The Noise of the Gravediggers

There are any number of ways we could talk about the religious dimensions of the crisis of our time. The mainstream religions of today's industrial societies offer one set of starting points, while my own Druid faith, which is very nearly as far from the mainstream as you can get, offers another set. Then, of course, there's the religion that nobody talks about and most people in the industrial world believe in, the religion of progress, which will be central to the discussion ahead and which has its own noticeably dogmatic way of addressing such issues.

Still, a starting point a little less obvious than any of these may be better suited to the exploration I have in mind, so we will begin in the Italian city of Turin, on an otherwise ordinary January day in 1889. Over on one side of the Piazza Carlo Alberto, a teamster was beating one of his horses savagely with a stick, and his curses and the horse's terrified cries could be heard over the traffic noise. Finally, the horse collapsed; as it hit the pavement, a middle-aged man with a handlebar mustache came sprinting across the plaza, dropped to his knees beside

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the horse and flung his arms around its neck, weeping hysterically. His name was Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and he had just gone hopelessly insane.

At that time, Nietzsche was almost completely unknown in the worlds of European philosophy and culture. His career had a brilliant beginning — he was hired straight out of college in 1868 to teach classical philology at the University of Basel, and published his first significant work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, four years later — but he strayed thereafter into territory few academics in his time dared to touch. When he gave up his position in 1879 due to health problems, the university was glad to see him go. His major philosophical works saw print in small editions, mostly paid for by Nietzsche himself, and were roundly ignored by everybody. There were excellent reasons for this, as what Nietzsche was saying in these books was the last thing that anybody in Europe at that time wanted to hear.

Given Nietzsche's fate, there's a fierce irony in the fact that his most famous statement of the core of his teaching is put in the mouth of a madman. Here's the passage in question, from *The Gay Science* (1882):

"Have you not heard of the madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, 'I seek God! I seek God!' As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? — Thus they shouted and laughed.

"The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried: 'I will tell you. *We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from the sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continuously? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as

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through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'"[1]

Beyond the wild imagery — which was not original to Nietzsche, by the way; several earlier German writers used the same metaphor before he got to it, and it has a long history in ancient religious traditions as well — lay a precise and trenchant insight. In Nietzsche's time, the Christian religion was central to European culture in a way that's almost unthinkable from today's perspective. By this I don't simply mean that a much greater percentage of Europeans attended church then than now, though this was true; nor that Christian narratives, metaphors and jargon pervaded popular culture to such an extent that you can hardly make sense of the literature of the time if you don't know your way around the Bible and the standard tropes of Christian theology, though this was also true.

The centrality of Christian thought to European culture went much deeper than that. The core concepts that undergirded every dimension of European thought and behavior came straight out of Christianity. This was true straight across the political spectrum of the time — conservatives drew on the Christian religion to legitimize existing institutions and social hierarchies, while their liberal opponents relied just as extensively on Christian teachings for the ideas and imagery that framed their challenges to those same institutions and hierarchies. All through the lively debates of the time, values and ethical concepts that could only be justified on the basis of Christian theology were treated as self-evident, and those few thinkers who strayed outside that comfortable consensus quickly found themselves, as Nietzsche did, talking to an empty room.

It's indicative of the tenor of the times that even those thinkers who tried to reject Christianity ended up copying it right down to the fine

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details. Thus the atheist philosopher Auguste Comte, a well-known figure in the generation before Nietzsche's though almost entirely forgotten now, launched a "Religion of Humanity" with a holy trinity of Humanity, the Earth and Destiny, a calendar of secular saints' days, and scores of other borrowings from Christian theory and practice. He was one of dozens of figures who attempted to create pseudo-Christianities of one kind or another, keeping most of the moral, conceptual and behavioral trappings of the faith they were convinced they had rejected. Meanwhile their less radical neighbors went about their lives in the serene conviction that the assumptions their culture had inherited from its Christian roots were eternally valid.

The only difficulty this posed is that a large and rapidly growing fraction of nineteenth-century Europeans no longer believed the central tenets of the faith that structured their lives and their thinking. It never occurred to most of them to question the value of Christian ethics, the social role of Christian institutions, or the sense of purpose and value they and their society had long derived from Christianity. Straight across the spectrum of polite society, everyone agreed that good people ought to go to church, that missionaries should be sent forth to eradicate competing religions in foreign lands and that the world would be a much better place if everybody would simply follow the teachings of Jesus, in whatever form those might have been reworked most recently for public consumption. It was simply that a great many of them could no longer find any reason to believe in such minor details as the existence of God.

