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## Unbelief: The Root of Totalitarian Trends in Liberal Democracy?

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In his book *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, Ryszard Legutko makes an intellectually bracing case that liberal democracy today threatens to become as radically progressive, as destructive of history and tradition, and as revolutionarily totalitarian as the Soviet Communism that for decades was its greatest foe.

In chapters that elucidate the similarities between communism and liberal democracy in regard to their perceptions of history, their status as political utopias, their tendency to politicize all of life, their proclivity for ideology and, finally, their animus toward religion, Legutko shows how, despite basic differences, the two systems are both “all-unifying entities” that compel “their followers how to think, what to do, how to evaluate events, what to dream, and what language to use.” Like communism, contemporary Western liberal democracy (especially in Western Europe) is about transforming the world; it is progressive. It is animated by the fight “against the forces of backwardness” and a rejection of the commitments of “religion, social morality and tradition.”

What lies at the root of this totalitarianism that seems to be asserting itself in free societies in today’s West?

This question reveals a fascinating affinity between Legutko, a 21st century Polish Catholic philosopher and member of the European Parliament, and the nineteenth-century Dutch Calvinist historian and statesman Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer. In a series of lectures, held in his home before a small group of friends and acquaintances in 1845-46 and published as *Ongeloof en Revolutie* (Unbelief and Revolution), Groen asserts that the revolutionary idea, as exemplified most clearly in the French Revolution, not only arises out of unbelief but is the necessary political consequence of unbelief. This bears remarkable similarities to the case that Legutko makes about the ultimate cause of the totalitarian temptation of liberal democracy.

Little known today, Groen is meticulous and explicit about his Christianity and his theological orthodoxy. For Groen, unbelief—which he also refers to as atheism—means not just lack of belief in a deity or the absence of religious faith. Rather, unbelief is the rejection of the Christian faith and the Christian God. Groen was an important precursor of neo-Calvinism, a strain within the Dutch Reformed tradition that is distinguished by its claim that God is sovereign over all spheres of life, not only the church but also politics, culture, and everything else. According to neo-Calvinists, the Christian is called not only to personal piety and the hope of eternal salvation, but also to engage as a Christian in all spheres of life in this present world. Groen was the mentor of the most famous neo-Calvinist thinker, Abraham Kuyper, theologian and prime minister of the Netherlands from

1901 to 1905. Kuyper encapsulated the neo-Calvinist credo most pithily in his statement, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

The main thesis of *Unbelief and Revolution* is best summed up in Lecture VIII, “Unbelief.” There, Groen writes:

the cause of the Revolution lies in unbelief. . . . The Revolution, with its variety of schools of thought and its successive historical manifestations, is the consequence, the application, the unfolding of unbelief. . . . the real formative power throughout the revolutionary era, right up to our own time, has been atheism, godlessness, being without God. It is this feature that has given the Revolution its peculiar stamp. . . . atheism in religion and radicalism in politics are not only not the exaggeration, misuses or distortion, but in fact the consistent and faithful application, of a principle which sets aside the God of Revelation in favor of the supremacy of Reason. . . . where unbelief is free to run its natural course in religion and politics, it cannot but lead to the most radical doctrines.

Though the term would not be used until the 1920s, a half-century after Groen’s death, what Groen calls radicalism or absolutism is, in fact, totalitarianism.

It is astonishing how precisely the nineteenth-century thinker Groen captures the essence of the twentieth-century European totalitarianisms of communism, fascism, and Nazism. In an analysis of Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, Groen declares: “A more complete absolutism is scarcely conceivable. The citizen’s very liberty consists in the surrender of body and soul to the state.” He continues with a prescient observation about the disastrous possibilities implicit in liberal democracies based on atheism, “What we have here is once again the monstrous system of Hobbes—the same sovereign omnipotence, with but one difference: where Hobbes argued that power passes to the government Rousseau insists that the people retain it.”

In describing the totalitarian impetus of liberal democracy in the European Union and its member states, Legutko carries Groen’s thought into the twenty-first century. And he is proving to be as prophetic as Groen. Legutko focuses on contemporary liberal democracy’s seemingly inexorable tendency to expand into all areas of life, to become, like communism, an “all-unifying entity.” Like Groen but more subtly, Legutko locates this all-unifying democracy’s incipient totalitarianism in its hostility toward religion and expansion into the religious sphere. He critiques liberal democracy’s inexorable politicization, usurpation, and devaluation of everything non-political, including the Christian religion of pre-liberal-democratic Europe, writing:

everything that exists in society must become liberal-democratic over time and be imbued with the spirit of the system. . . . Not only should the state and the economy be liberal, democratic, or liberal-democratic, but the entire society as well, including ethics and mores, family, churches, schools, universities, community organizations, culture and human sentiments and aspirations. The people, structures, thoughts that exist outside the liberal-democratic pattern are deemed outdated, backward-looking, useless, but at the same time extremely dangerous as preserving the remnants of the old authoritarianisms. . . . As a result,

liberal democracy has become an all-permeating system. There is no, or in any case, cannot be, any segment of reality that would be arguably and acceptably non-liberal democratic.

