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# **HISTORY OF FANATICISM: FROM ENLIGHTENMENT TO JIHAD**

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# HISTORY OF FANATICISM: From Enlightenment to Jihad

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## Introduction

The former head of the French intelligence services, Alexandre de Marenches, tells in his memoirs that when he first met the American president Ronald Reagan the latter asked him what he thought about the ayatollahs in Iran. The French intelligence chief then told the president the story about the siege of the French town of Béziers in the thirteenth century:

”Before the battle began, the representative of the pope said a mass for the troops and offered them benediction”, I said. “And he concluded with this phrase: ‘Soldiers, kill them all, God will recognize his own.’ (...) So they butchered by hand, one by one, every inhabitant of the town of Béziers. The pregnant women they cut open so that none of the heretics could survive. It was like killing twenty thousand sheep. Mr. President, God must have had a difficult time recognizing his own.”

President Reagan understood the point of the story – that for many of our new enemies – as fanatically religious serving as soldiers of Allah as were the troops at Béziers serving the will of the pope – human life has simply a different meaning than it does for us.<sup>1</sup>

This story shows by way of introduction that fanaticism is not unknown in the West. However, it may create the false impression that it is a thing of the past, of the Middle Ages, at least in the West.

Today, I would like to present you my research in progress regarding the history of fanaticism. Actually, it is a kind of genealogy which starts with the

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<sup>1</sup> De Marenches/Andelman, *War*, p. 244.

Bible book of Revelation and those who interpreted it as a guide for violent action in order to speed up the salutary work of God and it ends up in the present time with some preliminary questions about the state of apocalyptic thinking in the Islamic world.

My presentation will consist mainly of 4 parts:

1. the apocalyptic idea in Christianity
2. the impact of Enlightenment on fanatic apocalyptic ideas
3. the Russian terrorists of the 19th century as a key example of apocalyptic ideas midway between religion and ideology
4. present-day Islamist fanaticism and the question whether it is apocalyptic.

There are several points that I will try to make by way of my research:

- a. The current Islamist fanaticism has its roots both in its own Islamic tradition and a centuries-long western tradition; it is influenced by the Enlightenment;
- b. The current Islamist fanaticism serves needs that the West has been familiar with over the centuries and addresses at a certain level of abstraction the same values that the West calls essential;
- c. In the present globalized world, it is no longer possible to discuss the development of apocalyptic fanaticism as a singular strand or genealogy. There is too much interaction between different currents and what we see today looks more like a pandemic than the end of a line of genealogy.

Let me first explain how I define fanaticism: it is an effort to contribute to the fulfillment of the expectation of a better world, a utopia if you like, by way of violence. This can be part of an apocalyptic vision, the expectation that the end of time is near and that after some time of Tribulation, a separation will be made between good and evil and its human proponents. As such it is a collective process. Or it can be part of a process whereby an individual commits a deliberate violent act of murder, including suicide, believing that this act will immediately lead to his entrance into Paradise. Consequently, fanatics, in my definition, are people who try to force the hand of God or history by way of shortcut.

I want to emphasize that I do not believe that everyone who expects the fulfillment of time necessarily uses violence. I think that believers in the end of time can be divided into four categories:

1. the determinists: God or the course of history cannot be forced to deliver by people: all one can do is pray and/or hope;

2. the reformists: those who believe that by doing the good works, the end of time will gradually come closer;
3. the Utopian colonists: those who believe that they can come as close as possible to the fulfillment of time by separating themselves from the non-believers, from the ugly world and establish their own little Utopias; and finally
4. the fanatics.

So the fanatics are only a part of the believers in ideal state at the end of time and even the believers themselves may be a minority. That means that apocalyptic literature is ‘basically minority literature (...), the product of a subset of a subculture’. Therefore, it often takes the shape of resistance literature.

Furthermore, I have to explain that my research is mainly about the transmutation of the violent version of the violent apocalyptic idea through the ages and about those authors who have rewritten that story in its many manifestations. I am well aware that my research is mainly constituted as a history of ideas and that I pay little attention to more sociological questions regarding the apocalyptic movements, their charismatic leaders and their contexts. The only thing I want to maintain in this regard is that it is not always possible to relate the existence of apocalyptic movements to objective socio-economic or political crises. The crises that are at the roots of apocalypticism are just as often crises these believers themselves created because their belief system is at odds with the world around them. It is their own belief which alienates them from social reality. The apocalyptic mindset thus symbolizes religion in its most extreme form: it represents the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be. In other words, there is a situation that can be described as cognitive dissonance.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. The Apocalyptic Idea in Christianity

Although fanaticism and apocalyptic thinking can be found in almost all places of the world and in many religions, I limit my description of these phenomena in my research mainly to the Christian and Islamic world.

