

[*Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the War on Terror*, Michael Burleigh, HarperCollins, 557 pages]

Redeeming History

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

BETWEEN RICHARD DAWKINS, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, the past few years have witnessed a vitriolic string of attacks on organized religion, that terrible force from whose clutches the typical American teenager, full of knowledge and wisdom, never tires of announcing his glorious emancipation. These attacks went well beyond the usual claim that religion is a comforting, harmless delusion in which the weak or the intellectually deficient choose to take refuge. According to these critiques, religion is not only intellectually contemptible, but also a terrible scourge that with a few modest exceptions has produced nothing but misery for the human race.

These men are far from alone in taking such a stand. It has become increasingly common for intellectuals to extrapolate from the existence of Islamic terrorism the broader claim that religion per se amounts to little more than a source of irrationality and violence. In 2005, Muriel Gray declared in Scotland's *Sunday Herald*:

[T]he cause of all this misery, mayhem, violence, terror and ignorance is of course religion itself. . . . For the government of a secular country such as ours to treat religion as if it had real merit instead of regarding it as a ridiculous anachronism, which education, wisdom and experience can hopefully overcome in time, is one of the most depressing developments of the 21st century.

Likewise, Polly Toynbee wrote in the *Guardian*, "It is time now to get serious about religion—all religion—and draw a firm line between the real world and

the world of dreams." Matthew Parris suggested in the London *Spectator* that "what unites an 'extremist' mullah with a Catholic priest or evangelical Protestant minister is actually much more significant and interesting than what divides him from them."

Sacred Causes, Michael Burleigh's new book, is an implicit reply to these increasingly strident secularist claims. He finds that the most self-consciously secular regimes of the 20th century were not the beacons of reason and progress that the grand promises of secularism lead us to expect. The churches, moreover, have quite a bit to show for themselves other than obscurantism and violence. An important if hobbled counterweight to the totalitarian regimes, the churches, for example, played an important role in bringing down communism—not exactly an achievement to be sniffed at.

Burleigh is interested in chronicling the relationship between religious

forces (mainly Christian) and European regimes since World War I, and how the churches responded to the increasing claims of the political realm. He tells this important story superbly, with information and insight that can instruct even the expert. Burleigh is rightly contemptuous of the various strains of Christian leftism that became dominant in the 1960s, making it more difficult for the Christian world to operate as a counterforce to the secular state whose politically correct causes Christian leftists shared. He takes readers to the end of the Cold War and down through the present, with disorder in the Middle East and Islam challenging the tolerance of Europe.

Burleigh writes in an absorbing style and has a talent, reminiscent of Paul Johnson, for digging up long-forgotten historical episodes, though Burleigh is more organized and less idiosyncratic than his fellow British historian. Even

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when he repeats a familiar theme—the religious pretensions of the supposedly secular political ideologies of the 20th century—it is as if the reader encounters it for the first time. Consider this excerpt from the 1925 catechism of Italy's Balilla youth movement:

I believe in Rome the Eternal, the mother of my country, and in Italy her eldest Daughter, who was born in her virginal bosom by the grace of God; who suffered through the barbarian invasions, was crucified and buried; who descended to the grave and was raised from the dead in the nineteenth century; who ascended into Heaven in her glory in 1918 and 1922; who is seated on the right hand of her mother Rome; and who for this reason shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the genius of Mussolini, in our Holy Father Fascism, in the communion of its martyrs, in the conversion of Italians, and in the resurrection of the Empire.

Readers of *Sacred Causes* can expect to find much more evidence of politics as religion in recent European history.

Although far from uncritical of the Christian churches, *Sacred Causes* is certainly sympathetic, especially to the Catholic Church, whose wartime pope, Pius XII, has received a great deal of misplaced criticism since the 1960s. Among other sources, Burleigh cites Rabbi David G. Dalin's 2005 book *The Myth of Hitler's Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued Jews from the Nazis*. When defenders of Pius XII point out the avalanche of Jewish statements of thanks offered to the Pope shortly after the war ended, Pius's modern-day critics explain away these testimonies as mere flattery designed to win the Church's support for the Zionist program in Palestine—an explanation Burleigh finds not at all persuasive. It doesn't explain why Golda Meir composed a touching tribute to Pius upon his death in 1958, some ten years after Israeli independence, why Leonard Bernstein asked the audience of the New York Philharmonic to stand

for a moment of silence in honor of Pius XII, or why, when the left-wing writer Rolf Hochhuth portrayed Pius as indifferent to Jewish suffering in his fictional 1963 play "The Deputy," it was the Anti-Defamation League's representative in Rome who promptly composed a monograph in the wartime Pope's defense. Indeed, when we remember that Pius cooperated with anti-Nazi opposition to the point of encouraging German generals plotting the Führer's overthrow, and that the Nazis themselves devised a plan to kidnap the Pope, John Cornwell's story of Pius XII as "Hitler's Pope" grows ever more fanciful.

Burleigh is also quite interesting on the role of the churches in bringing down the Iron Curtain. The story in Poland is a familiar one, though as usual, Burleigh peppers his narrative with little-known facts and anecdotes. The election of a Polish pope in 1978 undoubtedly caused enormous problems for the Kremlin because the Pontiff's various appearances in his home country, attended by hundreds of thousands, helped the Poles realize just how numerous they were and what a tiny, isolated minority the Communist regime was. It was stunning for John Paul to tell his countrymen that the division of Europe worked out at Yalta was permanent—a prediction that came true sooner than anyone expected.

