



# Black Mass : Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia

Speakers      **Professor John Gray**  
Professor of European Thought, London School of Economics

Chaired by:   **Toby Green**  
Writer and Historian

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**Jonathan Carr-West:** Good evening everyone, I'm Jonathan Carr-West, I'm acting Head of Programmes here at the RSA. I'm very pleased to welcome you all here this evening.

I should notify you that tonight's event is being recorded and an audio file of it will be available on our website in a few days time.

We're delighted this evening to welcome Professor John Gray, who is Professor of European Thought at the LSE. He's giving a lecture entitled, "Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia". His new book of the same name is published by Allen Lane.

John will be introduced by our Chair for this evening, Toby Green. I'll introduce him. Toby's a writer and a historian. He's the author of four books and his work has been translated into eight languages. He's lectured in the USA, in Argentina, in Norway and in Uruguay and he's a regular contributor to "The Independent" and "The Financial Times". His major new history of the Inquisition has just been published by MacMillan and I'm pleased to say there will be an opportunity to purchase books by both our speakers after the lecture.

So for now would you please join me in welcoming both Toby Green and Professor Gray.

**Toby Green:** Thank you. Well, good evening, everybody. It's my great pleasure this evening to introduce John Gray. John is one of our most distinguished thinkers. He's held academic posts in a wide range of the most prestigious institutions across the world; at Oxford, at the LSE, at Harvard and at Yale. And his work as a political thinker has recently been discussed in a new book issued by Routledge; "The Political Theory of John Gray".

John has written fifteen books and over fifty academic articles, translated into over thirty languages. His most recent books include "False Dawn - The Delusions of Global Capitalism", "Straw Dogs - Thoughts on Humans and other Animals", "Heresies against Progress and other illusions" and "Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern".

Many of you will have read his articles and reviews in publications such as "The Guardian", "The Independent", "The New York Review of Books" and other important publications.

As we've heard, John is here to discuss his new book, "Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia". In the introduction to his book, John describes how Black Mass is the Christian Mass performed backwards. The book examines what he describes as the political perversion of religion. How from the Jacobins to the Bolsheviks, from Russian Anarchists to American Neo-Cons, radical Islamists to Neo-Liberal Evangelists for a global free market, modern politics has been ruled by repressed versions of apocalyptic religion. He argues that much enlightenment thinking is based not in science, but in Christian myth, apocalyptic myth. The belief in Utopia and the ideas of human progress that fuel modern politics are secular versions of this myth. And at the start of this century these myths are dead or dying and in many parts of the world we see fundamentalist versions of religion returning.

It's a novel and innovative view of the Freudian idea of the return of the repressed; the return of religion as a repressed force in secular society and I think we're so lucky to have John here tonight, because what the book does, very rare in any era, is give us a surgical, methodical, structural deconstruction of the ideological myths which lie behind the current political crisis.

Historians such as myself often try to do this for past eras, but it's very rare that someone can do that for a contemporary period. And that's what's so innovative and important about John's book. What we have in fact is something highly controversial; a searing critique of the comforts of secularism. It's no wonder that it's been attacked in some quarters, because what we have is a radical piece of thinking, and radical thinking is often highly polarising. Perhaps I'm speaking for myself, but I tended to find that mirrors are not always our best friends.

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So it's my great pleasure to introduce John to you all.

**John Gray:** Thank you very much, Toby, for that very generous and flattering introduction. It leaves me feeling a bit like Dorian Gray, but I hope...

Perhaps I can begin, and I don't want to talk too long, maybe for about thirty minutes, to tell you something briefly before I outline the main arguments or claims of the book, why I wrote it and what stimulated me to write it, what kind of puzzlement led me to write it. And it was really a puzzlement about the intensity of some of the worst episodes of twentieth century violence.

The twentieth century was an extraordinarily violent century; hundreds of millions of human beings perished at the hands of other human beings. Part of that violence, of course, wasn't that much different from the violence which has broken out throughout the history and pre-history of humans. It certainly wasn't all the type of violence I'm going to focus on later in my remarks today. It wasn't ideological violence or Utopian violence or Millenarian violence. There are large episodes of terrible violence, which were motivated by other factors. If we look, I suppose, at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century, one of the worst episodes of western inspired genocidal violence occurred in the Belgian Congo, where a large proportion of the population, estimates differ, some people say as little as ten percent, other people say it may be up to about a third of the population, perished, not only from killing but also from starvation, over work and demographic collapse and so on. And that episode of violence, although it had a light ideological gloss, the company which was set up by King Leopold of the Belgium had as its goals the propagation of progress and civilisation and of Christianity. The actual motives behind it were pure and sheer predatory greed.

So I'm not arguing that all of the main episodes of intensive violence, killing and terror in the twentieth century or before were motivated by the factors I'm going to focus on,

but some of them were, and some of the very largest and even the worst were.

And looking back at the history of Communism, looking in all of its diverse forms and phases and also even at Marxism about which is a singularity in many respects about which I will say something later.

I was impressed by the shallowness of many of the explanations for this violence. I mean, if you read about... if you read standard historical accounts of the early Bolshevik regime, of course much of what is said in them is true, they say it was encircled, there was a civil war, there was an attempted allied intervention to snuff out the regime. All of those factors obviously played an important part in what then transpired, and also people talk about the repressive characteristics of the Tsarist regime, although having done a bit of research on this I think although it had terribly repressive aspects, including some awful problems, the level of violence overall really was very low by comparison with what occurred later and also very low by comparison with many contemporary states.

But the main point is, that when I looked at this violence, there and elsewhere; Mao's China according to the wonderful book, "Mao, the Unknown Story" by Jung Chang and her husband, Jon Halliday, they talk about seventy million people killed in peace time. In the former Soviet Union estimates still differ, it depends how you count it, but I've not seen a plausible estimate lower than about twenty million dead in that regime. And if you go right back to the start, under the Lenin period; it didn't all start with Stalin, that's just a myth, the sweeping of peasants and working people into concentration camps. By the mid-twenties eighty percent of the inmates of the concentration camps were illiterate workers and peasants. The persecution and often killing of the intelligentsia, that all began under Lenin and proceeded quite far under Lenin.

What accounted for this? I became convinced the more I studied it that one had

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to take seriously the goals. You have to take seriously what they said they were trying to do. And so if you read Lenin's pamphlet which he wrote at a time when he didn't expect to survive the Russian Civil War, when he thought he probably would be killed and when he made provision for a posthumous publication, in his book, "State and Revolution", he holds to a version of the classical Marxist vision of a type of society without government, without property, without law as we now understand it, without religion, without family life, without most of the things that have characterised human societies throughout the ages. It's a wholly unrealisable goal.

So I began to focus on Utopianism. And of course there is a question of what Utopianism really is. And of course a lot of people defend Utopianism even now. Because they say, "Well, if we give up the Utopian impulse we're limited by current political possibilities". If we give up the Utopian impulse we're sort of stuck with a kind of pragmatic politics of negotiating the status quo. They think that anti-Utopianism, or Dystopianism is a sort of tacit complicity with power.

That's not my view. My view on the whole is that Utopianism, especially when it seizes control of powerful states, is extraordinarily dangerous and pretty well always ends in a huge river of human blood.

Just to anticipate one of the features of my... one of the arguments in my book, one of the most interesting aspects of intellectual political history of the twentieth century was the way in which Utopian politics, which had been mostly focussed on the far left, came towards the end of the twentieth century to find a home on the right.