In the New Testament, the last Bible book of Revelation sketches scenes of a final battle that will take place in Armageddon, in the northern part of present-day Israel, preceding the Day of Judgment, which will bring Heaven to the believers who have suffered because of their faith and will bring eternal punishment for those who prosecuted them. At the same time John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, sketches the opposition between human beings not only in terms of believers and non-believers, but also between the oppressed

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. S.L. Thrupp, ‘Millennial Dreams in Action: a Report on the Conference Discussion’, idem (ed.), *Dreams*, p. 12.

and their rulers. As such, there is a subversive tendency in this final Bible book, which by the way only barely made it into the Testament.

Although apocalyptic expectations formed ‘the air that was breathed by the members of the early Christian communities’,<sup>3</sup> it was only in the fourth century that it was accepted as part of the Canonical Bible and a little later, the Church father Saint Augustine decided that the Kingdom of Heaven was indeed a kingdom that was not of this earth and that the Bible clearly stated that the end of time was only known to God. Therefore, people should stop making calculations based on certain phrases and signs in the Bible about the nearness of the Heavenly Kingdom. Nevertheless, it was an attraction that could not be stopped and surged at different moments in time.

The reason for the hesitation among Church leaders throughout the centuries to accept Revelation as part of the Bible is exactly that it appealed to those who might use the book in order to change the societal order. For a good understanding it is necessary to clarify that apocalypticists do not strive for an egalitarian society altogether as can often be found in literature. Their main motive is a thirst for justice that will lead to a reversal of positions hitherto: the first will become last and the last will become first. The fanatics’ Heavenly Kingdom will only be ‘a paradise for a sect’.<sup>4</sup> In order to reach this stage through a cosmic battle, the preparing of the ground for the ulterior powers often takes the form of nihilistically creating a kind of Ground Zero: the way in which the city of Babylon, which actually stands for Rome, is destroyed according to the book of *Revelation*. A new heaven and a new earth, a completely new order, will have to be preceded by destruction. This is what the Christian-Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton has called the ‘apocalyptic *jouissance*’, ‘a sadistic jubilation in the wrecking of the old’.<sup>5</sup> And this is what the British novelist D.H. Lawrence meant when he wrote:

The second half of the Apocalypse [i.e. Revelation] is flamboyant hate and a simple lust, lust is the only word, for the end of the world. The apocalypticist must see the universe, or the known cosmos, wiped out utterly, and merely a heavenly city and a hellish lake of brimstone left.<sup>6</sup>

‘[H]ow one hears the envy, the endless envy screeching through this song of triumph!’

Thus love and hatred go hand in hand. The violent apocalypticist follows the maxims of Che Guevara, i.e. ‘the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love’, but at the same time by a ‘relentless hatred of the enemy that impels

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<sup>3</sup> A.-J. Levine, ‘Introduction’, Levine, Allison and Crossan (eds), *The Historical Jesus*, p. 30; Zie ook Chamberlin, *Antichrist*, pp. 11-12; Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 22; Shaw, *Eve*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> John Keats, quoted in Ali, *Clash*, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Eagleton, *Terror*, pp. 111 and 113.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, p. 80; Vgl. Kirsch, *History*, p. 14.

us over and beyond the natural limitations of man and transforms us into effective violent, selective and cold killing machines'.<sup>7</sup>

As a religious striving with earthly consequences apocalyptic acting often takes the form of a combination of religion and politics. It is even possible that those apocalyptic rebels come to power. Once in power, they still are in charge of executing monomaniacally the Will of God or the absolute Truth, which means that they will have to eliminate all non-believers. Thus their rule can only be totalitarian.

This was for instance the case in 1534 and 1535 in the German city of Münster, where radical Dutch and German Anabaptists believed they would have to level the ground for the second Coming of Christ. Their rule turned into quite an ordeal for every citizen who did not share these expectations and did not manage to escape. Already in 1934, two well-known Dutch historians wrote that Jan van Geel, one of the apocalyptic leaders, 'by combining his preparedness for total sacrifice and his business-like political cunning came close to the type of the modern "professional revolutionary"'.<sup>8</sup>

Quite often there is a gnostic element in the belief of the apocalypticists. They have the idea that they have obtained certain knowledge by revelation or by having a keen eye for the signs that indicate that the end of time is near. Often they believe to be part of an elite or vanguard who is in direct touch with the Supreme Being. Consequently, they cannot accept that something stands between them and God as there should always be a direct uninterrupted link. Therefore, they are against any kind of representation, whether it is a representative political body or images. In this sense, they are often literal iconoclasts, as was the case with the radical Anabaptists in the 16th century and with many of the other violent millennial movements which presented themselves at the times of great turmoil at the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, from the Hussites in Bohemia and Savonarola in Florence to the Peasant wars of 1525 in Germany.

