



Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia

By John Gray

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For the decade that followed the end of the cold war, the world was lulled into a sense that a consumerist, globalized, peaceful future beckoned. The beginning of the twenty-first century has rudely disposed of such ideas?most obviously through 9/11 and its aftermath. But just as damaging has been the rise in the West of a belief that a single model of political behavior will become a worldwide norm and that, if necessary, it will be enforced at gunpoint.

In *Black Mass*, celebrated philosopher and critic John Gray explains how utopian ideals have taken on a dangerous significance in the hands of right-wing conservatives and religious zealots. He charts the history of utopianism, from the Reformation through the French Revolution and into the present. And most urgently, he describes how utopian politics have moved from the extremes of the political spectrum into mainstream politics, dominating the administrations of both George W. Bush and Tony Blair, and indeed coming to define the political center. Far from having shaken off discredited ideology, Gray suggests, we are more than ever in its clutches. *Black Mass* is a truly frightening and challenging work by one of Britain's leading political thinkers.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Some readers will see pessimism where others see sober appraisal in Gray's antiutopian argument that we must reconcile ourselves to a world of multiple truths and incompatible freedoms, where there is no overarching meaning and human values and desires can never be fully harmonized. The views that history progresses toward perfection and the millenarian faith in human salvation—both rooted in abiding Christian myths—are as tenacious as they have proven destructive, the renowned British political theorist and critic argues. Building succinctly on arguments developed in his previous work (including *Two Faces of Liberalism* and *Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*), Gray traces the course of apocalyptic-utopian politics from early Christianity through its secular variant in the Enlightenment and into modern political thought from Marx to Francis Fukuyama, the French Revolution to radical Islamism. Centrally, he assails the contemporary American right (and staunch neoconservative fellow traveler Tony Blair), which after 9/11 advanced into the mainstream the utopianism previously confined to the extreme right and left. His eloquent and illuminating attack also challenges a notion common to the liberal establishment: that history moves inexorably toward the universal application of U.S.-style liberal democracy. He calls it a delusional article of faith that, like the utopian variants before it, easily justifies violence in the name of a greater destiny. (*Oct.*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [The New Yorker](#)

"Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion," Gray, a British philosopher, insists in this outspoken attack on utopianism and the "faith-based violence" it has inspired. History, Gray writes, offers no new dawns or sharp breaks, and, from the French Revolution to the war on terror, he is as critical of the humanist belief in progress as of the "belligerent optimism" of neoconservatives. Sketching the roots of utopianism, he emphasizes the similarities between seemingly disparate movements: radical Islam, he suggests, might best be thought of as "Islam-Jacobinism." Taking the Iraq war as an object lesson, he argues for an acknowledgment that the "local pieties of Atlantic democracy" are not the only way to govern. Gray's writing has a bracing clarity, but he tries to fit too much into his model of utopianism with too little argument.

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Review

"*Black Mass* . . . is a limpidly argued and finely written synthesis of Gray's thinking over the decade or so since *False Dawn*, his highly regarded and influential study of globalisation. It is not a cheering work, to say the least, and Gray's conclusions, though never exaggerated or overstated, are bleak . . . Yet the right expression of even the bleakest truths is always invigorating, and any half-sensible reader will come away from the book soberer and even, perhaps, wiser." ?*John Banville, The Guardian*

"Gray is right to scoff at the misplaced faith in progress propounded by Enlightenment philosophers . . . Gray reminds us about more ancient and truthful myths, which predicted that our reckless pursuit of knowledge and power would lead to disaster." ?*Peter Conrad, The Observer*

"When the fashionable pundits of the age of globalization are as forgotten as those who, in the run-up to World War I, predicted globalization had rendered war obsolete, John Gray's work will still matter. It is at once a reproof and an antidote to the reigning wishful thinking that makes Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss look like a

realist. Gray's work has always been about separating reality and delusion. In *Black Mass*, Gray dissects the greatest of all political delusions, utopianism, and maps the way in which, against all expectations it has migrated from left to right, from communism to neo-conservatism. This is that rarest of things, a *necessary* book.” ?David Rieff

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Linda McGrane:

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