



The New Eschatology of Peace

by John Gray

The relations of religious faith with political life in the modern world are riddled with paradoxes. In the Middle East, rapid secularization has provoked a fundamentalist revulsion, which seeks vainly to stem the tide of modernity that, at the same time, gives it all its strength. Middle Eastern fundamentalism is little more than a modernist frenzy, but it is at any rate a religious response to the decadence of Islamic culture and the challenges of secularization. The situation in Europe has been notably different, in that there the waning of Christianity has been accompanied by the displacement of religious passions into avowedly secular political movements. This European development has been observed by many theorists of 20th-century totalitarianism, including some (such as Arthur Koestler) who were among its most distinguished intellectual converts. Among Europeans, the decay of transcendental faith has resulted in the invasion of political life by religious longings. This suggests an ironic definition of European secularization — as the process by which social life comes to be dominated by unnoticed (because repressed) religious passions. In the United States, by contrast, there is little

evidence of mass secularization. Instead, religious faith has itself undergone a metamorphosis, in which both Christianity and Judaism have been conscripted into service as dependable allies of modern aspirations for progress and global improvement. Whether this has taken the form of the antinomian absurdities of liberation theology or the neo-conservative appropriation of religion as a support for bourgeois democracy, the result has been the same; the Judeo-Christian perception of human life as a tragedy has been lost, and religious faith has been subordinated to the purposes of ephemeral political movements.

Given the paradoxical interaction of religious with political life in the present century, it is a serious error to try to understand the current peace movements in Europe and America in altogether secular terms. This is a mistake often committed by the peace movement's critics and opponents, when they represent it as a movement dedicated primarily to promoting the strategic interests of the Soviet Union. For, whatever the truth in claims about Soviet infiltration and funding of the activities of the peace people — and I do not doubt that such claims contain much truth — their movement has a dynamism of its own, which it is perilous to ignore. The sense of apocalyptic mission that inspires the peace people has its origin, not in any realistic recognition of

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the dangers of nuclear war, but in a mutation of Christian eschatological hope, which affects believers and unbelievers alike. The passions fueling the peace movement can be understood only as the end result of a centuries-long process of moral inversion, beginning with the political religions of the Enlightenment, and now coming close to conquering the Christian churches themselves.

If we cannot expect the peace people to listen to reason, it is because theirs is a movement springing from the decadence of Christian life and from the moral paralysis of those whose lives have been robbed of any transcendental dimension. The curious belief of the peace people that the specter of nuclear annihilation can be exorcised by a series of public moral gestures becomes intelligible when we attribute to them a profane variation on Christian eschatology, from which divine providence and original sin have both been deleted, leaving only a fury of moral activism and the groundless certainty that the obdurate realities of history and human nature can be overcome by the sheer power of moral commitment.

Certainly the peace movement, including the most explicitly religious elements within it, is wholly untouched by genuine Christian teaching about first and last things. One might have supposed that such teachings, which represent the end of the world as we know it as encompassing an enlargement of the human prospect rather than its mere extinction, would have been especially pertinent to our contemporaries, each of whom knows for a certainty that he belongs to what could be the last generation of human beings. The sense of providential guidance, which the real Christian eschatology preserves even about the prospect of nuclear annihilation, may enable us to contemplate that most terrifying of possibilities with something other than sheer despair. But the transcendental dimension of Christian hope, which insists that even the destruction of this world cannot be an unredeemed tragedy, is precisely the vision that is repudiated by the peace activists, and often repudiated on Christian grounds. How has this decadence of Christian spirituality come about, and what does it portend for the peace movement?

The ultimate spiritual origins of the peace movement's virtual conquest of the Christian churches are to be found in the character of the Christianity of the Gospels as an antipolitical and indeed antinomian movement. In its earliest form, Christian faith and practice were conducted in daily expectation of the end of things, and for that reason, more than for any other, they were indifferent or hostile to the institutions of the family and government whose disciplines figure so prominently in the religions of the Romans and the Jews. Primitive Christianity neglected the sad business of sustaining political order and of prescribing for the ordinary dilemmas of life, not because it was supposed that the necessities of power and of moral constraint could ever be removed from the world, but rather from a conviction of the evanescence and imminent destruction of the world itself. Hence the famous *Interimsethik* of the first Christians, and the intense cult of moral individuality in which this was expressed.

