

MODERNITY, SECULAR RELIGIONS AND VIOLENCE – AN ORTHODOX CHRYSTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between modernity, secular religions, and violence from an Orthodox Christian perspective. It discusses how modernity emerged as a rejection of the transcendent, leading to a utopian desire for progress. The concept of monotheism and its alleged connection to violence is examined, with a counterargument asserting that Christianity's focus on love and human dignity contributed positively to European civilization. The analysis includes the role of secular ideologies, totalitarian regimes, and the rejection of traditional moral frameworks in promoting violence in the modern age.

Keywords: *modernity; secular religions; utopia; violence;*

MODERNITY AND THE REPUDIATION OF THE TRANSCENDENCE

Modernity refers to a period characterized by significant social, cultural, and technological changes that occurred during the late 18th to early 19th centuries and continue to influence the present day. It is often associated with the rise of industrialization, urbanization, scientific advancements, and a shift towards more secular and rational thinking. The modern age is usually regarded as an age in which the world is freed from all religious superstition, an age of the disenchantment of the world¹, of cultural, material or spiritual progress, of enlightenment of the human spirit through natural and rational knowledge. It is considered an age of scientific progress in which humanism replaces Christianity, man becomes the measure of all things and takes the place of Providence and God at the helm of history. God has died and with Him is claimed the disappearance of all mystical fervor, all religious interpretation of reality and all religious behavior, now inappropriate to the scientific interpretation of the world.

Modernity is born as a *repudiation of the transcendent*, on the one hand, but also as a *utopian desire to build the perfect world in time and space by idolizing progress*.²

The transcendent refers to things beyond our ordinary, everyday experiences - such as spiritual or religious beliefs, the idea of a divine being, or anything that goes beyond the material world. Before modernity, these transcendent elements played a central role in shaping how people understood the world and their place in it. However, during modernity, many thinkers and scholars began to emphasize the importance of reason, scientific observation, and empirical evidence. They sought to understand the world through logic and

¹ Marcel GAUCHET, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1997.

² Eric VOEGELIN, *Dall' Illuminismo alla Rivoluzione*, Gangemi Editore, Rome 200.



critical thinking rather than relying on traditional religious or spiritual beliefs. As science and technology advanced, they provided explanations for natural phenomena that had previously been attributed to the transcendent. This led some people to question or even abandon their traditional religious beliefs in favor of a more rational and empirical worldview.

Furthermore, during modernity, there was an increasing focus on the individual and human capabilities, rather than relying on external forces or divine intervention. Human achievements and progress were attributed to human efforts and ingenuity rather than seen as gifts from God. In this way, modernity can be seen as a turning point where many societies moved away from relying on the transcendent as a guiding force and placed greater emphasis on human reason, science, and autonomy.³

It's important to note that not everyone in modernity rejected the transcendent entirely, and there are still people who hold religious or spiritual beliefs even in modern times. However, the overall trend during this period was a shift towards secularism and a greater emphasis on human agency and rationality in shaping the world.

1. THE SECULAR RELIGIONS

The reality is, however, that the process of secularisation has not only meant the repudiation of Christianity or any religious attitude to the world, but also its replacement by certain religious surrogates, idolised reason, the god State or the political religions⁴ of the 20th century with ideologies professed as doctrines of faith: Nazism and Communism. The meaning of history can no longer be metahistorical but immanent.

One of the first philosophers to write about the connection between the secularization of Christian concepts and the emerging of secular religions and ideologies as religious surrogates was the German philosopher Eric Voegelin.

Eric Voegelin, a prominent political philosopher and historian of ideas, argued that modernity can be seen as a utopian desire to build a perfect world in time and space by idolizing progress. Voegelin's work provides valuable insights into how certain ideologies and political movements in modernity have exhibited utopian tendencies, which can be linked to the pursuit of progress. Voegelin identified a utopian impulse in modernity, which he saw as an attempt to create a perfect society or a "heaven on earth." This desire for perfection is often associated with ideologies that envision a future in which all social and political problems are eradicated, and human life is transformed into an ideal state of harmony and prosperity. This utopian vision is rooted in the belief that through human action and progress, we can create a flawless world.

Within the context of modernity, the idea of progress gained significant importance. Progress became synonymous with the advancement of science, technology, and rationality, leading to improvements in human life. The belief in progress led to a sense of optimism and faith in human capacity to overcome challenges and improve society continuously. As progress was idolized, it fueled the desire to reach ever greater heights of human achievement, often with the goal of reaching an ideal, utopian state.