The Neo-Cons are not Cons of any sort. And I say this having known many of them actually back in the eighties and nineties. They themselves say, "We believe in creative destruction". That's what they announced when they began their interventions in the Middle East. I tried to track down the phrase, "creative destruction", by the way. I think some of you may know, but it was used before

this and I think it goes back to De Kooning. Not normally thought of as some kind of Tory. What he thought was if you smashed society, get rid of the institutions, then a new type of order would emerge of itself, which embodied natural human impulses and perfected natural human freedom.

And a lot of the Neo-Cons, Neo Conservatives, particularly the older generation, but some of the younger ones took similar views and they're incensed, they're upset, they're insulted, if you associate them with what they think of as the sort of reactionary and cynical and sceptical traditions in European Conservatism. They don't embody that at all.

So one of the arguments of the book is that the type of Utopian thinking which in the twentieth century and before was mostly on the far left, moved to the right at the end of the twentieth century. And launched what was in part a Utopian project. The project of reshaping and regime change in the Middle East. Reshaping not only of Iraq but potentially other countries in an image of American liberal democracy.

And along with many others, by the way, including quite a lot of the uniformed part of the Pentagon, nearly everybody in the American State Department, even it is said large numbers of people in the CIA, many people in the British Foreign Office; practically everybody actually except the political leaderships of Britain and America, in their respective governments and public institutions, either had deep scepticism about this project or were adamantly opposed to it. I fell into the latter category.

And the reason that I opposed it, and I went on record and wrote lots of articles about it in a variety of publications, including "The New Statesman", who republished it recently, was that I believed that if one thinks of Utopianism as the attempt to achieve an impossible state of affairs either inherently impossible, as I believe Lenin's original goal of a modern society without laws or state or religion or private property is just impossible, or as being impossible in any circumstances

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one can reasonably envisage being created in the future, which I think was true of the idea of converting post-Communist Russia into an idealised version of Eisenhower's America, or nineteen nineties social democracy, a goal which was taken very seriously in the West. Gorbachev had something like that goal. And although he had no support at all in the Soviet Block and when he stood for President he got less than one percent of the vote, he had immense support in the West. Something which if you crossed the border into Communist countries as they still were, you would find that not a single person believed it was remotely possible, or barely a single person thought it was remotely possible. It is obvious that the system was profoundly illegitimate, it had no internal support, it could not be reformed. It could be either ossified or it could collapse. And that's what happened.

So that was a kind of example, I think, of a Neo-Liberal Utopian goal. The idea of converting post-Communist Russia into some kind of idealised version of Western liberal democracy, which as I don't need to remind you is not exactly what has happened.

And an analogous one which came later was the idea of installing some version of liberal democracy in Iraq. Now I don't want to become an Iraq obsessive and go on about it too much, it's only one of the examples that I use in the book, but I've given in the book a number of reasons why I think it could be known in advance and was known by regional experts, military people, historians and others, who were all consulted and ignored, or for the most part not consulted, that that was impossible.

For one thing, and this is perhaps one of the main things, Iraq like most of the states in the Middle East is a post-Colonial construction. It was constructed mostly by the British. It was in fact constructed mostly by one single person; a British woman, who I think some of you might have heard of, Gertrude Bell. She was a British political officer in the region. She constructed it on the back of an envelope. But when she constructed it, she made it clear in letters and comments at the

time that this state could never be democratic. She thought that if it became democratic it would break apart, the Kurds would cede and move away and it would be dominated by the Shia and she thought the result would be in fact some kind of popular theocracy. She said this. A type of democracy, if you like, but more like Rousseau, some kind of Islamist version of Rousseau's democracy. Not a liberal democracy. Not one in which minorities or individual liberties are particularly protected. But a type of popular or elective theocracy. That's what she wrote in some passages I quote in the book in the nineteen twenties after a meeting with the great grandfather of the present Muqtada Al Sadr. They were her thoughts at that point.

So it was possible then I think to make some observations about the possibility of democracy. And of course since then you've had lots of other examples in the former Yugoslavia, for example, when democracy comes to hitherto authoritarian imperial structures what normally happens is they break apart. There very often is ethnic cleansing or sectarian conflict and there are reasons for this which are fairly easy to work out.

If you are a minority in a state which historically has had tremendous conflict, if there are long memories of deep enmity and hatred, then what you'll fear in that democracy is not necessarily that you'll be killed but that you will always be in the minority. So what then happens is, whether or not you're geographically concentrated, there are cessationist movements. And normally there is pattern when democracy comes into those areas is that you have ethnic cleansing and bloodshed and murder.

And that happened and is happening in Iraq now and I think in fact that we're only at the start of a much larger conflict. For some reason, I don't know why, I have the reputation of being something of a Cassandra, but there we are. I'm just commenting on the logic of human events. I think we're only at the start of a much larger conflict, because

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essentially what's been created in Iraq is a black hole, a failed state. And what normally happens historically when that's done is that the states surrounding that black hole feel constrained to go in and protect their interests and also grab some of the resources.

Because what I haven't mentioned so far but is an important theme of the book is that of course with all Utopian projects, they get mixed up with other things and in the case of the Iraq project, it was from the start partially motivated by geo-political goals having to do with oil and energy. People I remember denying that at the time they can't have read Mr Cheney's remarks in 1999 to a gathering in London which I've reprinted in the book, in which he said, "The supreme prize is in the Gulf. Oil is depleting, we've got to get our hands on it. It's crucial to do that". From the start it was also a geo-political project. But even as a geo-political project, the Iraq project was a Utopia. Even as geo-politics, even as a Doctor Strangelove strategy it was Utopian, because if you smash the state you'll have a kind of anarchy and in the aftermath of the anarchy all production goes down and stays down. You can't protect thousands of miles of pipeline and there then is, and I think we're getting close to this situation right now in the north of Iraq, there then is a resource war for control of those resources. Who gets it? The Kurds? The Shia? Who protects it? Who gets the benefits. I think we're now at the stage at which that will start to be fought out.

And during that period, of course, oil production will go down further as there will be more insecurity.

And that's against the background of people like Wolfowitz saying, "This war will pay for itself. Oil production will be higher than it's ever been. The Iraq oil industry was very inefficient", which it was, "the price of oil will go down to ten dollars, fifteen dollars maybe max". None of that happened.

So what am I focusing on in saying what I've just done? I'm focusing on as it were deep seated unrealism, which I think began to affect Western political thought and practice towards the end of the twentieth century, whereby

projects which were unreal, which people who knew something about the area or the region; soldiers, intelligence experts and others who were consulted, all said, "This is very dangerous. It's very difficult", even if they may have had some sympathy with it or belief in weapons of mass destruction and so on, they said, "This is very, very dangerous. The likelihood of it working is very low", or many... some of them said, as I said, "It's impossible. It's simply preordained to fail. There's no chance whatever that these goals will be achieved."

So how did that come about? And that lead me to my next point of enquiry, which was what explains this very strong tendency to Utopian thinking in Western thought? After all, it's not quite universal, I mean, perfect societies of some kind or other occur in, I think, most cultures, many cultures, at least not only in Western civilisation, but they're normally, as they were in the West until the early modern period, they're placed in the past. You read Plato. He has ideas of a perfect society, but it's in an irrecoverable past, not in the future. It's not achievable. Never forget that Utopia means, "the perfect place", but also, "nowhere". You know? The other meaning of it is "nowhere". That's the meaning I usually give to it.

