Apocalypse & Totalitarianism

Entanglements between Religious and Secular Patterns

John Dik / Oleg Dik (eds.)

Theologische Anstöße

14

V&R


V&R

Theologische Anstöße

Edited by
Michael Beintker, Johannes Eurich, Miriam Rose,
Günter Thomas, Michael Welker

Volume 14
John Dik / Oleg Dik (eds.)
Apocalypse & Totalitarianism

John Dik / Oleg Dik (eds.)

Apocalypse & Totalitarianism

Entanglements between Religious and Secular Patterns

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek:
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available online: https://dnb.de.

© 2025 by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Robert-Bosch-Breite 10, 37079 Göttingen, Germany, an imprint of the Brill-Group
(Koninklijke Brill BV, Leiden, The Netherlands; Brill USA Inc., Boston MA, USA;
Brill Asia Pte Ltd, Singapore; Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn, Germany,
Brill Österreich GmbH, Vienna, Austria)
Koninklijke Brill BV incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Schöningh,
Brill Fink, Brill mentis, Brill Wageningen Academic, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht,
Böhlau and V&R unipress.

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Cover design: SchwabScantechnik, Göttingen
Typesetting: satz&sonders, Dülmen
Printed and bound: CPI books GmbH, Ulm
Printed in the EU

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage | www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com
E-Mail: info@v-r.de

ISSN 2567-9635 (print) | ISSN 2567-9643 (digital)
ISBN 978-3-525-55848-5 (print)
ISBN 978-3-647-55848-6 (digital) | ISBN 978-3-666-55848-1 (eLibrary)

Table of Contents

Preface by the editors 7

Introducing the Theme and Setting the Stage
(Oleg Dik) 11

Part 1 Historic Roots & Transformation of Apocalypse

1. Discovering Entanglements between Apocalypse & Totalitarianism
(Oleg Dik) 19

2. John's Apocalypse and the Roman Empire: An alternative Perspective
(John Dik) 31

3. Shifting Power and the Fate of John's Apocalypse in the Early Church
(John Dik) 65

4. The Apocalypse of Peter: The Origin of the Concept of Christian Hell and the Function of Fiery Afterlife Punishment
(Nikolai Kiel) 81

Part 2 Apocalypse & Totalitarianism in Modernity

5. Secularizing the Apocalypse? Modern Apocalypticism from a Sociology of Culture Point of View
(Alexander-Kenneth Nagel) 111

6. Revolution out of Collapse? Apocalypticism in Neo-Marxist Capitalocene Discourse
(Gregor Taxacher) 133

7. Apocalypse & Totalitarianism as Conditio Humana amidst liquid Modernity
(Oleg Dik) 157

Part 3 The Secular-Religious Entanglements in the 21st Century

8. The Possession of Political Realism & the Limits of the Secular Authority
(Oleg Dik) 179

9. Apocalyptic Church as Subversive-Emancipatory Embodiment
(Oleg and John Dik) 197

Conclusions 221
Contributors 225
Index of Modern Authors 227

Preface by the editors

Apocalyptic and totalitarian: Within the current divisive and heated political discourse these adjectives are often used to delineate the other. By calling the other apocalyptic I am implying that I am reasonable.[1] By branding the other totalitarian I am performing a virtue signal about my own liberal attitude.[2] We are interrupted at rare lucid moments in our othering games through a revelation: Perhaps the very same demons we sense in others linger in our hearts and groups of belonging as well? Catherine Keller writes openly about the post 9/11 realization that she succumbed to the same apocalyptic logic she was horrified by. On the surface she opposed the Bush administration Armageddon rhetoric, yet she got caught in the "apocalyptic mirror-game."[3] Alexander Solshenitzyn came to the realization in the gulag that he could have easily become the prison guard. He famously concluded that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.[4] In the following volume we would like to interrupt the political fueling of fires and lay bare the deeper patterns of apocalypse & totalitarianism, their destructive and life-giving potential, within every group, whether secular or religious, whether Right or Left. However, one may object: Are academics suitable for this task?

Intellectuals in general and paid ones in particular (academics) do not have a good track record of resisting the destructive modes of apocalypse and totalitarianism.[5] We are tribal beings. This is how we developed and survived as human species. Academics are even more tribal as they have a high incentive to stay within their group allegiance. Contrary to the blue-collar workers, the only "product" of intellectuals are ideas, which can't be evaluated according to their direct utility. Thus, their careers depend to a large degree on the

[1] John Gray in a conversation refers to Russia as an irrational actor in the current war due to their underlying religious apocalypse. Cf. Gray, John. "Russia, China & the Future," accessed 03.03.2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6fRypXIKV4.

[2] Zizek contends that "'totalitarianism,' far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of stopgap: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the only duty to think, or even actively prevents us from thinking." Zizek, Slavoj. *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion.* London & New York: Verso, 2002, 3. The performative use of the term creates a dichotomy between the liberal democracy and the evil other.

[3] Keller, Catherine. *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, 88.

[4] Cf. Solshenitzyn, Aleksander. *Archipel Gulag*. Moskva: Alfa-Kniga, 2019, 590.