Voegelin also introduced the concept of "immanentizing the eschaton," which refers to the attempt to bring about a future utopian state within the confines of earthly existence. Traditionally, eschaton represents the end times or the final divine fulfillment of history.

³Charles TAYLOR, *The Secular Age*, The Belknap Press Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2007.

⁴Eric VOEGELIN, *Modernity without Restraint. The Political Religions, The new Science of Politics and Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London 2000.



However, in modernity, certain ideologies sought to secularize this concept, seeking to achieve a utopian future within the immanent, temporal world rather than relying on divine intervention.

Voegelin particularly focused on totalitarian ideologies, such as Marxism and Nazism, which he viewed as manifestations of the utopian desire for a perfect world. These ideologies believed in the possibility of creating a utopian society by radically reorganizing social structures and eliminating perceived obstacles to progress. They were characterized by their rejection of traditional moral and religious constraints, emphasizing faith in human reason and material progress to achieve their goals.

Voegelin's analysis highlights the potential dangers of utopian thinking when it becomes divorced from the limitations and complexities of human existence. The pursuit of building a perfect world through progress, especially when combined with an absolutist rejection of the transcendent or spiritual dimensions of life, can lead to totalitarianism and other ideological excesses.

In summary, Eric Voegelin's work offers valuable insights into how modernity's utopian desire to create a perfect world in time and space is intertwined with the idolization of progress and can lead to ideological extremes.⁵

Modernity was also born through the secularization of some Christian values, through the approximate preservation of form and the extirpation of their transcendent essence, but also through the secularization of heresies, such as millenarianism or gnosticism. Thus 20th century ideologies have become religious surrogates for Christianity, and people, believing themselves to be liberated from the intellectual and spiritual minority in which they were held by Christianity, have embraced them en masse.⁶ The new religious surrogates in the form of political religions and totalitarian ideologies that have parasitized certain Christian values and elements of Christian eschatology have⁷, however, abandoned the essential values of Christianity and created a wave of violence and hatred that has marked the 20th century through the two world wars and continues to haunt Europe in the current war in Ukraine. These religious surrogates, with their secular eschatology, are idolatrous in nature, and the violence they have unleashed stems from the renunciation of the essential values of Christianity: love and human being as absolute value because he is the image of God.

Totalitarian ideologies are limited theories that reduce the complexity of human nature to a few, often misunderstood, general lines and consider themselves self-sufficient in explaining reality. Ideologies tend to substitute for Truth. Ideologies often promise the achievement of a perfect social order in history, a substitute for the Kingdom of Heaven. The main ideas and "values" of the utopian ideologies of the last centuries are ideas and values

⁵ Eric Voegelin discussed the concepts of utopian desire, progress, and the immanentization of the eschaton in several of his works. Here are some of the key books where he explored these ideas: *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, University of Chicago Press, 1987; *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism. Two Essays*, Simon and Schuster, 2012; *Order and History*, University of Missouri Press, 1957; *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri, 2006.

⁶ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, Harper Collins, 2011. In this book, Eric Hoffer explores the psychology behind mass movements and the role of fanaticism and violence in the pursuit of utopian ideologies.

⁷ Norman COHN, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press, 1970. While not directly focused on the modern age, this book examines millenarian and apocalyptic ideologies that have surfaced throughout history, offering insights into how such thinking can lead to violence and social upheaval.



that parasiticise and secularise the basic values of Christianity. This is why these ideologies have no concrete original content, but rather tend to absolutise a form of historical organization and misinterpreted principles based on a mistaken anthropology.

If for Christianity, the key to interpreting reality, the world and history is Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, for modernity it is the progress of the human spirit itself. Progress for the sake of progress becomes the central idol of modernity, mysticism is replaced by social activism, and the Kingdom of Heaven is replaced by the Utopia that is supposed to be built according to professed totalitarian ideologies: the perfect race, the perfect class, the perfect state, the perfect nation. Ernest Bernea wrote: "The contemporary crisis is the logical and historical consequence of the orientation of modern man, of the demiurgic spirit that dominates him, of his absolutism and the false divinities he has created for himself".⁸

Eric Voegelin's analysis of the idolization of progress in modernity can be understood through his examination of the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire. Voltaire, a prominent figure of the 18th-century Enlightenment, epitomizes the modern tendency to idolize progress and place faith in the power of reason and scientific advancement to shape a better world. Voegelin's critique of Voltaire helps shed light on the broader concept of progress in modernity. For Voegelin The Enlightenment, and especially Voltaire, was guilty for creating the cult of reason and rationality, an irrational optimism on human perfectibility and an undeserved critique of traditional institutions.

