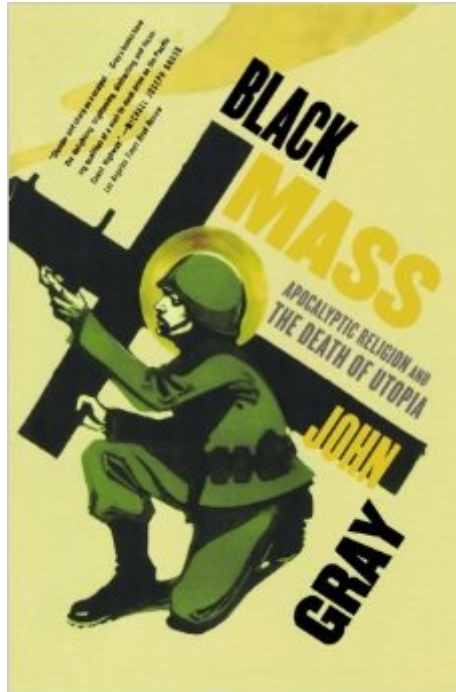# Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion And The Death Of Utopia

Synopsis

For the decade that followed the end of the cold war, the world was lulled into a sense that a consumerist, globalized, peaceful future beckoned. The beginning of the twenty-first century has rudely disposed of such ideasâ •most obviously through 9/11and its aftermath. But just as damaging has been the rise in the West of a belief that a single model of political behavior will become a worldwide norm and that, if necessary, it will be enforced at gunpoint.In Black Mass, celebrated philosopher and critic John Gray explains how utopian ideals have taken on a dangerous significance in the hands of right-wing conservatives and religious zealots. He charts the history of utopianism, from the Reformation through the French Revolution and into the present. And most urgently, he describes how utopian politics have moved from the extremes of the political spectrum into mainstream politics, dominating the administrations of both George W. Bush and Tony Blair, and indeed coming to define the political center. Far from having shaken off discredited ideology, Gray suggests, we are more than ever in its clutches. Black Mass is a truly frightening and challenging work by one of Britain's leading political thinkers.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition (September 30, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374531528

ISBN-13: 978-0374531522

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (24 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #992,062 in Books (See Top 100 in Books)   #75 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies & Doctrines > Utopian   #371 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > Ancient & Medieval Literature > Greek   #1495 inÂ Books > History > World > Religious > Religion, Politics & State

Customer Reviews

It's not easy categorising John Gray. He's generally listed as a "philosopher", but he rarely delves into the roots of human behaviour. His philosophy is founded on recorded history. Like most modern "philosophers", his arena is the canon of Western European tradition and practice. That approach, at least in Gray's hands, makes him more political commentator than philosopher. The shift of

emphasis doesn't erode his thinking prowess nor his ability in expressing what he has derived from it. His prose is clean and unpretentious, almost hiding the power of the thinking behind it. In this exciting little work, Gray examines the history of modern "utopian" ideas - their misconceptions and their persistence.The idea of utopias has long diverted us from confronting realities, Gray suggests. This self-generated departure tends to hide consequences of our acts until it's too late to deal with them successfully. Naturally, one of his glaring examples of this situation is the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Gray demonstrates how it was planned intentionally long before the causes were manufactured for it. The planning was clearly utopian in that the intentions were delusionary and inappropriate. Both governments declared their intention - based on false pretenses - to "extend democracy into the Middle East". This ambition was expressed without any perception of whether it would be welcomed. It's an underlying principle of utopian thinking, Gray observes, that a society can be re-created from within or imposed from the outside. The failure of such thinking is readily apparent in Iraq - a war that has lasted longer for the US than WWII. Utopian ideas have been seeded on infertile soil.In explaining how the utopian idea arrived in the Middle East by way of the US-UK "special relationship", Gray skips lightly over Thomas More's original idea to the Enlightenment era. There is a link, however, in that while we are generally taught that the Enlightenment thinkers were building a secular world, they were relying on Christian precepts to expound their ideas. "Improvement" was the means of overcoming disparities in the human condition, and the State could replace the Church in making beneficial change. Among other virtues of this thinking was that it seemed realisable within human timespans. In the 20th Century, a wide variety of such proposals were tried, and Gray brings Marxism, the hippie communes of the 1960s and the Fascist-Nazi movements into the same paddock. Once thought as a "Leftist" ideal, Gray is unsurprised that it is now the policy of choice of the "neo-cons" and their supporters on the "Christian Right". Yet, it seems that no matter where on the political spectrum utopians arise, they continue to commit similar blunders. The goal blinds them to the perils of trying to achieve it and utopia becomes tragedy.It's easy to peg Gray as grim or dismal. That's a common label pinned on those who seek to have us confront reality and think more deeply about our decisions. In this sense, Gray takes a long view of the role of Christianity in Western thinking. The shift of utopia from heaven to Earth, while seeming to provide improvement, was just as likely to introduce anarchy. He compares two contemporary thinkers, Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, in their approach to this problem. Modern liberals declare the unrestrained State as the greatest threat to freedom. Hobbes understood that anarchy was an even greater threat and government was needed to quell it. Spinoza, on the other hand, while unwilling to grant the state power to stomp on emerging