[5] Mark Lilla portrays various intellectuals who fell for the right and left totalitarianism. Cf. Lilla, Mark. *The reckless mind. Intellectuals in Politics*, 2nd edition. New York: New York Review Books, 2016.

recognition and validation of their colleagues.[6] We could be easily seduced to bolster the understanding and use of the terms "apocalyptic" and "totalitarian" as a polite way of insulting the other. These terms were often employed in modernity as performative exclusion of the other as an irrational evil human being or group. So, if this is the case, why are we still daring as academics to reflect upon this subject? Is it delusion or pride?

Perhaps it is both. However, we do believe that academics have a responsibility to rise above the divisive social struggles in order to deconstruct Manichean divides and construct a space for the common good, where people with divergent beliefs and identities can meet. Perhaps this metaphor smells too much like Plato's cave analogy, yet what is the alternative? Yes, every researcher has her own existential commitments and values. Yet we are also able to become aware of them and bracket them in order to transcend our particularities in order to create larger horizons. Even if Gadamer's ideal "merging of horizons" does not occur, the realization that my own beliefs are stranger than I assumed and the stranger's beliefs are more familiar than I imagined, could create surprising moments of transformation. Regarding the themes of apocalypse & totalitarianism, we would like to achieve these "aha" moments for both, the "religiously not musical"[7] and religious readers alike.

While the discourse of difference is prevalent in Europe and USA, it begins to dawn on us that difference can only be conceptualized and appreciated within the larger background of unity.[8] The danger of tribalism is real as this has been the prevalent mode of our bio-evolutionary past. I can only perceive the other as different human being if I assume him to be as part of the human species. Thus, while the common framework can extinguish differences and negate the other, it is nevertheless prior to the discourse of difference. Therefore, we view our primary task to establish this broader and deeper background of understanding. How are we hoping to proceed? Let me first mention the negative foil:

Within the tribal academic discourse, it would be relatively easy to commit "critical barbarity" regarding apocalypse and totalitarianism. Bruno Latour[9] wittingly described this mode of sectarian destruction of the other as following: First, the critical academic exposes what is sacred to the other as a fetish, while hiding his own matter of concern. Second, the critical academic

6 Cf. Sowell, Thomas. *Intellectuals and Society*. New York: Basic Books, 2009, 283.

7 Max Weber referred to himself as "religioes unmusikalisch."

8 Charles Taylor noticed this tension in the 90's. The challenge for pluralistic societies lies in the simultaneous unity and diversity. The tension of the paradoxical e pluribus unum can be undone towards total unifying totality or tribalism. Cf. Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Amy Gutman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 25–75.

9 Cf. Latour, Bruno. "Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern." In *The Winter Anthology*, Vol. 5, accessed 03. 03. 2023, http://www.winteranthology.com/?vol=5&author=latour&title=critique.

substitutes this sacred cause with his own real cause, while not opening the ontological discussion about the realness of his own cause. This hypocrisy is followed by the satisfying feeling of seeing the true reasons, which are hidden from the naïve believer. And lastly, the academic performs this destructive task with everything he does not like, while hiding what matters most to him from the critical gaze.

We agree with Latour that this form of critical theory is a form of sectarian destruction of the other and does not lead towards a deeper appreciation of what is dear to us all. At the end of the day people with different religious and non-religious worldviews and identities, from diverse political and cultural backgrounds, must co-exist peacefully in one society. Therefore, critical deconstruction must have a larger goal of the common good. Academics are privileged members of society as others serve them and enable them to sit in warm, quiet offices. Academics are undisturbed by existential worries and therefore are able to engage in deep thinking. For this reason, the academic class has a responsibility towards the broader society for a constructive vision. This is why we seek first to understand and explain the relation between apocalypse & totalitarianism from historical & sociological angles. Informed by these perspectives, we seek to provide a constructive, theological way forward in the last chapter, primarily for the church and hopefully for the larger public as well. By elucidating the entanglements between religious and secular patterns to interpret the world we hope to encourage both religious and secular citizens towards humility and appreciation of the other.

Introducing the Theme and Setting the Stage

(Oleg Dik)

Apocalyptic imagination carved out spaces of freedom and unleashed hells of slavery. The church gave birth to totalitarianism and at the same time subverted it. This paradox has not yet been sufficiently illuminated. While historians and philosophers explore the socio-political function of religious apocalyptic movements, they are usually not aware of their own strange inescapability from the apocalyptic framework. This entanglement lies in apocalypse as historiography and episteme. Thus, they apply the apocalyptic plot to their reading of totalitarianism and employ normative categories to discern the contours of totalitarianism and to make evaluative judgements. However, their categories were formed by the very same religion they seek to explore. Thus, circularity is unavoidable. They are unwitting members of the apocalyptic sects while pretending to stand above them gazing from a distance. Those few, who truly sought to break from the apocalyptic patterns and categories fell forward into the past myths of Greek mythology or ancient Stoicism. This insight leads us to the conclusion: The strongest grip of the religious occurs in the moment when the intellectuals succumb to the illusion of the secular.