Even those who did insist loudly on this latter point and on their own adherence to Christianity commonly redefined both in ways that stripped them of their remaining relevance to the nineteenth-century world. Immanuel Kant, the philosopher whose writings formed the high-water mark of modern philosophy and also launched it on its descent into decadence, is among other things the poster child for this effect. In his 1793 book *Religion Within The Limits of Reason Alone,* Kant argued that the essence of religion — in fact, the only part of it

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that had real value — was leading a virtuous life, and everything else was superstition and delusion.

The triumph of Kant's redefinition of religion was all but total in Protestant denominations up until the rise of fundamentalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, and left lasting traces on the leftward end of Catholicism as well. To this day, if you pick an American church at random on a Sunday morning and go inside to listen to the sermon, your chances of hearing an exhortation to live a virtuous life, without reference to any other dimension of religion, are rather better than one in two.

The fact remains that Kant's reinterpretation has almost nothing in common with historic Christianity. To borrow a phrase from a later era of crisis, Kant apparently felt that he had to destroy Christianity in order to save it, but the destruction was considerably more effective than the salvation turned out to be. Intellects considerably less acute than Kant's had no difficulty at all in taking his arguments and using them to suggest that living a virtuous life was not the essence of religion but a modern, progressive, up-to-date replacement for it.

Even so, public professions of Christian faith remained a social necessity right up into the twentieth century. There were straightforward reasons for this; even so convinced an atheist as Voltaire, when guests at one of his dinner parties spoke too freely about the nonexistence of God, is said to have sent the servants away and then urged his friends not to speak so freely in front of them, asking, "Do you want your throats cut tonight?" Still, historians of ideas have followed the spread of atheism through the European intelligentsia from the end of the sixteenth century, when it was the concern of small and secretive circles, to the middle of the eighteenth, when it had become widespread. From there it moved out of intellectual circles, spreading through the middle classes during the eighteenth century and then, in the nineteenth — continental Europe's century of industrialization — reaching the urban working classes, who by and large abandoned their traditional faiths when they left the countryside to take factory jobs.

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By the time Nietzsche wrote God's epitaph, in other words, the central claims of Christianity were taken seriously only by a minority of educated Europeans, and even among the masses, secular substitutes for religion such as Marxism and nationalism were spreading rapidly at the expense of the older faith. Despite this, however, habits of thought and behavior that could only be justified by the basic presuppositions of Christianity stayed welded in place throughout European society. It was as though, to coin a metaphor that Nietzsche himself might have used, one of the great royal courts of the time busied itself with all the details of the king's banquets and clothes and bedchamber, and servants and courtiers hovered about the throne waiting to obey the king's least command, even though everyone in the palace knew that the throne was empty and the last king had died decades before.

To Nietzsche, this clinging to the habits of Christian thought in a post-Christian society was incomprehensible. The son and grandson of Lutheran pastors, raised in an atmosphere of more than typical middle-class European piety, he inherited a keen sense of the internal logic of the Christian faith — the way that every aspect of Christian theology and morality unfolds step by step from core principles clearly defined in the historic creeds of the early church. It's not an accident that the creed most broadly accepted in Western churches, the Apostle's Creed, begins with the words "I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." Abandon that belief, and none of the ideas that depend on it make any sense at all.

This was what Nietzsche's madman, and Nietzsche himself, were trying to bring to the attention of their contemporaries. Unlike too many of today's atheists, Nietzsche had a profound understanding of just what it was that he was rejecting when he proclaimed the death of God and the absurdity of faith. "When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the right to Christian morality," he wrote in *Twilight of the Idols*. "Christianity is a system, a consistently

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thought out and complete view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands."[2]

To abandon belief in a divinely ordained order to the cosmos, he argued, meant surrendering any claim to objectively valid moral standards, and thus stripping words like "right" and "wrong" of any meaning other than personal preference. It meant giving up the basis on which governments and institutions founded their claims to legitimacy, and thus leaving them no means to maintain social order or gain the obedience of the masses other than the raw threat of violence — a threat that would have to be made good ever more often, as time went on, to maintain its effectiveness. Ultimately, it meant abandoning any claim of meaning, purpose, or value to humanity or the world, other than those that individual human beings might choose to impose on the inkblot patterns of a chaotic universe.

I suspect that many, if not most, of my readers will object to these conclusions. There are, of course, many grounds on which such objections could be raised. It can be pointed out, and truly, that there have been plenty of atheists whose behavior, on ethical grounds, compares favorably to that of the average Christian, and some who can stand comparison with Christian saints. On a less superficial plane, it can be pointed out with equal truth that it's only in a distinctive minority of ethical systems — that of historic Christianity among them — that ethics start from the words "thou shalt" and proceed from there to the language of moral exhortation and denunciation that still structures most of Western moral discourse today. Political systems, it might be argued, can work out new bases for their claims to legitimacy, using such concepts as the consent of the governed, while claims of meaning, purpose and value can be rebuilt on a variety of bases that have nothing to do with an objective cosmic order imposed on it by a putative creator.