And right up to Doctor Johnson, Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century when he wrote his "Rasselas", a perfect society was located if not in the past then in an unmapped part of the world. The idea that human energy, human action, could create a society which was perfect, or even the idea that it could create a society better than it had ever existed, was not acceptable. It only really came into politics, I think, as a central feature of political action in the eighteenth century.

But it had antecedents, and they were religious and I suppose one of the things I've done in the book is to apply an analysis by which I was much influenced when I read it over thirty years ago by Norman Coleman, a creative twentieth century intellectual historian, who is still alive and who I still talk

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to, in which he analysed the Millenarian movements of the late Middle Ages; these vast movements which extended all over Europe at the time, who are often associated with revolutionary upheavals and in one or two cases set up brief experiments in theocratic Utopias. There was one in Germany, when a city was taken over by a man called John of Lydon, who saw himself as a sort of Messianic prophet. And in this city private property was abolished, gold was seized, windows had to be kept open at all times and doors, and it wasn't too good for women if you happened to be a woman in that city, because an injunction was read out according to which any woman who was asked to be married had to agree. And if they didn't, which they didn't always, amazingly, they were executed. And some of them were executed. It was destroyed after a while and he himself was killed. That was John of Lydon. But that was an example in the Middle Ages.

Now I think, and the main thesis of the book is that the secular project of Utopianism in its radical revolutionary political form; there were lots of Utopias that just consisted of withdrawing from society, there are lots of long standing political Utopias, often religious, but not always. Radical revolutionary Utopianism, I think, is a secular version of this apocalyptic Millenarian tradition. And now why do I think that? Well one reason I think that is although mass violence, mass killing, is pretty ubiquitous in human society, mass killing to bring about a perfect world is less common. Killing with the aim of perfecting humanity is I think a Western achievement. It's distinctively Western. And where does it come from? I think it comes from Western in the broadest sense, which would probably include some element of Islam. Western religious traditions.

The apocalyptic tradition of seeing history as a narrative in which there is evil, there is some sort of fall followed by evil, a long struggle and at the end a kind of titanic short struggle followed by a perfect world. It's the religious creationality. You don't actually get that in most religious traditions because most of the religions humanity has had are not creation religions, they don't have the idea of the world being created. Most of them are

either animist or polytheist. So there isn't an idea of a single creative God and most of them don't attach any particular meaning to history as a whole.

The idea that human history has a distinct overall narrative isn't even found, I think, in pre-Christian Europe. You read the Greek and Roman historians and Plato or even Aristotle, you don't find very much of an idea that history has a goal or a pattern. The idea of a universal history is almost lacking. And if you go forward into European history and read writers like Machiavelli and even right up to Hume, an enlightenment thinker, you have the idea that history is basically fickle. At least in its political and ethical aspects. That evils are really evils and we should fight against them and when we do achieve a level of civilisation, humans, from time to time it can have different forms as it did in China, in Persia and in Africa and in other parts of the world, in India as well as in Europe. But that civilisations rise and fall and that process is normal.

Now that's the view I take. Up until about two hundred years ago it would have been seen as a sort of orthodox view. Because the idea of progress, which on its surface is an anti-apocalyptic idea, the idea of progress in its present form, which I believe to be a myth, only really got going some time in the eighteenth century, I think.

And I'll close on this matter, because there's no doubt that the least digestible part of the book and the least digestible part of my analysis for most people is not so much the attack on apocalypticism, because now when you talk to people about apocalypses and Utopianism you'll find that there never were any Utopians. Nobody admits to ever having held to any Utopian ideas, or to ever... there are no Marxists, there are certainly no Communists, there are no Leninists and if you talk to people there never were actually. They're all Neo-Cons now.

The part that really offends people is the criticism of the idea of progress. What do I mean by this? And these are my last

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remarks and why do I think it's a harmful myth?

Well what I mean by it, of course, is not to deny that there's progress in science and technology. Obviously there is. The basic reason there are six and a half billion human beings in the world and may soon be about nine billion is from spin offs from the growth of human knowledge. Public medicine, industrial farming, urban living, various kinds of spin offs from the growth of knowledge have given humanity much more power than it ever had before to live longer, to grow in numbers, to achieve a degree of prosperity for more people.

So progress, contrary to post modernists, progress in science and technology seems to be to be just a fact and I don't really take them seriously, I don't even take them seriously enough to dispute them at any length, post modernist theories which say that science is just another belief system like magic. It obviously isn't.

However, I think where the myth comes in is the idea that in ethics and politics you can replicate or reproduce a mirror of what happens in science. What happens in science is not sudden fits and starts of advance and retreat, what happens in science is cumulative advance. We know more now than scientists did in most areas a generation ago and I am pretty certain we'll know more still a generation from now. It's cumulative. Science is a cumulative advance.

The trouble with human life is that most aspects of human life aren't cumulative. Art isn't cumulative in that way. Different styles rise and fall, but if you said, "Is Shakespeare better than Aesculus?". What does it mean? And I think ethics and politics aren't like that either. In ethics and politics, I'm not a relativist, I'm not an unrestricted relativist certainly, there are goods and evils; peace is better than war, freedom is better than a lack of freedom and there are certain features of human civilisation which I think are extremely precious and valuable. But they tend to get lost.

And the worst, I think recently I think they tended to get lost quite quickly, because we forget that they can get lost. We think that once they are established, we're on a kind of stairway; that once you've achieved some important goal it can't suddenly vanish. Well everyone in this room I think has lived through the last four or five years, in which one of the fixed points as I view it at least of modern and twentieth century civilisation was suddenly lost.

One of the fixed points of twentieth century civilisation, emerging out of the horrors of the Second World War and earlier, but particularly out of that, was the prohibition on torture. We all accepted four years ago, and I did in fact do this, if one had suggested four years ago, and I did do this, that torture would be normalised, that water boarding, which was a technique used by Pol Pot, would be redefined as non-torture by the world's leading liberal regime. If one would say that the techniques of sensory and sleep deprivation which were used by Stalin when he prepared people for the show trials would be reintroduced in the world and no longer called torture, you'd be completely ridiculed as a hopeless misanthrope and pessimist.

Well I published an article in "The New Statesman", a spoof article which called torture a modest proposal in February 2003, that is to say before Abu Ghraib and before the War, in which I envisaged a situation in which torture would be brought back not as an aid to tyranny but as part of the battle for human rights. And I said in that circumstance we must not forget the well being of the torturer. Torturers have had a bad press. They have poor self-image. They have self esteem issues. And in those kind of circumstances what we need to do is give them psychotherapy, counsellors, legal aid, secure incomes, bring them out of the dark cellar, give them the kind of credit they deserve. Now that hasn't quite happened yet, but what has happened is that torture has been redefined and renormalised. It happened very quickly.

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And I think that kind of thing happens most easily against a background of a belief in progress. Because the idea is that once you've achieved something which ironically was a part of the enlightenment, because most of the enlightenment thinkers and movements which campaigned against torture starting with Montesquieu and Voltaire and others gained force and then it got a big boost after the Second World War. The irony now is that the idea of progress leads us to think that this is temporary, that it's actually just a blip. I don't think it need be. I think we could easily be sitting here twenty years from now and find that torture has been thoroughly and completely normalised. It's entirely possible and conceivable.