Until far into the 20th century, *Revelation* would continue to offer a special attraction to the oppressed of the earth. D.H. Lawrence, the son of a collier himself, remembered for instance how, in his youth around 1900, the colliers of the British northern Midlands were attracted by it:

The huge denunciation of kings and Rulers, and of the Whore that sitteth upon the waters, is entirely sympathetic to a Tuesday evening congregation of colliers and colliers' wives, on a black winter night, in the great barn-like Pentecost chapel. And the capital letters of the name: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH thrill the old colliers today as they thrilled the Scotch Puritan peasants and the more ferocious of the

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<sup>7</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Jan and Annie Romein, *De lage landen bij de zee. Een geschiedenis van het Nederlandse volk*, Amsterdam 1976<sup>6</sup> (1934), p. 179.

early Christians. (...) It is very nice if you are poor and not humble – and the poor may be obsequious, but they are almost never truly humble, in the Christian sense – to bring your grand enemies down to utter destruction and discomfiture, while you yourself rise up to grandeur. And nowhere does this happen so splendidly as in Revelation. (...) From being bottom dogs they were going to be top dogs: in Heaven. (..) It is popular religion, as distinct from thoughtful religion.<sup>9</sup>

It is especially the idea of justice and the wrath of God that attracted so many in the Christian world to this story. In the 1960s, it still inspired for instance the liberation theology in Latin America, which turned quite a number of priests into revolutionaries.

## 2. The Impact of Enlightenment on Fanatic Apocalyptic Ideas

The Enlightenment in the 18th century meant many things to many men, but a few of its characteristics stand out. It did away with traditional beliefs, and especially with the idea of a God that was not ready to be discussed. It was one of the well-defined goals of *philosophes* like Voltaire to do away with religious fanaticism, which he described as a disease which immunized its patients for rational critique. Even stronger: several of the Enlightenment *philosophes* declared the death of God. Furthermore, the Enlightenment and the ensuing French Revolution placed the values of liberty and equality at centre stage. Maybe the most succinct expression of the Enlightenment ideals can be found in the Bill of Rights of the American state of Virginia where it says: ‘...all men are by nature equally free’. The central positions of man, nature, equality and freedom are all present in these seven words.

However, it would soon turn out that, as an Arab proverb has it, when one expels God through the front door, a demon enters through the back door.<sup>10</sup> Stated in Enlightenment terms: ‘The turbulence of the encounter between God and man [was] transformed into the violence of an encounter between man and man.’<sup>11</sup>

Before the enlightenment, if man had heard an inner voice he would always have attributed that voice to God or alternatively to Satan. With the death of God, Satan disappeared as well, because his existence had always depended on that of his better counterpart. During the Enlightenment, the inner voice people still heard and which could no longer be attributed to God or Satan was now attributed to nature.

In this respect, I want to elaborate a bit on the writings of two philosophers out of the plenty of the Enlightenment times who have been seen as precursors of

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, pp. 62-63

<sup>10</sup> Berkéwicz, *Vielleicht*, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Voegelin, quoted in Bellinger, *Genealogy*, p. 128.

either communism or fascism: Rousseau and the Marquis de Sade. Some of you may be surprised that I bring up the latter as an example. He is often mainly known for his scabrous texts, but actually his writings contain a philosophical system and the sado-masochistic scenes that are intertwined with his philosophies are actually merely illustrations of his thought system.

Rousseau believed that if people listened well they could detect an inner voice that represented their authentic inner nature. If people were unhappy it was because they did not follow that voice. Rousseau thus thought that nature was inherently good. De Sade, on the other hand, believed that man had to follow the law of Nature with a capital N. The number one law of Nature was: 'eat or be eaten', 'kill or be killed'. Since man was part of Nature, de Sade actually believed that man was inherently violent, although he did not categorize his behaviour as morally wrong; it was just 'natural'. Consequently, de Sade had little sympathy with victims; they were merely the losers of the law of nature; it was their own fault, if not their fate, that they became victimized as a result of character defaults, decay or temporary flaws. Rousseau, on the other hand, felt sympathy for victims because their unhappiness was caused by a societal system that did not take nature enough into account. Because Rousseau was not certain that men would end up with the best way of living together, he introduced two ideas that had to safeguard man against his own wrongdoings. The first was the so-called social contract, a fiction that people had decided at an earlier stage that it was best to throw in their lot with all the other people. And the second was that man had to opt ultimately for reason and not for emotions. De Sade had a certain sympathy for Rousseau as a thinker, but in the end, he called him a coward because, according to de Sade, Rousseau did not follow his own reasoning to its logical end. The only way to stay in tune with the world around him would, according to de Sade, be: complete submission to the laws of nature and absolute egotism.

In spite of their egalitarian notions, both authors created a hierarchy of values, which followed from the tension, as they felt it, between liberty and equality. Rousseau attached great value to authenticity and self-expression. Artistic talents were highly valued by Rousseau and he was vehemently anti-bourgeois in his thinking. So, although every man had to follow his inner natural voice, it seemed highly unlikely that somebody would hear a voice telling him to become an exemplary bourgeois or a garbage-collector. In the value hierarchy of de Sade, the top of society was to consist of the Libertines, i.e. those people who made the best use of liberty. The latter were more equal than others and that came in handy because the ultimate freedom would be to torture and kill others and if others were inferior this could be done with a clear conscience, although de Sade, who coined the phrase 'Il n'est rien de sacré',<sup>12</sup> would have been abhorred by this term.

