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Fundamentalist violence.
Political Violence and Political Religion in Modern Conflict

The tragic events of September 11th have changed our world in many ways. They have redifined the range of terror, a typical phenomenon in the Age of Revolutions, they have opened up the likelihood of a „clash of cultures" in the Age of Globalization. But they have also given new urgency to the meaning of religion in the Age of Secularization. When Jürgen Habermas received the German peace prize at the Frankfurt bookfair a few weks ago he claimed – under the title „faith and knowledge" - that what had exploded on the 11th of September were the „tensions between secular society and religion": „If we are to avoid a clash of cultures we ought to remember the dialectic ambivalence (die „unabgeschlossene Dialektik") of our own western form of secularization". In other words, we ought to understand the moral deficits of secularization which are due to the fact that something is lost in translating religious meaning in secular knowledge. In the necessary transformation of „sin" into „guilt", Habermas claimed, we are left with a sense of loss.[1]

I want to take this as a starting point to question our understanding of „political religion" in the modern nation state and the role of violence in this historical transformation. The concept of „political religion" is precisely the kind of „translation" of religious sensititivities into secular practice which Habermas alluded to.[2] It was first applied to the Nazi regime by the catholic philosopher Eric Voegelin in 1938 and has recently been resurrected by a number of scholars of the Third Reich and political philosophers.[3] Voeglin had raised the cry of „secularization" and found in the Nazi programme and practices an apocalyptic sense of mission, in Hitler the ressurection of the Egyptian God-Rulers and salvation only in a reestablishment of the catholic order and hierarchy of *ecclesia* through the symbolic tools of Christian culture. As Philippe Burrin has pointed out,Voegelin was not alone in this diagnosis, maybe more so in the therapy. The oriental fascination also surfaced in C.G Jung who in 1939 wrote what might appear ironic to us today: „We do not know whether Hitler is going to found a new Islam. He is already on the way; he is like Mohammed. The emotion in Germany is Islamic, warlike and Islamic. They are all drunk with a wild god."[4]

The God they were drunk with, I would like to argue, was not a particular creed, it was the God of violence itself. The historians that have recently argued for the alleged character or National Socialism as „political religion" have looked for elements of religious thought, language or ritual in Nazi propganada.[5] The political religion was thus located either in the ideology or in the cult of the movement, in its self-installment as the harbinger of a racial utopia and in its sombre communion with the dead. Some studies in the vein of Erci Voegelin's "political theology" have tried to give meaning to the quasi-religious worldview of some of the leaders - Rosenberg, Goebbels and Hitler himself, others have interpreted the Holocaust as the path to apocalyptic redemption.[6] They have read into the fantasies of power and obsession elements of that parasytic christianity which are spelled out in the language of national redemption and personal

salvation, either couched in terms of the Paul de Lagarde's „religion of Germanness", disguised as a new heathen religiositiy or bluntly confessed as in Nietzsche's morality of „*Übermensch*". I will not go into details here, but it appears that this kind of reading does not help to explain what happened how and when it did.[7] Michael Bruleigh has for example put his "New History" of the Third Reich under the assumption that the Nazi "politics of faith" can only be understood by looking into the "metaphysical motives behind the Nazi project" without, however, following up this line of argument in his book.[8] In his editorial to the new journal on „Political religion and totalitarian movements" he even seems to submerge the concept of „political religion" completely in the broader context of „totalitarianism" - with the sting of violence almost taken out of the religious equation.[9]

It may be that in the heyday of social history the whole concept of modern religiosity was subdued by the critical appraisal of Weberian rationality and the reenchantment of the modern world by ritual construction and symbolic practices only came back in with the new cultural history. This has found its way into the field of Nazi history as well, although more has been made out of the sacralization of politics in the fascist ritual and symbolism of Mussolini's Italy.[10] But, in general, we have come to accept that there was an almost evangelical experience at the core of the Hitler-myth, not just modern propaganda techniques. And we take it for granted that the „cult of the dead" acquired totem (or Kitsch) status for Nazi society, just as the rituals of the faithful in the meetings of the *Reichsparteitag* in Nürnberg.[11] We also have a pretty clear picture of how Hitler - with his Austrian learning and the help of Goebbels - got himself into the mood for the great mission as Saviour-Führer which turned history into prophecy.[12] At the core of this mythmaking was his own *Opfersyndrom* played out in an aesthetics of violence: he was the high-priest of the *pompes funèbres* of the regime. The religious semblence of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was thus more than just a sect of the select few but a broad church of believers united in a community of the senses.[13]