So I'll conclude on that and really what it amounts to is that I think there's been a secular translation of certain apocalyptic myths, not only into revolutionary Utopianism but into something which seems at first to be opposed to secular Utopianism. Because what secular Utopianism says would be tremendously catastrophic conflict followed by an almost perfect world, what the idea of progress says is that humans can step by step incrementally and gradually improve the world. And that this is a cumulative process so that what is gained is not lost.

What is gained can always be lost and usually is. And if we want to make civilisation last a bit longer, if we want to defend it a bit more resolutely against rebarbarisation, then I think it would be better if we gave up the myth of progress, or at least became less attached to it and recognised actually that it's very easy for civilisations governed by myths which they don't take to be myths to lose some of their essential virtues, to lose some of the liberal values and some of the prohibitions on barbarism that really define those civilisations.

Thank you.

**Toby Green:** Well thank you very much, John, for that fascinating presentation. I was struck by the first puzzle you set out; the violence of the twentieth century and was struck partly by the work I've done previously on the Aztec civilisation in Mexico. Now when

the Spanish reached Mexico in the sixteenth century, as we all know, it was an incredibly violent and brutal interaction and the Spanish were incredibly successful on the battlefield. But it's a little known fact that one of the reasons they were successful on the battlefield was not so much to do with superiority of weapons, but it was to do with the fact that the Aztecs, instead of trying to kill people on the battlefield, tried to capture them alive, so that they could then sacrifice them.

Violence in the Aztec civilisation was a sacred phenomenon. It was a phenomenon which was directed towards the concept of the sacred, the concept of the religious. And it strikes me that today that perhaps that's returning, and that's one of the arguments set out in the book, but certainly in the secular world view that's certainly not the case. And I wonder if you feel firstly if the loss of sacralisation leads to a different approach to violence and to its justification, and of course that's something I'm particularly interested in, given my interest in the Inquisition.

So I suppose the first question is, the violence of the twentieth century is something which has to be a given, but at the same time we have to recognise also the intrinsic violence of the human condition. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about under what conditions you feel the human condition could be more or less violent and how the sacralisation of violence could fit into that?

**John Gray:** Well that's a very good question and I'm glad you brought up the Aztecs as an example. I mean, Toby is a great authority and wrote his book on the Inquisition, which is a wonderful historical mediation on a key element in actually modern violence to a large extent. It is to do with sacralised violence. Now I'm not completely sure, though, that so to speak sacred violence or sacralised violence disappeared in the modern period. I mean, if you think of Robespierre and the Jacobins, one of the attributes they attributed to revolutionary violence was that it was

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pedagogic; that is to say they said that it can purify human beings. Obviously it had other functions. If you read them, they say we're being attacked, we have to defend ourselves, there are counter-revolutionary armies, there are internal minorities that have spies plotting against us, we've got to protect ourselves. But I don't think you can understand, I mean, the French Revolution was a lot bloodier than we often think. In the Vendee when revolutionary violence was used to repress a peasant rising, it's estimated that between a quarter and a third of the population perished, often by means of like mass drowning. That's almost Pol Pot levels actually.

And if you look at modern terror, especially in the form of Pol Pot, it wasn't a reaction to external threats of invasion. Nobody threatened to invade Pol Pot's Cambodia at that time as far as I'm aware. Indeed, the rest of the world was distinguished by having hands off and letting them get on with it. And there wasn't any great internal revolutionary movement bubbling up. There weren't hundreds of disciples of John Dewey and John Stewart Mill as it were. It was a mass campaign of terror, which used torture on a huge scale, aiming partly at reconstituting society on a new, and I think impossible model, but also rather like the struggle techniques that existed in China about which in the Maoist period we have a little bit of information now and which are quite different from the ones that existed, or rather didn't exist, in the Soviet Union. Most of the time if you ended up in the Gulag you were abandoned to your own devices. You perished normally through starvation, cold or being overworked. You weren't constantly struggled as it was called to reconstitute your soul in a correct way. But you were in China.

And so I think there is this tradition which is not completely universal even with in revolutionary movements of a kind of secular version of sacralised violence.

Let me give you a different example, just briefly. The Tamil Tigers weren't the first people to use suicide bombers. I think chronologically in the 1980s it was used in

Lebanon. I think the first Tamil Tiger suicide bomber was in 1987. But the Tamils between 1980... excuse me, between then and up to about 2000, basically up to the Iraq War of 2003, are estimated as having committed more acts of suicide bombing than any other single organisation and according to some credible estimates to have committed about half of those in the world during that period.

And the interesting feature of them, of course, is that they're Marxist Leninists. They're not Muslims but they're not Hindus either. Some of them actually were Christians or belonged to Christian communities, but for the most parts they were Communists... Marxist Leninists who rejected all forms of religion. And yet when you read about them and their way of... in other words, they didn't do it in order to go to the afterlife. Nor, by the way, did most of the original Lebanese bombers. There's been a study of forty odd of the bombers in the early eighties in Lebanon, of whom only a small minority were Islamists. Most were secular leftists; Communists and Socialists. And some were women and some were Christians. One was a Christian woman high school teacher with a degree. It's a fairly safe bet she didn't do what she did in order to join the virgins in the afterlife.

The point is that so to speak secular political movements can sacralise their violence, because meaning can be found even in an act of terrible violence which involves the certain death of the person who commits it, even if that person has no vestige or seems to have no vestige of transcendental religious faith.

So I guess my main comment on what you say is that sacralised violence is something distinctive. It's not found right throughout human history and prehistory, which is full of violence, what you call the intrinsic violence of the human condition. But sacralised violence isn't restricted to exclusively so to speak religious contexts as we would think of as the Aztecs or the Inquisition.

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**Toby Green:** Yes. And I suppose that comes under the second question I wanted to ask before I open this up to everybody, but I wanted you to expand a bit on what you talk about in the book when you describe the faith based intelligence, which led up to the Iraq debacle. But also you talk very interestingly about how that was a sort of bastard offspring, if you like, of faith based views of knowledge of previous Utopian regimes and how that in turn connects to a sacralised view of faith based intelligence. Perhaps you could... I don't think you mentioned that.

**John Gray:** Well it's a curious story about the run up to the Iraq war. I mean, the term, "faith based intelligence" is not mine. I wish it was. But it was actually used by an American arms controller who was an opponent of the Iraq war who said the intelligence they used is, "faith based, not evidence based". It's being used by people who know the answers before they ask for the intelligence. And if the intelligence doesn't fit the answers, they reject the intelligence. It must be wrong.

And I was curious about that and went into it a bit and I found that some of the people centrally involved in the Iraq war were disciples of someone I admire, and I think who if he had been alive at that time would have probably been a critic; Leo Strauss, who some of you may have heard of. And he's often seen as the godfather of American Neo-Conservatism.

I think the truth is, and you'll see why I think this, I think if there's any political movement he would have condemned and ridiculed it would be Neo-Conservatism, because Leo Strauss was deeply convinced of the fragility of liberal democracy. He'd grown up in Naz... Weimar Germany. All of his political outlook had been shaped by that catastrophe. And he certainly didn't believe in the prospect of propagating it all around the world by force of arms. So I don't think we can blame him for it. But some of his disciples were prominent and among them as it were the feature of his thought which I think they used was the idea that texts or events contain

hidden meanings which are not available to the initiate.

So Strauss himself did do this. If you read Strauss on major thinkers, he says that all the major political thinkers have an overt meaning and a hidden, esoteric meaning as well, which is usually the opposite of what they say. And that he can penetrate it. So Plato is a tremendous anti-Utopian if you read Plato, but that's because Strauss says that's really because he's a Utopian. And he can sort of show that.