Both authors thus reached different conclusions from their notions of equality. Rousseau tended to think that because all people are equal no one has the right

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<sup>12</sup> Roche, 'Sun', p. 159.



to hurt another, whereas de Sade concluded that if all people are equal, it does not hurt if a few are killed, just as one does not miss a few thousand trees from a wood. As personal happiness and continued existence depend on the killing of others, it becomes even obligatory, according to de Sade, to kill ever more people. The one who stops killing or shies away from the larger numbers will eventually fall victim to the system of the Libertines. Thus, even Libertines themselves are not spared from the consequences of their own logic, 'kill or be killed'. It is therefore not very surprising that de Sade was the first author to use the word 'holocaust', which until then had only been used for devastating fires, in the meaning of mass murder.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is most clear by looking at de Sade, in the case of Rousseau it is also true that the combination of the values of liberty and equality may turn into despotism and that individuals may express themselves by killing others. This latter was the ultimate consequence that some anarchists, absurdists and surrealists took from the idea of authenticity and following one's inner voice. Was it not possible that the inner voice told somebody that he was predestined to become an authentic killer? And was it not very authentic to kill at random, leaving others with the idea that it was unimaginable what had been done? The British author Conrad in his novel *The Secret Agent*, which is one of the best artistic expressions of terrorism, is not far away from Rousseau's writings when he has one of his main characters, a terrorist professor, say:

"I am not impressed by them [i.e. other people]. Therefore they are inferior. They cannot be otherwise. Their character is built upon conventional morality. It leans on social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of conventions. They depend on life, which, in this connection, is a historical fact surrounded by all sorts of restraints and considerations, a complex, organized fact open to attack at every point; whereas I depend on death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked. My superiority is evident."<sup>14</sup>

And in Rousseau's writings, we see foreshadowed the sniper of Bunuel's film *El fantasma de libertad (The phantom of freedom)*, who climbs to the top of a skyscraper and starts shooting people in the street at random, after which he becomes famous.

Thus, although there were those in the 19th and 20th century who thought that without a God there was also no hidden plan for Salvation in history and life was in essence without meaning, others started looking for new meanings and truths, thus creating new deities.<sup>15</sup> Already in 1844, Johan Caspar Schmidt, a German teacher, published under the pseudonym of Max Stirner the book *Das Einzige und sein Eigentum*. In it, he concluded that after man had freed himself from God and religion, he had substituted them by new phantoms. Scientific laws, humanism, humanity, progress, equality, freedom, brotherhood, the state,

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<sup>13</sup> Roche, 'Sun', p. 179 n. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Conrad, *Agent*, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Van der Wall, *Godsdienst*, p. 21.

and so on. Whereas all these universal criteria had no founding in reality, they could, if invoked, lead to nasty consequences for those who believed in them. Therefore, people had to free themselves, according to Stirner, from their 'existential prisons' and make a radical choice for the individual.<sup>16</sup> Few did agree with him and finally Nietzsche refuted his idea: *individuum est ineffabile*: the individual is inexpressible, he cannot be known, not by others because they cannot penetrate the consciousness of the individual, but neither by the individual himself because his consciousness of himself is merely consciousness and can never converge with reality. Although Nietzsche seemed to close the door even on this last escape from overriding principles that could be presented as the ultimate truth that, at some time, would manifest itself in its fullness, he opened another door. Seemingly, Darwin had found another way to close the door for any plan of salvation. His idea of transmutation of the genes did away with a general plan by God ending in a place and time that was known to Him beforehand. Changes in species were by way of increment and only gradually, while species adapted to its environment. It was all very much a matter of accident and coincidence. However, if species was transmutable and man was only another species, why would man be the final link of the chain? And here, Nietzsche introduced the superman, not one that was living already among men, but one that man had in him or herself and that could be molded in the future if one succeeded in transgressing one's own limitations. Furthermore, Nietzsche came to the conclusion that every urge to gain knowledge was essentially caused by the hope of healing the essential wound of being. Therefore, he ended up applauding the irrational powers of thunder, storm, hail and waves. Only by converging with the powers of nature could man become superman. It is more sophisticated, but not that far away from what de Sade stated. Nietzsche had not expected that modern philosophers who had reached these ultimate truths would have an influence upon societies like their colleagues in ancient times. On this score, Nietzsche was wrong.

The Enlightenment gave birth to what the political philosopher Eric Voegelin in 1938 called 'political religions'. He opposed the idea that was supported by many at the time that national socialism implied a return to the Middle Ages. He emphasized that it was exactly the secularization that created the basis for movements like nazism or bolshevism. The transcendental God had been replaced by an earthly God. The individual had become part of a collective that had to work united to create the betterment of the world. Voegelin blamed Fichte, who had replaced the Christian believers by the German people; Comte, who did the same for the French, Marx for the proletariat, Gobineau for the elected race. And at the same time, they had, according to Voegelin, created their own satans: the bourgeoisie, the Jewish race and so on.