Key to this ‘totalitarizing’ is unbelief. He writes, “[the so-called ideological neutrality of the liberal-democratic state] has irrevocably dethroned Christianity from the position it had had for many centuries and thus led to redefining European civilization.” Legutko laments “the growing infiltration of liberal democracy into religion” and liberal democracy’s “overwhelming tendency to politicize and ideologize social life in all its aspects” which has led to a “total subjugation of the mind by politics and ideology,” ideology marked by its rejection of Christianity.

Why does unbelief presage the totalitarian revolution? Groen believes that the problem begins in the idea of popular sovereignty, government via consent of the governed. This constitutes an implicit rejection of God’s sovereignty over all of creation, which is the true ground of political authority. He says, “[The] basic principle [of the revolutionary eighteenth century], the sovereignty of man, independent of the sovereignty of God, I consider radically false.” Liberal democracy asserts that the consent of the governed is the basis of liberty. But in reality, that “odd sort of liberty that shoots up from this revolutionary soil,” in which a “popular sovereignty ... holds sway, recognizing no independent source of authority above or alongside or beneath itself” is nothing other than the arbitrary and absolute tyranny of an amorphous General Will: “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body. This is no more than to say that he will be forced to be free.”

Similarly, Legutko laments how all-unifying liberal democracy, like communism, feeds off of “the inspiring force” of a fully vulgar and barbaric “modern man” whom it imagines and has helped create, “in opposition to the classical and Christian views of human nature.” This “homo novus,” whom liberal democracy serves, is a “product of the West, which at a certain stage of its history turned against its own culture,” including its religion. This new man, stripped of all tradition, culture, history and “anything subtle, genteel, elegant, beautiful or spiritual,” has nothing of his own to fall back on. He cannot but be swallowed up by the all-unifying system. The same goes for Groen’s atheist man, whose liberty consists in the surrender of body and soul to the state.

One more point: Though Groen seemed far less critical of the American Revolution than of the French, his contention that popular sovereignty lies at the heart of the godless revolutionary idea certainly does implicate the American Revolution. The American Declaration of Independence states unequivocally that governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” But I would argue that the popular sovereignty at the origin of American democracy does not at all deny the primacy of the sovereignty of God. Rather, in the American view, popular sovereignty is derived from God’s sovereignty. The Declaration of Independence grounds the American Revolution in “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” and on the “self-evident” truths “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This contrasts starkly with the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (*Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*) of 1789. Although it uses the word “sacred” several times and declares the rights of man “in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being,” the Declaration of the Rights of Man is essentially silent about God. It makes claims about rights, the aims of political association, the nature of liberty, etc., without bothering to justify those claims in anything but the claims

themselves. Article 1, for example, simply states, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.”

But we Americans have strayed far from our founding. We are losing our faith in the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God and have a turn to the French Revolution. Vulgar, violent mobs often assert sovereignty over our streets. We are rejecting our tradition of individual liberty in responsibility and rewriting our history. A new, essentially atheistic religion of political correctness dominates our airwaves, our social media, the arts and culture, business, and academia. Those who oppose this, and even those who support it without sufficient fervor or correct word choice, risk public shaming, job loss and ‘cancellation.’ Many consider religion to be bigotry, and reject the idea of religious freedom, the ‘first freedom’ of the U.S. Constitution, as a cover for bigotry.

Even in America, current events indicate that Groen might have been right about the consent of the governed. Not only was he one hundred years ahead of his time in discerning the totalitarian threat of communism, fascism, and Nazism, but also 170 years ahead of his time regarding what is becoming of liberal democracy under the reign of militant atheism, in a West shorn of belief in Nature’s God. By the same token, Legutko’s description of atheist liberal democracy in Europe is an increasingly apt characterization of American democracy as well, in which a thoroughly post-Christian governing elite—like that of Western Europe—appears to be succumbing to the totalitarianism of radical wokeism.

“With law and history set aside,” writes Groen, “the builders [of the Revolution] have no rule save self-conceit and whim.” That echoes Legutko’s assessment of the state of liberal democracy’s new barbarians. I pray that the situation is not this bleak, but when I look around, I cannot deny that it probably is. In everything, though, I dare say that our greatest consolation is the fact that God exists, and he alone is truly sovereign.

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