And the point about this, of course, is that there's no method behind this. It's just naked intuition. It's almost like deconstructionism. It's just arbitrary. And some of his disciples who I name in the book really start to apply this to issues of intelligence. And some of them go back to the seventies actually. Among them are a thing called "The B Team", which was set up by some kind of hard line, rather hawkish people in the Cold War period. Some of them connected with Chicago University and with Strauss.

They argued that the absence of evidence for certain claims about the Soviet Union was the best evidence in favour of those claims. So for example they would say, "The Soviets have got this and this kind of new type of ballistic missile, or they're developing this and this type of invulnerable submarine", and they would be told by genuine experts, "Well, there's no evidence for that". They'd say, "Ha ha, there we are. It's absolutely certain." I'm not making this up. I give sources in the book.

Some people who are involved in this have later come out and said what happened and that really began to occur in the period leading up to the Iraq War. It wasn't known for sure that there were no weapons of mass destruction. It could be that even Saddam was misled about that. Certainly there have been biological programmes in the nineties. But the actual intelligence that was available and which has been discussed in public forums, which is all I have access to, was certainly very far from conclusive and there

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was a lot of contrary evidence. Now the point about this in the run up to the Iraq War is that the contrary evidence wasn't so much cherry picked. It was simply ignored. Because the people at the top knew, they thought, what the truth was.

And some of it, there were statements like, "Well we don't belong to the reality based community. We are creating a new reality. We can do what we like". Now the one thing I've learned, or one of the few things I can really say that I've learned, is that when that kind of hubris is expressed you're just before a major catastrophe. If you laugh in the face of fate like that, fate laughs back. Usually pretty loudly. And I think that's happened.

So I'm not arguing against rational enquiry, I think it's essential in war and in politics and in medicine and in law. What I'm arguing against is basing war, especially war but also politics, on faith. And basing the kind of judgements we make about different countries on faith rather than evidence. Let's not forget, a final point, President Bush said he could see into Mr Putin's soul. Maybe what he saw there has changed since then. I don't know. Basing big policies on that kind of nonsense is terribly ignorant.

**Toby Green:** Thank you, John. Well let's open this up. I'm sure there will be lots of questions so can I ask you to stand and obviously speak clearly and we'll have a good question and answer session.

**Question:** John, I wonder going back to basics could you explain how religiosity and Utopian ideas have got mixed up? Is there some salvation in the fact that I understand that the largest growing non-sect in America is in fact Atheism, which seems to be ubiquitous in the UK? Perhaps France is an exception, but I wondered whether basically you could mix one with the other?

**John Gray:** Well there's an historical link and there are other... historically speaking, I think Utopianism as we now think of it, and especially in its revolutionary forms, which involve the capture of state power, really didn't get going until the period of the French

Revolution and after that. But if you go back to the Puritan movements of the early modern period and even in the English Civil War, if you look at people like the Fifth Monarchy Men. Somewhere between twenty and forty thousand armed men, not that they were men at that time in Britain, who believed that, rather like elements of some radical groups in Iran now believe, that the world was on the brink of a Messianic change and that God was going to come and rule the world and in particular England. And advocated in England a form of theocracy. They've been called by one historian of them, he argues that the Fifth Monarchy Men in seventeenth century England were expecting this divine revelation followed by a theocracy were the first armed Soviets. There are many features of them in which they are rather like the Bolsheviks later on.

And so I interpret Utopianism as a sort of secular invocation of that kind of late Mediaeval and early modern Millenarians and apocalyptic traditions.

And the argument for that is really you don't find it anywhere else, unless there's been extensive Western influence. There are one or two counter examples maybe from China round about the Tai Ping Rebellion, but it's interesting that the leader of that saw himself as a second Jesus and had been influenced by Western missionaries. I don't see how I can prove it's uniquely Western, but it predominantly belongs to this Western religious tradition.

Now your argument about atheism. Well, does that offer hope? I'm not sure that it's... I mean, certainly in terms of book sales it's a good example that it seems to be pretty strong at the moment. And good luck to them, because it shows people are interested in these issues. But I'm afraid I regard militant evangelical atheism as Christian heresy. One of the less interesting Christian heresies. And the reason for that is not only that they use the terminology of Christianity, because they've got to, because they say they don't believe in X, Y, Z so they've got to... like if you say you don't believe in fairies you've got

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to use the concept of a fairy. It's that much of the world view of many of the atheists really takes a lot from Christianity.

And the example I usually give of that is in Dawkins' book, "The Selfish Gene", where he's constantly throughout the book saying that we're gene machines and we're selfish replicators and we're mechanically controlled by our genes. Suddenly, I think almost on the last page, he says, "But uniquely among the animals on the planet, we humans can decide our fate. We can disobey the laws of the selfish gene".

Now where's that come from? Not from science. Not from Darwin. I think it comes from our religion and more particularly Christianity, because the Western modernist tradition, Christianity in particular, is unusual among religions in having such a profound categorical difference between humans and other animals. Buddhism doesn't. Hinduism doesn't. Cannibalism certainly doesn't. Which is the primordial religion of the whole human species actually.

The idea that there is a radical difference between us and the rest of the animal creations, so that we have free will and they don't is a Christian idea. You can find sort of traces of this idea in the ancient pre-Christian world, some of you even know the history of philosophy and will remember Epicurus on the swerve, he says, "Atoms swerve randomly". I always thought myself I would be more persuaded by Dawkins if the book had been called, "The Wayward Gene" or, "The Swerving Gene".

But the centrality of ideas of free will comes from religion. So I'm not convinced and in fact I've found... I'm not a believer myself of any kind, but there is a certain degree of bullying intolerance about contemporary atheism. There is a certain kind of... and there is a kind of paradox in it, which says that all human beings are rational. If they really tried it, they could be as rational as we are. They call themselves, by the way, "The Brights". I'm not making that up. Look on their sites. "We are the Brights".

And yet around them they find a billion Muslims, hundreds of millions of Catholics. They find this incorrigibly religious species. Now as a naturalist who's also a non-believer I take religion to be as ineradicably human as sex, play or violence. That's what characterises human beings. That's what human beings are like. It has many risks and dangers and evils associated with it, but so does love. So does knowledge. So does science. So does play. All good things come with great evils.

They say, of course, "Well that's faith. You're talking about faith. And we can do without faith". Well I must say if I saw the slightest evidence of scepticism in them I would take that more seriously. I don't really see any scepticism there.

And the person I kind of go back to, and I'm not sure whether he was a believer or not, it's sort of inscrutable, Toby's written about this very beautifully I think, is Michel de Montaigne. You have everything you need in Michel de Montaigne. If you want to read a real sceptic and whether tactically or not he always kept the window open. Partly because he believed that even in our everyday life we rely on a certain element of the animal faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, which of course if you know any philosophy you will know that there's still a probable induction. We have to rely on that.

So the whole idea of, I think, getting rid of faith and relying purely on reason, it leads to a kind of comedy. The comedy of evangelical atheism is that the view of humanity it propagates is taken from Christianity.

**Questioner:** Sorry, just to clarify on that last point, are you saying... where do you stand on the whole free will debate and are you saying that ultimately human beings are trapped by their very humanity and there is no escape and we're all very sad and predictable and do you believe in a determinist universe?

