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Daniel J. Mahoney

“The Abusive Exploitation of the Human Religious Sentiment”: Michael Burleigh as Historian of “Political Religion”

Michael Burleigh, a distinguished English historian, is the author of a remarkable trilogy on the “political religions” that have been the scourge of late modernity. In his authoritative *The Third Reich: A New History* (2000)¹ Burleigh studied Nazi Germany as a form of *totalitarian* society. In doing so, he rehabilitated the category of “political religion” as the indispensable interpretive framework for deciphering the National Socialist enigma. That book provides a detailed account of the “moral breakdowns and transformations of an advanced industrial society,” one where Hitler’s “rage against the world was capable of infinite generalization.” Burleigh eloquently locates the atavistic modernism at the heart of National Socialism:

Nazi ideology offered redemption from a national ontological crisis, to which it was attracted like a predatory shark to blood. . . .

It lacked Communism’s deferred, but dialectically assured, ‘happy ending,’ and was haunted by and suffused with apocalyptic imaginings and beliefs which were self-consciously pagan and primitive. Although it paradoxically claimed to speak the language of applied reason . . . Nazism had one foot in the dark, irrational world of Teutonic myth. (*TTR*, 12)

In the Introduction to *The Third Reich* and again in the later volumes of his tril-

ogy, Burleigh expresses his fundamental debts to earlier antitotalitarian thinkers including Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron, and Waldemar Gurian. They were among the first to confront this strange phenomenon of “political religion” in its hyper-modernist manifestations. With their help, Burleigh explores what the early twentieth-century Italian Catholic statesman and political thinker Luigi Sturzo called the “abusive exploitation of the human religious sentiment” by the totalitarian ideologies of our time. Burleigh’s eloquently written books are informed by impressive erudition and by deep moral seriousness, but he is not a philosophic historian in the manner of those such as Alain Besançon and Martin Malia who have delved deeply into the intellectual origins and the elusive “pseudo-reality” posited by totalitarian ideology.² He is, instead, an antitotalitarian historian of evident theistic and Christian conviction.

Burleigh shows how National Socialism was founded on an almost unimaginable demonic willfulness, with a monstrous

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disregard for “charity, reason, and skepticism.” Like its *frère-ennemi* Bolshevism, Nazism aimed to create a “New Man” who in this case intensified the evils of the “old Adam” and who, as with Bolshevism, would discard the moral limits that are integral to any modicum of decency and civilized human existence. In Burleigh’s capacious view, the Holocaust “does not exhaust everything there is to say about National Socialism.” But this crime that cried out to heaven was indeed the horrific logical consequence of a fevered social doctrine that reduced man to a “beast of prey” and that rejected any superintending principle above the human will.

The Church and the New Barbarism

In both *The Third Reich* and *Sacred Causes*,³ Burleigh emphasizes the widely unknown or deliberately ignored fact that the strongest opposition to Nazi ideology and criminality came from conservative “men of God.” This is no accident. While left-wing critics of Nazism wrongly saw in it only a virulent version of either “late capitalism” or German nationalism, its conservative Christian opponents were far more sensitive to the movement’s profoundly antitraditional character. The more discerning among them saw in Nazism nothing less than a “revolution of nihilism.” And not a few of them courageously rose to the challenge of resisting the new barbarism.

In addition to Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen, the “lion of Münster,” who in a series of famous sermons in 1941 denounced the murderous Nazi euthanasia campaign, some of the Austrian and German bishops did not shrink from attacking the “racist madness” of Nazism. In his great encyclical *Mit brennender sorge* (1938), written pointedly in German and clandestinely smuggled into

Germany, Pope Pius XI attacked modern racialism, the cynical Nazi appropriation of Christian symbolism, nationalist idolatry, and a false cult of human greatness. Likewise, in the first encyclical of his pontificate, *Summi pontificis*, released in the fall of 1939, Pius XII affirmed the “fundamental unity” of the human race and expressed his profound sympathy for the plight of Poland. The whole world had no doubt at the time whom the same pontiff had in mind in his 1942 Christmas message when he spoke of “the hundreds of thousands of innocent people put to death or doomed to slow extinction, sometimes merely because of their race or descent.” This prudent, perhaps too prudent, diplomat-pope, despising National Socialism but solicitous of putting an end to a suicidal total war, helped inspire the heroic witness of groups like *Témoignage chrétien* in France (whose anti-Nazi pamphleteers included such eminent philosophers and theologians as Gaston Fessard and Henri de Lubac) as well as the Italian Catholics who saved tens of thousands of Jews in the fall of 1944 when the Nazis unleashed full scale war against the Jews in occupied Italy.