Voltaire, along with other Enlightenment thinkers, emphasized the power of human reason and the scientific method in understanding and shaping the world. This emphasis on rationality was a departure from traditional religious and metaphysical explanations for natural phenomena. Voltaire's works championed the idea that human progress could be achieved through the application of reason to solve problems and improve society. Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers were generally optimistic about the potential for human perfectibility. They believed that through education, the spread of knowledge, and the elimination of ignorance and superstition, humanity could continually progress toward a more enlightened and prosperous state.

The Enlightenment thinkers often criticized traditional institutions, such as the Church and the monarchy, for hindering progress. They viewed these institutions as obstacles to reason and liberty, advocating for the need to reform or even overthrow them to create a more rational and progressive society.

Many Enlightenment thinkers, including Voltaire, held a teleological view of history. They saw history as moving towards a predetermined endpoint, characterized by enlightenment and progress. This view suggested that human history had a purpose, and that purpose was the continual advancement of knowledge and human civilization.

Thus, modernity fostered an almost religious faith in the power of human reason and progress. The Enlightenment's rejection of traditional authorities and metaphysical frameworks allowed for the rise of an optimistic and utopian vision centered on human agency and rationality. However, Voegelin also cautioned against the dangers of this idolization of progress. He argued that the rejection of transcendent principles and the belief in an immanent utopia could lead to an imbalance in human affairs, potentially resulting in ideologies that aim to impose utopian visions through totalitarian means and violence.

⁸ Ernest BERNEA, *Criza lumii moderne*, (*The Crisis of the Modern World*), Predania, București 2011, p. 47.



The Church, the body of Christ, does not create or participate in the creation of social or political utopias, because any such utopia is nothing but a surrogate for the Kingdom of Heaven, an absolutisation of limited structures, ultimately an idolatry. But the Church is in history the most important creative factor of culture and civilization, because by aiming at the Kingdom of God it creates those values that continually renew the world and human society, refusing to absolutize any intermediate state on the way to the Kingdom, any surrogate of the Kingdom of Heaven, refusing to recognize any usurper of the Messiah. "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), says the Saviour Christ. The Church follows the same programme of seeking a Kingdom which is not of this world, but which, from beyond history, is continually transforming history itself into a form which more and more approximates the true Kingdom, without, however, fully coinciding with it.

In modernity, however, Christianity has remained focused on the salvation of the soul, and the original eschatological hopes have been parasitized and confiscated through secularization by political utopias that militate for the change of the world, for the creation of a perfect world in time and space, for the indefinite progress of society. "The creation of a new world: this is the task which now absorbs all energies. As a result, the older eschatology has been pushed back into a corner where it stands bearing the dismissive label "salvation for the soul". No contribution here, or so it seems, to the *praxis* of a new age."⁹

In modernity "the Christian God, transcendent living reality, becomes something superfluous, an imagination without meaning and correspondence in objective reality... The immanent God is nothing other than the self-divinization of man, individual or collective man, but always man and his productions".¹⁰

Modernity gave birth to what Bernea calls *atheistic religion*: „Descartes and Hegel carried the process of idealizing God to the point of presenting Him as the peak of evolution of man. Nietzsche and Marx carried out the process of decapitating God to the point of creating an *atheistic religion*, a task that fell to Lenin in the social-political order".¹¹

2. SECULAR RELIGIONS AND VIOLENCE

Recently a theory has emerged stating that the main source of violence in history was the emergence of monotheism. Monotheistic religions are therefore the main culprits of violence because of their religious exclusivism, their claim that their God is the only true God. It is also implied that it is polytheism or religious syncretism that is more likely to set the conditions for lasting peace.

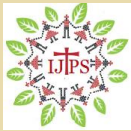
Jan Assmann, an influential Egyptologist and cultural theorist, has explored the relationship between monotheism and violence in his book "Der Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt" (Monotheism and the Language of Violence)¹². In this work, Assmann presents the concept that the emergence of monotheism in history has played a significant role in shaping patterns of violence. He highlights how the exclusivity of monotheistic beliefs, the role of sacred texts, and the construction of the "other" have contributed to historical instances of religiously motivated violence and conflict. Assmann argues that the transition from polytheism to monotheism was a crucial turning point in human history. In many ancient societies, polytheistic religions had multiple gods representing various aspects

⁹ Joseph RATZINGER, *Eschatology. Death and eternal Life*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1988, p. 15.