All this is true, and the history of ideas in the Western world over the last few centuries can in fact be neatly summed up as the struggle to build alternative foundations for social, ethical and intellectual

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existence in the void left behind by Europe's gradual but unrelenting abandonment of Christian faith. Yet this simply makes Nietzsche's point for him, for all these alternative foundations had to be built, slowly, with a great deal of trial and error and no small number of disastrous missteps. It has taken centuries of hard work by some of our species' best minds to get even this far in the project of replacing the Christian God, and it's by no means certain even now that their efforts have achieved any lasting success.

A strong case can therefore be made that Nietzsche got the right answer, but was asking the wrong question. He grasped that the collapse of Christian faith in European society meant the end of the entire structure of meanings and values that had God as its first postulate, but he thought that the only possible aftermath of that collapse was a collective plunge into the heart of chaos, in which humanity would be forced to come to terms with the nonexistence of objective values, and would finally take responsibility for their own role in projecting values on a fundamentally meaningless cosmos; the question that consumed him was how this could be done. A great many other people in his time saw the same possibility, but rejected it on the grounds that such a cosmos was unfit for human habitation. Their question, the question that has shaped the intellectual and cultural life of the Western world for several centuries now, was how to find some other first postulate as a basis for meaning and value in the absence of faith in the existence and providence of the Christian God.

They found one, too — though one could as well say that one was pressed upon them by the sheer force of circumstance. The surrogate God that Western civilization embraced, tentatively in the nineteenth century and with increasing conviction and passion in the twentieth, was progress. In the wake of that collective decision, the omnipotence and benevolence of progress have become the core doctrines of a secular religion as broadly and unthinkingly embraced, and as central to contemporary notions of meaning and value, as Christianity was before the Age of Reason.

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That in itself defines one of the central themes of the predicament of our time. Progress makes a poor substitute for a deity, not least because its supposed omnipotence and benevolence are becoming increasingly hard to take on faith just now. There's every reason to think that in the years immediately before us, that difficulty is going to become impossible to ignore — and the same shattering crisis of meaning and value that religious faith in progress was meant to solve will be back, adding its burden to the other pressures of our time. Listen closely, Nietzsche might have said, and you can hear the noise of the gravediggers who are burying progress.

To describe faith in progress as a religion, though, courts a good many misunderstandings. The most basic of those comes out of the way that the word "religion" itself has been tossed around like a football in any number of modern society's rhetorical scrimmages. Thus it's going to be necessary to begin by taking a closer look at the usage of that much-vexed term.

The great obstacle that has to be overcome in order to make sense of religion is that so many people these days insist that religion is a specific thing with a specific definition. It's all too common for the definition in question to be crafted to privilege the definer's own beliefs and deliver a slap across the face of rivals. This is as true of religious people who want to define religion as something they have and other people don't as it is of atheists who want to insist that the ideology in which they put their trust doesn't constitute a religion no matter how closely it resembles one. Still, there's a deeper issue involved here as well.

The word "religion" is a label for a category. That may seem like an excessively obvious statement, but it has implications that get missed surprisingly often. Categories are not, by and large, things that exist out there in the world. They're abstractions — linguistically, culturally and contextually specific abstractions — that human minds create and use to sort out the confusion and diversity of experience into some

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kind of meaningful order. To define a category is simply to draw a mental line around certain things as a way of stressing their similarities with one another and their differences from other things. To make the same point in a slightly different way, categories are tools, and a tool, as a tool, can't be true or false. It can only be more or less useful for a given job, and slight variations in a given tool can be useful to help it do that job more effectively.

A lack of attention to this detail has caused any number of squabbles, with consequences ranging from the absurd to the profound. Thus, for example, when the International Astronomical Union announced a few years back that Pluto had been reclassified from a planet to a dwarf planet, some of the protests that were splashed across the Internet made it sound as though astronomers had aimed a death ray at the solar system's former ninth planet and blasted it out of the heavens.[3] Now of course they did nothing of the kind; they were simply following a precedent set back in the 1850s, when the asteroid Ceres, originally classified as a planet on its discovery in 1801, was stripped of that title after other objects like it were spotted.

Pluto, as it turned out, was simply the first object in the Kuiper Belt to be sighted and named, just as Ceres was the first object in the asteroid belt to be sighted and named. The later discoveries of Eris, Haumea, Sedna and other Pluto-like objects out in the snowball-rich suburbs of the solar system convinced the IAU that assigning Pluto to a different category made more sense than keeping it in its former place on the roster of planets. The change in category didn't affect Pluto at all; it simply provided a slightly more useful way of sorting out the diverse family of objects circling the Sun.

