

[*Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, by John Gray; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 229 pages]

Getting Lost on Utopia Highway

By R.J. Stove

TO PRAISE A WRITER on American foreign affairs for being adult might seem a backhanded compliment but for the obvious puerility of so much written in this field. Mark Steyn, David Frum, and Michael Ledeen are not necessarily the names that first spring to mind in considerations of serious reasoning for grown-ups. It does credit to John Gray, London School of Economics professor and regular *New York Review of Books* contributor, that he takes political dogmas seriously and, above all, is not constantly engaged in screaming down his opponents.

While Gray's main preoccupation in his new book, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, is the Iraq imbroglio, in its American and (more unusually) its British aspects, he avoids—as his title and subtitle make obvious—the entire “what one apparatchik told another apparatchik” method illustrated by, for instance, Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* and James Mann's *Rise of the Vulcans*. Nor is his principle interest geostrategic scrutiny. He concerns himself, instead, with the history and prehistory of the fantasizing that has animated the Bush-Blair imperium: how it arose and how it laid successful siege to otherwise rational minds.

As a concise blocker-in of intellectual backgrounds, Gray warrants, at his best, being likened to Isaiah Berlin, although in accordance with his subject, his overall picture is darker. He owes much (maybe too much) to the surveys of Norman Cohn, the British chronicler of

demonology who died only weeks before Gray's book arrived in the mail. Nevertheless, Gray admits the crucial distinction, which Cohn blurs, between even the most crackpot of medieval Christian millenarians—such as Joachim of Fiore in the 12th century—and their modern counterparts. Whereas the former, as Gray notes, “believed that only God could remake the world, modern revolutionaries imagined it could be reshaped by humanity alone.”

Forming a bridge between medieval and modern apocalyptic lunacies stands Gray's account of life—if life it can be called—in the proto-Jacobin, proto-Marxist, proto-*Playboy* city-state ruled during the 1530s by John of Leyden, who devised a new calendar, abolished private ownership, and implemented polygamy. This supplies some comic relief, an element not otherwise conspicuous in this volume, though it does crop up again on page 42. It seems that Stalin thought New Soviet Man might be created by way of New Soviet Primate. Yes, in Uncle Joe's Georgia, women were officially impregnated with ape sperm. (Goodness knows whether these pregnancies resulted in live births, but if they did, that would explain lots about journalism.)

When dealing with comparatively recent times, Gray asks the simple and resonant question: “How did Utopia—once found mainly on the Left—come to power through the Right?” Some notion of Gray's expository gifts may be gathered from the fact that he even makes Leo Strauss intelligible, a feat usually conceded to have been beyond Leo Strauss himself. (Dwight Macdonald's verdict on Alger Hiss describes Strauss admirably: “The cuttlefish can take lessons from our author in how to obscure an issue.”) It is hard to withhold a certain perverse admiration for a guru who attained as cultic a following as Strauss did without having bothered to elucidate what his own religious views were or if he held any such views at all. Gray avoids over-easy identification of Strauss with neocons—after all, Strauss

never imagined that Zanzibar could be forcibly democratized by next Tuesday at the latest—but the common ground between them remains. Both Straussianism and neoconservatism appeal primarily, in 2007, to those whose desire to be In The Know outweighs any piffing loyalty to sane traditions. Moreover, both offer the specific charms of a world where the plebs can be fobbed off with mere surface meanings while the Big Kahunas feast on Gnostic fantasies of their own creation: fantasies in which Plato's *Republic* somehow becomes an attack on utopianism and Baghdad becomes as law-abiding as Burlington, Vermont.

Gray is just as lucid on writers who, unlike Strauss, condescend to intelligibility. Locke, Voltaire, and such “Counter-Enlightenment” (Berlin's term) figures as Joseph de Maistre and J.G. Herder all get considered. (A passage of Maistre's serves as Gray's chilling epigraph: “This is an abyss into which it is better not to look.” / “My friend, we are not free not to look.”) He devotes particular attention to F.A. Hayek, which is perhaps a polite way of saying that he tars and feathers him. Hayek furnished, in his *Constitution of Liberty*, a vaguely social Darwinist explanation for British institutions' survival. “Unfortunately it was as a theorist of the free market that Hayek achieved influence. ... As an account of the emergence of the free market [his explanation] is the opposite of the truth. ... Reinventing the market meant curbing spontaneously evolved institutions, such as trade unions and monopolistic corporations. This could be done only by a highly centralized state.” Michael Oakeshott famously, but not famously enough, said of Hayek's worldview: “A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics.” As Gray aphoristically comments: “The free market became a religion only when its basis in religion was denied.”

The situation is worse still when we consider Thatcherism's gulf between statist reality and capitalist rhetoric.