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<sup>16</sup> Safranski, *Nietzsche*, p. 120.

### 3. The Russian Terrorists of the 19th Century

Midway between the pre-Enlightenment religious fanatics and their 20th century ideological counterparts, we find the 19th century Russian revolutionaries. When the intellectual founder of the Counter-Enlightenment, Joseph de Maistre, in 1804 was stationed as a diplomatic representative for Savoy in Saint Petersburg he had the hope that he could finally live among people who had not been touched by *philosophes*. His hope turned out to be false. He found a French-speaking elite who were full of admiration for the *philosophes*.<sup>17</sup> The same was true for revolutionaries and terrorists. Nicolay Ogarev, one of the cronies of the anarchist Michael Bakunin, wrote at the age of 27: 'My heart is filled with love for the masses and with the wrath of Robespierre. I yearn to set up the guillotine as an instrument of justice.'<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the ideas of the Russian revolutionaries of the 19th century were both a transformation and a deformation of traditional Russian messianistic ideas.<sup>19</sup>

These Russian terrorists have often been depicted as gentleman-terrorists who would not throw their bombs when children were around. However, although some may argue that they were hesitant in their practice, their contribution to nihilistic and destructive theories was impressive and finally it all ended in a totalitarian communist system. Already in the early 1860's, one of the revolutionaries, Peter Tkachev, had stated that once the revolution would have succeeded every Russian above the age of 25 had to be executed in order to counter any backlash.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the problems that nowadays afflict the Islamic world presented themselves in 19th century Russia. In the mid-nineteenth century, an autocratic regime tried to introduce some reforms, but it ultimately shied away for the possible results. Due to better educational opportunities, there was something like an intellectual proletariat, young people who went to university, but were uncertain about their possibilities on the labour market. Among some of those intellectuals, there was the idea that their country was caught between humiliation and the need for modernization. They tried to come up with plans for a modernization that would present a kind of third way between tradition and modernity, i.e. agrarian socialism, introduced by using western sciences in favour of the Russian agrarian economy. Because of the lethargy of the countryside and the inertia of any development in Russia of that time, they could eventually see no other way of realizing their visions than by way of terroristic activities, whereby they would be the vanguard of a larger political movement. They looked upon such violent acts as a form of both self-sacrifice and self-realization or self-expression. Their vision of a sudden revolt created by individual terrorist acts was heavily influenced by the literary idea of the

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<sup>17</sup> Gray, *Mis*, p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> Ulam, *Name*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Gray, *Mis*, p. 66

<sup>20</sup> Ulam, *Name*, p. 177.

extraordinary man, which in turn was influenced by both traditional folktales and religious hagiographies. And at the same time, this extraordinary man was a kind of sadist libertine, using his relatively free position in society to do the things that one better not talk about, but clearly is intended to nihilistically level the ground for the revolution. It is, for instance, ironical to read about such a literary superman and nihilist in the 2000 preface to an American edition of the novel *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev: 'He would destroy all of Russian society before laying a single brick for a new one based, presumably, on a scientific model. He wants to return to ground zero.'<sup>21</sup>

Amongst his Russian co-revolutionaries, there was always a mix of admiration and apprehension with regard to these supermen. In their literary version, they act and speak abruptly, constantly aware that all they do has to be devoted to a single sacred cause, i.e. revolution.

The best example of the way this type of literature and terrorism influenced each other is the novel *What Is to Be Done?* by Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Chernyshevsky was a descendant from a family of priests and himself an ex-seminarist. However, he became a literary critic who judged literature on the criterion whether it contributed to revolution. In 1862, he was arrested on probably trumped-up charges and started writing his novel while in jail. After he finished it he gave it to an editor who lost it in the cab on his way home, but with the help of the Petersburg police he retrieved it, probably one of the greatest contributions by police to a revolution ever, as Chernyshevsky's novel became the most popular novel in Russia of the whole 19th century. Quite an accomplishment if one thinks of the Russian writers of that time, such as Tolstoi, Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev and so on. The book, whose title refers to the Gospel of Luke, 3:10: "'What should we do then?' the crowd asked', became the Bible or, as it was even called, the Quran of the Russian revolutionaries.<sup>22</sup> In the novel, Chernyshevsky painted a picture of the ideal agrarian-socialist society that was to come in Russia. On the one hand, there are people in the novel who gradually work towards the new society by living together in cooperatives, but, on the other hand, there is the extraordinary man Rakmetov, who, although Chernyshevsky obviously could not write that in his prison cell, prepares for a revolution that Chernyshevsky expected to occur within a few years.