The rewriting of history to suggest that the Christian West was somehow culpable in the murderous agenda of the National Socialists is one of the greatest intellectual distortions of our time. Burleigh has done a great service by recovering an appreciation for the impregnable wall that separated the Christian religion—with its affirmation of the fundamental unity of the human race and of conscience informed by right reason—from both the “horrors of applied rationality” (communism) and the National Socialist religion of the absolutized human will. This project of historical and moral restoration achieves something like its finished form in his magisterial two-volume history of

political religion, *Earthly Powers*⁴ and *Sacred Causes*.

The Theory and Practice of Political Religion

In keeping with a venerable conservative-liberal tradition, in both works Burleigh highlights the links between Jacobinism, the secular “civil religion” *par excellence*, and the political religions that would do so much to despoil the twentieth century. Jacobinism was not only proto-totalitarian, it was the prototype for later and more fully developed ideological justifications of terror and tyranny.

Burleigh observes in *Sacred Causes* that the term “political religion” has a “more venerable history than many imagine.” It was widely used after 1917 to describe the new regimes established by Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin. In the middle of the nineteenth century the French historian and political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville had already invoked the idea of political or secular religion. He did so in the opening section of *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856) when discussing the social passions unleashed by the French Revolution of 1789. The Revolution “took on the appearance of a religious revolution” despite the contempt in which its progenitors and principal actors held the Catholic Church in particular, and the Christian religion in general. It brought forth a uniquely modern fusion of religious sentiment and rationalism, a “new kind of religion, an incomplete religion, it is true, without God, without rituals, and without life after death, but one which nevertheless, like Islam, flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs.”

For its twentieth-century analysts and critics—heirs to both Tocqueville and Burke—secular religions, especially in their totalitarian forms, are so horrific

and so destructive of human dignity in no small part because they are *idolatrous*. They erase the distinction, integral to Christian civilization and to decent and humane governance, between the things of God and the things of Caesar. They establish an unprecedented *monism* that makes the theocratic despotisms of the past seem humanly bearable. But—and here Burleigh’s approach is wanting, or at least incomplete—it is still necessary to painstakingly confront the *philosophical* sources of the misplaced modern emphasis on human self-sovereignty. As Pierre Manent has pointed out, for example, communism does not stand as an antithesis to modern democracy; rather, it can be located on a continuum with modern democracy in its inebriated confidence in Man as the “sovereign author” of the human world, in its faith in progress and “humanitarian” values, and in its belief that human beings are essentially “historical” beings un beholden either to nature or to God. At the same time, communism destroyed everything that is decent and good about the democratic order. Political philosophy is indispensable for unraveling this conundrum and for more fully exploring the vexing question of the relationship between modern rationalism and the totalitarian movements and ideologies that “radicalize” rationalism’s underlying premises.

Burleigh’s Project

In *Earthly Powers*, Burleigh surveys the prehistory of the twentieth-century totalitarianisms. He provides a fascinating account of Puritan messianism, the proto-totalitarianism of the Jacobins, the quasi-religious cult of the nation, the rise of humanitarianism as a self-conscious social ethos and even as a “religion” in the pseudophilosophical expression given to it

by August Comte. A powerful chapter inspired by Dostoevsky’s *Devils* explores the deep convergence of moral nihilism and political fanaticism in nineteenth-century Russia. Burleigh also expertly chronicles the response of the Christian churches to the rise of secular ideology, as well as their responses to the modern “social question.” His book breaks off with the bloody apocalypse of 1914, when liberal and Christian Europe confronted the abyss and was on the verge of committing suicide.