Herein lies the current significance of our study. If the religious dimension is inescapable on the social level, its denial augments its formative force. "If one cannot think without mental patterns – and, in my belief, one cannot – it is better to know what they are; for a pattern of which one is unconscious is a pattern that holds one at its mercy."[1] Thus by elucidating these unconscious patterns, we seek to contribute towards the possibility of emancipation. While the opinion on the use of apocalyptic rhetoric ranges between banning it altogether due to its destructive nature and employing it for the sake of creating urgency and rallying collective response, we seek to dig deeper beyond these pragmatic considerations and raise the question on the secular illusions about breaking forth from the apocalyptic background.

This illusion is harmful as it repeats the apocalyptic patterns thus reviving 20th century secular apocalypse in the 21st century under a different guise. By illuminating this secular blind spot, we seek to alter the destructive potentiality of secular apocalypse and clarify its embedding and inevitable return towards other religious myths. By embedding the apocalyptic mode in the anthropological and symbolic realms, we question as to whether a clear break between apocalyptic-religious and secular spheres can occur. Instead,

[1] Toynbee, quoted in Perkins. Cf. Perkins, Mary A. *Christendom and European Identity. The Legacy of a Grand Narrative since 1789*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, 346.

we purport that the apocalyptic pattern is akin to the second law of thermodynamics: Apocalypse remains constant while changing its form. Thus, we hope to achieve a double shattering of illusions. Christians must become aware of how socio-political power of the church transformed the apocalyptic hermeneutics and bent its originally emancipatory function towards oppression. Secular intellectuals, who view apocalypse as dangerous indulgence of naïve believers, must recognize that their own reasoning is deeply embedded within apocalyptic imaginary.

The destructive nature of apocalypse can only be stopped by this double shattering of both Christian and secular illusions. While the secular intellectuals have humbled fervor Christians attempting to establish the kingdom of God through grabbing political power, they have barely begun to realize their own entrapments. By viewing the relation between the religious and secular as inherently entangled, we hope that both the believers within the Church and believers in the omnipresent state, will be humbled. Humility might cause us to wonder about the other and hopefully encounter her within a common space thus leading towards a shared understanding of the world.

Our main thesis of entanglement between the secular and religious patterns presupposes their inescapable intertwining. This contrasts sharply with the prevalent popular narratives, which seek to establish a clear differentiation between the religious and secular realms. European intellectuals believed to have buried religion. Yet its ghostly contours reappear. Sociologists debate as to whether Christianity experiences a resurrection in Europe. However, it is undeniable that Islam increases rapidly due to immigration and religion begins to raise its head in the academic disciplines as well. The question on the relation between the religious and secular reemerges with full force. Perhaps it never disappeared but was only sedated since 1648 due to the secularization of Christianity in the religiously homogenous socio-political space. The pluralization due to increasing religious diversity and divergent nonwestern arrangements between religion and modernity crack the immanent frame and trigger the collective European memory on the conflicting nature of religion.

It is undeniable that the current socio-political order emerged from the religious transformation of Roman-Greek antiquity and the medieval scholasticism. The disenchanting nature of monotheism in general and in particular the exhilaration of the *etsi deus non daretur* imagination through the Judeo-Christian tradition is well researched.[2] The main difference lies in the interpretation of this event. Two plots abound.

The first plot is the story of liberation. Accordingly, a disruption between the "dark" Middle Ages and the advancing age of reason occurred, epitomized in terms of ascend towards light. The burden of tradition and religious super-

[2] Since Max Weber the disenchantment thesis has been reiterated in different versions, Cf. Gauchet, Marcel. *The Disenchantment of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999 and Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

stition was shaved off and the reasonable individual emerged.[3] This liberated individual became the sole reason for progress in sciences, philosophy, economics and culture. Thus, social progress was wrestled against the regressive power of religious institutions. In this story, apocalyptic religion is contrasted to the rational agent who is able to establish a political order through mutual consensus.[4] The 20th century totalitarianism came as a shock to this story. It is mostly dismissed as an irrational diversion from the overall ascend towards reason and universal wellbeing. Overall, humanity has freed itself from religion and is moving towards a bright future. This telos is grounded in the utilitarian understanding of the common good as minimizing suffering.

As liberation story took a hit during the 20th century due to bloody wars and totalitarian regimes, it produced a pessimistic splinter. Accordingly, the disruption with religion was confined to a wishful thinking of a few Enlightenment thinkers, who used this disruption plot as a device to gain wider influence and delegate religion to the fringes. In fact, the idea of disruption mirrors the religious idea of conversion. A break from old gods is necessary as new gods do not tolerate a divided allegiance. In reality, religion is still spewing its poison, disguising itself through its secular shell. These thinkers anchor the disaster of the 20th century totalitarian ideologies in the legacy of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic sects and the medieval church is interpreted as a blueprint for the totalitarianism of the state.[5] Many other social and environmental ills are attributed to the persistent negative influence of Christianity, like the destruction of nature due to desacralization of creation, atomization of our societies and persistence of violence due to dichotomies in the monotheistic religion.[6] Deeper religious patterns still operate in the background, influencing our imaginaries and actions. The proponents of this story advocate for a clear break from religion in order to truly arrive at a dispassionate, critical judgement of reality and then procession towards the betterment of the world. Some intellectuals even recognized that this narrative of a break from religion follows a Christian pattern, as it employs the idea of historical intervention akin to Incarnation as an interruptive and radical new event and a conception of time

[3] Charles Taylor coins this plot a "subtraction story." See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26–29.