It is only in Paul and, above all, in Augustine, that we find an accommodation of Christian moral life to the perennial

demands of human nature, because in these writers eschatological hopes have come to refer to a spiritual metamorphosis, possible at any time, rather than to a historical event. Buttressed by the doctrine of original sin, Pauline and Augustinian Christianity could coherently envisage Christian moral life as a permanent tension between the perspective of eternity—which is the perspective of grace and of the forgiveness of sins—and the perspective of this world. In Augustine, and certainly in the theology of Aquinas, Christian morality appeared to have reached, not indeed a *modus vivendi*, but an inevitably contradictory and for that reason a highly fruitful relationship of participation in the demands of worldly life. It thereby escaped the great danger of Christianity, that of loosening social bonds for the sake of moral individuality, and of subverting civilization in the pursuit of purity of heart.

This was the hazard, if not the reality, of early Christianity—that the sense of human life as bounded by mortality and by every other sort of finitude, and limitation, so prominent in Jewish experience and (in a very different idiom) in the pagan philosophers, should be swamped by a triumphant moral hope. Partly because of the story of the Passion itself, the perception of tragedy always remained an essential element in Christianity, but it had from the first to contend with an explosive moral hope in which the accommodations of the ancient world, Jewish as much as pagan, were transvalued. The synthesis of Christianity's transcendent hopes with the necessities of earthly life wrought by Augustine created Christendom as a civilization that lasted over a thousand years, and is only now unmistakably on the decline.

Nothing could be further from the truth than the conservative cliché that the decline of Christianity in modern times is owed to a return to a pagan outlook. Pagan religious sensibility, insofar as we can reconstruct it from our understanding of spiritual life in Greece and Rome, was a matter of local piety and natural reverence and was altogether lacking in the dimension of individualism and moral optimism that infused early Christianity. When a pagan moral life is revived, as perhaps it is in Machiavelli's writings and in the lives of some of his contemporaries, it is a moral life centered around the struggle for a strong city-state—a struggle in which the promptings of Christian conscience are swept aside. The pagan morality as we find it revived (or at least admired) in the Renaissance is a morality of energy and tragedy, contemptuous of Christian moral scruples and avowedly entirely worldly. This pagan morality is, above all, entirely devoid of the sense of human history as a progressive moral drama which Christianity had inculcated, and because it expected little in the way of any fundamental improvement in human affairs, it could not issue in the intemperate moralism to which Christianity has often succumbed. As Michael Polanyi says in his study *The Logic of Liberty*, "Had the whole of Europe been at the time of the same mind as Italy, Renaissance Humanism might have established freedom of thought everywhere, simply by default of opposition. Europe might have returned to—or if you like relapsed into—a liberalism resembling that of pre-Christian antiquity. Whatever may have followed after that, our present disasters would not have occurred."

A recrudescence of paganism could not have led to our

present troubles, if only because of the extreme moral modesty of paganism. As against the vast moral hopes that Christianity has kindled in mankind, paganism expressed an attitude of resignation and fatalism in regard to moral misfortune, which is reflected in all the reflective philosophies—Epicurean as much as Stoic—of late antiquity. Never was it supposed that imperfection was evanescent, or tragedy conquerable by will.

The modern political religions express, not a recrudescence of paganism, but a relapse into primitive Christianity, with the early exultant expectation of the end transformed into moral activism, and the civilizing transformation of Christianity by Augustine rejected. Modern political religions are (in Polanyi's invaluable expression) all manifestations of *moral inversion*—the displacement of Christian moral hopes from their natural context in transcendental commitment and their intensification in the resultant spiritual vacuum.