The book created a 'hype' among young Russian radicals: throughout Russia, cooperatives were created following the example of the characters of the novel and many youngsters tried to eat as many beefsteaks as the novel's superhero,

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<sup>21</sup> J. Kulka, 'Introduction', Turgenev, *Fathers*, p. ix

<sup>22</sup> Ulam, *Name*, p. 135; M.R. Katz and W.G. Wagner, 'Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* And the Russian Intelligentsia', Chernyshevsky, *What*, p. 21; I.A. Paperno, quoted in M.R. Katz and W.G. Wagner, 'Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* And the Russian Intelligentsia', Chernyshevsky, *What*, p. 30; Nikolaev in het proces-Karakozov, paper C. Verhoeven, 'The Making of the Revolutionary after Karakozov', presented at the European Seminar of the History Department of UCLA, October 2003.

who had done so in preparation of the violent tasks that he would have to fulfill.

One of the reasons the books of such visionary exile- and prison-authors like John of Patmos and Chernyshevsky attract people is that because of their dire circumstances they have to veil their actual meanings behind cryptic wordings, metaphors, allegories and numbers in order to circumvent censorship. It brings their readers into a position where they share a secret with the author that is supposed to remain a secret to outsiders. For instance, there is a chapter in Chernyshevsky's book that consists of only a number and not a word of text. To every insider, it was clear that at this place in the text the revolution took place, about which the author could not write.<sup>23</sup>

An important part in the book is the so-called fourth dream of Vera Pavlovna, one of the main characters of the book. In it, she looks as a kind of Moses at the promised new society. And this is where the book of the ex-seminarist Chernyshevsky looks very much like the revelation that John of Patmos had, a kind of tour through heaven and the events that will occur at the end of time.

Further, Chernyshevsky shows himself to be a devotee of the idea of rational egotism, although he transfers it from the individual level to the level of class: One has always to think of the personal interests that coincide with the class interest, since the sum of all conscious personal interests will bring about the perfect society. Those who do not act according to these personal interests block the revolution and are in for personal mishap. And just like de Sade, Chernyshevsky thinks that it is no serious problem that a few people who stand in the way of the others' desires will be killed because, on the grounds of equality, they will not be missed.

After Chernyshevsky's novel the idea of supermen causing a revolution was further developed in Russian literary and revolutionary circles. There was such an exchange between literature and reality that it was often unclear which one influenced the other. In the ideas of the revolutionaries, the individual supermen were replaced by a vanguard of strongmen a revolution would need. And those supermen were allowed to freely use other people for their purposes as disposable, or as Trotsky is believed to have called them: useful idiots. *The incarnation of the extraordinary man became Sergey Nechaev, another ex-seminarist, who became the author of the *Catechism of a Revolutionary*. He was inspired as much by traditional religious beliefs as by the French Revolution and Robespierre. And he liked pain and suffering as proof of oppression to such an extent that one of his biographers is inclined to think that he was actually a sado-masochist in the real sense of the word. The Narodniki or populists of the latter part of the 19th century showed at least verbally a willingness to execute Nechaev's *Catechism* to the extent that the existing culture in Russia had to be destroyed completely in order to facilitate the breakthrough of a new society.*

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<sup>23</sup> Chernyshevsky, *What*, p. 369.

Like so many other radicals, Lenin was also greatly impressed by Chernyshevsky's novel. He called him

the greatest and most talented representative of socialism before Marx (...) Under his influence hundreds of people became revolutionaries (...) He plowed me up more profoundly than anyone else (...) After my brother's execution, knowing that Chernyshevsky's novel was one of his favorite books, I really undertook to read it, and I set over it not for several days but for several weeks. Only then did I understand its depth (...) It's a thing that supplies energy for a whole lifetime.<sup>24</sup>

When, in 1902, Lenin published his pamphlet about the role and organization of the revolutionary party he gave it the same title as Chernyshevsky's book. And later on under his political leadership, the practice was started whereby all children in the Soviet Union had to read the fourth dream of Vera Pavlovna.

It showed how, out of apocalyptic views of a new society and the idea of free-roaming supermen, a communist dictatorship became possible in Russia as had been predicted in Dostoyevsky's novel *Demons* where one of the main characters says, "Starting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that apart from my solution of the social formula, there can be no other."<sup>25</sup> Or as it had been foreshadowed during the French Revolution in Robespierre's 'despotism of freedom' and Marat's 'tyranny of freedom' which now became the real-existing dictatorship of the proletariat.

Less known, but for our purposes just as interesting is another reaction Chernyshevsky evoked from Dostoyevsky. In 1864, Dostoyevsky published his *Notes from the Underground*, which was a direct reaction to Chernyshevsky's novel. Dostoyevsky warned against the dangers that can be created by a person who feels humiliated and looks for justice by way of revenge.

One of the themes I try to elaborate upon in my research is how time and again authors who were imprisoned or lived in exile were the ones who created works that would turn out to be very subversive, because they magnified their own misery and projected it upon the alleged fate of an oppressed people: John, who was banished to the isle of Patmos, author of Revelation, a book, in the words of D.H. Lawrence, 'of power-lust, written by a man who is a prisoner, denied all power'; the Marquis de Sade who was languishing in prison cells; and later on, e.g. Sayyid Qutb, the spiritual father of Jihadism. Dostoyevsky calls such characters 'paradoxalists': they want to be humiliated as well as to humiliate others. Their moaning is meant to keep others awake.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in M.R. Katz and W.G. Wagner, 'Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* And the Russian Intelligentsia', Chernyshevsky, *What*, p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, p. 402

<sup>26</sup> Dostoyevsky, *Notes*, p. 89.