Sacred Causes picks up where *Earthly Powers* leaves off. The twentieth century witnessed a radical intensification of Sturzo’s “abusive exploitation of the human religious sentiment”—an exploitation that, like “earlier attempts to realize heaven or earth,” would result in “hell for many people.” In the nineteenth century the “dystopian strain” mainly occurred *at the level of thought* (Burleigh provocatively refers to “the hare brained schemes” of August Comte and Charles Fourier, the “moral insanity of Russian nihilists,” as well as “the scientific socialism” of Marx and Engels “which was morally insane in other ways”). The twentieth century turned out to be the century of *applied* ideology, of secular religions warring against the tripartite Western heritage of biblical religion, classical wisdom, and liberal constitutionalism.

The Totalitarian Political Religions

The most important chapter in *Sacred Causes* is the synthetic second chapter on “The Totalitarian Political Religions.” It brilliantly surveys historical facts and moral perspectives that have largely been forgotten, displaced by the dominant “antifascist” narrative of the twentieth century. That narrative gives communism a free pass by locating evil in the twentieth century in an ill-defined “fascism,” a word that is sometimes used so indiscriminately

as to include both National Socialism and the civilization it set out to destroy. In the antifascist narrative, the central drama of the twentieth century was not the struggle between “liberal and Christian civilization” and a new ideological barbarism but rather the never-ending struggle between “progress”—whose ultimate victory is guaranteed—and the forces of “reaction.” In a more moderate form, this faith in progress is the common faith—or common illusion—of modern democratic societies. Burleigh’s work is blessedly free of such facile progressivism.

The chapter on “The Totalitarian Political Religions” shows exactly what was at stake in the instantiation of the “secular messianism” that first came to the forefront in the nineteenth century. Early on, Burleigh quotes the Russian religious philosopher Semyon Frank—a Jewish convert to Orthodox Christianity and one of the contributors to the remarkable collection *Vehki (Landmarks)*. That 1909 manifesto powerfully challenged the Russian intelligentsia’s addiction to “progressive” ideals that eschewed the spiritual life, renounced any ethical affirmation of limits, and that demonstrated limitless indulgence toward the revolutionary Left. In his contribution to *Vehki* Frank took sure aim at the “nihilistic moralism” of the prerevolutionary Russian intelligentsia:

Sacrificing himself for the sake of this idea, he does not hesitate to sacrifice other people for it. Among his contemporaries he sees either merely the victims of the world’s evil he dreams of eradicating or the perpetrators of that evil. . . . This feeling of hatred for the enemies of the people forms the concrete and active psychological foundation of his life. Thus the great love of mankind of the future gives birth to a great hatred for people; the passion for organizing an earthly paradise becomes a passion for destruction. (*SC*, 39)

This “passion for destruction” is coextensive with the “ideological” dream to

create another world, another reality. The best philosophical critics of the ideological project have shown how the aspiration to “change the world,” to alter the structure of reality, gives rise to a “surreality,” an imaginary present and future that is at odds with the nature of men and societies and even the ontological structure of the real world. In their own way, the ideologists are aware of this. The auspicious gap between reality and ideological surreality can only be bridged by what Solzhenitsyn in his *Nobel Lecture* has called the twin pillars of the ideological project: violence and lies. However, the revolutionary enterprise necessarily becomes routinized, stale, and sclerotic (witness the final decades of the Soviet regime—the “years of stagnation,” as they came to be called). Still, the never wholly extinguished impulse of the ideological project is a deep-seated nihilistic Manicheanism. The Bolshevik outlook remained to the end “essentially Manichean, dividing the world into good and evil, light and darkness, old and new, a view which led to the demonization of their enemies” (SC, 75).

These enemies famously ended up including “heretics” within their own ranks. The demonized included not merely “class enemies” (the bourgeoisie, aristocrats, independent peasants), not only “heretical” communists, but especially those intellectuals and ordinary believers who embodied a more traditional understanding of the world. In particular, the Bolsheviks “resolved to eradicate Christianity as such.” They unleashed several waves of savage persecution against the Orthodox Church that are chronicled in detail by Burleigh. In the first wave, bishops and priests were brutally murdered or subjected to show trials. In a second wave of persecution that coincided with the collectivization of agriculture, churches were closed and bells removed from churches that had been at the

center of Russian village life for centuries. And from 1937 to 1941, tens of thousands of priests and nuns were killed, while others were sent to labor camps to perish on the tundra. Eventually, the leadership of the Orthodox Church was infiltrated and even controlled by the atheistic authorities. When reflecting on this scandalous fact, it must be remembered that Orthodox Christians experienced the worst persecution of the Christian religion in human history; untold numbers of believers conducted themselves in a spirit of fidelity and suffered martyrdom.

