hostile to Catholicism at various parts of the twentieth century. They also suffered at German hands under Bismarck, although that regime had little sympathy for most Enlightenment values.

The book ends with the hideous First World War. This was marked by the invocation of God on both sides. Kaiser Wilhelm had a bizarre belief in his unique relationship with God, while in the UK an Anglican priest pronounced ““We are fighting, not so much for the honour of our country, as for the honour of God. Not only is this a Holy War, it is the holiest war that has ever been waged... This truly is a war of ideas. Odin is ranged against Christ, and Berlin is seeking to prove its supremacy against Bethlehem.”

Overall the book provides a sense of the decline in Christianity through the century, especially amongst the new working classes. At times religion is actively suppressed in the name of rationality, or more cynically to suppress any perceived internationalist threat to new nations. Both Germany and Italy feared the disloyalty of those who hearkened to the word of the Pope. Most fascinating are the hints at elements which hinted at the direction of Germany in the twentieth century. Burleigh provides an answer (undoubtedly to be expanded upon in the next volume) to those who cannot answer how Nazism could take root in a supposedly civilised Christian nation. He points out the popularity of individuals such as Adolf Stoecker who exemplified “the extent to which Protestantism had become polluted with antisemitism and chauvinism, at the expense of traditional Christian values”. However even more importantly the middle classes were distancing themselves from the traditional church, leaning towards “a vulgar scientism” and the power of the individual. Even in traditional Germany ruled by a monarchy and by the conservative Bismarck these Enlightenment values gained credence. This undermines to some extent the idea that Germany’s twentieth century fate can be

explained by it missing out on the Enlightenment. I look forward to seeing how Burleigh develops his ideas in the next volume *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror*.

Note on the Kindle edition: annoyingly the illustrations were omitted, and all the footnotes were just numbers, not hyperlinks. Publishers - please up your game!

Peter van de Pas says

I first sensed there was something strange with this book when I read the part where Mr. Burleigh describes the Catholic Jezuit order as being liberal and flexible, not two traits commonly associated with this order. On reading further the Catholic bias only became stronger. Trials, torture and execution by Catholics are described as trivial incidents (including the horrors of the Inquisition) whereas the crimes executed by the revolutionaries during the French Revolution are phrased in words of horror and disgust (as they should be).

On reading several interviews with this writer I found him to be a very conservative Catholic apologist with extreme opinions on the role of Catholicism and Protestantism throughout history. In one interview he goes so far as to say that Catholicism was the defense against fascism during World War 2 whereas Protestants were exceptionally susceptible to the temptations of Fascism. No mention of course of fascism in Catholic countries like Italy and Spain. The widely criticized role of the Catholic Church during this war is dismissed as being the only pragmatic stance possible.

I have no problem with reading works of conservative thinkers (I am an admirer of the books of John Gray - who Mr. Burleigh dismisses as a one-language writer who doesn't know his sources) but this extreme bias makes this book worthless as a work of history. There is no way to know where Mr. Burleigh is accurately describing events and where his personal views distort the picture.

In the introduction the writer quotes his editor as saying that he (the writer) has a problem writing narrative because he write books on ideas. Frankly, the lack of ideas is one of the most striking characteristics of this book. The writing plods from one description to the next in a less than coherent fashion. Burleigh mentions many unimportant details, often with a sort of 'tongue-in-cheek' attitude, especially, I think, to make his 'bad guys' look worse. Well, humor is not this writer's strong point. And really, must we be told that Marat suffered from Psoriasis, three times!

Rosanne says

Burleigh expected me to have profound prescience of French national history. To my regret, I don't. Made this a hard read.

Diane says

Fascinating history of the relationship between church and state in a Europe between the French Revolution and World War I. The book's subject matter is quite unique, and I felt that the author was very fair to the church, which is a rarity in academic writing. My only complaint is that he didn't give much insight into why

different governments treating churches and religion differently, but that may just be the political scientist in me coming out.

Marc says

Very broad overview, but very tendentious: Burleigh wants to prove at all costs that religion after the French Revolution was not dead. In that sense, this book is laudable as a corrective on the sometimes dominating view, but he neglects a number of other topics (such as the conflictual attitude of religion towards science). In between, there's dismissive comment against politically correct thinking and modernist architecture.

Rodrigo Salazar says

Don't know the original version in English but it's translation to Spanish has the effect of the most powerful sleeping pill ever invented! :)

I gave the book more than 5 chances wondering if it was me already tired after the day's journey but it's definitely not my tiredness. I find the writing unnecessarily complex, un-linear and un-concrete.

