

Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda

by Michael Burleigh, HarperPress, 2006, 576 pp.

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A book by one of Britain's foremost historians of Nazi Germany about the relationship between religion and politics, and in particular the role of the great totalitarian political religions of left and right, should have had something important to contribute to public knowledge at a time when we are preoccupied with a new totalitarian threat in the form of Islamist extremism. Unfortunately, Michael Burleigh's *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* fails to live up to that promise. Too opinionated and polemical to be a serious history, but lacking the wit and pace to be a decent polemic, it has the vices of both and the virtues of neither.

At times *Sacred Causes* reads like it has been spliced together from the manuscripts of two different authors: one an academic historian, the other a right wing newspaper columnist. Burleigh is of course both, but his failure to reconcile these different personas for the purposes of this book produces a very uneven result. Convincing scholarly analysis is punctuated with statements and judgements so crude and unsubstantiated as to call into doubt the whole work. The chapter on the Irish Troubles, for example, opens with a bizarre and wholly extraneous outpouring of prejudice in which Burleigh complains, variously, about the ubiquity of Terry Wogan and the ethical standards of Irish builders. After that, it is hard to take anything else he says on the subject seriously.

Good histories always have a point of view, but this one flaunts its agenda with a conspicuous lack of subtlety. It basically amounts to a *tu quoque* defence of Christianity, and the Catholic Church in particular, against the claims of militant secularists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Whatever terrible things man does in the name of God, they are as nothing compared to the terrible things he does when he abandons God. Speaking of the political religions he sees as the apotheosis of Godlessness, Burleigh says: 'Without a moral code derived from a transcendental God there was nothing to inhibit them. Any means were justified, from lying propaganda to mass murder, to bring about the desired realm of Good

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on earth, that being the key to the moral insanity that Communism and Nazism unleashed on the world.' This passage is the essence of his case.

It is possible even for fair-minded atheists to sympathise with religious believers when faced with the modern secularist onslaught. Dawkins in particular comes across as shrill and unreasonable in his insistence that religion has no redeeming qualities. By way of a rejoinder, Burleigh cites Roy Hattersley to good effect when he asks, 'when have committed rationalists ever operated soup-kitchens, hotlines for the suicidal or hostels for crack addicts?' In its long and complex history, religion has inspired the best as well as the worst of what humanity has to offer. In this it has much in common with socialism (unlike fascism, which has never inspired anything but wickedness).

But Burleigh goes too far in glossing over the misdeeds of the established religions. The past is littered with examples of 'lying propaganda' and 'mass murder' deployed with divine justification. If anything, those possessed of a belief in their heavenly mandate are even less likely to feel inhibited than those who expect themselves to be held to earthly account first and last. Their higher purpose trumps all mortal considerations. That was certainly the view of Mohammed Atta and his homicidal associates on 9/11. The 'moral insanity' we face today is not one advanced in the name of a political religion, but in the name of religion pure and simple.

Burleigh is at his most interesting when he details the ways in which Communism, Fascism and Nazism mimicked religious practices and narratives, with the Party replacing the Church, class/nation/race providing a chosen people and the leader elevated to the status of God. His argument that these movements were in effect substitute religions is convincing and supported by a wealth of detail.

The weakness is that Burleigh fails to follow his line of reasoning to conclusions that would be difficult to reconcile with his wholly benign view of religious faith. In his treatment of Nazism, for example, he fails to acknowledge the extent to which its racial anti-Semitism built on centuries in which theological anti-Semitism had been officially encouraged by Catholics and Protestants alike. Indeed, he seems to regard them as unrelated, describing the latter as 'anti-Judaism' and the former as 'newfangled anti-Semitism.' At a more fundamental level he refuses to acknowledge the extent to which the totalitarian idea was made possible by the rise of monotheism with its insistence on One God/One Truth.

The Moses who had three thousand idolaters slaughtered at the foot of Mount Sinai had no more respect for freedom of conscience than the murderous dictators of the twentieth century. Mainstream currents of religious thought have of course come a long way since then, but it has taken centuries in which violent persecution was the norm, and the journey remains far from complete. The changes that have happened have been the result of lived experience and the demands of non-believers which have obliged mainstream faiths to ditch significant chunks of their own scriptures.