**John Gray:** That's a good question. Thank you, I'll try and reply to it. Well, one

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can reject free will without believing that humans are predictable. Because we don't have the knowledge to enable us to predict human behaviour. It's unfathomably complex. I would even go further; even the historical past is unfathomably complex. We can spin stories about it, but we don't really know why things happened as they did. I mean, there are more or less plausible stories.

I'm not a relativist, as I say, there are some stories, like vast conspiracy theories which are rubbish. But we don't really know why things happened as they did. So you could be a determinist. But I guess this won't satisfy you, as you could be a determinist, but I guess this won't satisfy you. And you could be a determinist and still say you can't predict human behaviour. And in particular we can't predict our own. Because if we try to predict our own behaviour we would be standing outside ourselves and we would have knowledge of ourselves which we don't in fact have. So we can't predict our own behaviour.

My basic view of... my basic stance towards free will is I'm not interested in it. It's a sort of pseudo problem. And I find the position of... it isn't debated in most religious or philosophical traditions. It isn't even a problem in most philosophical or religious tradition. It's certainly not a central problem. Not a major problem. And therefore I find a sort of comedy when you have atheist materialist philosophers like Daniel Dennett who spend their entire lives trying to reconcile some idea of free will with scientific materialism. Why would you do that if you weren't already shaped by a Christian or at least a Western monotheist culture?

I'll take a different example. Supposing Darwinism hadn't come along in the nineteenth century England but had been discovered in Tibet or China or Japan or India? In other words in cultures whose religious did not posit a vast difference between humans and other animal species? Would have been the continuing explosive thing that it is now is? It's still kind of shaking America. It's still actually having an impact on Britain through faith creationists taking over faith schools and things

like that. It's still being right at the very heart of our debates. Still having Darwinian Evangelists banging their drums. I doubt it. I think that, as it were, shows in a sense that... myself since I sort of stand outside this, if I were a Christian, if I were a theologian, I would be interested in free will. And I might be interested in reconciling it with materialism.

But I'm not. So it's not one of those issues I have... it's like the problem with evil. I say, "What about the problem of evil?" Well there are a lot of things in the world... evil is an indispensable term for us. There are things in the world I can't help viewing as and feeling as if and acting as if are truly evil. People who plant bombs on the Underground, whatever their reasons are, I can't help feeling that there is something pretty bad about that. And yet I don't think there's a problem with evil in the sense in which Christians have talked about it, because I don't assume there is a good God who creates things. I mean, what we see are human animals with very contradictory needs and impulses, which weren't designed and which are not harmonious.

That's what we see. That humans are a very violent, capricious animal. Not, by the way, the most violent and capricious. I rely on the great writer, E.R. Wilson, I wish I could remember it, I think it was the hamadryas, he says there is a type of monkey which is a lot more violent than humans, he says that if this monkey had invented the nuclear weapon, we'd all be gone by now. They're tremendously violent and they exhibit some proto-genocidal trace for ganging up on others. We haven't yet found evidence of monkeys engaging in systematic torture or... they don't seem to gang up on other troops of monkeys because the other monkeys have the wrong beliefs or a sort of suspect metaphysics. It seems to be principally ganging up for property. Now I take it that that is somehow a feature of our... we're hardwired to something like that. We're not like the benobal, we're more like these hamadryas.

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And that's what many people resist, because there is an enlightenment view which says, "This is all error. If we're going to think clearly and correctly, this is all error". Which reminds me, it's a true story, twenty years ago I knew a philosopher who told me he'd persuaded his cat to become a vegan. I said, "You must have presented some very compelling arguments". He said, "I did, John. I did". Well, I was a little baffled by this. It led me to some interesting reflections on the folly of philosophy. But I then said, "Does the cat go out?" "Yes". Well then we have a solution. It's not in fact entirely satisfied by the mouse tasting Soya that he prepared. And just as cats are predators, I don't see that humans are wired to be genocidal, but they are very violent. And given the right circumstances, which recurrently occur, they can kill each other in very large numbers and very quickly and very cruelly too.

So one of the things I'm sort of looking for, and here I differ from most philosophers, I'm looking for as it were beliefs or if you like even myths that are not harmful and don't encourage this behaviour. If I have to choose a myth I'd prefer to choose one that discourages it. And that is therefore less harmful.

**Questioner:** I've got a point and a question. The point, to start off with, is it seems to me that you're making many of the same mistakes that Adorno and Horkheimer made in, "The Dialect of the Enlightenment". You seem to be painting with much too broad a brush. The Russian Revolution, Neo-Conservatism, you know and the same kind of thing, it seems to be a night in which all cows are black.

So that's my first point. My question following on from that is if freedom is better than unfreedom, how do we institute or defend it? To resort to myths doesn't seem to be a satisfactory answer to me.

**John Gray:** Okay, they're both very good questions. I will try to answer them. For those who are unaware, some of you might not be, Horkheimer and Adorno were two Marxist theorists who wrote a book called, "The Dialect of the Enlightenment". And in this

book, and I mention them actually in "Black Mass", and in this book they portray the horrors of the twentieth century as a direct result of enlightenment thinking. Now I don't think that's true for a variety of reasons, which I give in the book. One reason is that there are enlightenment thinkers who weren't like this. Unfortunately they weren't the most influential. Hume wasn't like this. Spinoza wasn't like this. Just to name two. And the greatest twentieth century enlightenment thinker, Sigmund Freud, certainly wasn't like that.

However, the world isn't dotted with statues of David Hume. When I went to see his grave in Edinburgh a few years ago, I saw a piece of unkempt ground covered at that time by beer cans. And you don't as you travel around the world find ruins of Humeian regimes everywhere. But you do find ruins of communist regimes and other examples of the radical enlightenment. So I think the grain of truth in the Horkheimer / Adorno thesis, which is over inflated in my view, but the grain of truth is that there is, even now, a strong radical Utopian tradition which has been politically highly influential within the enlightenment.

In other words, what I am not convinced of, which a lot of people now are saying, "Well, that's not what I mean by the enlightenment", because this is post modern pick and mix, they say, "Well that's not the enlightenment", I say, "Well, what's the enlightenment then?" It's what they believe in. It's what they like. And it's almost like when you talk to some modernist Christians, who I like most of them, they say, "Well, nobody ever believed in the Virgin birth. Not a single person. None of us ever did. It's all utter nonsense. We never believed in demonic possession." I say, "Well what about these statements of twenty nine articles?" "No. No. No. That's all a metaphor. Pure metaphor". I mean, there is a very strong tradition, it seems to be that Marx was an enlightenment thinker, Lenin took many of his essential beliefs from Marx, including the belief in the necessity of a period of terror. Bakunin was an enlightenment thinker. The

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red Hegel. The red ((Krudon 63:12)). Who were these people other than that they were radical enlightenment thinkers?

So I hold to the view that there's a strong enlightenment, not the whole of the enlightenment, there are many enlightenment thinkers I greatly admire; Hume, Hobbes if he's an enlightenment thinker, Spinoza and Freud would be examples from different periods of history. But there is that strong tradition.

And I also sort of insist on this because they do, I've been in debates with it, that the Neo-Cons belong in the enlightenment tradition. I've talked to Neo-Cons. They're militant. I've been strongly attacked in America and here for criticizing the enlightenment by Neo-Cons. "We stand for enlightenment. We are militant for enlightenment". So I say, "Well, what about Communism?" "It's barbarism. It's entirely to do with what happened in Russia". "Well, what about Cuban Communism? Korean Communism? Chinese Communism? Mongolian Communism? African Communism? The Communism of the Peruvian and Nepalese Guerrillas? Are they all barbarians who've corrupted this noble, humanistic dream? Or is there something in the dream? In the enlightenment dream?"