Likewise in East Germany, the churches provided a rallying point for various strands of political opposition. According to Burleigh:

The key point was that the Churches helped them all overcome the intense atomization which the regime had deliberately fostered, be it isolating and persecuting active dissidents or encouraging individuals in harmless private pursuits. Now they came together in candlelit vigils and prayer, a mode of organization that was difficult to combat with police dogs and water cannons as the moral balance was so blatantly asymmetrical, while the peaceful

forms nullified the entire Communist mythology of violent revolutionary upheaval.

On the subject of Iraq and the War on Terror, however, Burleigh's views are much more conventional. He points to the "bitter divisions between so-called 'tough' liberals like Michael Ignatieff and Christopher Hitchens and those apparently less concerned with whether Iraqis and Afghans should enjoy the same rights as themselves." This is to suggest that the only reason anyone could oppose ruinously expensive, destabilizing wars around the world—and particularly a war in Iraq that has empowered the Shi'ites and greased the skids for *sharia* law—must be a cavalier indifference to the cause of justice. How an otherwise intelligent man could uncritically repeat such an embarrassing piece of state propaganda is a mystery I am at a loss to solve.

Furthermore, Burleigh treats Islamic terrorism as if it required no explanation. While one might argue that many Islamic fighters would do their terrible work even in the absence of Western or Israeli provocation, it is a stretch to assume from this point that sympathy for or actual involvement in Islamic radicalism is always and everywhere a purely spontaneous phenomenon arising out of a sudden realization that this is what the unadulterated Islamic faith demands. If that were so, al-Qaeda would not produce recruitment tapes featuring Israeli or U.S. government atrocities. Is it not conceivable that Muslims may be drawn to radicalism by witnessing repeated acts of injustice?

These are minor drawbacks that should not dissuade people from reading Burleigh's provocative and important book. It deserves to be widely read for the way it skillfully and convincingly presents the opposite of what usually passes in the Left's intellectual circles as the history of the 20th century. ■

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Spend It Like Beckham



The British media is up in arms because a nice young man by the name of David Beckham has accepted a vast sum of money to play soccer for

an American club. Here we have George W. Bush angling for war against Iran in the crowded Persian Gulf—and the Brits are in a lather about Beckham's defection. You would think he had been playing for an English club, an archrival of the unheard of LA Galaxy. But Beckham left Manchester United for Real Madrid three years ago after the English club treated him in the manner George Steinbrenner used to reserve for managers before Joe Torre.

Nothing makes an Englishman's blood boil more than seeing a fellow Brit strike it rich—which Beckham did, to the tune of \$250 million. He is 31 years old, the ex-captain of an English football team, obviously in the autumn of his sporting career, and he is offered a contract dreams are made of by an obscure Los Angeles club trying to lure soccer-mad Hispanics into its stadium. (The money comes from casinos, so don't feel too sorry for the obscure soccer club dishing out the moolah.). Of course he grabbed it, and of course he said what was expected of him: "I'm not doing it for the money, but for the challenge..."

The challenge, needless to say, is enormous. If Beckham manages to do what the great Pelé failed to, I will personally send a large check to William Kristol. Americans like contact games like football or fast, up-and-down games like basketball in which one uses his hands and not his feet. If soccer was ever going to catch on in the U.S., it would have done so long ago.

Beckham was picked because he has film star looks—he's a clean-cut man who is far healthier looking than the

sleaze balls Hollywood has been coming up with lately—and because of his wife. Victoria Beckham, or Posh Spice, is a former pop star who diets a lot and shops even more. The British tabloids loathe her and have been trying to wreck her life since she married David. I recently sat next to her at a luncheon in Rome, and she could not have been nicer and more polite. And she's a pretty little thing to boot, although too skinny for my taste. Where else but Los Angeles would this perfect, famous English couple end up? They even named their firstborn Brooklyn, which once upon a time had a baseball team that now plays out of LA. It's a natural fit.

BECKHAM HAS NOT BEEN THE IDEAL ENGLISH FOOTBALLER BECAUSE HE DOESN'T SPIT ON HIS OPPONENTS, DOES NOT USE THE F-WORD ALL THE TIME, AND HAS MANAGED TO LIVE LIKE A GENTLEMAN DESPITE BEING CONSTANTLY IN THE LIMELIGHT.

But back to the Brits and the hate that dares not speak its name. One of the most serious sportswriters took Beckham to task for "being a supreme striker of a dead ball [taking penalty kicks and fouls] but one who the further he traveled along his career path, the further he moved away from the idea of being a footballer first and foremost."

In this the hack was right. Beckham has not been the ideal English footballer because he doesn't spit on his opponents, does not use the F-word all the time, and although uneducated, has managed to live like a gentleman despite being constantly in the limelight. No

drugs, no public brawls, nothing to endear him to the British tabloids. Other writers openly abused him and Victoria for accepting lots of money. Journalists, especially British journalists, are known never to file false expenses, lie, set people up, or play tricks on innocents in order to enhance their salaries. "Beckham has decided to unroll the beach towel and reach for the sun tan lotion," railed one scribbler. "He should be drummed out of polite society for his greed," screamed another.

The worst, of course, is yet to come, especially if Beckham fails to turn Americans away from football, baseball, and basketball and into soccer freaks. When it emerged that Tom Cruise and Beckham were so-called friends—Hollywood is known for old-fashioned true friendship—the hacks could no longer contain themselves. "Beckham lost in space,"

was the kindest headline, an obvious reference to Tom Cruise's scientology beliefs that the human race is immortal and reincarnated from an alien spirit.

Reincarnated or not, Tom Cruise and John Travolta aside, a big bust or a star to be born, I wish Beckham luck. He is buying a house in LA and is moving his young family over there. He will be worth half a billion greenbacks by the time he hangs up his cleats—and he should buy a full-page ad in every British tabloid in which to tell the hacks what film stars he breaks bread with and how much money he is making per minute. ■