

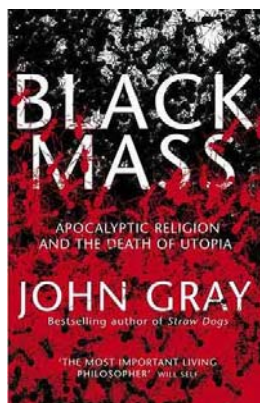
Gray, John, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*

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As we struggle to maintain hope and optimism in the face of today's natural disasters and human belligerence, John Gray dares to ask, "Should we?" Optimism, we are urged by both shrink and pharmacy, is good for our health. And, are not visions of a new and better world the needed driving forces to progress and achievement? In this historical and philosophical criticism of utopias Gray examines both of these cultural assumptions and finds them wanting.

Black Mass defines and describes as well as gives examples of the many forms of utopia, literary, religious and political. Some utopias live only in nostalgia, the golden age, or "the good old days" left behind. Some are meant to be in the here and now institutions we are shaping. Some await the hereafter. Some are eschatological expectations of raptures and ruptures in the near or distant future. In any case, "the end" is coming.



Gray examines what these utopian mental paradigms and the actions they promote tend to have in common, and why, in fact, they may be bad for our health and the health of the planet. Put in the simplest of terms (Gray is more eloquent), utopian faith divides the world in to good guys and bad guys and then inevitably sets in motion a "final solution" for the bad guys. Those who posture themselves as good guys legitimate terror on bad guys. Operative words in this context are: persecution, inquisition, witch hunt, assassination, crusade, holocaust, genocide, jihad, etc. These give operational context to other words like fire, noose, sword, guillotine, gulag, suicide bomber, concentration camp, gas chambers, agent orange, nuke, etc.

Black Mass is not a tirade about human inhumanity, though the evidence is there, but a collection of historical case studies about the inevitable failure of utopian thinking. The author attributes this recurring phenomenon to the religious eschatology of the West and, as well, its influence on other parts and peoples of the world. The opening line of the book says it well, "Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion." Faith is faith, whether based on faith in God or faith in science—the dynamics are the same and when it comes to utopian visions, the results are the same whether we are talking about the Reign of Terror, Puritan witch hunts in "the city upon a hill," the holocaust of Third Reich, the Bolshevik repression or the apocalyptic USian pursuit of progress, democracy and the free market. The key element is that the "good guys" see history having a purpose and a goal, aligned of course with their faith and their interests.

It is to the present day that Gray's considerable historical, theological and philosophical treatment is leading. He roots his argument in a detailed analysis ideas of times recent—the 20th century and in particular the period between the two World Wars. This may not be an easy read for those not conversant with philosophic debate in this period. His chapter on "The Americanization of the Apocalypse," however, lands firmly on the doorstep of the neo-conservative movement in US politics, where "The idea that America is the best—perhaps the only legitimate—regime in history" becomes the mainstay and subtext of the neo-conservative mindset.

Once firmly in power, where science and intelligence appeared to reign, responsibility for evidence was rejected and disinformation and outright fiction became necessary to support the neoconservative articles of faith about what America needed to fulfill its destiny, launching the US on a campaign of worldwide

terrorism and a policy of preemptive and endless war to achieve it via its “Armed Missionaries.” Declaring war enabled those in power to claim war powers and in effect silently alter the nation’s constitutional framework of the USA and subverting the liberties it was meant to guarantee.

Black Mass argues that “the war on terror” cannot be won. Exploration of the stages of the war in Iraq demonstrate its geopolitical counter productivity, even in terms of the short term wins sought through exploitation of resources for economic gain. It is responsible not for the elimination but for the proliferation of terrorism on a global scale with a chimerical faith in US destiny that brings “the end of history, the passing of the sovereign state, universal acceptance of democracy and the defeat of evil.” Gray contends that religious eschatology has gone underground for many, but that secular redemption and salvation are similar fantasies. Atheists who believe in them are under the same delusion as believers as, in fact, they themselves are believers. Despots, Gray observes, tend to hide their crimes, while liberal democracies tout them as heroic.

Gray leaves us with a choice: utopia achieved by apocalyptic Armageddon, versus a resurgent realism that involves setting aside visions of world transformation and eschewing frenzies of faith for political advantage. Such realism involves setting aside teleological views of history while understanding that human nature is fixed and flawed and so called “rational choices” are often not rational at all. The new realism must accept that warfare has, beneath the surface, largely ceased to be state versus state and takes into account the raging environmental degradation. Choosing realism does not have to be cynicism if it leads toward a *process* (not a permanently realizable goal) of generating freedom and supporting diversity: freedom from narrative, freedom from history as a plot; diversity of culture, beliefs and practice. It requires the moral and careful efforts of government to provide frameworks in which these values can be safely lived out.

If we be allowed to parody the Nepalese, one can sum up the message of *Black Mass* thus: our moral objective and our ongoing measure of safety is our measure of “gross national self-knowledge.” It is a book for the stout hearted who are willing to navigate our perilous seas of cultural and political conflict where there are few reliable maps.