In the question of how close this description comes to the religious martyr. Adam Ulam, the biographer of the 19th century Russian revolutionaries, writes:

The cult of violence among the Russian radicals reminds one of the history of many a religion: conceived first by a fanatic who somehow convinces a small group of followers to accept his pronouncements for reality, it grows with the passage of time into a faith and a ritual observed by quite reasonable people. The zealots among them will take literally the preachings of the founder. Others will observe only the external requirements of the cult but view with awe and occasional envy those who give witness to their faith by deeds.<sup>27</sup>

This cult of violence was not only the outcome of a belief system. It helped to further it as well, because it created the hoped-for superman. Faith and practice go hand in hand among apocalyptic visionaries. In the words of Voegelin:

In the imaginary reality of the ideologists, this killing of men in revolutionary action is supposed to produce the much desired transfigurative, or metastatic, change of the nature of man as an event in “history”. Marx has been quite explicit on this point: Revolutionary killing will induce a *Blutausch*, a “blood-intoxication”: and from this *Blutausch* “man” will emerge as “superman” into the “realm of freedom”. The magic of the *Blutausch* is the ideological equivalent to the promise of the Pauline vision of the Resurrected.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Present-day Islamist Fanaticism

In the last quarter of the 20th century, we have seen an upsurge of what is often called religiously inspired terrorism, but which I prefer to call fanaticism. This type of violence is characterized by the fact that, unlike the politically motivated terrorism that was common during the fifties, sixties and seventies, it does not aim at negotiations as part of an endgame and consequently does not have the same inhibitions in the use of violence. In the words of former CIA chief James Woolsey, the current fanatic terrorists do not want to sit at the negotiating table: ‘They want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it.’ They act on behalf of God and with God it is impossible to negotiate. Fanatics use the scourge of God, which means that their violence is less of a means, as was the case with the political terrorists of earlier decades, than as an objective in itself, a way of self-expression.

As we already saw at the beginning of my presentation, according to some authors and many politicians, present-day Islamists are still living in the Middle Ages. The famous islamologist Bernard Lewis, for instance, writes that ‘the Renaissance, the Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the

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<sup>27</sup> Ulam, *Name*, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Bellinger, *Genealogy*, p. 128.

Enlightenment (...) passed without effect in the Islamic world, without even being noticed’.

However, the story is much more complicated. During the first centuries of its existence, Islam exchanged many ideas with believers of both the Christian, the Jewish and the Zoroastrian faith. Among these shared ideas, were also apocalyptic visions. Even though it is hard to find apocalyptic tendencies in the Quran and only parts of the most prestigious collections of the hadith contain apocalyptic references, one can rely upon the famous 14th century Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun, who wrote:

It has been accepted by all Muslims in every epoch, that at the end of time a man from the family [of the Prophet] will without fail make his appearance, one who will strengthen Islam and make justice triumph. Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdi. Following him, the Antichrist will appear, together with the subsequent signs of the Day of Judgment. After the Mahdi, [the Prophet] Isa [Jesus] will descend and kill the Antichrist. Or, Isa will descend together with the Mahdi and help him kill the Antichrist. Such statements have been found in the hadiths that religious leaders have published.<sup>29</sup>

According to a present-day author: ‘From India to Tunisia, every few generations an individual lifts a banner and claims that he is the Mahdi (...)’<sup>30</sup> The Mahdi is supposed to come at a time of great tribulation, chaos, decay and injustice, and just like in Christianity, many Muslims have made calculations based on the signs that are supposed to precede this coming of the Mahdi. It is believed that the Mahdi will bring justice and the rule of Islam throughout the world. And just as in Christianity, the belief in the Mahdi has always represented a subversive element as well and more successfully at that. In some cases, Mahdi-led rebellions caused regime changes that led to long-lasting dynasties.

Although it is commonly believed that the Mahdi is a specifically Shi‘ite element in Islam, throughout history there have been more Sunnite Mahdis and among current Islamic apocalyptic writings, the majority is from a Sunni point of view.

At the end of this lecture, I would like to examine briefly three strands of apocalyptic belief in today’s Islam, which may lead us smoothly into the discussion:

1. apocalyptic belief in Iran
2. apocalyptic writings by independent authors
3. the possibility of apocalyptic visions among jihadists.

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Muraviec, *Mind*, p. 109. Zie ook Cook, *Literature*, p. 9; Filiu, *Apocalypse*, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> M. Rubin, ‘Foreword’, Furnish, *Wars*, p. 7.



