



The Black Book of Religion

In 1997, a thick grim volume titled *The Black Book of Communism* became a surprise best-seller in France, where Marxism was once as commonplace as claret. Edited by Stéphane Courtois, the director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, it documented the crimes against humanity committed across the globe in the name of socialism. Expertly translated for American readers by Harvard University Press in 2001, the *Black Book* offers an authoritative indictment, 856 pages long, of the ideological extremism to which many among the thinking classes have been susceptible. The book writes finis to the state of denial on the left concerning Stalin and Mao that long persisted, not just in France.

Faced as we are every day by a different kind of zealotry, it occurred to me that we need a companion volume, a *Black Book of Religion*, documenting the grievous offenses perpetrated in the name of God. The suicide bombers who have sown mayhem in Iraq, the Islamists who last year shredded railway passengers in Spain, or the demented Muslim who recently shot and stabbed a Dutch filmmaker, then pinned a note to his bleeding body boasting of his deed, are but current examples of an uncomfortable paradox. Few humans stoop lower, seemingly, than those whose gaze is fixed on heaven. The same transcendent epiphany that animates saints can perversely transform others into devils. Just how and why Dr. Jekyll becomes Mr. Hyde surely deserves keener attention from the devout of all faiths, or so it seems to me.

What follows is a prospectus, humbly submitted by a troubled secularist.

The Slaying of Peacemakers

Topping my outline is the shaming fact that the bravest martyrs to peace in our own time have been murdered by their own unforgiving flock. Thus Mohandas Gandhi was fatally assailed by a Hindu, Anwar Sadat by Muslim soldiers, and Yitzhak Rabin by a demented Jew. So, too, with independent Sri Lanka's founding prime minister, Solomon Bandaranaike, slain by a Buddhist monk in 1959 for seeking to conciliate the island's estranged, non-Buddhist Tamil minority. When Michael Collins agreed in 1922 to the peace treaty with Britain partitioning Ireland, this generous-minded guerrilla chieftain confided to a colleague that he had signed his death warrant; the sentence was soon executed in Dublin by nationalist gunmen. In each case, decades of strife intensified after these sacrificial murders. Typically, awkward facts were ignored or denied within the stricken communities. Writing in *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud provocatively speculated that Moses may have been secretly killed by the very Israelites whom he had led, thus explaining the Bible's silence concerning his fate.

But then, assassination from its origins has been entwined with religion. The word itself derives from *hash-shashun*, meaning hashish, the narcotic allegedly employed by an Islamic order to drug potential assassins in Persia and Syria. Astutely, according to accounts left by Marco Polo and by eleventh-century Crusaders, the order's grand masters arranged for drugged youths to be awakened in a castle where sultry damsels explained

they were in paradise, to which they would immediately return once they had carried out the order's planned murder. The lure of heaven has been an abiding motive for self-immolation. In *The Blood of Martyrs* (New York: Routledge, 2004), the University of Wisconsin historian Joyce Salisbury details the blood offerings among early Christians, initially encouraged by the church and popular among the faithful. "The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity," opined the second-century church father, Tertullian. Over time, dismayed by the brutal voyeurism attending immolation, later church fathers condemned suicide—but not before the propaganda value of martyrdom was established. There is thus a direct line from the early Christian pyres to Jim Jones's People's Temple in Guyana and David Karesh's deluded Davidians in Waco, Texas. The suicide bombers in the Middle East are scarcely unique to Islam; indeed, as Salisbury relates, the Prophet himself reputedly and more wisely admonished, "The scholar's ink is more sacred than the blood of martyrs."

The Messiah's Red Badge

Asked to specify the bloodiest carnage during the nineteenth century, most of us, I suspect, would propose either the Napoleonic wars or America's Civil War. In fact, more casualties flowed from the Taiping uprising that ravaged China in 1845–64, leaving at least 20 million dead. The rising originated in the excited discovery by a farmer named Hong Xiuguan that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and ordained by God to combat the demons leading the earth astray. As he resolved in 1837, "My hand grasps the killing power/in Heaven and earth;/to behead the evils ones, spare the just/and ease the people's sorrow." Thus he established his own millennial utopia, so frightening the creaking Qin Dynasty that a protracted and sanguinary war ensued. The nightmares about China's instability, its vulnerability to Western missionaries and British-imported Indian opium, acquired galloping force as hundreds of thousands flocked to Hong's cause. His doctrines were as baffling to Christians as they were alarming to Confucians. Like other apocalyptic warriors—notably, the Mahdi, General Gordon's nemesis during the 1880s in Sudan—Hong became a legend. His story is powerfully retold by the Yale historian Jonathan Spence in *God's Chinese Son* (New York: Norton, 1996).

