CHAPTER 20

The Sacrificing King: Ancients, Moderns, and the Politics of Religion

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Extreme times encourage despair about our ability to manage collective problems. In the wake of the Holocaust and as the Cold War settled in, the Israeli political theorist Jacob Talmon was gloomy about the future. His 1960 book, Political Messianism—a quest for the roots of totalitarianism in the world of European Romanticism—ended with a deep sigh.

While the stakes are becoming truly cosmic, the sustenance once given by religious certainties and consolations, and the self-assurance provided in the past by the firm settings of tradition, habit and custom are less and less help. The challenge to be free and the duty to make choices grow more awe-inspiring as man finds less relief in his lonely torment.1

We have lost the taste for religion, in Talmon’s view, but not the hunger that religion satisfied. We have lost the object of faith, but not the lack that this faith remedied. This is the modern condition and it is, he wanted to teach us, a dangerous one. For the loss of religion, its “firm settings,” frees us neither from our abiding need for faith nor from the “lonely torment” that religion soothed. Indeed, it only intensifies these, and in the frantic effort to relieve their pain, human beings bow down before substitute gods. Jacobins, Leninists, Nazis: the worst modern political ideologies all make their sacrifices at secular altars, whether worshipping History, the Future, the Proletariat, the Race, or the State. Religion without religion, so to speak, makes monsters of us all.

At the time of his writing, Talmon was not alone in his worries. Mid-twentieth-century defenders of a certain liberal tradition—Talmon, Eric Voegelin, Isaiah Berlin, Jacques Maritain, Leszek Kolakowski, and many, many others—discovered in their ideological enemies, whether Communist or Fascist, forms of secular spirituality, political religions in which Christian transcendence had been wrenched world-ward, with sickening effects. “Do not immanentize the eschaton,” went one famous formulation of this, made immortal in American conservative political circles by a young reader of Eric

Voegelin, William F. Buckley. Substitute gods are violent gods, all blood and no mercy.

The 1950s and 1960s were not just home to stories of substitution like these, needless to say. Their complement, the sublimation stories that predicted the inevitability of religion’s disappearance, were routinely touted by a generation or more of Euro-American social and human scientists. Peter Berger’s 1967 *Sacred Canopy*—which spoke of secularization as a total process of religious sublimation from political, sociological, and cultural life, and finally from consciousness itself—is just one important example. Others abound, in both liberal and Marxist traditions, which together saw on the horizon a coming time of celebration, of the end of the idols and their replacement by something better, or at least more modern.

However divergent in normative and political terms, both substitution and sublimation stories shared a commitment to the view that religion is something that transcends any particular moment of its historical appearance. His goal in his book, Talmon wrote, was to show how “faith is an identifiable factor in shaping human urges, attitudes and actions," that is, a thing with a force of its own. In the substitution story, this thing supposedly remains, but improperly oriented. In the sublimation story, this thing supposedly vanishes, its force diffused by reason or capital or social differentiation. Let’s call what these stories share, then, a substantialist view of religion.

This substantialist view of religion entered the philosophical register for the first time in the late eighteenth century. It was a great ultramontanist, a Catholic conservative, a despiser of the Jacobins, Joseph de Maistre, who made it more or less respectable. As he put it in 1797:

> Either every imaginable institution is founded on a religious concept or it is only a passing phenomenon... Whether one laughs at religious ideas or venerates them does not matter; true or false, they nevertheless form the unique basis of all durable institutions. Religion surrounds us on all sides; everything speaks its language to us... It animates, vivifies, perpetuates, and infuses our legislation... It has formed the great European family.

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3 Talmon, *Political Messianism*, 17.