Religious semantics and sacred ritual go a long way to explain the *fascinans* and *tremendum* (Hans Maier) in the „political religion" of Nazism. But even if we accept that there were religious notions of self-transcendence and rebirth behind the „palingenetic nationalism" of generic fascism – as in Roger Griffin's definiton – or of racial purity and salvation behind the concept of „redemptive antisemitism" – as in Saul Friedländer's interpretation, neither ideas nor rituals alone can convey the sense of connectedness and urgency which properly defines a „political religion" as a revolutionary phenomen in the wake of secularization.[14] As Voeglein himself has remarked in retrospect: The idea of "political religion" as a secular religion which aims at sacralizing the political collectivity was not wrong as such, he wrote, but he would not use the concept of "religion" any more, because it detracted from the real problem, and this was not dogma or ritual, but religious experience or religiosity - and this, I want to argue, was in the political myth of violence itself.[15]

To speak in Durkheimian terms, all this can be seen as the sacralized liturgy of a secular belief system. When it comes to „religious passions", however, this is quite

another matter. In this sense I would like to ask to what extent the power of violence itself actually accounted for the religious quality of what came to be seen as modern „political religions". On a very basic level extreme political violence provides the „intoxication of the absolute" (Burrin) because it secures the ultimate physical determination of „them" and „us".[16] It was fundamentalist in so far as it essentialized identity as part and parcel of the 19th century „nationalization of the masses" through the political cult of war.[17] And it was fundamentalist in so far as it created „a macabre form" of „dead certainty" in 20th century genocidal conflict, especially in the form of „ethnic cleansing" through extreme bodily brutality among neighbours.[18] Even within the secular form of „civil religion", as in the republicanism of France or the Unted States, there was also that „forgotten" tradition of violent religiosity which was „translated" in modern revolutions into the „myth of violence". The myth of violence replaced the „religious passions" (Durkheim) at the centre of modern „political religions", as Georges Sorel has so aptly shown. It was only this experience, he argued, which would recreate the kind of revolutionary energies which in ancient Christianity had provided the strength for the ultimate sacrifice - and which would "enligthen" whatever would come out of its destructive capacities. This creative power of violence was the modern myth-maker, it seems, by sanctifying the nation-state as a community of the dead, the living and the unborn.[19] Nations were born in War, wars showed up their "manifest destiny", they also provided the founding myth and the promise of national immortality. But it was the new "morality of violence" in the Sorelian sense, "la volonté de délivrance" through violence, which gave the new political religions of the twentieth century their religious status.[20]

In that respect the extreme forms of violence from revolutionary terror to genocide qualify for the concept of funadamentalist violence, for it is not the violence that is in the religion – it is the religion that is in the violence. When looking at the "Furies" of revolutionary terror, for example in the case of the French and Russion Revolutions, it is clear from the evidence laid out by Arno J. Mayer, that quite apart from the „cult" of the republic or the worship of a Higher Being it was the self-propelled violence as such which provided the self-empowerment for transcendence.[21] Typically, that kind of extreme violence in revolutions is the outcome of a real or imagined danger which destroys political reason in favour of the violent endgame of all politics: the epiphany of a new life after death, a kind of secular *Gottesbeweis :* „The Furies of revolution are fuelled primarily by the inevitable and unexceptional resistance of the forces and ideas opposed to it, at home and abroad. This polarization becomes singularily fierce once revolution, confronted with resistance, promises as well es threatens a radical refoundation of both polity and society." The Furies that rage beyond instrumental reason are, therefore, „fear inspired, vengence driven and ‚religiously' inspired."[22] They – logically - have no end, they are the end of politics, the ultimate epiphany.