[4] The conception of such an individual, who is marked by volition and sovereignty, began in the reworking of the biblical tradition by Apostle Paul and St. Augustine, through scholasticism and extended to the liberal theory of Rawls. On the historic genesis of the idea of the individual, cf. Siedentop, Larry. *Inventing the Individual. The Origins of Western Liberalism*. UK: Penguin Books, 2015.

[5] Cf. Cohn, Norman. *The pursuit of the millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages.* London: Random House, 2004 (1957).

[6] The critique of Christianity as ultimately world denying and destructive religion has been a continuous feature since its inception. The polemics of Celsus were reiterated in various forms throughout history, accelerating since Enlightenment. One could make a case that such a critique of self is a genuine feature of Christianity's Hebrew roots as the prophets in the Old Testament foremost critiqued Israel and its false worship.

as progressing towards a telos.[7] Thus the story of liberation is revealed as an impossibility, unless one converts into a different religious matrix.

The second plot consists in viewing religion as a source of everything that is good in the current socio-political order. Thus, the idea of the individual, human rights and democracy – all these achievements are attributed to the social role of Christianity.[8] Similarly to the pessimistic splinter from the positive outlook of the liberation story, the eruption of the two world wars caused some theologians to reconsider the role of the Church in the Enlightenment project. Karl Barth accused the merging of the Protestant Church with the German Culture thus dissolving any distance and lacking a prophetic vision vis à vis a society sliding into the evil of National Socialism. Thus, the corruption of the church led towards a perverted social reality.[9]

In the following study, we embrace both plots and claim that ecclesial apocalypse does not necessarily prepare the ground for modern totalitarianism. The relation between the two hinges primarily on the socio-political power of the church. We elucidate this entanglement by looking at a concrete interaction between Judeo-Christian apocalyptic imaginaries and practices regarding the socio-political order.

In the first part, the authors trace the historic roots and transformation of Apocalypse. In the first chapter, Oleg discerns the entanglements in the epistemic conditions and history of religion. Political Scientists, Historians and Philosophers, who researched the nature of totalitarianism, made two assumptions: We are able to discern what totalitarianism is and it is evil. However, both assumptions arise from a deeper background, which is formed by the apocalyptic Judeo-Christian tradition. While secular philosophers and historians rightly discerned the roots of modern totalitarianism in the apocalyptic medieval ecclesial order, they are blind to the fact that they are unwitting members of these sects due to their cognitive indebtedness.

After the demonstrated entanglement, the second chapter by John Dik takes us back to one of the roots of apocalyptic thinking, namely the last book

[7] Gray further espouses the research of Cohn on the influence of apocalyptic medieval sects upon the political imaginary of modernity. Cf. Gray, John. *Black Mass. Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.

[8] Rodney Stark attributes the rise of Christianity to its positive social contribution in late Antiquity. Cf. Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. New York: Harper.

[9] This argument reaches back to Hebrew prophets and to various monastic movements within the medieval Roman Catholic Church. These reform movements viewed the mainline church as corrupted from within. These voices were further institutionalized through the Reformation in the 16th century and became the mainline critique coined against the ancient regime during the French Enlightenment. Ivan Illich further elaborated this strand of critique and Charles Taylor borrowed this insight as a premise for his genealogy of modernity. Cf. Illich, Ivan. *Rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich.* Toronto: Anansi, 2005.

of the New Testament canon, the apocalypse of John. In this first century context, an apocalypse (from the Greek *apokalypsis*) is a visionary disclosure or revelation. John the seer transformed such a vision into a literary piece of art in order to liberate the addressed churches in Roman Asia Minor from the oppressive images by the Roman Empire. By his visions full of symbols and metaphors he is constructing a different kind of reality than the Roman one for his addresses. The recipients get involved in seeing his vision and thus their reality is transformed. They are empowered to interpret history differently and to look beyond the collapse of the oppressive forces of the Roman Empire whose fall John prophesies to a new world of peace and righteousness introduced by the images of lion and the lamb.

In the third chapter John Dik investigates the reception history of the Apocalypse of John in early church history. In the first two centuries of its reception, it was widely read because it was a great comfort in the face of the persecutions by the Empire. However, when the church rose to power in the Constantine period the beast lost its threatening appearance and the church itself became the beast for other minority groups in the Empire. What consequences did this have for the hermeneutics of the Apocalypse? Being a powerful institution on the side of the Roman Empire, how did this change the reading of an originally Rome-critical and power-subversive book like the Revelation of John? John Dik is consulting the writings of the so-called fathers of the church in order to highlight some aspects in the relation of power and hermeneutics concerning the Apocalypse of John.

Nikolai Kiel goes on to analyze one specific apocalyptic motif which shows the other side of redemption, namely the punishment of the evildoers in the lake of fire. This motif occupies a central place in the Apocalypse of Peter, the Christian Sibylline, and the Apocalypse of Paul. He compares these three apocalypses and their use of this apocalyptic motif by explaining them in their historical context and their function.