Modern political faith—that of the peace movement no less than those of Marxism and liberalism—is the price we pay for the Christian overrefinement of conscience, when the containing vessels of transcendence and mystery have been shattered by secularization. Eric Voegelin has put this point with unsurpassed clarity in his *The New Science of Politics*: “The characterization of modern political mass movements as neopagan, which has a certain vogue, is misleading because it sacrifices the historically unique nature of modern movements to a superficial resemblance. Modern redivinization has its origins rather in Christianity itself, deriving from components that were suppressed as heretical by the universal church.” Or, as the same insight was expressed by Bertrand de Jouvenel in his book *Sovereignty*: “It is a curious thing, moreover, but true, that political applications of the Christian idea of men grew and multiplied at the very time that Christian theology was rejected.” The modern political faiths, then, are vehicles for Christian moral hopes, orphaned by being cast out of their natural religious home, and rendered dangerous by their resistance to any doctrine suggesting man's imperfectibility.

In Marxism, moral inversion expresses itself as a cold fury, an explosive conjunction of moral cynicism with utopian commitment. In the peace movement, the apocalyptic conviction of the end of the world evokes an infantile moral rage and a violent resistance to the dimension of tragedy in our present predicament. For let us not suppose that the peace people have ever dwelt on the delicacy of the strategic balance, or the dangers of further proliferation, in any realistic way. If they did, they would soon see that proliferation of nuclear technologies, though it may be retarded, cannot be halted, since it is at bottom only a side-effect of the spread of scientific knowledge. Having grasped this, they would be bound to conclude that the military use of nuclear power, sooner or later, is inevitable in a world of some hundred or so sovereign states, many of which are chronically unstable, some of them ruled by criminals or madmen, and all of them existing in a Hobbesian state of nature in their relations with each other. They would reflect that nothing in human history suggests that we have the wisdom needed to use the destructive powers of modern technologies with restraint, and they

would see the problem of nuclear weapons as only one aspect of the larger dilemma posed by the unleashing of powerful technologies on an intractably disordered world. They would realize that agreements for the denuclearization of contested areas of the world are unlikely to be kept when the conflict between contending powers over them becomes serious. They would even perceive that the unilateral disarmament of all the Western powers cannot guarantee release from the danger of nuclear holocaust, since we live no longer in a bipolar world, but in a pluralistic one, in which the People's China, or Qaddafi's Libya, might easily replace the Soviet Union as our chief enemy. If they were able to see all this, the peace people would see the task of statesmanship in our times as one of almost desperate humility—that of staving off disaster, day by day, by finding ever new stratagems for the preservation of the fragile balance of terror.

Perhaps a pagan view of life could tolerate our present predicament without flinching, seeing it as a historical fate against which we may struggle but which we cannot hope to avert. Perhaps also Judaism, with its millennial experience of patience and fortitude, could sustain a clear acceptance of the tragic possibilities of nuclear destruction, which are part of our human condition henceforth. And perhaps a revival of genuine Christianity, with its emphasis upon the evanescence not of evil but of this world itself, could engender the detachment required for wise policy in an age of desperate peril. It cannot be said that present auguries are hopeful for any of these prospects. The religion of the Western intelligentsias remains liberal humanism—surely the most ignoble and banal of any faith to have captured the allegiance of a culture's intellectual leaders. For liberal humanism, which is a sort of pagan this-worldliness denatured of the pagan acceptance of fate and mortality and animated by a delusive vision of world improvement, is of all perspectives that least fitted for our circumstance of mortal danger.

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Nor does Christian culture offer a particularly edifying spectacle. Where it has not been overrun by the fashionable nostrum of secular meliorism, Christianity—especially in its American fundamentalist variants—has been captivated by promises of a technological solution to the danger of nuclear holocaust. For that, surely, is the real appeal of the Strategic Defense Initiative. I do not mean that this is an initiative that should not be supported, since the hysterical response of Soviet publicists to every mention of it suggests its inestimable value in curbing Soviet ambitions. I refer rather to the fraudulent terms in which it has been proposed to, and accepted by, the American people. It should be plain that the Star Wars program cannot do what its most hubristic proponents have claimed for it—deliver America and mankind from the specter of nuclear devastation. The

proliferation of nuclear technologies across the globe, together with the growing possibilities of nuclear terrorism, rules out any such easy solution. Even in respect of the Soviet Union, the Star Wars shield cannot protect Europe at all, and could be nearly perfect and still (by allowing in a few multi-warhead missiles) allow for the devastation of North America. Whereas it undoubtedly has virtue as a lever against the Soviet Union, SDI has been seized upon as a technical solution for a moral and political dilemma that is probably insoluble.