In social research on personal violence, if I may be allowed that detour, we have come to accept the idea, that the structural causes for large scale violence of underpriviledged groups do not reveal the inner logic of their violent outbursts. Poverty, unemployment, boredom, masculinity etc. are never quite enough to explain the symbolic

virtue of violent transgression.[23] Nor does the close-up of violence, the cold-blooded analysis of the rituals of violence itself, yield more than a phenomonology of violence wich in some cases even feeds on the fascination of the horrific act.[24] It is only in the enigmatic form of „interpretative biographies“, i.e. in the telling of the experience, that the „religious“ dimension of those acts becomes apparent: Acts of violence are often represented as turning points in an individual's life. They are, to use the terminology of Norman K. Denzin, „epiphanies“, or in Victor Turner's terminology „liminal moments of experience“ which are told as acts of relevation. They are existential acts, in which the threshold of the self is crossed, sometimes in ritualized form as in status-passages, sometimes they are „totally emergent and unstructured“. But in the way they are told they are performative self-acts which need an audience and usually follow the established narrative pattern of relevation.[25]

This observation fits in nicely with the artistic construction of the exalted self in what Charles Taylor calls the „epiphanies of modernity“, i.e. the new religiosity of subjectivism and the hunger for transcendence in turn of the century art and philosophy.[26] This new excitement of the „inner experience“ to secure the vital sources of self called for a new poetic language of redemption. It also called for a violent language of masculine identity which through Marinetti's futurist manifesto fuelled the nascent squadrismo of Italian fascism and went right to the heart of Ernst Jünger's „male fundamentalism“.[27] Just as „nature“ was conceived as the major source of self in the first romantic movement, so was „shock“ in the second. Even the surrealist search for beauty fed on this fascination with the violent shock, as in André Breton's advice that the most simple surrealist dead wold be to „run out on the streets with guns in hand and shoot at the crowd at random and at length“.[28] This vitalistic cult of „lived experience“ (*Erleben*) and the hunger for identity made violence into the ultimate „epiphany of modernity“. It was meant as a relevation of self – just as in the personal life stories above – and it was to become the ultimate test of Nietzsche's new „religion of will“ at the centre of which was the externalized „death-wish“. [29]

In psychological and philosophical terms, therefore, the epiphanic quality of violence seems evident. But it is only when we combine these interpretations with the above argument about the birth of „political religion“ in the sacralization of nationhood , that we will arrive at a full understanding of „fundamentalist violence“ as a prerequisite for charismatic leadership in the twentieth century. In Max Weber's sociology of religion there are some telling passages tucked away in his consinderation of war: War, he says, transfers modern political communities into a *„unio mystica“*, know only from the religion of heroic orders. *„Die Gemeinschaft bis zum Tode“*, the heroic communion of battle stipulates the presence of the „extraordinary“ as in holy charisma and gives meaning to violent death, as „victime“ and „sacrifice“ – both wrapped up in the German word *„Opfer“*.[30] This is not just about the rhetoric of national protestantism in the German war effort or about the French cult of Mary the Saviour, the sacralized language of „extreme exertion“ or Christian rites of consolation after Great War.[31] It is about the self-empowerment for „holy war“ through violence. Modern charisma is, therefore, bound up with the totalization of war and its ultimate test lies in the violent

appropriation of salvation through violence. The revolutionary power of charisma, according to Max Weber, is based on „*Offenbarungs- und Heroenglauben",* in other words, on violent epiphanies, and it works in people through some internalised *metanoia,* a self-communion of atonement and redemptive expectation (*„Heilserwartung").*[32]