In the second part of the book Alexander Kenneth-Nagel, Gregor Taxacher and Oleg Dik accentuate the entanglement between apocalypse and totalitarianism in modernity. Alexander-Kenneth Nagel explores 'apocalyptic' tropes in contemporary social movements based on an analytical distinction between apocalyptic semantics, syntax and rhetoric by taking up the Löwith-Blumenberg-Debate which taught us that it is possible to regard Western modernization as a prolongation of a specific European history of religions. Religious concepts, such as revelation or the end of the world as we know it, have not vanished, but undergone deep transformation. He demonstrates this by elaborating on secularized apocalypticism in the fields of cultural theory, sociology and religious studies and by analyzing programmatic texts from two recent political movements, namely the diagnosis of a climate emergency by Extinction Rebellion and the myth of a Great Replacement as put forward by alt-right circles.

Gregor Taxacher analyzes the apocalyptic language of Marxist eco-politics and how it attempts to respond to contemporary global challenges. With Ja-

cob Taubes he interprets the Marxist sketches theologically as the latest chapter of "occidental eschatology" by showing its consciousness of crisis and its totalitarian danger. The eco-Marxist apocalypse is, in contrast to some bourgeois modern apocalypses (from pessimistic philosophy of history to popular culture), by no means "docked" (Klaus Vondung). On the catastrophe follows a new beginning. But post-apocalyptic hope is no longer directed toward a triumphant victory of revolution and a new ideal society, but toward survival from the ruins of the old. Taxacher compares and contrasts the Marxist concepts with theological viewpoints.

Oleg Dik closes this part by grounding apocalypse and totalitarianism in the anthropological condition. From this angle apocalyptic interpretation of reality can't be prevented, but hopefully shaped when we become aware of their structuring causes. Humans are meaning making animals. Due to our communal survival we need to make sense of time, the larger whole and engage in communal rituals, which enable agency. Apocalyptic imagination provides us with deep patterns to act collectively. Therefore, a secular dismissal of apocalypse as pathological, remains naïve and only fuels its resurgence. Oleg points to the resurgence of Apocalypse from the cracks of unstable and hollow modernity.

In the third part Oleg Dik and John Dik outline a constructive approach. First, Oleg delineates the limits of critical realism in the political sciences in approaching apocalypse. By pointing out the hubris of secular authority to employ apocalypse to its final goal, Oleg sketches how tragically secular politics are once again possessed by demons they sought to conquer. Apocalypse reappears in a secular disguise and transforms political realism into soft totalitarianism, taking on the bio-political shape and ushering a post-liberal order. Oleg suggests that instead of naively using apocalypse for a realist secular conception, political realism must admit the limits of the secular and invite the theological / ecclesial approach towards apocalypse as a partner in the common task to establish a flourishing society for all.

In the final chapter, Oleg and John draw together the threads from historical and sociological analysis to develop the contours of apocalyptic ecclesiology, which both subverts the encroaching totalitarianism and liberates towards a hopeful reality. John and Oleg argue that both the Christian believers and those who view themselves outside of the religious realm must embrace the inherent entanglement between religious and secular spheres. There is no disembodied privileged position from which this intricate embrace could be clearly cut asunder. Hopefully this realization will lead towards humility and an ironic view of history.[10] The destructive power of the apocalyptic imagination and practice could be subverted and give ways to life-giving apocalypse. Apocalyptic imagination and practice have the potential to both destroy the world and to renew it.

[10] On irony in history cf. Niehbuhr, Reinhold. *The Irony in American History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2008 (1952).

Part 1
Historic Roots & Transformation of Apocalypse

1. Discovering Entanglements between Apocalypse & Totalitarianism

(Oleg Dik)

Abstract
In the following chapter I demonstrate the intricate entanglement between Apocalypse & Totalitarianism as epistemic categories to interpret society. In particular, I analyze the conversation between Arendt and Voegelin on the reasons for emergence of modern totalitarianism. On the one hand 20th century totalitarianism emerges from decaying Christendom. On the other hand, this totalitarianism can be recognized and denounced as evil through the apocalyptic Judeo-Christian epistemic lens. I conclude that the secular patterns can't be clearly distinguished from the religious background. Friedrich Nietzsche and the contemporary political philosopher John Gray sought to establish a break from religious history. However, they could only perform a break from one religious myth by accepting the other. Thus, the religious framework is inescapable.

Keywords
Episteme, Eric Voegelin, Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsch, John Gray, Apocalypse & Totalitarianism, narrative plot, genealogy, structural, secular-religious patterns

The Secular within the Judeo-Christian frame

The rise of Italian fascism, German National Socialism and Russian Stalinism in the 20th century unleashed a burgeoning field of research on the phenomenon broadly coined under the concept of "totalitarianism". I am not concerned here with the exact definition, comparisons or particularities of totalitarianism. Although it is important to look up closely, I seek to discern a pattern, which permeates the relation between apocalypse and totalitarian order thus shaping societies in the past and present. Totalitarianism is secular insofar as the social realm is imagined and organized exhaustively under human authority, without any reference to the divine. Totalitarianism of the 20th century justified itself primarily through reference to the historical / natural necessity and objective sciences. While its secular nature is well researched, the religious background of the secular is often bracketed. Where are the deeper roots of this "immanent", totalizing order, which permeated every inch of a person's life and every social segment?