Government spending swelled as much between 1979 and 1990 as it had done during any of the preceding 30 years. The National Health Service, better known for its nurture of death-dealing maniacs like Harold Shipman than for anything describable as care, continued to balloon. In Northern Ireland, the very pretense of cost cutting found no favor: one citizen in three was a bureaucrat, and useless industries were propped up by *dirigiste* funds with a gusto that would have left Erich Honecker agape. Readers of Peter Hitchens's reports will long since have realized how completely Thatcherism echoed left-liberalism on social issues, being as pro-abortion, pro-immigration, and anti-capital punishment as any hip pagan could desire. Whether this fact derived from active moral turpitude or, more probably, from the Tories' mere

failure to discern that a culture war existed, others must judge.

From Thatcherism to Blairism is but a step, one acknowledged by Gray himself. "The incessant 'modernization' [Blair] demanded was, in effect, an ossified version of the ideas of the late '80s. Like Thatcher ... Blair lacked skepticism. For him the clichés of the hour have always been eternal verities." Hence his imperviousness, apropos the Middle East, to arguments expounded by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both popes being handicapped by some expertise in Augustinian and Thomistic just-war theory. "The audience [with John Paul in 2003] must have pained Blair, but it failed to shake his sense of rectitude," Gray writes. "It was enough that he felt he was right."

Blair is in abundant, if not good, company. As with the techno-utopians quoted with horrified fascination by Andrew Keen in his recent book *The Cult of the Amateur*, so with the politico-utopians quoted here: it is hard to believe that anyone actually uttered such tripe, but believe it we must. When, in September 2002, Bush announced, "Our responsibility to history is clear: to ... rid the world of evil"—a project still unfulfilled a mere two millennia after the Sermon on the Mount—we have to accept it as a seriously intended credo. When dispensationalist theocons maintain that the Old Testament, if properly understood, assigns the universe's ultimate redemptive roles to Bush and to Likudniks, they are not acting out a satirical "Simpsons" script—they mean what they say. Ditto Blair's messianic assurances that "success is the only exit strategy I am prepared to consider." Gray, citing Raymond Aron, offers a brilliant comparison between Blairism and 1930s Stalinism, wherein comparatively minor lying by the show trials' victims (Nikolai Bukharin et al. confessing to nonexistent "Trotskyist-fascist" crimes, and so on) could not, and did not, shake the prevailing devotion to a higher millenarian truth. Blair, as Gray notes with pardonable *Schadenfreude*,

"constructed a pseudo-reality that aimed to shape the way we think ... out of power he faces decades on the lecture circuit dispensing uplifting platitudes to listless audiences drawn from the second division of American business." At least Stalin's average NKVD head-kicker could enliven his grunts by occasional allusions to Spartacus's revolt. For Blair and Bush, "the history of the past two decades [was] the only history they knew." Oh yes, and 1938.

For anyone who has the inestimable good fortune not to be in Iraq, the crucial question with Bush is to what extent his compatriots, especially after the 2006 midterm elections, share his dumbed-down fundamentalism. The assumption—particularly prevalent in Europe—of Americans' foaming religious fervor might well be overdue for skeptical analysis, based as it now is on two things: Americans' willingness to talk about God and their willingness to attend church. (How much might churchgoing derive from the loneliness and anomie of car-obsessed suburbia, factors that make any form of avowable regular socializing attractive?) A 2002 *Newsweek* poll that Gray mentions found that almost half of respondents considered America "a secular nation." Today, even in the Bible Belt, believers in the continued existence of Christ would probably be outnumbered by believers in the continued existence of Elvis. If (as could be argued) Gray overestimates Christian enthusiasm in America, he might underestimate it in parts of modern England, which appear well on the way to growing as Pentecostalized—and as incurably imitative of U.S. Pentecostal models—as Guatemala or Brazil. Yet none of this invalidates Gray's main point: that in being able to call on the Christian Right at home, Bush has had a weapon unavailable to Blair or, currently, to Gordon Brown. (The latter's father, it may be worth noting, was an old-style Presbyterian clergyman.)

This reviewer being an agnostic on matters environmental, it is not within his competence to assess properly the numerous passages in Gray's last section

MOVING?

Changing your address?

Simply go to **The American Conservative** website, www.amconmag.com. Click "subscribe" and then click "address change."

To access your account make sure you have your TAC mailing label. You may also subscribe or renew online.