Burleigh also considers the other manifestations of ideological Manicheanism in the interwar period. He describes the intense decades-long struggle between Italian fascism and the Catholic Church to shape the lives and loyalties of young people. He also traces the myriad ways the Nazis dehumanized their enemies. The evocation of “blood”—of bloodlust and sacrifice and destruction as ends in themselves—was central to the Nazi view of man and nature. And the crude and incoherent assault on Judaism as the source of all the evils in the contemporary world (Jews being blamed simultaneously for “plutocratic” liberalism and rapacious Bolshevism) was at the core of the Nazis’ fevered redefinition of reality.

The Bolsheviks earlier had created a secular “theocracy” that aped the hierarchies of traditional religion without any of its moral wisdom or restraints. In one respect at least the Nazis went a step further. Their secular religion promoted an emotional and aesthetic intoxication, symbolized by the Nuremberg rallies, that made “everyone” a participant in these deluded collective rituals. The SS, Burleigh suggests, was the nihilist avant-garde of a hypermodern pagan religion that bowed to nothing except its own willfulness. The men of the SS were “insanely fertile

in destructiveness” and “their subscription to the codes of their own bureaucracy was never incompatible with the most irrational, pathological fanaticism.” This combination of bureaucracy and “moral autism,” so eloquently described by Burleigh, would reveal its demonic face in the murderous rage of the *Einsatzgruppen* on the eastern front, who killed millions even before the systematic unfolding of the Final Solution, and in the sadistic and cold “industrial rationality” of the Nazi death camps.

The Church Between Liberalism and Totalitarianism

In an important chapter in *Sacred Causes* entitled “The Church in the Age of the Dictators” Burleigh provides an exhaustive account of “the murderous conflict between church and state” in Mexico, Spain, and Soviet Russia during the interwar period. It is easy today to chastise the church for its hesitancy in accommodating itself to the full range of “liberal” and “republican” movements and regimes. But Burleigh reveals just how “illiberal” various forms of republicanism could be (the murder of 7,000 clergy in republican Spain between July and December 1936 is the most chilling manifestation of this phenomenon.) While responding forthrightly to ferocious anticlericalism in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s as well as to the persecution “raging within the unhappy borders of Russia,” Pope Pius XI continued Leo XIII’s policy of semi-neutrality with respect to forms of government. Burleigh recounts, for example, how the Vatican initially accepted the establishment of the Spanish Republic in 1931 with equanimity. The Vatican also showed much more moderation and good sense than the Spanish episcopacy in its dealings with Franco during the Spanish Civil War (the Vatican was rightly suspi-

cious of Franco’s alliance with the Falangists, a secular movement of the totalitarian Right). Nonetheless, even the profoundly antitotalitarian Pius XI, a persistent and eloquent critic of the totalizing aspirations of the pagan state, remained deeply suspicious of liberal or bourgeois republicanism in its dominant forms. Not enough distinctions were made, and constitutional democracy was identified with the most extreme versions of philosophical liberalism. The Catholic Church in the United Kingdom and the United States provided the most notable exception to this antidemocratic tendency in Catholic thought.

As Burleigh shows, the church had an honorable record in fighting totalitarian political religions because it knew exactly what was at stake in the ideological “sacralization” of politics. However, it underestimated the moral resources of constitutional democracy and overestimated the prospects for Catholic “corporatism” in countries such as Austria and Portugal. At the end of the Second World War, the pontificate of Pope Pius XII “decided to abandon its prudent agnosticism towards forms of government in favor of democracy.” This change was motivated in part by a deepening appreciation of the crucial role of “human rights” in the proper defense of human dignity (a “Christian democratic” position theorized by the influential Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain). In addition, a more liberal and activist ethos had arisen out of Christian currents in the resistance movements during the Second World War. There was also the need to mobilize Catholics for active citizenship and the defense of basic liberties against the Communist threat in France, Germany, and Italy after 1945. Burleigh tells this important story with the requisite nuance and scholarly care.