If one assumes that it is not accidental that totalitarianism occurred in civilizations shaped by Christianity, one must look at this particular religion as a larger historic background, which enabled the emergence of the secular

experience.[1] The overarching significance of Christianity in enabling humans to create an independent space from divine infringement has been well researched. Christianity has had a disenchanting effect on the world full of magic and divine presence. Christianity is "the religion for departing from religion."[2] Yet it did not leave a complete vacuum. Instead, the totalitarian order within the Christian frame employed religious patterns to establish its steely logic. It could not have done otherwise as it needed a larger reference and stronger authority beyond the reference to human negotiation as a source of normativity.

What are the historic roots of modern 20th century totalitarianism? Broadly, two answers have been given: The structural narrative explains the advance of totalitarianism through socio-economic transformation of industrial nation states and the advance of anarchic mass society, from the 18th century onward. Hannah Arendt defends this thesis and establishes a causal link between the alienated masses and the lack of resistance against terrorizing order.[3] Although I concede that the structural causes are necessary, I maintain that they are not sufficient.

Eric Voegelin critiques the structural explanation and proposes a genealogical explanation, which poses the history of religion as the sufficient cause, reaching back to the 12th century.[4] Voegelins' main critic of Arendt's explanation consists in the observation that the breakdown of institutions is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of totalitarianism. He views the fatalistic and deterministic view of history as too simplistic and maintains that humans are able to respond to larger structural transformations in a variety of ways.[5] Therefore, instead of merely understanding the surface appearance of how change presents itself, the core question must be posed: Why do humans respond in this particular way? This necessarily touches on the principles, which are borrowed from philosophical anthropology, thus leading towards a deeper theoretical engagement.[6] Hannah Arendt responded to Voegelin's critic in an ambivalent way. On the one side, she gave a concession in an

[1] I continue here within the Weberian trajectory. Charles Taylor sketched the change within the experiential background since Renaissance, which enabled the phenomenon we broadly call secularity. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

[2] Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, 101.

[3] Norman Cohn follows Arendt in his identification of socio-material upheaval as primary causes of mental destabilization of the masses, which made them susceptible towards the slide into apocalyptic irrationalism. Cf. Cohn, *The pursuit of the millennium*, 307–315.

[4] These approaches are not mutually exclusive. Initially, Arendt allowed for the wider historical explanation. Her first edition even contained passages implying causal link between religious history and totalitarianism. Perhaps as a response to Voegelin's critique, who critiqued her for not spelling out the consequences for her theoretical approach, led Arendt to delete these observations in her German translation. Cf. Arendt / Voegelin, *Disput ueber den Totalitarismus,* 48.

[5] Ibid., 48.

[6] Ibid., 64.

earlier letter that totalitarian movements must be placed in the context of decaying Christian civilization, reaching back to the medieval times.[7] At the same time she was turned off by the possible conclusion of this approach, which might advocate a return towards tradition and religion. Arendt viewed the sheer evil of modern totalitarianism as unprecedented in history. Therefore, she advocated for "new discovery of morals",[8] while Voegelin viewed the solution in the rich heritage of "Greek philosophy, Jewish prophets and Jesus' teachings".[9] Voegelin's caution stems from his insight that all totalitarian ideologies sought to change human nature. The sacred idea of humans created in the image of God served as an otherworldly taboo against human hubris to imagine the human nature according to their own image and thus denigrate what was once sacred to human control.

While I agree with Voegelin, I propose another reason as to why a genealogical approach to totalitarianism is more encompassing. Arendt herself hints at this. She suggests that the positive approach towards totalitarianism must be reversed. This would lead to the question as to why the historic-normative background was not sufficient for people to find answers posed by the evil of totalitarianism.[10] However, Arendt quickly reverts from this intuition and claims that this question does not need to be pursuit further. I think it is worth taking up Arendt's question and believe that she is mistaken on two grounds:

The fact that she is able to see totalitarianism and has a strong ethical intuition about its evil nature suggests the presence of a functioning background, which must be brought to the forefront. Thus, she is right in her intuition that the negative lens is primary, and she is wrong in the quick dismissal of this intuition. Philosophers and political scientists who follow Arendt's approach make two positive assumptions. First, a social phenomenon of totalitarianism exists, and we can describe it. Second, totalitarianism is evil. What is the background of these assumptions? Let me briefly take up the negative lens regarding Hannah Arendt's work.[11] I elucidate how Arendt employs the apocalyptic pattern as her epistemic lens in order to discern the contours of totalitarianism. Moreover, she falls back on the Judeo-Christian normative background in her value judgement.[12]

[7] German: "Die totalen Bewegungen muessten daher, meines Erachtens, in den Zusammenhang des Zerfalls einer christlichen Zivilisation gestellt werden; und das Kontinuum dieser Zerstoerungskraefte geht in die mittelalterlichen Sektenbewegungen, mindestens bis ins 12 Jh. zurueck." Cf. Arendet / Voegelin, *Disput ueber den Totalitarismus*, 32.

[8] Ibid., 28.

[9] Ibid., 33.

[10] Ibid., 36.