A similar shift, though in the other direction, took place in the sociology of religions in 1967 with the publication of Robert Bellah's essay "Civil Religion in America."[4] Before that time, most definitions of religion had presupposed that a belief system could be given the label "religion" only if it involved belief in at least one deity. Challenging this notion, Bellah pointed out the existence of a class of widely accepted

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belief systems that had all the hallmarks of religion except such a belief. Borrowing a turn of phrase from Rousseau, he called these "civil religions," and the example central to his paper was the system of beliefs that had grown up around the ideas and institutions of American political life.

The civil religion of Americanism, Bellah showed, could be compared point for point with the popular theistic religions in American life, and the comparison made sense of features no previous analysis quite managed to interpret convincingly. Americanism had its own sacred scriptures, such as the Declaration of Independence; its own saints and martyrs, such as Abraham Lincoln; its own formal rites — the Pledge of Allegiance, for example, fills exactly the same role in Americanism that the Lord's Prayer does in most forms of Christianity — and so on straight down the list of religious habits and institutions. Furthermore, and crucially, the core beliefs of Americanism were seen by most Americans as self-evidently good and true, and as standards by which other claims of goodness and truth could and should be measured: in a word, as sacred.

Americanism was the focus of Bellah's essay, but it was and is far from the only example of the species he anatomized. When the essay first saw print, for example, a classic example of the type was in full flower on the other side of the Cold War's heavily guarded frontiers. During the period between the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* and the implosion of the Soviet Union, Communism was one of the modern world's most successful civil religions, an aggressive missionary faith preaching an apocalyptic creed of secular salvation. It shared a galaxy of standard features with other contemporary Western religions, from sacred scriptures and intricate doctrinal debates all the way down to street-corner evangelists spreading the gospel among the downtrodden.

Even its vaunted atheism, the one obvious barrier setting it apart from its more conventionally religious rivals, was simply an extension of a principle central to the Abrahamic religions, though by no

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means common outside that harsh desert-born tradition. The unyielding words of the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," were as central to Communism as they are to Judaism, Christianity and Islam; the sole difference in practice was that, since Communist civil religion directed its reverence toward a hypothetical set of abstract historical processes rather than a personal deity, its version of the commandment required the faithful to have no gods at all.

Not all civil religions take so hard a line toward their theist rivals. Americanism is an example of the other common strategy, which can be described with fair accuracy as cooptation: the recruitment of the deity or deities of the locally popular theist religion as part of the publicity team for the civil religion in question. The rhetoric of the Christian right in today's America offers a fine example of the type, blurring the boundaries between patriotism and religious faith in a remarkable bricolage of secular and religious images and themes. Such habits of thought are far from unique to American culture. In the heyday of nationalism, few Western nations failed to find some excuse to claim God as an honorary citizen who, like any other member of the national community, could be drafted into service in the event of war or crisis.

Other examples of civil religion would be easy enough to cite, but the two I've just named are good examples of the type and will be wholly adequate to illustrate the points I want to make here. First, it takes only the briefest glance at history to realize that civil religions can call forth passions and loyalties every bit as powerful as those evoked by theist religions. Plenty of American patriots and committed Communists alike have laid down their lives for the sake of the civil religions in which they put their faith. Both civil religions have inspired art, architecture, music and poetry along the whole spectrum from greatness to utter kitsch; both provided the motive force that drove immense social and cultural changes for good or ill; both are

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comparable in their impact on the world in modern times with even the most popular theist religions.

Second, the relations between civil religions and theist religions tend to be just as problematic as the relations between one theist religion and another. The sort of bland tolerance with which most of today's democracies regard religion is the least intrusive option, and even so it often demands compromises that many theist religions find difficult to accept. From there, the spectrum extends through more or less blatant efforts to coopt theist religions into the service of the civil religion, all the way to accusations of disloyalty and the most violent forms of persecution.

The long history of troubled relations between theist religions and officially nonreligious political creeds is among other things a useful confirmation of Bellah's thesis. It's precisely because civil religions and theist religions appeal to so many of the same social and individual needs and call forth so many of the same passions and loyalties that they so often come into conflict with one another. Believers in theist religions often condemn the more intolerant civil religions as idolatrous, and believers in the more intolerant civil religions condemn theist religions as superstitious: in both cases, what's behind these condemnations is a tacit recognition of the common ground to which both kinds of religion lay claim.

Third, civil religions share with theist religions a curious and insufficiently studied phenomenon that might best be called the antireligion. An antireligion is a movement within a religious community that claims to oppose that community's faith, in a distinctive way: it embraces essentially all of its parent religion's beliefs, but inverts the values, embracing as good what the parent religion defines as evil, and rejecting as evil what the parent religion defines as good.