In chapter 6 of *Sacred Causes* (“The Road to Unfreedom: the Imposition of

Communism after 1945”) Burleigh tells the other half of the story: the brutal imposition of Leninist-Stalinist totalitarianism on unwilling peoples in east-central Europe after 1945. The chapter provides an exhaustive account of the various assaults on the churches in the newly “liberated” Europe. Burleigh makes the heroism and moral grandeur of persecuted leaders of the Catholic Church such as cardinals Mindszenty, Beran, and Wyszynski known to new generations who will surely have never heard their names. Burleigh’s conclusion to this chapter is worthy of extended citation, not least because it reminds us of the crucial role of the churches in providing a space, however limited, for “civil society,” and in preserving an image of the moral order in societies that had been brutalized by ideological lies. Burleigh writes

Within a remarkable short time totalitarian rule had been reimposed on half a continent using a combination of force and fraud. . . . Although they were subjected to relentless assault from state-sponsored atheism, the Christian Churches remained the only licensed sanctuaries from the prevailing world of brutality and lies. Appropriately enough . . . they played an important role in the overthrow of Communism forty years later. (SC, 344)

The Catholic Church’s positive accommodation to liberal democracy was a matter of both principle and prudence and reveals that august institution’s deep-rooted capacity for self-renewal. But the church’s “Christian Democratic” turn also oc-

curred on the eve of an immense cultural revolution that revealed the self-radicalizing propensities of democracy in the modern world. It was not an auspicious conjunction. I am, of course, referring to the cultural and political transformation of the 1960s. This revolution unleashed powerful antinomian and demotic forces lurking beneath the surface of seemingly complacent bourgeois societies.

The churches were lamentably slow in appreciating what was at stake in a full accommodation to the forces of late modernity. A hedonistic youth culture became the order of the day and authoritative institutions were challenged everywhere. The Catholic Church’s salutary efforts at *aggiornamento*, of liturgical, spiritual, and theological renewal, all too often degenerated into what Maritain,

no reactionary himself, suggestively called “kneeling before the world.” As believers had a harder time replicating their beliefs among their children, prominent Western churchmen flirted with progressivist ideologies and turned a blind eye to the fate of Christians behind the Iron Curtain. Most ominously, Christians had an increasingly difficult time articulating the ontological and moral structure that alone provides a sturdy foundation for the liberties and obligations of men. Burleigh tells the story with his characteristic élan and does justice to all the appropriate nuances. But this issue cries out for a more searching reflection on the promise and risks



*The extremism of ideology:
leftists desecrating a corpse in 1930s Spain*

inherent in the church’s accommodation to democratic modernity. Were the anti-nomian excesses of the 1960s inherent in the propensities of democracy itself? Were they bound to come to the forefront once the traditional elements of our societies lost their vigor and self-confidence? More fundamentally, how much has the cultural revolution of the 1960s undermined the continuity of Western civilization? Did a new civilization—antitraditional, hostile to political and social authority, and essentially non-Christian—come into being during those heady and tumultuous days? These questions arise naturally, so to speak, from Burleigh’s own exposition. They highlight the difficulties inherent in any unqualified assent of the Christian churches to democracy, not as a form of government, but as a comprehensive or total way of life.

Today’s World:

Islam and Secular Europe

In the tenth and final chapter of *Sacred Causes* (“Cubes, Domes and Death Cults: Europe after 9/11”) Burleigh recounts the events leading up to “the day that changed the world,” September 11, 2001. He is undoubtedly right that it is necessary to read Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* or Dostoevsky’s *Demons* in order to truly fathom the minds and hearts of those contemporary “nihilists” who, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, are intoxicated with conspiratorial violence and their own set of deadly ideological abstractions. But Burleigh unfortunately overstates the case when he reduces Islamist terrorism to “a cover version of ideas and movements that have occurred in modern Western societies.” As a result he concedes too much to terms like “Islamofascism” that in my view obscure more than they clarify.