[11] I am using Arendt's German translation for the sake of clarity and taking it up as her final stage. Arendt's writing in English can't shed the German syntax and therefore appears as convoluted at times.

[12] I am focusing on Arendt's last part, where she crystallizes her view, and it is here that her indebtedness to the history of religion becomes apparent.

The irony of Arendt's analysis lies in the obvious contradiction. On the one hand she claims that the totalitarianism of the 20th century surpasses our political categories. Moreover, through its sheer evil it breaks with our available Judeo-Christian ethical concepts. On the other hand she employs deeper Judeo-Christian patterns in order to make sense of this phenomenon. It could not be otherwise, as we always fall back on prior background in order to recognize a pattern of the new phenomenon we perceive. We begin, as Gadamer emphasized, with a "Vor-urteil" (prejudice) as we always seek to understand the new in light of the previous epistemic structure. Arendt creates an epistemic knot by cautioning about a too quick of a parallel between the Nazi totalitarianism and any other historic events as this attempt could lead towards "explaining away" the "specific unheard" evil.[13] Thus she seeks to capture the essential newness in the unique appearance of totalitarianism. At this point she leaves the strictly immanent framework and projects a theological concept of the transcendent breaking into immanent order. As humans, we would not be able to recognize the essential new (German: "das wesentlich Neue"[14]) without a leap of faith. For Christians, the only event, which stands out in its uniqueness and organizes all of history is the event of Incarnation. This can be called as the essential new event. Contrary, the manifestation of evil in John's apocalypse does not compare to the qualitative break with history in Incarnation. Instead, the degree of evil is presented as an outgrowth of the prior historic evil. Thus, Arendt's idea of the essential new quality of totalitarianism seems to evoke the Christian interruption of history through incarnation. If the state totalitarianism is evil, it can't be new in the strict epistemic and theological interpretation, but only a perversion of the good which proceeded it.

Further, Arendt argues that in the totalitarian system, the specific positive legal framework is replaced through an abstract right of nature or history, which is employed as a final legitimacy. This principle stands above the concrete human needs and situations and is used to justify coercion. Those who subjugate appeal directly to this objective, higher principle, which overrides particular human reasoning and pragmatic adjustments. The inhumane loyalty to this principle requires strict execution of orders. Particular humans of flesh and blood are sidelined as mere objects, as necessary sacrifices, which must be calculated in the achievement of objective goals. Thus, the brutality and the coldness of totalitarian regimes stem from this abstract principle, which surpasses the individual will of a human tyrant. Arendt gives away her deeper pattern by calling this principle "inhumane".[15]

Hebrew prophets portray an idol as a superhuman power, which overrides particular subjectivities and requires a total subjugation. Idols imbue societies

[13] Arendt, Hannah. *Elemente und Urspruenge totaler Herrschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Europaeische Verlagsanstalt, 1955, 674.

[14] Ibid., 674.

[15] Ibid., 675.

with the cold logic of necessary sacrifices in order to uphold the eternal divine order. Arendt contrasts positive law, which outlines boundaries for human freedom, from the cold abstract totalitarian principles, which ultimately employ continuous terror in order to keep people in perpetual fear and isolation. Her description mimics the Hebrew prophets who viewed the ten commandments as an expression of Jahwe's grace. The detailed revelation lent people trust and security. The application of divine law required Jews to engage in interpretation. Through this "lowering" of divine principles humans became co-interpreters, mirroring their co-creating task as described in Genesis 3. Through the self-limiting nature of Jahwe in the covenant they could develop trust. Thus, the positive legal framework served as an outline of human freedom in contrast to pagan deities, who exerted abstract requirements without mutual commitment.[16] Arendt's totalitarianism exhibits similar qualities like a Canaanite idol, who keeps its worshipers in the perpetual state of terror.

The similarity is moreover striking in Arendt's description of the totalitarian claim possessing "a key"[17], which unlocks the meaning of surface events pointing to the deeper objective movement, which permeates all social reality. Thus, totalitarianism abhors holding still and seeks to pull everyone and everything into this spiral of mass movement. Everything which resists this movement must be spewed out as unnecessary and harmful. Here, Arendt's view resembles the author of the book of Revelation, who is given a deeper perception and a key to unlock the mysteries of surface events.[18] Arendt also claims, in the same manner as totalitarian rulers and apocalyptic seers, to perceive deeper meaning underneath the surface. While Arendt takes up the role of a Hebrew seer, she describes the seducing and coercive power of totalitarianism, who takes on the feature of the false prophet. Contrary to the exhaustive perpetual movement Jahwe established Sabbath as a day of interruptive rest. This normative background on the goodness of Sabbath shapes Arendt's critique of perpetual movement of the subjects, thus robbing them of ability to pause and rise above the steely logic through reflexive practices.

According to Arendt, the totalitarian political body is created through the steely bondage, which erases individuality and any space of freedom.[19] The psalmist warns the Israelites that they will turn into the idol by gazing at its image. The identification of the worshippers with the image and thus complete dissolution in the image of the idol is another striking parallel between totalitarianism and an idol. The psalmist further[20] mocks the idol worship-

[16] Daniel Block compares a prayer, which was discovered in the ruins of Ashurbanipal's library dating back to 668–633 BC to the detailed laws in Deuteronomy. Cf. Block, Daniel I. *For the Glory of God. Recovering A Biblical Theology of Worship.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2014, 34.