The classic example of the type is Satanism, the antireligion of Christianity. In its traditional forms — conservative Christians among my readers may be interested to know that Satanism also suffers from modernist heresies — Satanism accepts essentially all of the

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presuppositions of Christianity, but says with Milton's Satan, "Evil, be thou my good." Thus you'll have to look long and hard among even the most devout Catholics to find anyone more convinced of the spiritual power of the Catholic Mass than an old-fashioned Satanist. It's from that conviction that the Black Mass, the parody of the Catholic rite that provides traditional Satanism with its central ceremony, gains whatever power it has.

Antireligions are at least as common among civil religions as they are among theist faiths. The civil religion of Americanism, for example, has as its antireligion the devout and richly detailed claim, common among American radicals of all stripes, that the United States is uniquely evil among the world's nations. This creed, or anticreed, simply inverts the standard notions of American exceptionalism without changing them in any other way. In the same way, Communism has its antireligion, which was founded by the Russian expatriate Ayn Rand and has become the central faith of much of America's current pseudoconservative movement.

Pseudoconservatism? Well, yes; the historic tradition of Anglo-American conservatism, with its deep-dyed suspicion of abstract intellectual schemes for a perfect society, has been abandoned by the utopian true believers in the free market who claim the conservative mantle in America today. In the same sense, there's nothing actually conservative about Rand's Objectivism; it's simply what you get when you accept the presuppositions of Marxism — atheism, materialism, class warfare and the rest of it — but say "Evil, be thou my good" to all its value judgments. If you've ever wondered why so many American pseudoconservatives sound as though they're trying to imitate the cackling capitalist villains of traditional Communist demonology, now you know.

Emotional power, difficult relations with other faiths and the presence of an antireligion: these are far from the only features civil religions have in common with the theist competition. Still, just as it makes sense to talk of civil religions and theist religions as two subcategories

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within the broader category of religion as a whole, it's worthwhile to point out at least one crucial difference between civil and theist religions, which is that civil religions tend to be brittle. They are far more vulnerable than theist faiths to sudden, catastrophic loss of faith on the grand scale.

The collapse of Communism in the late twentieth century is a classic example. By the 1980s, despite heroic efforts at deception and self-deception, nobody anywhere could pretend any longer that the Communist regimes spread across the globe had anything in common with the worker's paradise of Communist myth, or were likely to do so on anything less than geological time scales. The grand prophetic vision central to the Communist faith — the worldwide spread of proletarian revolution, driven by the unstoppable force of the historical dialectic; the dictatorship of the proletariat that would follow, in nation after nation, bringing the blessings of socialism to the wretched of the earth; sooner or later thereafter, the withering away of the state and the coming of true communism — all turned, in the space of a single generation, from the devout hope of countless millions to a subject for bitter jokes among the children of those same millions. The implosion of the Soviet empire and its inner circle of client states, and the rapid abandonment of Communism elsewhere, followed in short order.

The Communist civil religion was vulnerable to so dramatic a collapse because its kingdom was entirely of this world. Theist religions that teach the doctrines of divine providence and the immortality of the soul can always appeal to another world for the fulfillment of hopes disappointed in this one, but a civil religion such as Communism cannot. As the Soviet system stumbled toward its final collapse, faithful believers in the Communist gospel could not console themselves with the hope that they would be welcomed into the worker's paradise after they died, or even pray that the angels of dialectical materialism might smite the local commissar for his sins. There was no refuge from the realization that their hopes had been betrayed and the promises central to their faith would not be kept.

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This sort of sudden collapse happens tolerably often to civil religions and explains some of the more dramatic shifts in religious history. The implosion of Roman paganism in the late Empire, for example, had a good many factors driving it, but one of the most important was the way that the worship of the old Roman gods had been coopted by the civil religion of the Roman state. By the time the Roman Empire reached its zenith, Jove and the other gods of the old Roman pantheon had been turned into political functionaries, filling much the same role as Jesus in the rhetoric of today's Tea Party activists. The old concept of the *pax deorum* — the maintenance of peace and good relations between the Roman people and their gods — had been drafted into the service of the Pax Romana, and generations of Roman panegyrists insisted that Rome's piety guaranteed her the perpetual rulership of the world.

When the empire started to come unglued, therefore, and those panegyrics stopped being polite exaggerations and turned into bad jokes, Roman civil religion came unglued with it and dragged down Roman paganism in its turn. The collapse of belief in the old gods was nothing like as sudden or as total as the collapse of faith in Communism — all along, there were those who found spiritual sustenance in the traditional faith, and many of them clung to it until violent Christian persecution intervened — but the failure of the promises Roman civil religion had loaded onto the old gods, at the very least, made things much easier for Christian evangelists.

It's entirely possible that some similar fate awaits the civil religion of Americanism. That faith has already shifted in ways that suggest the imminence of serious trouble. Not that many years ago, all things considered, the great majority of Americans were simply and unselfconsciously convinced that the American way was the best way, that America would inevitably overcome whatever troubles its enemies and the vagaries of nature threw at it, and that the world's best hope lay in the possibility that people in other lands would finally get around to noticing how much better things were over here and be inspired

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to imitate us. It's easy to make fun of such opinions, especially in the light of what happened in the decades that followed, but it's one of the peculiarities of religious belief — any religious belief, civil, theist, or otherwise — that it always looks at least faintly absurd to those who don't hold it.