¹⁰ Ernest BERNEA, *The Crisis of the Modern World*,...p. 54.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Jan ASSMAN, *Der Monotheismus un die Sprache der Gewalt*, Vienna 2006.



of life, and there was often a degree of religious pluralism. However, with the rise of monotheism, the belief in a single, all-powerful deity emerged, leading to a transformation in religious consciousness.

Monotheism brought with it the idea of exclusivity, asserting that there is only one true God, while other gods are false or even evil. This exclusivity led to a rejection of other religious beliefs, practices, and deities. Assmann argues that this shift in religious exclusivity contributed to an "us vs. them" mentality, setting the stage for potential conflict and violence between different religious communities.

Assmann emphasizes also the importance of sacred texts in monotheistic religions. These texts, such as the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, or the New Testament, carry religious authority and provide a basis for moral and legal codes. However, the interpretation and promotion of these texts can sometimes lead to the justification of violence, as seen in historical instances of religiously motivated wars and conflicts. Assmann argues that monotheistic religions, by virtue of their belief in a singular and absolute truth, have the potential to justify and legitimize violence in the name of religious preservation or divine mandate. He suggests that monotheistic traditions have been historically entangled with power and politics, leading to violence in pursuit of religious or political goals.

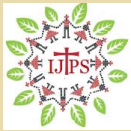
It's important to note that Assmann's work does not aim to portray monotheism as inherently violent, but rather to explore the historical and cultural dynamics that have shaped the relationship between monotheistic belief systems and violence. He encourages a nuanced examination of the historical context and the various factors contributing to violence throughout history.

Nothing could be further from the truth in this theory. It misses the point, it forgets that Judaism and Christianity, the former linking the honouring of God to a moral attitude towards people, and the latter positing love and human person made in the image of God, as fundamental values, moved away from the violence of previous tribal and idolatrous ages and built European culture and civilisation on these values. Only when Christianity began to be repudiated and replaced by the religious surrogates of totalitarian ideologies, only when the Christian God, God Who is love, was „killed”, did violence increase exponentially. It is precisely the exclusivism, radicalism and competition of the new idols of modernity that have come to sacrifice people on the altars of the new secular religions. It is not the concrete man who has absolute value anymore, but the abstract man, humanity, the state, race or class, in whose name and for whose sake the concrete man, who is no longer considered the image of God, can be killed.

To argue against Assmann's ideas, one could emphasize the importance of contextual understanding when examining historical instances of violence related to monotheistic religions. While some violent acts have been carried out in the name of monotheism, it is essential to consider the broader historical, political, and social factors at play. Violence in the name of religion is not unique to monotheistic traditions, as polytheistic religions and even secular ideologies have also been associated with violence throughout history.

It is crucial to recognize that monotheistic religions, including Christianity, encompass a wide range of beliefs and practices. While some interpretations of sacred texts may have been used to justify violence, there are countless examples of religious leaders and followers advocating for peace, compassion, and love. The teachings of Jesus Christ in Christianity, for instance, emphasize love, forgiveness, and non-violence.

Assmann's argument regarding the role of sacred texts in justifying violence can be countered by highlighting that texts are often subject to interpretation. Individuals or groups



with specific political or social agendas may selectively interpret religious texts to suit their objectives, leading to a distortion of the original message. This misuse of texts does not necessarily reflect the core teachings of the religion itself. People can use religious or ideological beliefs as a pretext to rationalize their actions, but underlying political, economic, or social factors often contribute to acts of violence.

One of the revolutionary moral principles introduced into the world through the Jewish and Christian religions is the linking of honoring God with kindness to people. In the Decalogue revealed to Moses, God, showing Himself to be a living and personal God, different from any idolatrous human representation, links His honour to moral behaviour towards people. For the first time in history, honouring the divinity is done by honouring one's parents, not killing, not stealing, not fornicating, etc. Up to that time, idolatry was also embellished by human sacrifices. In the New Testament this becomes the essence of religion: to love God with all your being and your neighbour as yourself.