I swapped the book for "The birth of the modern world" from C. A. Bayly which covers about the same period in history... Let's see.

D.L. Morrese says

I can't say I liked this one. It provides a good history of the century or so between the French Revolution and the Great War, but the tone of the book is often more judgmental than analytical, hinting at the author's biases without providing any explanations for them. His overarching point that nationalistic and ideological movements are effectively religions is, I think, a stretch. Yes, they are religion-like. When they gain power, they exhibit some of the worst characteristics of religions. They become dogmatic. They persecute (and sometimes execute) dissenters. They develop rites, rituals, slogans, and holidays. They indulge in propaganda and indoctrination. They idolize their leaders and honor their martyrs.... But religion requires something in addition to all that. It needs to have some mystical, ethereal, supernatural, magical, or metaphysical aspect. I'm not sure things like the French Revolution or various nationalistic movements have enough of these to qualify.

What is interesting is a point the author does not make. Regardless of how noble, how insightful, or how enlightened the founding principles of a movement may be, when it gains followers and influence, it degenerates to become, well, religion-like. This may be an effect of something inherent in human behavior. People, as individuals, can exhibit clear, logical thinking, at least on specific tasks for short periods. But in groups, and over time, insanity reigns. Despite our pretenses, humans are not rational animals.

Pieter says

Na enkele keren het boek te hebben opgepakt, heb ik eindelijk de tijd gevonden om tot het eind door te lezen.

Eigen aan het christendom is de bekende uitspraak van Christus toen hij werd gevraagd naar zijn houding tegenover de Romeinse overheid: 'Geef wat van de keizer is aan de keizer, en geef aan God wat God toebehoort.'

Eerdere utopische experimenten zoals Campanella, More en Jan van Leiden trachten de hemel op aarde te transponeren. De stap van de studietafel naar de werkelijkheid bleek enkel haalbaar met het nodige geweld.

Verdeeldheid in het christelijke huis door de opkomst van het protestantisme, ondergroeven de positie van de Katholieke Kerk, chronologisch gezien in Engeland, Duitsland en Frankrijk. Vaak wordt ook verwezen naar de rol van de joden en de opkomst van de vrijmetselarij, ideologisch gestut door de Verlichting.

Burleigh schetst bijvoorbeeld de verdeeldheid tussen de jezuïeten en de jansenisten. De Franse Revolutie trachtte met bloed de Kerk in te kapselen in een Frans-republikeinse traditie. Het land werd sindsdien verdeeld tussen links-rechts, katholiek-seculier, monarchist-republikein zonder dat de kampen zo homogeen waren als wordt beweerd. Bonald en Maistre passeren de revue. Langs links werd onder de vlag van de tricolore republiek de macht van de Kerk (onderwijs!) in te perken. De zaak-Dreyfus duikt op, waarbij de schrijver vooral de rol van het leger benadrukt in het anti-kamp, eerder dan de Kerk. Daarna komt ook Action Française om de hoek kijken. De pennen en daarna de zwaarden worden gewet in aanloop van de Eerste Wereldoorlog.

In Engeland is de Katholieke Kerk eerder gemarginaliseerd en geassocieerd met de Ierse aanwezigheid. De Industriële Revolutie en verstedelijking doen de aanwezigheid op de wekelijkse diensten afnemen. Maar dankzij de Victoriaanse periode wordt de moraal (vaak dus ontdaan hun religieuze context) hoog gehouden, zelfs bij socialisten als Robert Owen. En vele sociale initiatieven in de schoot van het Engelse christendom (Leger des Heils en andere) hebben aandacht voor de armoede, in Vlaanderen verbonden met de figuur van priester Daens.

Duitsland was door de Dertigjarige Oorlog zwaar getroffen door de tegenstelling katholiek-protestant. De figuur van Bismarck die het gewicht van het protestantse Pruisen liet doorwegen en het vijandsbeeld van de katholieke Oostenrijk, deden de katholieke Beiers en Rijnlanders in de politieke marge verdwijnen. De zogenaamde Kulturkampf. De wisselende bondgenootschappen (onder andere tegen het socialisme) schiepen kansen. Verbazingwekkend dat op 1914 de keizer iedereen op dezelfde lijn kreeg. Marx en Engels liepen niet ver met hun internationalistische boodschap.