Still, the point I want to make is more specific. You won't find many Americans holding such beliefs nowadays, and those who still make such claims in public generally do it in the sort of angry and defensive tones that suggest that they're repeating a creed in which neither they nor their listeners quite believe any longer. American patriotism, like Roman patriotism during the last years of the Empire, increasingly focuses on the past: it's not America as it is today that inspires religious devotion, but the hovering ghost of an earlier era, taking on more and more of the colors of utopia as it fades from sight. Meanwhile politicians mouth the old slogans and go their merry ways. I wonder how many of them have stopped to think about the consequences if the last of the faith that once gave those slogans their meaning finally goes away for good.

Such things happen to civil religions far more often than they happen to theist faiths. I encourage my readers to keep that in mind as we turn to another civil religion, which has played even a larger role in the making of modern history than the two just discussed. That faith is, of course, the religion of progress.

To suggest that faith in progress has become the most widely accepted civil religion of the modern industrial world is to say something at once subtler and more specific than a first glance might suggest. It's important to keep in mind, as noted above, that "religion" isn't a specific thing with a specific definition; rather, it's a label for a category constructed by human minds — an abstraction, in other words, meant to help sort out the blooming, buzzing confusion of the cosmos into patterns that make some kind of sense to us.

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To say that Americanism, Communism and faith in progress are religions, after all, is simply a way of focusing attention on similarities that these three things share with the other things we put in the same category. It doesn't deny that there are also differences, just as there are differences between one theist religion and another, or one civil religion and another. Yet the similarities are worth discussing: like theist religions, for example, the civil religions I've named each embody a set of emotionally appealing narratives that claim to reveal enduring meaning in the chaos of everyday existence, assign believers a privileged status vis-a-vis the rest of humanity, and teach the faithful to see themselves as participants in the grand process by which transcendent values become manifest in the world.

Just as devout Christians are taught to see themselves as members of the mystical Body of Christ and participants in their faith's core narrative of fall and redemption, the civil religion of Americanism teaches its faithful believers to see their citizenship as a quasi-mystical participation in a richly mythologized national history that portrays America as the incarnation of freedom in a benighted world. It's of a piece with the religious nature of Americanism that the word "freedom" here doesn't refer in practice to any particular constellation of human rights; instead, it's a cluster of vague but luminous images that, to the believer, are charged with immense emotional power. When people say they believe in America, they don't usually mean they've intellectually accepted a set of propositions about the United States. They mean that they have embraced the sacred symbols and narratives of the national faith.

The case of Communism is at least as susceptible to such an analysis, and in some ways even more revealing. Most of the ideas that became central to the civil religion of Communism were the work of Friedrich Engels, Marx's friend and patron, who took over the task of completing the second and third volumes of *Das Kapital* on Marx's death. It's from Engels that we get the grand historical myth of the Communist movement, and every part of that myth has a precise equivalent in the Lutheran faith in which Engels was raised.

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The parallels are almost embarrassingly straightforward. Primitive communism is Eden; the invention of private property is the Fall; the stages of society thereafter are the different dispensations of sacred history; Marx is Jesus, the First International his apostles and disciples, the international Communist movement the Church, proletarian revolution the Second Coming, socialism the Millennium, and communism the New Jerusalem which descends from heaven in the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation. The devout Communist, in turn, participates in that sweeping vision of past, present and future in exactly the same way that the devout Christian participates in the sacred history of Christianity.

To be a Communist of the old school is not simply to accept a certain set of economic theories or predictions about the future development of industrial society. It's to enlist on the winning side in the struggle that will bring about the fulfillment of human history, and to belong to a secular church with its own saints, martyrs, holy days and passionate theological disputes. It was thus well placed to appeal to European working classes which, during the heyday of Communism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were rarely more than a generation removed from the richly structured religious life of rural Europe. In precisely the same way, Americanism appealed to people raised within the framework of traditional American Christianity, with its focus on personal commitment and renewal and its tendency to focus on the purportedly timeless rather than on a particular sequence of sacred history.

If this suggests a certain dependence of civil religions on some older theist religion, it should. So far, I've talked mostly about the category "religion" and the ways in which assigning civil religions to that category casts light on some of their otherwise perplexing aspects. Still, the modifier "civil" deserves as much attention as the noun "religion." If civil religions can be understood a little better if they're included in the broad category of religions in general, as I've suggested here, they also have certain distinctive features of their own, and one of them — the

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most important for our present purposes — is that they're derivative; it would not be going too far to call them parasitic.