Since then, in a civilization built on Christian values, as long as the awareness and experience of the existence and presence of a living, personal, incarnate God and of a God-bearing human being, image of God and destined to live forever, remains alive, human life is sacred and intangible. When, however, the world is "stripped" of His existence and presence, replacing Him with the new abstract idols of totalitarian and materialistic humanist ideologies and utopias, the sacred value of the human being is also denied. The fundamental moral principle on which our civilisation was built disappears: the identity between honouring God and kindness to His children. The new idols also demand their human sacrifices precisely because they are idols. Therefore, goodness and love for people are not self-evident values that can be automatically extracted from human nature, but are revealed. It is not secular humanism or science that creates moral values but the relationship with the living and personal God. Without Him man always reverts to idolatrous representations that demand their human sacrifices, however materially, technologically and scientifically developed he may be. When people end up being cruelly murdered again it is because the murderers reject God, even though they sometimes use His name, marginally, as a pretext and bait in the abject equations of their (idol) ideology.

The goal of progress within secular eschatologies is Utopia, and the way to change the world on the road to utopia are revolutions which have always been in the modern era based on resentment and violence. From the reign of terror during the French Revolution when the first genocide in modern history took place¹³, to the Bolshevik Revolution,¹⁴ all have been based on resentment and achieved through extreme violence. In one way or another, modern secular eschatologies, manifested in the form of political religions, totalitarian ideologies, justified violence in the name of Utopia. The secular eschatologies of utopian ideologies imagine the perfect world of utopia in terms of Christian morality, but justify the violence and immorality they produce as necessary to build that world.

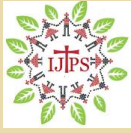
The rise of secular religions and utopian ideologies in the modern age, particularly during world wars and totalitarian regimes¹⁵, has been linked to significant violence and atrocities. The rejection of traditional moral restraints, the cult of the leader, apocalyptic

¹³ David A. BELL, *The French Revolution, the Vendée, and Genocide*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Volume 22, 2020 - Issue 1, pp. 19-25.

¹⁴ Orlando FIGES, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, Penguin Books, 1998.

Alexander RABINOWITCH, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, Pluto Press, 2004.

¹⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, HarperCollins, 1973.



thinking, and the pursuit of absolute control are among the factors that contributed to the use of violence to achieve ideological goals. It is essential to critically examine the historical context and ideological underpinnings of such movements to understand the role they played in perpetuating violence in the modern era.

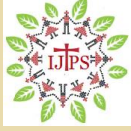
The secular religions and utopian ideologies have played a significant role in producing violence in the modern age. Totalitarian ideologies, such as communism and fascism, were explicitly secular in nature and aimed to create a utopian society based on a specific vision of progress and perfection. These ideologies sought to reshape society entirely, often through the elimination of perceived enemies or obstacles. The implementation of these ideologies resulted in mass violence and atrocities, such as the Holocaust during World War II or the horrors of the Soviet gulags. Secular religions and utopian ideologies often reject traditional moral and ethical restraints in pursuit of their vision of a better society. They prioritize achieving their ideological goals over preserving individual rights and human dignity. This rejection of moral restraints can lead to dehumanization, brutal treatment of opponents, and the justification of violence as a means to an end.

Totalitarian regimes often revolve around a charismatic leader who is placed at the center of the ideology. The leader's authority is portrayed as absolute and beyond questioning, similar to a religious figure. The cult of personality around the leader can lead to the suppression of dissent and the justification of extreme actions in the name of the leader's ideology. As secular religions and utopian ideologies gained prominence in the modern age, traditional religious beliefs were often rejected or suppressed. In the absence of traditional moral frameworks, people could be more susceptible to radical ideologies that promoted violence in the pursuit of a utopian future. Some secular religions and utopian ideologies embraced apocalyptic thinking, envisioning a cataclysmic transformation of society. This apocalyptic mindset could justify extreme measures, including violence, in the belief that the end goal justified the means to bring about the utopian vision.

Totalitarian regimes sought total control over all aspects of society, using propaganda, surveillance, and repression to maintain power. This centralized control enabled them to enforce their ideological agenda with violence, as seen in the Holocaust, the Soviet purges, and other atrocities.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, although Christianity, a revolution of love, has placed at the foundation of European civilization the values of love and the human person, the image of God as an absolute value, incompatible with violence and war, modern times have seen outbreaks of violence of an intensity and extent never seen before in the form of revolutions and wars. The origin of this modern escalation of violence has been precisely the repudiation of Christianity, the secularization and parasitism of Christian values and the emergence of a type of secular eschatology and secular political religions which, in the name of Utopia, the modern surrogate of the Kingdom of Heaven, abandon those Christian values on which Euro-Atlantic civilization was built, and end up justifying violence.



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