It is when the revolutionary Furies combine with these national epiphanies that we get the political transfiguration of religious charisma in fundamentalist violence. Sometimes these religious qualities of extreme violence are downplayed, for example when the cult of the *Führer* in the public ceremonies of the Third Reich is likened to the excitement of a „pentecostal congregation" - as if the outpouring of the spirit was enough. Ian Kershaw has argued that the Nazi movement was a „classic ‚charismatic' leadership movement," whereas Stalinism was not. I am not sure whether the degree of regularization – *die Veralltäglichung* – of the terrorist regime in Soviet Russia is a sufficiant indication for its less then charismatic character. Again it is not the socialist utopia as such, or the cult of the leader, it is the relentless use of violence which builds up fear – and at the same time a quasi-religious enthusiasm for certainty.[33] The same seems true for the Nazi regime which did, however, eventually disintegrate in the extraordinary „mission" of national redemption through racial purification lodged in the *Führer* . „Working towards the *Führer"* , Kershaw argues, constructed him as the „enabler" of the „New Order" and bound his followers to a personalised form of truth revealed. [34] But they were not necessarily driven by ideological motivation, although it did give coherence and meaning in many ways, they were spell-bound, it seems, by the „holy touch" of violence.

The charisma is in the violence, I would argue, not in the belief-system, whether secular or not. In light of the syncretistic Nazi ideology it may indeed be doubted whether Nazism ever could aspire to the full status of a „political religion": Hans Mommsen has argued that it was simply lacking in ideological substance and that the self-agrandisement of the master race could easily be explained without such analogies to religious motivations.[35] But even when its parasytical use of different forms of religiosity is acknowledged and their simulation is made out to be its key performance, so that it could stand in for *ecclesia* as well as for a millenarian movement, there is still the element of „religious passion" in the „national salvation" through violence which is the proof of the charismatic leader. This implies a complete reversal of the traditional argument, according to which modern „political religions" – seen as ideologies – provide the trajectory for violence.[36] On the contrary, it may well be the violence that makes them into „political religions". And this violence by definition should be regarded as fundamentalist violence. (By the way: It would be equally erronious to charge Christianity or Islam as such with the fundamentalist practises of the cruisaders or *dshihad* fighters. It is the suicidal terror itself, as for example the tradition of *Amok* in Malaysia, which adds absolute confirmation to holy status.[37])

This is not to „explain" the Holocaust in terms of the „religious rationality" of violence – neither for charismatic leadership nor for some other metaphysical reason – the „realization of racial utopia" needed very pracitical contingencies of war and destruction which took Hitler's own people and his forced allies hostage in that unimaginable act. More could be said about this „revolutionary" proof of genocide, for example, when comparing the Holocaust to genocide more generally and modern ethnocide in particular. In a number of cases there is a link to revolution, as an opener for the messianic violence of the „Furies", as well as to large scale population exchanges in war, which fuelled the „fires of hatred" in ethnic cleansing.[38]. There is also an anthropological reading in which we – for obvious reasons – are more ready to concede „extreme violence" in backward Ruanda, Kampuchea or even the Kosovo. According to Appadurai we can see in these cases the mutilated, dehumanized, disfigured and ultimately disposable body „as a site of violent closure in situations of categorical uncertainty".[39] In order to define the „enemy within" it appears to the perpetrators as „matter out of place", as in Mary Douglas' argument about „purity and danger". The hunting down of that enemy is everwhere closely allied with the theme of deception, treachery, betrayal, secrecy and ultimate „relevation": This was also the case with the Nazi obsession with the Jew as pretender as it is with the „knowing" of the Hutu by the Tutsi by way of mutilating, killing, raping and sometimes even eating his or her body.

From this perspective it appears that the Jewish body was transformed by Nazi violence into something quite different from the usual logic of scapegoating, stereotyping and the like. It was the „perfect site for the exploration of Nazi uncertainty about both Christianity and capitalism" (Appadurai). It was the „enemy within the racial body" that could only be detected with „dead certainty" by the use of violence - and for precisely that reason by the use of extreme violence alone. Of course, other factors in those post-colonial genocides come into play, the classfication craze of the colonial powers as in India, the „long-distance" nationalism of disaspora existence as in Indonesia, the magical traditions of corporeal rites of passage as in Africa and so on. But the „surplus rage" of this kind of „premortem autopsy" in modern ethnocide reminds us that the fundamental role of political violence in the making of modern „political religion" is about the „categorial certainty through death and dismemberment".[40]

This „epiphany" is the hallmark of fundamentalist violence. It transforms neighbours and friends into monsters and sacrifices humanity to the God of Wrath. This extreme violence constitutes modern „political religions", it is its „violence fondatrice" as in ancient ritual. For as René Girard has obseserved: „c'est la violence qui constitue le coeur véritable et l'ame secrète du sacrè."[41]

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[1] Jürgen Habermas, Glaube und Wissen, FAZ 15 Ocgt. 2001.