The derivative nature of civil religions reaches out in two directions. First, where theist religions in literate urban societies generally have an institutional infrastructure set apart for their use — places of worship, places of instruction, organizations of religious professionals and so on — civil religions generally don't, and make use of existing infrastructure in a distinctly ad hoc fashion. In the civil religion of Americanism, for instance, there are sacred shrines to which believers make pilgrimages. Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where the Continental army under George Washington spent the decisive winter of the Revolutionary War, is a good example.

Among believers in Americanism, the phrase "Valley Forge" is one to conjure with. While pilgrimage sites of theist religions are normally under the management of religious organizations, though, and are set apart for specifically religious uses, Valley Forge is an ordinary national park. Those who go there to steep themselves in the memory of the Revolution can count on rubbing elbows with birdwatchers, cyclists, families on camping vacations and plenty of other people for whom Valley Forge is simply one of the largest public parks in southeastern Pennsylvania. There's a local convention and visitors bureau with a lavish website that was at one point headlined, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Fun,"[5] which may suggest the degree of reverence surrounding the site these days.

In the same way, it's hard to speak of the priesthood of a civil religion in other than metaphorical terms, since those who take an active role in promoting a civil religion are rarely able to make that a full-time job. A great many civil religions, in fact, are folk religions, sustained by the voluntary efforts of ordinary believers. The existing political system may encourage these efforts, or it may make every effort to stamp the civil religion out of existence, but the fate of civil religions is rarely dependent on the actions of governments. Communism again is a case in point; as a civil religion, it came under heavy persecution in those

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countries that did not have Communist governments and received ample state support in those countries that did. Just as the persecutions usually failed to lessen the appeal of Communism to those who had not seen it in action, the state support ultimately failed to maintain its appeal to those who had.

The dependence of civil religions on infrastructure borrowed from nonreligious sources, in turn, is paralleled by an equivalent dependence on ideas borrowed from older theist religions. I've already discussed the way that the civil religion of Americanism derives its basic outlook from what used to be the mainstream of American Protestant Christianity, and the point-for-point equivalences between the theory of the Communist civil religion and the older sacred history of European Christianity. The same thing can be traced in other examples of civil religion — to return to an example already cited, the way that the civil religion of the late Roman world derived its theory and practice across the board from older traditions of classical Paganism. There's a reason for this dependence, and it brings us back to Nietzsche, kneeling in the street with his arms around the neck of a half-dead horse.

Civil religions emerge when traditional theist religions implode. In nineteenth-century Europe and America, the collapse of traditional social patterns and the lasting impact of the Enlightenment cult of reason made uncritical acceptance of the teachings of the historic Christian creeds increasingly difficult, both for educated people and for the masses of newly urbanized factory workers and their families. Nietzsche, whose upbringing in rapidly industrializing Germany gave him a ringside seat for that process, saw the ongoing failure of the Western world's faith in Christian revelation as the dawn of an age of tremendous crisis: the death of God, to use his trenchant phrase, would inevitably be followed by cataclysmic struggles to determine who or what would take his place.

In these impending conflicts, Nietzsche himself was anything but a disinterested bystander. He had his own preferred candidate, the

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Overman: a human being of a kind that had never before existed, and could never have existed except by very occasional accident as long as religious belief provided an unquestioned basis for human values. The Overman was not a successor species to today's humanity, as some of Nietzsche's less thoughtful interpreters have suggested, nor some biologically superior subset of human beings, as Nietzsche's tenth-rate plagiarists in the Nazi Party liked to pretend. As Nietzsche envisioned him, the Overman was an individual human being — always and irreducibly individual — who has become his own creator in a perpetual process of self-overcoming, remaking himself moment by moment in the image of values that he himself has created.

Nietzsche was perceptive enough, though, to take note of the other contenders for God's empty throne and sympathetic enough to recognize the importance and value of theist religion for those who could still find a way to believe in it. In the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the first person that Nietzsche's alter ego Zarathustra meets as he descends from the mountains is an old hermit who spends his days praising God. Zarathustra goes his way, being careful to do nothing to challenge the hermit's faith, and only when he is alone again does he reflect: "Could it be possible? This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that God is dead!"[6]

For the Overman's rivals in the struggle to replace God, Nietzsche had less patience. One alternative that he discussed at great length and greater heat was German nationalism, the local variant of the same civil religion that became Americanism on this side of the ocean. The state was to him a "cold monster" that claimed the right to replace the Christian deity as the source of values and the object of public worship; he hated it partly because of its real flaws, and partly because it stood in the way of his preferred candidate. "There, where the state *ceases* — look there, my brothers. Do you not see it — the rainbow and the bridges to the Overman?"[7]

Socialism was another alternative Nietzsche noted; here again, his assault on it was partly a harsh but by no means inaccurate analysis of

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its failings, and partly a matter of brushing another contender aside to make way for the Overman. Still, another rival attracted more of his attention, and it was the ersatz deity with which this book is principally concerned. The core challenge that Nietzsche leveled against belief in progress will be discussed later on, as it needs to be understood in the context of the most difficult dimension of his philosophy. That in turn needs to be put into its own much broader context, which will require more than a little explanation of its own. Still, the point that's relevant here is that Nietzsche's identification of faith in progress as an attempted replacement for faith in God is at least as valid now as it was in his own day.