We return here to the decadence of Western religious culture, which is shown in nothing better than in the endorsement by conservative churchmen of the extravagant claims made for SDI. When it is conservative, the conservatism of Western religiosity is of an Aquarian or New Age description—a conservatism issuing in groundless hopes and based on a repression of the intractabilities of human

history. Such a feel-good conservatism is crucially dependent on a climate of prosperity, which will likely be diminished over the next few years. It supports a hopelessly naive optimism, not only about the powers of technology to overcome immemorial tragedies such as war, but also about the reformability of human institutions. And it occludes public perception of the global environment to such an extent that even avowed enmity cannot be recognized. The fusion of Christian meliorism with triumphalist conservatism bodes ill for us.

If this account is at all correct, it follows that we can expect no quick or easy recovery in our culture. The most that can be reasonably hoped for the future is that the trials it contains may chasten the inordinate optimism that, at present, represses the eschatological dimension in our religious traditions, and blinds us to the apocalyptic vision of the real world in which (for the moment) we continue to live. ◇

LIBERAL ARTS

LUTHER ON SECULAR AUTHORITY

We must firmly establish secular law and the sword, that no one may doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance. The passages which establish this are the following: Romans xiii, "Let every soul be subject to power and authority, for there is no power but from God. The power that is everywhere is ordained of God. He then who resists the power resists God's ordinance. But he who resists God's ordinance shall bring himself under condemnation." Likewise, I Peter ii, "Be subject to every kind of human ordinance, whether to the king as supreme, or to the governors, as to those sent of Him for the punishing of evil and for the reward of the good."

This penal law existed from the beginning of the world. For when Cain slew his brother he was in such great terror of being in turn killed that God specially forbade it and suspended the sword for his sake—and no one was to slay him. He would not have had this fear if he had not seen and heard from Adam that murderers should be slain. Moreover God re-established and confirmed it after the Flood in unmistakable terms when He said, "Whoso sheds man's blood, his blood shall be shed again by man." This cannot be understood as a plague and punishment of God upon murderers; for many murderers who repent or are pardoned continue to live, and die by other means than the sword. But it is said of the right of the sword, that a murderer is guilty of death and should in justice be slain by the

sword. Though justice be hindered or the sword be tardy, so that the murderer dies a natural death, the Scripture is not on that account false when it says, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." For it is men's fault or merit that this law commanded of God is not carried out; even as other commandments of God are broken.

—from *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*

Any man against whom it can be proved that he is a maker of sedition is outside the law of God and Empire, so that the first who can slay him is doing right and well. For if a man is an open rebel every man is his judge and executioner, just as when a fire starts, the first to put it out is the best man. For rebellion is not simple murder, but is like a great fire, which attacks and lays waste a whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land full of murder and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the greatest disaster. Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you. . . .

They cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the Gospel, call themselves "Christian brethren," receive oaths and homage, and compel people to hold with them to these abominations. Thus they become the greatest of all blasphemers of God and slanderers of His holy Name, serving the devil, under the

outward appearance of the Gospel, thus earning death in body and soul ten times over. I have never heard of more hideous sin. I suspect that the devil feels the Last Day coming and therefore undertakes such an unheard-of act, as though saying to himself, "This is the last, therefore it shall be the worst; I will stir up the dregs and knock out the bottom." God will guard us against him! See what a mighty prince the devil is, how he has the world in his hands and can throw everything into confusion, when he can so quickly catch so many thousands of peasants, deceive them, blind them, harden them, and throw them into revolt, and do with them whatever his raging fury undertakes.

It does not help the peasants, when they pretend that, according to Genesis i and ii, all things were created free and common, and that all of us alike have been baptized. . . . For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the Gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who do of their own free will what the apostles and disciples did in Acts iv. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others,—of a Pilate and a Herod,—should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, would have other men's goods common, and keep their own goods for themselves. Fine Christians these! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants.

—from *Against the Robbing and Murdering Peasants*