[2] Best introuduction: Philippe Burrin, Political Religion. The Relevance of a Concept, in: History and Memory 9(1997), 321-349; cf. also Wolfgang Hardtwig, Political Religion in Modern Germany: Reflections on Nationalism, Socialism, National Socialism, in: Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Washington 28(2001), 3-28.

[3] Eric Voegelin, Die politischen Religionen, Vienna 1938; cf. Cf. also Hans Maier, Michael Schäfer (eds.), Totalitarismus' und ,Politische Religion'. Konzeopte des Diktaurvergleichs, 2 vls. Paderborn 1996; Hans Maier, ,Totalitarismus' und ,politische Religion' in: VfZ 43(1995), 387-406; Hans Maier (ed.), Wege in die Gewalt. Die modernen politischen Religionen, Frankfurt 2000.

[4] The Colected Works of C.G. Jung, vol.10: Civilization in Transition, Princeton 1970, 281, quoted in Burrin, Political Religion, 346 fn.32.

[5] For the religious connonations of Hitler's ,language of sacrifice' see already J.P. Stern, Hitler. The Führer and the People, London 1975, ch.3.

[6] Claus E. Bärsch, Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus. Die religiösen Dimensionen der NS-Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Josef Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler, München 1998; Michael Ley, Genozid und Heilserwartung. Zum nationalsoziqalistischen Mord am europäischen Judentum, Wien 1993; Michael Ley, Julius H. Schoeps (eds.), Der Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion, Bodenheim 1997.

[7] See for example Frank-Lothar Kroll, Utopie als Ideologie: Geschichtsdenken und politisches Handeln in DrittenReich, Paderborn 1998.

[8] Michael Burleigh, The Third Reich. A New History, NY 2000, 11.

[9] Idem, XXXX

[10] Emilio Gentile, Fascism as Political Religion, in: JCH 25(1990), 229-251; idem, The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy, Harvard UP 1996.

[11] Susanne Beherenbeck, Der Kult um die toten Helden: nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole, 1923 bis 1945, Vierow 1996; Jay W. Baird, To die for Germany. Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon, Indiana UP 1990; cf.also Yasmin Doosry, Die sakrale Dimension des Reischsparteitagsgeländes in Nürnberg, in: Richard Faber (Hg), Politische Religion – religiöse Politik, Würzburg 1997, 205-224.

[12] Ian Kershaw, Hitler, 2 vls, London 1998, 2000, pasim. On the lasting reflection of this attraction see Saul Friedländer, Kitsch und Tod: der Widerschein des Nationalsozialismus, revised ed. (Frankfurt: Fischer), 1999.

[13] Peter Reichel, Der Schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches. Faszination und Gewalt des Faschismus, München 1991; and more generally George L. Mosse. The Fascist Revolution. Toward a general theory of fascism, New York 2000.

[14] Roger D. Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, London 1993; Saul Friedländer, Nazi Germany and the Jews. Vol.1: The years of persecution 1933-1939, New York 1997.

[15] Eric Voegelin, Autobiographische Reflexionen, München 1994, (ed by Peter Opitz), 70, quoted in: Bärsch, Politische Religion, 368.

[16] Burrin, Political Religion, 328.

[17] George Mosse, The Nationalisation of the Masses, New York 1975.

[18] Arjun Appadurai, Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization, in: Public Culture 10(1998), 225-247.

[19] On the general argument see Peter Berghoff, Der Tod des politischen Kollektivs. Politische Religion und das Sterben und Töten für Volk, Nation und Rasse, Berlin: Akademie, 1997); also Dirk Richter, Nation als Form, (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996).