Even so, evidence of monotheistic intolerance can still be found, and not just on the Islamist fringe. Muslims who took to the street to demand the banning of the Danish cartoons were no different in essence from Protestant evangelicals who took to the picket line to demand the banning of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* or Sikh protestors who forced the closure of the play *Dishonour* in Birmingham. All insisted that their religious sensibilities were more important than freedom of expression and that their faith should be imposed on the public realm. Pressure to enforce Sharia law has a direct counterpart in Dominion Theology, the belief that national legal systems should be based on the Ten Commandments advocated by influential sections of the Christian Right in America.

The recent row about gay adoption shows that even mainstream religious leaders are susceptible to the belief that divine right puts them above man-made law. The new rules will not force anyone to engage in sexual practices that are inconsistent with their beliefs, but that misses the point. What these leaders were demanding was the right to impose their sexual morality on others through a policy of discrimination. Religious conservatives of all stripes seem to find it particularly difficult to keep their noses out of other people's bedrooms. They also wallow in victimhood when they are told to mind their own business. Burleigh does this when he complains about the fact that when Rocco Buttiglione was prevented from becoming EU Commissioner responsible for equality on the perfectly reasonable grounds that he didn't believe in equality for women or gays.

The final chapter, dealing with 9/11 and the rise of Islamist terrorism, ought to have been the most compelling. But by this stage all pretence at academic rigour has been abandoned and Burleigh deems it sufficient to cite the Daily Mail in order to establish a point. His analysis is disappointingly unoriginal and he gives partial support both to the hysterically silly 'Eurabia' thesis and to the fallacious concept of 'Islamofascism.' The latter is particularly regrettable, given Burleigh's historical specialism, not because it implies moral equivalence, which is at least arguable,

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but because accurate analysis is the key to coming up with successful policy prescriptions. The 1930s are a bad guide for how to fight Islamism, something we surely know by now. Fascism and Nazism were doctrines of nation, race and state, whereas Islamism is transnational, multiracial and stateless. The tools required to defeat it are necessarily different.

The most interesting aspect of the concluding chapter is the confusion it reveals in the Christian conservative response to 9/11. Quite properly, Burleigh warns of the dangers of appeasing Islamists by allowing them to establish 'extra-territorial moral and legal enclaves where the writ of the Western secular state no longer runs.' Yet in other passages he condemns secularists for encroaching on the prerogatives of the Church and undermining its role in welfare and education. Are these not autonomous moral enclaves? And where does this leave the role of faith education?

At times Burleigh sounds like the sort of progressive liberal he witheringly dismisses elsewhere in the book, taking Islamists to task for their misogyny and homophobia. Perhaps the Devil really does have all the best tunes, at least when it comes to taking on al-Qaeda. But he can't keep it up for long and soon relapses into complaining about public drunkenness, 'the vulgarly queer Graham Norton,' 'the homosexualisation of the clergy' and our 'freakish obsession with deviant sex.'

He even has a Jerry Falwell moment in which appears to blame western society for provoking al-Qaeda with its decadence. It is worth quoting at length:

Mass tourism has become the means whereby affluent Westerners, who are ignorantly indifferent to local sensibilities, have established outposts of their way of life on the coastal fringes of more traditional cultures. Instead of getting blind drunk in Birmingham, Benidorm or Bremen they do it in Eilat, Marrakech or the Maldiv Islands. Moderate Muslims say this is no bad thing and that the natives gradually get used to it, but then they are part of a privileged elite that does not have to encounter such horrors on a daily basis. Satellite television enables people in the remotest societies to access such ghoulishness as MTV where even wild animals are not safe from being stuffed down teenage trousers, in the mindless antics of those American teenagers whom Michael 'Halloween' Myers has not yet murdered. Joking apart, international corporations, whose lack of local legal anchorage and arrogance appals as many on the right as on the left, leave their sordid traces on virtually every society on the planet, notwithstanding their commercials

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extolling cultural sensitivity. There is something wrong with the Gadarene rush of US companies and armies of private security contractors into the Iraqi war zone where robotic-seeming US troops already look, and often sound, like something that has strayed from a Terminator movie.

This sounds like a case of Mary Whitehouse meets Noam Chomsky. It is certainly a novel take on the 'root causes' debate.

What is clear from *Sacred Causes* is that Burleigh doesn't like the modern world very much. One therefore suspects that if he ever met Osama Bin Laden, he would find that they had rather more in common than he cares to admit. Perhaps the lesson to draw is that the battle lines of the War on Terror are less clearly defined than we often suppose. Christian conservatism is certainly our enemy's enemy, but that doesn't make it our friend.

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