

ALL THE NEW RIGHT THAT'S FIT TO PRINT

Black Mass

Apocalyptic Religions and the Death of Utopia

John Gray

New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007

Reviewed by Edward Dutton

In *Black Mass*, John Gray systematically argues that many Western political ideologies are “religious” in nature, something he claims has caused “untold suffering.” This is summarized in the first line: “Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion” (p. 1). Early Christianity was a utopian movement. It held that the end times were at hand and that one day the utopian “Kingdom of Heaven” would come to pass after a catastrophic battle between good and evil. Gray argues that this utopian thinking “has haunted Western life ever since,” and it is to be contrasted with the eastern and western pagan belief in cycles. In particular, utopian thinking can be observed in intellectual and political movements that expound the “myth” of progress towards a perfect state: “the myth of the End” (p. 210). Gray argues that from Marx to Hitler and from the Taliban to George W. Bush, Judeo-Christian influenced thought is ultimately in the mould of a millenarian cult. And, as such, the United States has effectively been captured by utopians and, to a lesser extent, so has Britain.

It should be emphasized immediately that this book – though academic insofar as it attempts to present a rigorous argument – is aimed at the educated layman, and this is often reflected not just in the style but in the depth of many of the arguments.

In the first chapter, Gray summarizes the early history of the Western ideology of progress, beginning with St. Augustine and his belief that “evil can be destroyed” (a belief Gray claims has “resurfaced in the Bush administration”) and moving on to the Gnostics, Reformation cults, Hegel, Marx, and Positivism. These movements, he claims, either look to an idealized future or the resurrection of an idealized past. He then proceeds to examine supposedly egalitarian movements such as the various sects in Cromwell’s interregnum in seventeenth-

century England and the French Revolution. Indeed, he observes that the “French Terror,” in particular, is the “prototype for subsequent millenarian revolution” (p. 27). There must be an apocalyptic battle between good and evil so that the new utopia can arise.

Gray then proceeds to argue that neo-conservatism has all the hallmarks of a utopian movement, particularly since 9/11. The “Bush administration behaved like a revolutionary regime” (p. 29), Gray claims, because it limited freedom, set up concentration camps, and engaged in pre-emptive attacks. “Under the leadership of Tony Blair, Britain suffered, in a more limited way, a similar transformation” (p. 29). According to Gray, the American situation is far more acute than the British, because not only does the US government believe the utopian idea that American “democracy” is perfect and can be applied everywhere, but those at the top—including the president—are “fundamentalist Protestants” (or “theo-conservatives” as Gray terms them) who genuinely believe that the battles they fight in Iraq are a prelude to Armageddon itself.

Gray argues persuasively that Soviet Communism was likewise millenarian, aiming to create a utopia that required world government and the transformation of human nature. (Gray even points out the little-known fact that Stalin supported research that attempted to cross-breed monkeys and humans to create stronger soldiers.)

National Socialism is also portrayed as millenarian. Hitler, we are told, would not have stopped with Danzig. Nazism, inspired by “a farrago of scientific racism” (p. 1), aspired to create a super-race of human beings, to conquer the world through a series of “titanic wars,” and to exterminate all of its enemies, everywhere on the planet. Gray claims that very idea of racial thinking is ultimately grounded in the Enlightenment ideology of progress. It is utopian thinking and must be expunged.

Even Islamic fundamentalism is argued, again persuasively, to be a “Western” ideology in the tradition of apocalyptic Christianity.

Gray then looks at how millenarianism entered the political “mainstream,” especially in Britain and America. He suggests that Margaret Thatcher’s “neo-liberalism was a successor ideology to Marxism” (p. 83), since neo-liberals believe that only one system—the free market, minimum government, democracy, etc.—is correct and has to be “imposed” accordingly.

Gray also contends that Tony Blair, having accepted the “destruction

of socialism," remolded his party in a Thatcherite image. Blair, however, did not believe in the "imaginary era of minimum government" (p. 95). He is a neo-conservative, and as such he is religious and also promotes religion for reasons of social cohesion. Gray summarizes that both Blair and Bush "practiced a missionary style of politics whose goal was nothing less than the salvation of mankind" (p. 104).

Though *Black Mass* is commendable for its breadth of scope and thought-provoking thesis, there are a number of difficulties.

Most obviously, Gray appears unfamiliar with a philosopher who has effectively argued many of the same points, but who offers a far deeper analysis and a more radical alternative. I am referring to Alain de Benoist, most notably his book *On Being a Pagan (Comment peut-on être païen?)*, which first appeared in French in 1981 and then in English translation in 2004.¹

In *On Being a Pagan*, Benoist systematically lays out the difference between indigenous European polytheism and Biblical (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic) monotheism. For Benoist, the distinctive aspects of Western thought criticized by Gray—such as linear progressive history, singular truth, intolerance, and utopianism—stem from monotheism. Western intellectual life is thus a kind of battle between monotheism and polytheism, with the Renaissance being a movement (within Christian domains) towards paganism and the Reformation a counter-movement towards monotheism.

Gray may be correct that the ideologies he discusses parallel or arise from millenarian Christianity, but Benoist provides a deeper analysis, arguing that millenarian Christianity stems from monotheistic Judaism. Gray rightly points out that the term "West" is a shifting category, but his model of "Western" religious thought seems defined in terms of Biblical monotheism and omits paganism entirely. Benoist, however, identifies current "Western thought" as an outgrowth of Biblical monotheism, i.e., a Near Eastern import imposed upon much of Europe through violence, and he points out that paganism is the indigenous Western religion. More significantly, Gray implicitly argues that, in effect, pagan-style religion is the best kind: "at least at its best religion has been an attempt to deal with mystery rather than the hope that mystery will be unveiled" (p. 210). This is precisely what

¹ Alain de Benoist, *On Being a Pagan*, trans. John Graham, ed. Greg Johnson (Atlanta: Ultra, 2004).