[20] Georges Sorel, Reflexions sur la violence, quoted from the instroductory letter to Daniel Halévy, 1907, in 8th ed., Paris 1938, 24.

[21] Arno J. Mayer, The Furies. Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions, Princeton 2000.

[22] Idem, XVI.

[23] Lutz von Trotha, Soziologie der Gewalt. Sonderheft der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie 37(1997). Cf.also, Wilhelm Heitmeyer (ed.), Das Gewalt.-Dilemma. Gesellschaftliche Reaktionen auf fremdenfeindliche Gewalt und Rechtsextremismus, Frankfurt 1994..

[24] Wolfgang Sofsky, Traktak über die Gewalt, Frankfurt 1996.

[25] Norman K. Denzin, Interpretative Biography, London 1989 (Qualitative Research Methods 17), 69ff.

[26] Charles Taylor, Quellen des Selbst. Die Entstehung der neuzeitlichen Identität, Frankfurt 1994, 789ff. (engl.: Sources of the Self)

[27] Bernd Weisbrod, Violence guerrière et fondamentalism masculin: Ernst Jünger, in: Genèses 33(1998), 107-127; cf. also Barbara Spackmann, Fascist Viriities. Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy, Univerity of Minnesota Press 1996.

[28] André Breton surrealist Manifesto of 1930, as qupoted in Taylor, Quellen des Selbst, 816, fn 45 (my translation). See also for the manifesto sources: Charles Russell, Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries OUP 1985.

[29] Steven E. Aschheim, The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990, University of California Press 1992.

[30] Max Weber, Zwischenbetrachtung: Theorie der Stufen und Richtungen religiöser Weltablehnung, in: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I, Tübingen (1920) 1988, 548f.

[31] Gerd Krumeich, „Gott mit uns?" Der Erste Weltkrieg als Glaubenskrieg, in: id., Hartmut Lehmann (eds.), „Gott mir uns". Nation, Religion und Gewalt im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert, Göttingen 2000, 273-283; cf. also Anette Becker, La Guerre et la Foi. De la mort à la mémoire 1914-1930, Paris 1994; and Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European cultural history, CUP 1995.   .

[32] See Wolfgang Mommsen, Universalgeschichtliches und politisches Denken, in: id., Max Weber. Gesellschaft, Politik, Geschichte, Frankfurt 1974, 122; quoted from Max Weber, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft.

[33] Erhard Stölting, Charismatische Aspekte des politischen Führerkults. Das Beispiel Stalin, in: Faber (ed.), Poitische Religion, 45-75; also Moshe Lewin, Popular Religion in Twentieth Century Russia, in: id., the Making of the Soviet System. Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia, London 1985.

[34] Ian Kershaw, „Working towards the Führer': reflections on the nature of the Hitler dictaorship, in: id., Moshe Lewin (eds.), Stalinism and Nazism. Dictatorship in Comparison, CUP 1997, 88-106.

[35] Hans Mommsen, Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion, in: Hans Maier, Michael Schäfer (eds.), ‚Totalitarismus' und ‚Politische Religion'. Konzepte des Diktaurvergleichs Bd. II, Paderborn 1996, 173-181.

[36] As in the title of Hans Maier (ed.), Wege in die Gewalt. Die modernen politischen Religionen, Frankfurt 2000.

[37] Robert Winzeler, Amok: Historical, Psychological, and Cultural Perspectives, in: Wazir Johan Karim (ed.), Emotiojns of Culture. A Malay Perspective, OUP 1990, 96-122.

[38] Robert Melson, Revolution and Genocide. On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, The University of Chicago Press 1992; Norman M. Naimark, Fires of Hatred. Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe, Harvard UP 2001..

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[39] Appadurai, Dead Certainty, 234f.

[40] Ibidem, 238

[41] René Girard, La violence et le sacrè, Paris 1972, 52, as quoted in: Walter Burkert, Anthropologie des religiösen Opfers. Die Sakralisierung der Gewalt, München 1984, 20.