If you prefer to mail your address change send your TAC label with your new address to:

The American Conservative
 Subscription Department
 P.O. Box 9030
 Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9030

that deal with “peak oil” and broader crises. It does seem improbable, not to mention insane, that Joe Sixpack can continue partying on cheap petroleum as if it were still 1962—shades of Carlyle’s formulation, “Soul extinct; stomach well alive”—but then the apocalypse does have a habit of not actually happening quite yet. Only a generation ago, the Club of Rome assured us that overpopulation would bring famine in its train from Scarsdale to Singapore. A decade previously, Americans took imminent nuclear annihilation so much for granted that Tom Lehrer wrote a bestselling song about it, one that present-day ethnic sensibilities would render unrecordable:

*We will all go together when we go,
Every Hottentot and every Eskimo.
When the air becomes uranious,
We will all go simultaneous.
Yes, we all will go together when we go.*

Meanwhile, Gray scornfully refers to the “cartoon science of creationism.” Why, when this science prevailed always and everywhere until the early 19th century and the likes of Charles Lyell? It could well be that disgust at theocons has led Gray to assume that anything they utter must be false. So coarse-minded a dismissal blunts the effectiveness of his whole conclusion. And it cheapens a tome which, despite its profuse typographical errors—Norman “Podoretz,” “Dostoyesky,” and “Rheinhold” Niebuhr—is worth anyone’s study. If only he had ended it with the noble words he uses on page 192: “Preserving the hard-won restraints of civilization is less exciting than throwing them away in order to achieve impossible ideals. Barbarism has a certain charm, particularly when it comes clothed in virtue.” ■

R.J. Stove lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is the author of The Unsleping Eye: Secret Police and Their Victims.

[*Micronations: The Lonely Planet Guide to Home-Made Nations*, John Ryan, George Dunford, and Simon Sellars, Lonely Planet, 156 pages]

Big Ideas Need Small Places

By Jesse Walker

The patriot never under any circumstances boasts of the largeness of his country, but always, and of necessity, boasts of the smallness of it.

—G.K. Chesterton

You can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline—it helps if you have some kind of a football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer.

—Frank Zappa

THE DESERT REPUBLIC of Molossia doesn't appear on many maps, and it doesn't have a seat in the United Nations. But if you drive about 18 miles northeast from Carson City, Nevada, you'll find it. It's not right there on the highway—you need to take a left at Lafond Avenue. Then there's another left at Wagon Wheel Way, and then you take a right on Mary Lane. “The Republic of Molossia is at number 226, just up on the right,” report the authors of *Micronations: The Lonely Planet Guide to Home-Made Nations*. “Make sure they're expecting you; don't just show up.”

Molossia has been independent since 1977, though it did not settle into its current location until the mid-'90s. It has a navy (an inflatable raft), a national observatory (a telescope), and a currency; the latter, called the Valora, is “pegged to the value of Pillsbury Cookie Dough.” With a total population of four, it's unable to field its own baseball team, so instead it focuses on broomball, a local sport that “can appear very similar to field hockey.” The republic also has its own time zone: according to the country's official website, Molossian Standard Time “is 39 minutes ahead of Pacific Standard Time, or if

you prefer, 21 minutes behind Mountain Standard Time.”

Molossia is a micronation: a home-brewed jurisdiction that doesn't qualify for statehood by most conventional measurements, but still proudly insists on its independence. To these small statelets, Vatican City is uncomfortably large and Liechtenstein is a leviathan. They're a familiar feature in fiction and film: the independent borough in G.K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*—the London district that stumbles into a temporary sovereignty in the comedy *Passport to Pimlico*—and the modern-medieval Duchy of Grand Fenwick in *The Mouse That Roared* and its sequels.

In real life—or, at least, that mode of life that isn't as fictional as a novel—micronations fall into three rough categories. There are the places that actually achieved a somewhat sovereign status, at least until a larger neighbor invaded or the head of state found another way to occupy his time. There are quiet backyard countries like Molossia, which may lay claim to territory but don't do anything that might aggravate the empires that surround them. And there are entirely virtual nations—a humorless grump might call them imaginary—that don't exist outside a pamphlet or a website.

The classic guide to such societies is Erwin Strauss's 1979 book, *How to Start Your Own Country: How You Can Profit from the Decline of the Nation State*. Since the '90s, several websites have built on Strauss's work; the best of them is James L. Erwin's *Footnotes to History* at buckyogi.com/footnotes. In 2005, the Scottish comedian Danny Wallace hosted a BBC miniseries about micronations, also called *How to Start Your Own Country*; it ended with the creation of the kingdom of Lovely, located in Wallace's apartment. (From his declaration of independence: “Please do get in touch if there are any legal ramifications to what I'm doing, or if you have any problems with it whatsoever. If you don't ring, I'll just assume everything's a-okay and proceed as planned.”) Now the Lonely Planet series has published a travel guide devoted entirely to these DIY polities.