Death and devastation tend to accompany the rise of messianic figures because the Awaited Ones by definition wage their battles for souls, not spoils or territory. Experience amply attests that ordinary mortals will often fight heroically for what they perceive as a glorious cause greater than themselves. Thus religious risings find their secular mirror in wars fought for flag or radical doctrines, with their attendant martyrs, saints, scriptures, holy days, and cabalistic symbols rifled from the arsenals of faith. Not coincidentally, Stalin was a lapsed priest, the Nazis seized on symbolism from medieval crusades, and Mussolini, like the pope, thundered his words from a balcony.

The Swords of Faith

We live in a world carved by warriors inflamed by either Cross or Crescent. The frontiers between East and West, between Islam and Christianity, and between the Orthodox and Latin faiths, were all demarcated centuries ago through holy wars. We commonly forget how many, and how bloody, these wars were. We may remember that there were eight Crusades centering on the Holy Land between A.D. 1096 and 1270, and some may recollect less edifying detours—the sack of Christian Constantinople by the Venetians, the massacre of Jews in the Rhineland, the savaging of the heretic Bogomils in the Balkans, and of the Albigensians in France. But who recalls the Northern Crusades?

The Northern Crusades raged sequentially around the Baltic and northern Europe, from A.D. 1147 to 1525, where the principal defenders of the True Faith were the implacable and ferocious Order of Teutonic Knights. In Germany, the Knights were subsequently seen as harbingers of the Prussian monarchy and German *Kultur*, and of Bismarck's Second Reich and Hitler's Third. "What thrills us," trumpeted the nineteenth-century German writer Heinrich von Treitschke, "is the profound doctrine of the supreme value of the State, which the Teutonic Knights perhaps proclaimed more loudly and clearly than do any other voices speaking to us from the German past." All but carried away, he added, "A spell rises from the ground which was drenched with the noblest German blood." So it came to pass that Heinrich Himmler envisaged his elite SS units as the reincarnation of the Teutonic Order. (For a fuller account, see *The Northern Crusades* by the Oxford historian Eric Christiansen, [London: Penguin Books, 1997].)

Yet it also needs recalling that the Crusades found their counterpart in the Islamic Jihad that persisted for more than 1,300 years, and its glowering legatees now constitute America's prime adversary in the war on terror. "From the fury of the Mohammedan, spare us O Lord!" was a prayer that sounded for centuries in European churches. Among the Jihad battlefields were Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Sicily, Austria, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, and southern and eastern Russia. "History has largely bypassed the Muslim attacks on and invasions of Europe that lasted from the seventh to the seventeenth century," writes Paul Fregosi, with some warrant, in *Jihad* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997). "When accusing the West of imperialism, Muslims are obsessed with the Christian Crusades, but have forgotten their own, much grander Jihad." From the windowed House of God, no one can credibly throw stones.

The Subjugation of Women

All the world's major religions, it can be safely generalized, are patriarchal. In times past, and still in times present, leading faiths offer divine sanction for the enthronement of the male over his submissive mate. This primacy took extreme forms among Hindus, who for centuries obliged high-caste widows to join the funeral pyre along with their deceased lords in the now-forbidden rite known as suttee; even today, some adherents condone wife burnings, if and when dowries evaporate. Devout Muslim husbands can still confine multiple spouses to purdah, while swaddling their bodies in obligatory scarves and burkhas. Under traditional Islamic codes, allegedly unfaithful wives can be stoned to death, and women who are deemed dishonored can be slain with impunity. Still, nothing in the non-Christian world matches the inherent misogyny of the Christian West's obsession with witches.