So they say they're disciples of the enlightenment. They are strongly opposed to any criticism of the enlightenment. So I take them seriously and also they deny that they belong to any tradition of conservative thought, which I don't think either. But they call themselves Neo-Conservatives.

So I think there is a pretty strong, robust argument for what I'm saying and I'm not really doing it in too broad brush terms, because in the book I identify some enlightenment thinkers. Particularly the early enlightenment, the early modern period of enlightenment thinkers, who I think are the best guides now. The best guides to how to react to this period of mix of wars of religion and wars of resources are Hobbes and Spinoza. Who I would say were both enlightenment thinkers. They're the best guides to... and some people even think, I had a discussion with Toby before we came out

here, some even... I don't think this myself, but you could of de Montaigne, who I think is the best writer to read, was a sort of precursor of the enlightenment. Or even an early enlightenment thinker. I'm not so sure about that, but he is certainly someone we can really learn from.

But you're making a valid point, which is often made against me. People often say I'm attacking straw men as if there were no radical Utopians, or as if no-one had ever followed them or no-one ever believed them. Well, that's not... if you read what Lenin said, if you read what... it just isn't what they themselves or what they themselves believed when Marx and Engels wrote, "Communism is the riddle of history solved". I don't think they intended that as a joke. I think they believed it. And that's an essentially religious, epistological apocalyptic view, which mutated into the modern... into the later Utopian experiments. All of which lead to terrible disasters.

And it was on the basis of that analysis that I was certain from the word go, not just from 2002 when I concluded that the Iraq War would occur, but from 1989, when Communism was replaced by a new type of militant neo-liberalism that this would lead in most part of the world to disaster. Either war, or in the case of the former Soviet Union to a huge period of criminalised Capitalism, a demographic drop of maybe four of five million Russians and the rise now of a new type of authoritarianism which is generally quite menacing.

**Questioner:** I'm trying to hang on to some kind of fairy, and my fairy, my Utopianism isn't a place, it isn't necessarily the capture of state power, it's a process, and the process is democracy in its deepest, most meaningful sense. Have you got any kind of view on that?

**John Gray:** Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that. I think the trouble with reposing grateful in democracy is that democracy need not be associated with anything that I think you and I and most people in this room would think off as

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civilised or liberal values. We tend to forget now, and this is because of various reasons to do with the education of politicians and what they've read or not read and of the public media, we tend to forget that there has been in Europe a tradition of illiberal or anti-liberal democracy going back to Rousseau in which what democracy... his image of democracy, his ideal was the Swiss Canton. That sounds sort of wonderful as long as you remember that he said there would be no minorities in it. As long as you remember that he was opposed to all kinds of movements of people; i.e. immigration and emigration. And the reason he wanted that was that he thought there was a general will you could discover and that if you had these quarrelling people who belonged to different religions or cultures they wouldn't find it. And so you wouldn't have democracy.

So there is a strong tradition in Europe, aspects of which appeared in certain types of Fascism, in which democracy doesn't mean human rights or individual freedom or life under the rule of law, what it really means is something like popular will. And I think that's what has emerged through the shattering of the secular despotisms in the Middle East.

If you remember, in most of the Middle East the despotisms that have been destroyed have been... Saddam's was a secular despotism for most of the time. It was modelled on the former Soviet Union. He flirted a bit with radical Islam towards the end, for the last few years, but he was always adamantly opposed... it was an anti-religious regime. That's gone now. The secular despotism has gone. That's been dismantled by the Americans. And what you have instead is, I think, a form of democracy. But it's democracy without protections for minorities, or for that matter majorities; e.g. women. It's a form of democracy where religious minorities are not protected.

So democracy in an... now you might say, "Well, what we mean by democracy is constitutional rights, that's a part of it, and the protection of liberal freedoms, that's all part of democracy", and Winston Churchill's view is basically mine, democracy is a very bad form of

government but better than all the rest. Where you can institute it, it's better. And the ultimate reason it's better is that it holds our rulers accountable and also it enables them to be changed without violence. Because if you have a non-democratic system, deeply entrenched, the only way to change it usually involves violence.

So I think democracy's a good idea. But it's not always achievable and one of the things, I think, we've learned is but people are very resistant to accepting, because it's perhaps a slightly bitter truth, is that if you introduce democracy, as I mentioned earlier, in a post-colonial state with lots of different groups, usually the state breaks up and then you have a lot of violence. Eventually you may have a time of democracy emerge from it, but it might not be terribly liberal. It might be even more repressive than the tyrannical regime before.

And interestingly, if you go back in the history of the enlightenment, there was a whole tradition of people who supported enlightened despotism. I don't myself, but there were large numbers of thinkers who supported enlightened despotism. Because you can't trust the people. They might be illiberal.

So I can't share this... I'm more of a two cheers for democracy person than I am a three cheers person. It's better than many types of tyranny but it can sometimes be achieved at a colossal cost and the cost can be a long period of illiberal self rule and a tremendously long period of war.

Let me finally point out a historical thing. We tend to forget how hard it is to establish a modern, democratic state. In America, the paradigm if you like, it emerged only after the Civil War, one of the most brutal and horrible wars in history.

In Europe it spread by the Napoleonic Wars. In Britain we had the Civil War. There are not many examples in history. There are some, because history is full of exceptions, but there are not many examples of a democracy being firmly established without

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long periods of conflict. Usually it is intimately connected with nation building, which involves wars, the assimilation, sometimes forcible, of internal minorities, the kicking out of external minorities. That's what is very often involved.

So I can't really take seriously this idea that democracy can be propagated all over the world quite easily and quite quickly by force of arms. But one thing you can be completely certain of, is that that project will either lead to state collapse or to some fragmentation of states into other states and into anarchy or in many contexts into something quite different to what is imagined. In the examples where it has happened; Poland is a democracy, functioning. Not all political tendencies there are wonderful, but it functions reasonably well, rather successfully in fact. The Czech Republic. Slovenia. Some of the Eastern European countries.

But in the big examples of Russia it's produced something quite different from what everybody anticipated. People will say, "But that's because it's not a democracy". I wonder if that's the reason. Or I wonder if the reason is that actually the authoritarian regime there is in fact democratically quite popular.

So I think the trust in democracy as a process is likely to lead to great disappointment and if one looks at the history of the twentieth century, that's what happened very frequently. We had periods frequently... right up to the First World War everybody thought that democracy was spreading everywhere, then there was the catastrophe of the First World War, Fascism, Communism, ethnic nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe. Where democracy existed it was subverted.

And I'm not saying that's going to happen again, certainly not in Europe and in many parts of the world, but there could easily be a period in which dictators and demigods are not only turned to and admired, but even revered and loved, because that's what they were in the twentieth century. I think that could easily happen again.

**Questioner:** You said earlier that a tendency to believe, to have faith and to listen to religion is endemic to being human. But at that point I don't see what's so wrong with Utopia? Is it not a similar phenomenon? Is it not something we can go towards, to spread democracy, not just simply doing...