Burleigh is on firmer ground when he

criticizes contemporary European elites for their lack of self-confidence and for their willful restriction of European memory. He rightly criticizes those elites who want to reduce the European inheritance to a set of “humanitarian” abstractions as if “democratic” Europe is intelligible without some substantial reference to its Christian past. But like many conservative-minded defenders of the Western tradition, Burleigh makes too many claims for the Christian roots of “modern liberty.” Modern “autonomy,” the quest to create individuals shorn of attachments to every external or “heteronomous” domination, has profound roots in *anti-Christian* philosophical thought. Those associated with the radical Enlightenment self-consciously aimed to create a radically new civilization that owed nothing to the moral inheritance of classical Christianity. These important reservations aside, Burleigh is right to stress the necessarily Christian component of any substantive or morally serious antitotalitarian defense of human dignity. Christianity’s “transcendental focus has set bounds to what the powerful could not, or more importantly, *should not* do by providing moral exemplars of good kingship and evil tyranny” (as Bertrand de Jouvenel has argued modern doctrines of sovereignty—of human self-sovereignty—point in a much more “monistic” or totalitarian direction). One conclusion is clear: the liberal “separation” of state and society depends upon individuals who are fully more “Christian” than “autonomous” in their self-conception and moral bearing.

Sacred Causes has the additional merit of confirming one of the deepest insights of the best “dissident” thought of our time. In light of the profoundly antihuman experiments to live in a world beyond good and evil, it is necessary to rethink our understanding of the moral foundations of

liberty. As the Czech Catholic dissident Vaclav Benda strikingly put it in a remark quoted by Burleigh, in order to overcome totalitarianism, it was necessary “to shake that evil off, escape its power, and to seek the truth.” That invitation to open ourselves to *truth* has immense implications for the responsible exercise of freedom in our all-too-jaded liberal societies.

Paying Tribute to Those Who Understood

In all the volumes of his trilogy Burleigh pays tribute to a series of thinkers “who saw clearly . . . what these movements and regimes were,” who understood without equivocation their pretenses to change reality, their psychological commonalities, and their support for the most hyperbolic violence. The fact that Burleigh provides nearly identical tributes in all three books suggests not only the extent of his debt to the insights of these thinkers but also the sad fact that these wise and humane theorist-witnesses are largely unknown or ignored in “mainstream” intellectual quarters today. It is an indictment of the academy that apologists for European totalitarianism such as the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukacs or the French “existentialist” Jean-Paul Sartre remain prominent in our intellectual life while those who truly illuminated the tragedies of the age are cast into obscurity by the gatekeepers of intellectual prestige.

Waldemar Gurian (1902–54) is a particularly important influence on Burleigh. This Russian Jewish convert to Catholicism came with his mother to Germany in 1912 and fled the country in 1934 when it became apparent that he was being targeted by the Nazi regime. The author of an incisive critique of Communist theory and practice (*Bolshevism: Theory and Practice* [1932]), he was a scourge of Brown and

Red totalitarianism alike. From his Swiss exile in 1936 he published the massive *Hitler and the Christians*, warning Christians that the Nazis would do their best to promote their racialist doctrines under the more palatable guise of a restoration of the spirit of Christian Germany against the alleged perfidies of the Jews. Burleigh rightly credits Gurian with “the most important analysis of Nazi Germany from a Catholic point of view.” Gurian went on to become the founder of the *Review of Politics* at Notre Dame, where he brought the penetrating thought of the best European writers (including Eric Voegelin, Jacques Maritain, Leo Strauss, and Hannah Arendt) to bear on “the crisis of our time.”

Burleigh is also deeply indebted to the various efforts of Eric Voegelin (1901–85) to come to terms with totalitarianism. Recognizing that “his thought is immensely complicated,” he nonetheless locates “one powerful moral consideration that drove it.” This is an aversion, in Voegelin’s own words, to the ideological “swindlers” who gained a “pseudo-identity through asserting one’s power,” through participating in or justifying mass murder. Burleigh highlights Voegelin’s critique of Nazi “racial science” as well as his affirmation, simultaneously moral and scientific, of “the fundamental commonalities between human beings across reaches of time.” Like Voegelin, Burleigh appreciates that “[e]vil (is) a palpable actor in the world” and that the “demoralization” of social science leaves scholars “emasculated” before “evil, immoral, and unethical political ideologies.”