Compare the civil religion of progress to the others just discussed and the parallels are hard to miss. Like other civil religions, to begin with, the religion of progress has repeatedly proven its ability to call forth passions and motivate sacrifices as great as those mobilized by theist religions. From the researchers who have risked their lives, and not infrequently lost them, to further the progress of science and technology, to the moral crusaders who have done the same thing in the name of political or economic progress, straight on through to the ordinary people who have willingly given up things they valued because they felt, or had been encouraged to believe, that the cause of progress demanded that sacrifice from them, the religion of progress has no shortage of saints and martyrs. It has inspired its share of art, architecture, music and literature, covering the usual scale from the heights of creative genius to the depths of kitsch; it has driven immense social changes and made a mark on the modern world at least as substantial as contemporary theist religions have done.

The relationships between the civil religion of progress and theist religions have been as challenging as those involving the civil religions we've already examined. The religion of progress has its own sects and denominations, and it bears noting that these have responded differently to the various theist faiths of the modern world. On the one hand, there have been plenty of efforts, more or less successful, to coopt Jesus, the Jewish prophets and an assortment of other religious figures

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as crusaders for progress of one kind or another. On the other hand, there have been any number of holy wars declared against theist faiths by true believers in progress, who hold that belief in gods is "primitive," "backward" and "outdated" — in the jargon of the religion of progress, these and terms like them mean roughly what "sinful" means in the jargon of Christianity.

The civil religion of progress also has its antireligion, which is the faith in apocalypse: the belief that the modern industrial world and all its works will shortly be annihilated for its sins. Like the antireligions of other faiths, the apocalyptic antireligion embraces the core presuppositions of the faith it opposes — in this case, above all else, the vision of history as a straight line leading inexorably toward a goal that can only be defined in superlatives — but inverts all the value signs. Where the religion of progress likes to imagine the past as an abyss of squalor and misery, its antireligion paints some suitably ancient time in the colors of the Golden Age; where the religion of progress seeks to portray history as an uneven but unstoppable progress toward better things, its antireligion prefers to envision history as an equally uneven but equally unstoppable process of degeneration and decay; where the religion of progress loves to picture the future in the most utopian terms available, its antireligion uses the future as a screen on which to project lurid images of universal destruction.

The diverse sects and denominations of the religion of progress, furthermore, have their exact equivalent in the antireligion of apocalypse. There are forms of the apocalyptic antireligion that have coopted the language and imagery of older, theist faiths, and other forms that angrily reject those same faiths and everything related to them. Just as different versions of the religion of progress squabble over what counts as progress, different versions of the antireligion of apocalypse bicker over which kinds of degeneration matter most and what form the inevitable cataclysm is going to take.

In either case, as with other religions and their antireligions, the level of hostility between different subsets of the same religion or

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antireligion quite often exceeds the level that any branch of the religion directs at its antireligion, or vice versa. The one great divergence between most forms of the religion of progress and most forms of its antireligion is that nowadays — matters have been different at other points in history — very few believers in progress expect the utopian future central to their faith to show up any time soon. Most contemporary believers in the antireligion of apocalypse, by contrast, place all their hopes on the imminence of the end.

The civil religion of progress, finally, shares the pattern of twofold dependence with the other civil religions we've examined. Like them, it is largely a folk religion, supported by the voluntary efforts and contributions of its faithful believers, by way of an ad hoc network of institutions that were mostly created to serve other ends. Those who function as its priests and preachers have day jobs — even so important a figure as the late Carl Sagan, who came as close as anyone in recent times to filling the role of pope of the religion of progress, spent most of his career as a tenured professor of astronomy at Cornell University, and his putative successor Neil DeGrasse Tyson has a comparable day job as director of a planetarium. Like most folk religions, the religion of progress receives support from a variety of institutions that find it useful, but routinely behaves in ways that embarrass at least some of its sponsors.

The other side of its dependence — its reliance on a set of ideas borrowed from theist religion — is a more complicated matter. In order to make sense of it, it's going to be necessary to look into the way human beings in modern industrial societies, and in other societies as well, think about time. That's a far from simple matter. In today's industrial world, in particular, the way there leads through highly controversial territory, because a refusal to deal with the implications of time is all but hardwired into contemporary popular culture.

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