In Rusland was het politieke geweld vanwege anarchisten naar West-Europese normen ongezien. Tegelijk had geen enkel Europees land een sterker cultureel figuur dan Dostojevski in zijn rangen om tegengewicht te bieden aan het opduikende nihilisme. "Boze Geesten" blijft het basiswerk voor wie de gevaren van de politieke revolutie wil leren kennen.

Tussendoor zien we ook het driemanschap Mazzini-Garibaldi-Cavour de strijd aan te gaan met de paus, Frankrijk en uiteraard Oostenrijk. In de poging om het verdeelde land te verenigen. Zelfs in deze kringen trachtte waar mogelijk het katholieke geloof te gebruiken om het nationale gevoel te schragen.

Het vervolg "Heilige Doelen" ligt al klaar...

Wolfe Tone says

Very Interesting take on the politics of religion and the religion of politics. Smart and original. Unfortunately I couldn't give it a higher rating, because it's a bit biased. Burleigh is quite the conservative, and his take on Catholicism and liberalism isn't entirely accurate. But still worth reading.

Kevin Downey says

When the European Union made its first attempt at creating a constitution a few years ago, the drafters of the document rejected a proposal to make reference to Europe's Christian heritage. *Earthly Powers* is an exploration of the conflict between religion and secular politics as it played out in Europe from the French Revolution to the First World War, and shows how secular politics came to assume many of the societal roles previously played by the church, particularly in such fields as education.

I found the book challenging: Michael Burleigh presents a wide-ranging survey of European political and social history, and while I am broadly familiar with the period that Burleigh covers, he discusses many individuals and movements with which I am thoroughly unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity probably explains why I struggled with the book initially: I have read Burleigh's previous writings on the Third Reich, and had no trouble with his prose style as he addressed a more familiar set of characters and events. Ultimately, though, I found *Earthly Powers* to be a satisfying exploration of the subject, and I look forward to his follow-up, in which he takes the story up to the present day and offers speculations on the future of "post-Christian" Europe, including what role religion may have to play.

Dermot Nolan says

Having read blood and rage and being struck with a worry that this might be another right wing polemic I am happy to report that Burleigh keeps his hair on and at least makes an attempt to be impartial. The result is an interesting well written account of the interchanging role of religion and politics in the lives of the average citizen of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dfordoom says

Earthly Powers, Michael Burleigh

Michael Burleigh's *Earthly Powers* is a fascinating history of religion and politics from the French Revolution to the First World War. It was published in 2005 and followed in 2006 by a second volume, *Sacred Causes*, taking the story up to modern times.

Burleigh is an academic who has taught at Oxford among other places. How a non-Marxist like Burleigh ever got a teaching job at modern British university remains a mystery. He is also open-minded and not hostile to Christianity, which adds to the mystery.

For anyone who thinks the culture wars are a modern phenomenon this book will come as a revelation. The culture wars started in earnest with the French Revolution. And raged throughout the nineteenth century. Most bitterly of all in France where anticlericalism became a kind of secular religion, but also in Italy and in Germany and indeed the whole of Europe. The main theme of the book is the rise of secular substitutes for religion, most notably the idea of the state as a focus for religious devotion.

Some religious leaders, most notably some of the nineteenth century popes, fought back, but mostly the nineteenth century saw the Christian religion not merely on the defensive but adopting the kind of defeatist attitudes that have become so characteristic of mainstream Christianity in our own day. Most fatally the century saw Christianity implicitly accepting the new superiority of the state and falling back on a species of vaguely Christian socialism or do-goodism or various other compromises with the rising tide of liberalism.

Bismarck's war on Roman Catholicism, the kulturkampf, was a key struggle.

The end result was the exaltation of the state as an alternative religion, a development that would have catastrophic consequences in the twentieth century. The willingness of the disciples of Reason to resort to mass murder (a quarter of a million people were slaughtered in the suppression of counter-revolutionary revolts in the Vendée during the French Revolution) was a particularly chilling foretaste of the future.

In the nineteenth century though the culture wars mostly followed the pattern we are familiar with today - bitter struggles to control the education of the young and to undermine the family.

A superb and fascinating book presenting an almost unique view of the history of the nineteenth century as essentially a religious struggle.

Tobias says

I found this book quite stodgy. The later chapters were full of details about the protestant and catholic churches accomodations with the state (antidisestablishmentarianism) and social movements and the approach to the First World War and also the more extreme actions of 19th century Russian revolutionaires. But the details didn't appear to congregate to much in a way of an arguement.