[17] Arendt, *Elemente und Urspruenge totaler Herrschaft,* 679.

[18] Cf. John Dik's contribution "John's Apocalypse and the Roman Empire: An alternative Perspective" in this volume.

[19] Ibid., 682–83.

[20] E.g. Psalm 115.

per due to their complete detachment from a commonsense experience. They carve an object, feed it and clothe it. Thus, they reveal its complete impotency while bowing in front of it and surrendering themselves to its "power".

Similarly, Arendt describes the complete detachment of totalitarian rule from the empirical knowledge, which is ultimately bracketed in favor of the "higher, objective" principle. Externacoercion is internalized and people lock themselves in the internal compulsion. Once the first presupposition has been accepted the logical deduction locks people in the sealed off cycle and makes them into prisoners of their own logic as they are afraid of contradicting themselves. This view mirrors the Augustinian view of sin as *incurvatus in se*, a person who is bent into himself, unable to get outside of the self-imposed prison.[21] Thus the only freedom lies in this first act of faith. This interpretation evokes Luther's view of human free will as a whore, which is merely able to choose its master, but then willfully obeys. Why do people succumb to this external coercion and keep themselves prisoners in the totalitarian system?

Arendt views the primary reason for this self-imprisonment in the mass-psychological phenomenon of uprootedness and abandonment, which transforms modern people into a herd without identity, thus being vulnerable towards totalitarian torture. While on the surface she views the primary reason for this sense of abandonment in the breaking apart of social structures during the industrialization upheavals, she hints at deeper reason by quoting Luther, according to who it is not good for men to be alone.[22] Arendt's description of this existential state of abandonment goes beyond a merely sociological analysis and taps into the narrative of expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. According to Arendt, abandonment occurs when people are thrust from the world or when this communal world breaks apart and every person is thrown upon himself.[23] In such a world the individual is not merely abandoned by other people and the world, but also estranged from her inner self. This description reminds one of Marx' idea of alienation, which is a secularized version of the idea of alienation from God as narrated in Genesis 1 and Ephesians 2,11–12. Both the secular and Christian idea presuppose the ontology of relation, which is viewed as an ideal. Arendt engaged Augustine's relational ontology in her espousal of the idea of love in her PhD dissertation. It is therefore not by accident that she closes her book with the reference to Augustine.[24] The idea of abandonment and estrangement can only be meaningful within the anthropological framework of the person as relational in her core.

[21] This idea is further developed in the New Testament, e.g. Romans 1–2. Arendt's dissertation was about Augustine's conception of love. So perhaps she subconsciously employed this theological pattern of interpretation.

[22] Arendt, *Elemente und Urspruenge totaler Herrschaft,* 696.

[23] Ibid., 697.

[24] Ibid., 699.

Evil occurs when this relation is broken and the right proportion, the harmony of people towards the world, interpersonal and the inner-personal relationship is set off balance. In the Christian narrative these three consequences follow from the primary alienation from the highest ideal, which is God. Charles Taylor shows lucidly that this pervasive feeling of abandonment is not merely a consequence of a structural breakdown, but a growing mood in the western culture since the 16th century. The primary reason for it is the existential angst and a sense of being orphaned due to the departure of God.[25] Thus the modern self finds himself in a continuous anguish about meaning.[26]

The parallels between Arendt's totalitarianism, the psalmist idol and John's antichrist are striking. Arendt employs biblical patterns in her interpretation and falls back on Judeo-Christian anthropology, which views the human in his core as a relational being. The idea of the equal, free individual, which serves as a background for her clear denouncement of totalitarianism as evil, was conceived within the Judeo-Christian imagination. If this normative background is removed totalitarianism can't be discerned and evaluated. Arendt's unease with the deeper religious background, which enables her to think and to perceive, is understandable. She was afraid of the next logical step: The return to the religious past. However, as she herself insisted, one is not forced to say B, if one says A, as the German saying goes. Both the reality of totalitarianism and Arendt's account confirm the paradoxical impact of Christianity upon European history: "That the Christian saeculum has become secular shows modern history in a paradoxical light: it is Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence. Both aspects derive from the worldly success of Christianity and, at the same time, from its failure to make the world Christian."[27] This paradox triggers the question as to whether the secular has its own existence without the Christian saeculum. Arendt's analysis makes sense within the Judeo-Christian framework, which could be taken for granted 70 years ago. However, as this background fades, so is Arendt's analysis becoming increasingly unintelligible. One could conclude that the secular mode is parasitical[28] and can't survive without its host. Secular intellectual stand at the juncture, which Nietzsche faced: Are we able to perceive and evaluate historic events without the Judeo-Christian patterns?

[25] Taylor exemplifies this modern sense of melancholy through Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach". Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 570.

[26] Ibid., 711–713.

[27] Löwith, Karl. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950, 202.

[28] Habermas, in his conversation with Ratzinger, acknowledged the indebtedness of the secular thought to the deeper religious metaphors. One could further question the persistence of the latter without the former. Cf. Habermas, Juergen. *Zeit der Uebergaenge*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001, 191.