Curiously, it was not during the Dark or Middle Ages, but during the Renaissance and Reformation that the obsession with witches raged through Europe, beginning with Pope Innocent VII's notorious papal bull in 1484. During the next three centuries, as many as several hundred thousand persons were tried and executed as witches. The exact totals are elusive, since witch hunters tended to exaggerate and key records are missing. But in the cautious reckoning of the University of Texas historian Brian P. Levack, in early modern Europe there were at least 110,000 witchcraft persecutions and 60,000 executions. And this hysteria was abetted by Protestants and humanists who otherwise condemned the excesses of the Inquisition. As the Oxford historian H. R. Trevor-Roper remarks in *The European Witch-Craze* (New York: Harpers/Torchbooks, 1969):

Whatever allowance we may make for the mere multiplication of evidence after the discovery of printing, there can be no doubt that the witch-craze grew, and grew

terribly, after the Renaissance. Credulity in high places increased, its engines of expression were made more terrible, more victims were sacrificed to it. The years 1550–1600 were worse than the years 1500–1550, and the years 1600–1650 were worse still. Nor was the craze entirely separable from the intellectual and spiritual life of those years. It was forwarded by cultivated popes of the Renaissance, by the great Protestant Reformers, by the saints of the Counter-Reformation, by the scholars, lawyers, and churchmen of the age of Scaliger and Lipsius, Bacon and Grotius, Berulle and Pascal.

Thus the flames that lapped at Saint Joan in France found their way across the Atlantic where Puritan divines in our own brave new world proved more zealous than their home-bound British counterparts in trying, torturing, and executing women. As the infidel Mark Twain once rightly observed, humans are the only animals that blush, or have reason to.

Ignorance Is Strength

It is not just people but reason itself that has historically provoked an embarrassing intolerance among believers of every kind. Rabbis and priests, monks and mullahs, often look with suspicion on scientific discoveries or contentions that appear somehow to conflict with their doctrines. A great American named Andrew White completed a landmark two-volume book on this theme titled *A History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom*. He corrected the proofs in 1896 while living in St. Petersburg, where he was serving as U.S. envoy to the tsars. White was as well a historian and eminent educator, having helped found and establish the intellectual traditions of Cornell University. With compendious detail, he documented efforts by theologians to suppress, refute, or traduce scientific scholarship in a score of fields, from astronomy to zoology. Nothing so sharpened his pen as the assaults on Charles Darwin.

White noted that *Origin of the Species* (1859) burst into the theological world “like a plough into an anthill.” As the decades progressed, and as battle lines hardened, he writes, everything was done “to discredit Darwin, to pour contempt upon him, and even, of all things in the world, to make him—the gentlest of mankind—‘a persecutor of Christianity,’ while his followers were represented more and more as charlatans or dupes.” Thanks to White and scholars like him, America and its academies were made safer for Darwinism. Indeed, so widespread was derision in the 1920s when a teacher named Scopes was tried in Tennessee for violating state anti-evolution laws that it appeared that the battle was won.

It proved premature. In this age of computers and space travel, Christian evangelists and ultra-orthodox Jews are more than ever troubled by Darwinism. Sharing their alarm is a new school of Islamic creationists, exemplified by Harun Yaha, who writes in *The Evolution Deceit* that the six-day creation story in the Koran is literally true and the theory of evolution “nothing but a deception imposed on us by the dominators of the world system.” Even more specifically, Srila Prabhupada of the Hare Krishna movement explains that God created “the 8,400,000 species of life from the very beginning” to establish rigorous tiers of reincarnation. Such beliefs are more than a fringe or cult phenomenon. A Gallup poll in February 2001 found that 45 percent of Americans responding agreed that “God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so.” The political battle over adding creationism to schoolbooks is so widespread that *National Geographic*, that pillar of every medical waiting room, blazoned its cover with this question in November 2004: “Was Darwin Wrong?” (An emphatic NO, responded the

Geographic, providing a full-court, richly illustrated exposition of natural selection, together with the data quoted just above.)

Unreason is contagious. Inevitably, as night follows day, evangelicals discerned an omen in Asia's devastating tsunami: that the Almighty was punishing Swedish homosexuals vacationing in Thailand. How curious that a republic founded by eighteenth-century rationalists—who avoided all mention of God in the Constitution—should today spawn legislatures bent on breaching the once inviolable wall separating church and state. From revising schoolbooks to implanting the Ten Commandments in courthouse squares, politicians now fish in the seas of belief, abetted by a president who seems persuaded that a special Providence guides his hand. High time, surely, for the party of reason to recall the follies and crimes perpetrated through the centuries by God's self-chosen apostles. ●

—*Karl E. Meyer*