Aron’s Faith Without Illusions

Burleigh also pays his respects to “one of the finest minds in twentieth century France, the liberal conservative sociologist and journalist Raymond Aron.” He praises Aron (1905–83) for his sobriety

and for his “impassioned but limpidly expressed lucidity,” as accurate a description of Aron’s voice that I have ever come across. Burleigh is particularly impressed by Aron’s magisterial two-part analysis of the secular religions (“The Future of Secular Religions”) that first appeared in the exile journal *La France Libre* in July and August 1944.⁵ Aron stands out among Burleigh’s intellectual guides in part because he was not a believer. A self-described “de-Judaized Jew,” he nonetheless had genuine respect for religion. He liked to say that while he could not affirm the truth of transcendental religion in any unqualified way, he had no wish or right to “negate” it. He was an incisive critic of Marxist “prophetism,” of Marxism’s revolutionary historicism and its conflation of facts with desires. He despised the “idolatry” as well as the fanaticism inherent in the Marxist religion of “hyper-rationalism” and pointed out its deep roots in the modern project of making human beings “sovereign lords of nature through knowledge and his own will.” In his writings in *La France Libre* during the Second World War, Aron took particular aim at “the pessimistic irrational religion of the Nazis.”

Writing in 1944, Aron appreciated the untenability of the ideological lie. “It is not easy,” he wrote slyly, “for representatives of *homo sapiens* to believe that Mussolini is always right or that Hitler’s words define good and evil.” But Aron was a chastened or conservative-minded liberal because he knew that liberal rationalism in its nineteenth-century expressions was neither philosophically viable nor capable of moving the souls of men. Human beings in every time and place need “faith in ideas and in men.” When elites in bourgeois societies succumbed to cynicism and lost faith in the rational and moral foundations of a free and decent political order, fervent ideologists guaranteed that faith would be used

at the service of “barbaric fury.” Aron offered no guarantee that a revitalized liberalism, buttressed by a renewed “conservative” confidence in the integrity of a moral order above the will of man, would finally win the day against the totalitarians. But in the elegiac conclusion of his 1944 essay, he cited the words of Tacitus that had been read out to the first Free French volunteers at the end of June, 1940: “One need not hope in order to try, nor succeed in order to persevere.” “I saw,” he wrote, “in that phrase and I see still, the watchword of revolt, always vanquished yet always victorious—the revolt of conscience.”

Conclusion

In Michael Burleigh the political religions have found a historian who resists the “demoralization” of the age, the tendency to write history as if moral evaluation and the imperatives of conscience do not matter. His work is a powerful challenge to the “antifascist” vulgate which confuses authority with authoritarianism, and which downplays the essential affinities between totalitarianism of the Left and the Right. Readers of Burleigh’s work cannot help but reflect on the fact that all too often “progressive democracy,” as the Hungarian political philosopher Aurel Kolnai called it, shares with discredited totalitarianism a blind confidence in the sovereignty and self-assertion of man. The antitotalitarian thinkers to whom Burleigh pays such well-deserved tribute all appreciated that the ultimate roots of totalitarianism lay in the human tendency, quintessentially modern yet as old as Adam, to forget that men are not gods. A democratic civilization that has truly absorbed this lesson will have already begun the ascent from the most problematic assumptions of theoretical modernity. Hence the vital contemporary need of histories of this quality and insight.

1. Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). Further citations to this source will be indicated parenthetically in the text as *TTR*.
2. For representative examples of their work, see Alain Besançon, *A Century of Horrors: Communism, Nazism, and the Uniqueness of the Shoah*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock and Nathaniel H. Hancock (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007) and Malia's posthumously published *History's Locomotives: Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale, 2006).
3. Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the*
4. *War on Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). Further citations to this source will be indicated parenthetically in the text as *SC*.
5. Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).
6. An English-language version of “The Future of Secular Religions” can be found in Raymond Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness to the Twentieth Century*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 177–201.



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