anarchy, had a different proposal. Humans are part of the natural world, and turning to the state for salvation of any kind was erroneous. His realistic view was that disorder and peace are natural cycles of the human condition. We must approach this situation realistically, without any fixed or unattainable goals to repress the one to gain the other. Such simplistic thinking can never succeed. Gray has offered an exceptionally rational set of pointers on avoiding such single-mindedness. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

Picking up where he left off in his genuinely iconoclastic book "Straw Dogs," John Gray turns his attention to the ineluctably human penchant for utopia and apocalyptic fantasy. His style here is less abrasive but no less bracing. A British commentator recently wrote of Gray, "He is so out of the box it is easy to forget there was ever any box" - which fairly describes the intellectual jolt he'll deliver to readers dulled by boxy thinking.The previous reviewer has done a decent job of describing the argument, but any summary misses the electricity that hums in Gray's sentences. Gray's unsparing synopsis of the neo-conservative fantasy that led to the debacle in Iraq will have patriotic Americans grinding their teeth in fury at the waste of American and Iraqi lives and the betrayal of American ideals. He also lambasts liberals who delude themselves about "inalienable" human rights, and minces no words about born-again Christians who've sanctioned and supported the torture and carnage, which leads him to a grim conclusion: "Liberals have come to believe that human freedom can be secured by constitutional guarantees. They have failed to grasp the Hobbesian truth ... that constitutions change with regimes. A regime shift has occurred in the US, which now stands somewhere between the law-governed state it was during most of its history and a species of illiberal democracy. The US has undergone this change not as a result of its corrosion by relativism ... but through the capture of government by fundamentalism. If the American regime as it has been known in the past ceases to exist, it will be a result of the power of faith." (pp. 168-169)Gray is explicit about the folly of religious myths, but he accepts that "the mass of humankind will never be able to do without them," just as he dismisses "militant atheism" as a "by-product of Christianity," mocking its pretensions at evading the conundrums of theology. He's equally clear on the ineradicable future of terrorism. "Nothing is more human than the readiness to kill and die in order to secure a meaning in life." (p. 186) Following the bleak logic of these observations to their conclusion, he can only advocate a clear-eyed realism about the nature of human being - which he confesses may in turn be a self-deceiving hope: "a shift to realism may be a utopian ideal."As I read "Black Mass," I couldn't help recalling the work of William Pfaff, who as a political analyst practices the realism Gray recommends, and whose fine study "The Bullet's Song" examines the "redemptive

utopian violence" as it was envisioned by a rogue's gallery of 20th century artist-intellectuals. Neither of these books are comfortable reading; neither offer a panacea - because (as Gray puts it) "there are moral dilemmas, some of which occur fairly regularly, for which there is no solution."It's December, the time of year when voracious readers start compiling their "best of" lists. "Black Mass" (despite its silly title) ranks at the top of my list for 2007.

Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia Apocalyptic Fiction: TUMULTUS: A pulse-pounding apocalyptic fiction thriller... (Mac Walker Book 5) The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature Mass and the Sacraments: A Course in Religion Book II (A Course in Religion for Catholic High Schools and Academies Ser.) J. D. Robb CD Collection 2: Rapture in Death, Ceremony in Death, Vengeance in Death (In Death Series) Mass Motorization and Mass Transit: An American History and Policy Analysis Burn Chambers for Rocket Mass Heaters: A short introduction to 4 types of burns chambers for rocket mass heaters Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion (Gender, Theory, and Religion) The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity Among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics (Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture) When Religion Becomes Lethal: The Explosive Mix of Politics and Religion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam Memory, Music, and Religion: Morocco's Mystical Chanters (Studies in Comparative Religion) Magic Witchcraft and Religion: A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion Santeria: the Religion: Faith, Rites, Magic (Llewellyn's World Religion & Magick) Buddhism the Religion of No-Religion (Alan Watts Love of Wisdom) Behold, Darkness and Sorrow: A Post-Apocalyptic EMP-Survival Thriller (Seven Cows, Ugly and Gaunt Book 1) The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature 36 Hours: A Post-Apocalyptic EMP Survival Fiction Series (The Blackout Series) (Volume 1) Highway: A Post-Apocalyptic Tale of Survival 36 Hours: A Post-Apocalyptic EMP Survival Fiction Series (The Blackout Series Book 1)