**John Gray:** Good question. Good question. I don't think Utopianism in the sense of the belief that human action can create a much better society, or even perhaps a perfect society in the future is at all hardwired or universal. Because as I mentioned earlier, up until about, it depends people differ as to when, some people say the eighteenth, some people the seventeenth, even sixteenth, but anyway, up until the modern period, when people talked about Utopia it wasn't as an object that they could ever create. It was something in the past that had been lost forever. That's the way that Plato thought of it. Or something in a far removed country that is not on the map. This went right up to the eighteenth century and Doctor Johnson as I mentioned.

So the idea which we now think of, people often say to me, "But isn't the human animal an ineradicably Utopian animal?" I don't think so. Most of human history, most of human prehistory isn't like that. We might like to think that humans have a kind of built in self improvement gene, but I don't think so.

What is true, however, is that something like what is religion after all, something like the need for myth or something like the need for narratives that give life meaning. That might be pretty well hardwired actually in humans.

They're not always historical myths, by the way, I mean, many of the myths of non-Western religions; myths of eternal return, myths of reincarnation, myths of Nirvana or emancipation from history. And those myths had by way... those types of philosophies or religions had parallels in the pre-Christian Europe. All kind of mystery religions in which the goal wasn't to change the world, it was to get out of the world.

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Some of the Gnostics were like that too. Their idea was that the world was created by a demigod, not by a god, but a kind of...

Hume, by the way, wonderful Hume, he used a version of this ironically when he said that... or he'd put in the mouth of one of his characters in the dialogues on religion, he said he sometimes thought the world had been created by a god in its premature dotage. A forgetful and as we would know say early Alzheimer's type of god, who created the world and got a bit confused and thought, "I wonder why I did that? Wonder what that was for?" Sort of intervened forgetfully and forgot about the last intervention, made another one and so on. Hume thought... I've often thought that was a very plausible theology myself. And it's a sort of version, a sceptical Hume-ian version of a Gnostic theology in which the world is created by a demigod.

So there are all kinds of myths, and I think it's that if anything which is hardwired. Now of course if you talk to Dennett and Dawkins and ((Graylee 77:21)) and others, they'll say, "Monstrous, it's a product of error. It's a product of bad education. It's a product of superstition". But where does all this error and superstition come from? Why are humans so fond of it? Does it come from the Devil perhaps? It seems to me to be quite obvious. It's even obvious in the behaviour of these evangelical atheists.

I suppose, there is this need for an all comprehensive narrative, whether historical or not historical and it is very deeply rooted. It may not be completely universal, in the sense that every single human being has it, but it's pretty ubiquitous in human societies and human cultures. Very, very strong.

And I think it's better to admit it, it's better to face up to it, just as it's better to treat it with respect and friendliness. Just as it's better to treat human sexuality as something which is hardwired and we should treat with friendliness rather than to say, "Well this is something that is the product of some kind of fundamental mistake". Although I must tell you, just briefly, I was in dialogue once with a Christian fundamentalist who said that if

children were brought up properly they wouldn't feel sexual impulses at all until marriage. Well if you believe that, you might believe atheism too.

**Toby Green:** I've got one last question. Yes?

**Question:** You kind of touched upon it already, but I was just wondering if you could elaborate on the difference between religious Utopians and secular Utopians and why these secular Utopians tend to be so destructive?

**John Gray:** Thank you. It's a very good question. Because I insist... although they weren't called Utopians at the time, they didn't use the word, the religious Utopians or the mediaeval Millenarians were very destructive. The example I gave of John of Lydon who killed a lot of people, executed women, terrorised a lot of people, I mean, these movements in the late Middle Ages were violent movements.

Of course, Toby's written about this better than I can, but it's not exactly a Utopian movement or a political movement, but of course the witch craze consumed far more people than the Inquisition did. Killed far more people. It was a very violent, horrible period.

So it's not that religious Utopianism was less violent, I don't think it was. The difference is between in a sense the aspirations of it. Religious Utopianism or Millenarianism, and you will see this if you read Norman Cohn's wonderful book, "The Pursuit of the Millennium", first published in 1957 out in new edition in the late nineties, it was always associated with the necessary belief that God would intervene and end the cycle of human crime and misery and so on. And humans could perhaps advance this moment and they could prepare for it, but basically it was divine intervention.

Modern, I guess secular Utopianism rests on a belief which I at least regard as even more absurd, which is that humans can do it alone. And whenever that's been

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attempted the result has been completely disastrous.

Now of course I will just conclude on this, there are people who will say, and there are people who really believe this, that really if the circumstances had been there then these revolutionary epics wouldn't have ended the way they did. So in other words if there hadn't been the First World War. If there hadn't been a First World War then there wouldn't have been the Bolshevik Revolution, but if it hadn't been for the First World War, if there hadn't been the allied intervention, if there hadn't been this, if there hadn't been that then it wouldn't have turned out... that's not my view. Because you can look at a wide variety of historical instances.

And let me put it differently, I am pretty confident, though I can't prove it, that if something like a revolutionary Marxist regime had been installed in any of the countries of Western Europe where they weren't installed, the results would have been roughly similar. If they'd lasted, if they hadn't been overthrown, it would have been roughly similar.

And the reason I think that, is that the countries in which they had these similar results were hugely dissimilar. Bohemia, the Czech lands, I'm not saying it's better or worse, it's just different from Mongolia, which was in turn different from Cuba, which was in turn different from Tibet, which was in turn different from the Yemen, which was in turn different from Eastern Germany. They're all completely different. Different language, different traditions, and they didn't all suffer the same kind of fate. And yet the results were pretty ubiquitously the same. Environmental pollution on a vast scale, ubiquitous corruption, the worst off people were working people who couldn't bribe for medical care or housing. There was pretty much the same absolutely everywhere.

And there's I think an intrinsic logic to that, which is partly explored in writers like Poppa, but if I can push someone writing, who's an interesting writer explored in many ways, if you want to really understand this it's best in a sense not to read the philosophers, at

least not to begin with, but to read people who actually observe the process first hand. Writers like Arthur Koestler, who knew about Soviet Stalinism, and who also knew about Nazism and travelled extensively in Nazi Europe and wrote novels as well as autobiographical works. You can really see how this works in practice. And I think the logic of it, although it has many different historical forms, is pretty well similar. It's a sort of logic that works itself out in China just as well as in other countries.

And that's, I think, a hard pill for many people to swallow. Because they want to think, "Well it could all have been so different if we had changed that and changed this and if these mistakes hadn't been made".

It's the same about the Iraq War, they say a lack of planning. Well if they'd been planning, they'd never have launched it. If there had been careful forethought, they would have listened to all of the Generals, all of the CIA all of the State Department, all of the regional specialists who had said, "Well, it's not going to work". It's not because they didn't plan, it's because they were sure it would work. And in part I don't think they're just cynics, I don't think they were all in it for corporate greed. I think some of them like Wolfowitz were completely sincere. They really believed that when you sweep away tyranny what you get is freedom. But that, unfortunately, is rarely true.

**Toby Green:** Well thank you, John. I think you will all agree it's been a fascinating presentation and I think it seems to me that your talk and the book ultimately come down to realism. As you say at the end of the book, a realism about both politics and about ideas and how the two interconnect. It struck very much when you talked about democracy, what I think we all forget is democracy is something that comes along with the nation state. I mean, that in itself is a contingent from the outset, and doesn't necessarily apply all over the world.

**John Gray:** No.

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**Toby Green:** And that sort of realism as you've been discussing, is something which is sorely lacking today. But thank you very much for your wonderful talk and John will be signing copies of his book.