Benoist argues in far greater conceptual depth. *Black Mass* is uncannily close to Benoist's work, minus everything that would make an editor of a mainstream publishing house uncomfortable.

It is possible that Gray senses this resemblance to European New Right thinkers like Benoist, because he strenuously tries to distinguish himself from the "far right," a term he fails to define. Gray began as a Hayekian "neo-liberal" in the 1980s. Since then, he has been tip-toeing rightward, towards a skeptical, pluralistic, post-humanistic form of conservatism, pausing along the way to produce a number of books in which he insinuates that he is now as far to the right as one can reasonably go.

Another problem is that Gray uses the term "religion" without really defining it. This is odd, because functionalists such as Clifford Geertz² define religion in a manner that actually lends credence to Gray's view that movements that are not generally regarded as religious, such as neo-conservatism, are in fact "religious," and indeed are specifically "utopian." Scholars like Bryan Wilson also see utopianism as a specific kind of religion.³

Gray uses the term "utopian" very broadly, referring to any movement whose goals are "unrealistic." But are there not "unrealistic" dimensions to all religions? Isn't the tribal shaman's aim of pleasing the spirits "unrealistic"? He argues that "utopians" are "irrational," but is there anything necessarily more rational about the Hindu view of cycles of rise and fall? Is this cyclical view not equally a way of imbuing the world with meaning that can never be empirically verified?

Gray also fails to distinguish between different kinds of utopianism. But surely there are important distinctions between Thatcherite neo-liberalism and Communism, or between Communism and National Socialism. Neo-liberalism, for instance, does not require the abolition of private property or the transformation of human nature, but Communism does. And surely the goal of Communism—a world state where private property, selfishness, and scarcity are abolished—is less realistic than putting Germans in a single ethnically homogenous state with one leader. Would Gray brand a conservative attempt to undo utopian social engineering as just more utopian social engineering?

² Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Bristol: Tavistock, 1966), 4.

³ See Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1970).

Gray asserts that "the world" would be better if it were "well rid of" utopianism (p. 209). Yet Gray also realizes that we are in a paradoxical situation where "An irrational faith in the future is encrypted into contemporary life, and a shift to realism may be a utopian ideal" (p. 204). But even granting that utopianism and progressivism are essentially ungrounded articles of religious faith, does that mean they are intrinsically negative? Surely we should judge them by their results, not all of which are negative.

There are many theories of why "the West" is so highly advanced. Could it be that the West progresses precisely because it has a religious ideology of progress? Anthropologist Roger Sandall points out in *The Culture Cult* that countries dominated by religions that emphasize "mystery" have progressed far more slowly than those which, in Gray's terms, are "utopian" to a certain extent but yet open to new ideas.⁴

Are scientists pursuing cures for Alzheimer's disease or cancer "utopian"? Is it "utopianism" to think the world is improvable, just not perfectible? Is it "utopianism" to reject the idea that an occult force of progress is leading to necessary improvements, but to still think that human beings can make all sorts of contingent improvements? Impossible dreams may be destructive, but are possible dreams? Pure idealism is destructive, but so is pure cynicism. Political movements lacking idealism have trouble motivating people, and often cede the world to destructive utopians. Even the Greek city states—whatever their pagan beliefs—sought to advance their interests through political, athletic, and artistic competitions, "progress" by another name. In light of this, I wonder if all "progressive" and "utopian" impulses or movements are quite as negative as Gray implies.

Another problem is that the last third of *Black Mass* is superfluous. After an often needlessly abusive discussion of Tony Blair, Gray examines utopianism in American politics beginning with the Puritans, moving through the "utopian" American Revolution, and culminating in neo-conservatism, pointing out that Bush's Republicans are backed by three quarters of Born Again Christians in the United States. Gray observes that, under Bush, apocalyptic thinking has returned in a literal form—with Christian fundamentalists fighting "terrorist" Islamic

⁴ Roger Sandall, *The Culture Cult: On Designer Tribalism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001).

fundamentalists. However, Gray then feels the need to repeat in somewhat turgid detail the rise of neo-conservatism in the United States, at which point Gray might as well have taken his leave. But instead we are treated to a lengthy and quite unnecessary chapter on the latest Iraq War, peppered with little barbs against the United States, accusing it of hypocrisy, human rights abuses, and general stupidity.

A final problem is that Gray frequently gives vent to his emotions and prejudices without feeling any need to justify them. This is annoying, and it makes it difficult to take this sometimes intelligent work seriously. Two examples will suffice. First, Gray asserts that religions like "Shinto and Hindu nationalism" have used violence, but apparently only Christianity and Islam make violence "systematic." How can this distinction be supported? Gray fails to tell us. He also launches into quite fantastic—and apocalyptic—tirades about global warming and how it will set off a "rash of cults" (p. 209). Perhaps, but he does not substantiate these claims. I accept that this is a popular book, but I suspect that even the "educated layman" would find such unjustified asides damaging to Gray's intellectual credibility.

John Gray's *Black Mass* is a highly readable book that persuasively argues that the remnant ideologies of our time, no matter how secularist they claim to be, are rooted in Biblical millenarianism. Gray does not, however, explore millenarianism's origins or alternatives as radically as does Alain de Benoist. But perhaps Gray goes as far as he feels is possible within the taboos that regulate the intellectual mainstream. If his muse should someday require a freer forum, maybe he will discover the pages of *Nouvelle Ecole* and *The Occidental Quarterly*.

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