

Your idol is my icon

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Confronted with hideous crimes, the first temptation is to portray the perpetrators as archaic bloodthirsty fanatics who have no place in our midst and that should be uprooted and forever eliminated. It's especially tempting to say that we are at war with them, since they themselves claim to be at war with us. However, we begin to have second thoughts when we learn that they have been educated in the same schools as our children and that until the moment when they started to be, as it is said, "radicalized", they were fully "assimilated" to our "secular culture". The more we learn about them, the more we realize that they are just as French as the London bombers of 2005 were British.

Even more unsettling is the thought that the way they "radicalized" themselves looks suspiciously similar to the ways lots of other fully integrated young men and women became, in earlier times, militants of a cause for which they were ready to kill. Germans don't need to be reminded of those "years of lead". Nor the Italians. Nor the Russians. Nor the French.

Once you follow this line, it becomes difficult to be at war with those criminals, since they have ceased to be foreign and archaic: they are very close to us and are fully our contemporaries. We might be at war, but then it is with us as well. Hence the question: what is so different from the other radical movements of the past? This is the moment when the "religious question" comes in. And there is no doubt that the killers of Charlie Hebdo's journalists killed in the name of their religion. Any attempt to hide that fact behind a screen of "social explanations" is evading the central issue.

One answer is to say: "We have not eradicated religions enough, and since they have no place in our multicultural public space we should end all our communiqués with Voltaire's signature *écraser l'infâme*". If secularism is attacked, more secularism should rise to the defense. What has succeeded against Catholicism and Protestantism should work with Islam.

That there is a problem with this solution is revealed when secularism itself becomes a form of "civic religion" that should be enforced by law as the only indisputable way to behave in public space, a rather intolerant form of tolerance since it considers all religions as equally absurd. Here the *laïcité* — in the French meaning of the word — shifts subtly to a religion of irreligion. It looks like pluralism, except that there seems to be only one way of being pluralist. Behind the call for tolerance you hear a troubling diktat for unanimity. Please come in our Republic, but on the condition that you

behave like “us” — “us” becoming now a specific identity rather than a *modus vivendi* among various ways of building identities through different attachments.

The trouble deepens when you realize that the object of the crime committed the 7th of January is related to the drawing of images, some permitted, some forbidden. Every inhabitant of Europe who knows anything about its past, immediately recognizes how familiar this fight is: what you take as a respectable icon, is what I consider a monstrous idol, and I will smash it — and I will kill you in front of it to make amends to what I respect above all. Iconoclasm is coextensive with our traditions — religious, scientific, political, economical. But of course there is an amazing diversity in what you take as an idol to be smashed to pieces, and what is taken as an icon — a value — to be respected. What is common is the designation of a victim to be sacrificed on some altar. Reformers, revolutionaries, modernizers of all shapes and hues, have a lot to share about that respect. While we fight the criminals (let the police do its job), we should not forget to fight ourselves as well, that is, to resist smashing the idols of the others on the altar of our icons. That is, let’s shift from iconoclasm to what I called “iconoclash”, the *suspension* of the iconoclastic gesture.¹

The difficulty here is that in Europe we seem to be convinced that religious wars came to an end long ago. What is terrifying with the irruption of Islamist radicals is that we are reminded that the religious wars had concluded with an *armistice* not with a *peace treaty*. The dangerous knot that had tied religion and politics is still there, just as difficult to untie as when the State — this makeshift solution to an insoluble problem — was invented. Except that now it is not pitting Catholics against Protestants on the European soil, but against Islam embraced by billions of people in foreign lands that the vagaries of globalization bring so close to home. Back to the 16th century, with Kalashnikovs in addition!

What Eric Voegelin had so clearly diagnosed is that you cannot loosen the tie between politics and religion by separating the two — as the secular State had attempted — because politics is full of religion and religion full of politics.² Secular politics is not the same thing at all as a *mundane* view of politics. A religion of uncertainty about what it means to be in God’s hand is

¹ Bruno Latour, and Peter Weibel, eds. *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002.

² Eric Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics (new foreword by Dante Germino)*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1952] 1987.

not the same at all as a religion that sees in politics the organ that will bring Heaven on Earth. The huge problem with which we are confronted by radical Islam is that the defense of a secular State has made us oblivious to the task of defending *both* religion and politics against their deadly embrace in Western history — now transported to the whole world through the various agents of modernization.

Behind the “religious question”, Voegelin has discerned another more important feature: differentiation of values. The radical militants that he portrays — first in the figure of the puritan, later in that of the communist and of the Nazi, and now we may add to his list, the Islamist extremist — fuse together all sources of authority in one single sword. The militant knows for sure whom to sacrifice and why. He or she does not tremble. Such a fusion of all sources of authority, all occasions to hesitate, is as foreign to religion as it is to politics. For a religious soul, there is a huge difference between putting oneself in the hands of God, and taking God’s will in one’s hand. For any political servant, there is a huge difference between exploring what the common good is and knowing for sure that you are the agent bringing Peace on Earth.

How could Europeans ask true devotees of Islam to clarify this point, if they themselves have not clarified it in their own history of modernizing the planet? Have they not themselves indulged into what Voegelin names “immanentization” of what should have remained transcendent? Did they not try to bring Heaven on Earth? Whatever way you take the problem of radicalization, it is our problem as well as theirs. No matter how many crimes have been committed in the name of Allah, Islamists are still far behind in number of crimes the toxic mixture of religion and politics has committed in our history. Think of the crimes committed by the “secular religion” of economics, to use Karl Polanyi’s term.³

The horror of the situation in which we find ourselves is compounded by the fact that while we have to reopen the wound of religious wars to start nursing them all over again with another religion and at a much bigger scale, we have simultaneously to reopen the whole fabric of modernity because of the ecological mutation modernity has brought to the planet. And that’s a crime, the magnitude of which dwarfs all earlier crimes. And for this one, the question of attributing responsibility suffers not much uncertainty: here at least we clearly know where the blame lies. What is common to both tasks is to learn how to multiply the sources of authority. Precisely what we are not so good at. And yet, it is the only way to resist the two brands of Apocalypse,

³ Karl Polanyi. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1944.

the one fanatics threaten us with, and the other we have blindly brought upon ourselves.