After the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, there was an upsurge of apocalyptic belief throughout the Muslim world.<sup>31</sup> This was especially the case in Egypt and in Iran prior to the revolution of 1979. In 1976, the Muslim World League declared the belief in the coming of the Mahdi even obligatory.<sup>32</sup> If one has to single out one person who greatly contributed to the apocalyptic visions in Iran it is Ali Shari'ati who introduced the idea of red Shi'ism. Shari'ati, who has been called the main ideologue of the Iranian revolution,<sup>33</sup> based his thinking partly on that of Franz Fanon, author of the anti-imperialist and Sartre-inspired book *The Wretched of the Earth* which Shari'ati translated. Shari'ati acknowledged that Fanon himself saw no role for religion in the anti-imperialist struggle:

He had, in fact, an anti-religious attitude until I convinced him that in some societies where religion plays an important role in the culture, religion can, through its resources and psychological effects, help the enlightened person to lead his society toward the same destination toward which Fanon was taking his own through non-religious means.<sup>34</sup>

This statement shows already how religious and ideological elements were fused in Shari'ati's thinking. But the ideology spread by Shari'ati and other leaders of the Iranian revolution was not only anti-imperialist, it was also taking a stand on behalf of the oppressed. In the words of Shari'ati himself: 'Jihad in the way of God is jihad in the way of the People.'<sup>35</sup> Shari'ati's texts, in an unconscious echoing of de Sade, exhorted the people to kill if they could or otherwise to die. He also invented the slogan that the martyr is the heart of history.

1979 marked a special point in time since it meant the turn from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century in the Islamic era. When ayatollah Khomeini came to power, many wondered whether he was the Hidden Imam who, according to the Shi'ites, was to return at the end of time.

A few months after the Iranian revolution, a Mahdi was presented in Mecca, which showed that the Shi'ite revolution in Iran had consequences for the Sunnite world as well. The new Mahdi and a few hundred followers took power in the Great Mosque in Mecca and could be repelled only after a fortnight, at the cost of a couple of hundred fatalities and with western assistance. It was a serious omen that the followers consisted not only of Saudis, but also of Egyptians, Kuwaitis, Jemenites and citizens of several other nationalities.

It was to be expected that, after Khomeini's death in 1989 and the decay of the revolutionary spirit, the apocalyptic tendencies in Iran would diminish.

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<sup>31</sup> Cook, *Literature*, pp. 13-14; Furnish, *Wars*, pp. 88-89; Murawiec, *Mind*, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, p. 87; Murawiec, *Mind*, p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> J.L. Esposito, 'Foreword', Shari'ati, *What*, p. ix.

<sup>34</sup> Shari'ati, *What*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Murawiec, *Mind*, p. 280.

However, in the past five years, there has been an upsurge as president Ahmadinejad is a firm believer in the return of the Mahdi for whom he thinks he is destined to pave the path. In his 2006 address to the United Nations, for instance, he pleaded to God to ‘hasten the reappearance of the Imam of the times [i.e. the Mahdi] and to grant us victory and prosperity. Include us among his followers and his martyrs.’<sup>36</sup> Upon his return to Iran, Ahmadinejad declared that, at the time of the speech, he had been enveloped by an halo of light and that, during the almost half an hour of his speech, none of the leaders of the world had blinked: ‘They were looking as if a hand was holding them there and had just opened their eyes.’<sup>37</sup>

If one looks at the popular apocalyptic writings in the Islamic world, it is amazing to see to what extent elements from outside the Islamic world have been adopted. Not only do the authors of such publications use elements from the Bible and the Torah to prove their point, they even borrow from apocalyptic utterances from popular American evangelical reverends; presidents Nixon and Reagan, themselves avid believers in the nearness of the Apocalypse; and introduce elements like the Bermuda triangle and UFO’s. Dominant are ideas about a final nuclear battle near Harmagiddun or Armageddon and in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean. Some of these texts suggest the formation of an army of *muwahhidun*, proponents of the unity of God (tawhid) to assist the Mahdi. Prevalent is a type of antisemitism that originates from national-socialism and sees a Jewish conspiracy throughout the world in terms of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is often explicitly mentioned. The only solution to this is, according to these writings, the total annihilation of the Jews by way of jihad.

These popular publications have certain elements in common with the messages of jihadists, such as the stress upon *tawhid*, *jihad* and *takfir*, the need to re-establish a caliphate and the targeting of the United States and Israel as the main enemies. Both the popular apocalyptic writings and jihadists profit from the fact that youths have less knowledge of the Quran than they used to have. Some internet sites on the Mahdi also depict Osama bin Laden as his brother.<sup>38</sup>

As David Cook, one of the greatest experts on Islamic apocalyptic literature notes:

It cannot be a coincidence that the rise of radical apocalyptic writers has been concurrent with the rise of radical Islam, but there is no evidence of actual interdependence, other than the fact that radical apocalyptic writers feed off the events and trends that radical Muslims have either generated or benefited from, and interpret them in their actual framework.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Amanat, *Islam*, p. 241.

<sup>37</sup> Amanat, *Islam*, p. 242.

<sup>38</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, p. 111.

<sup>39</sup> Cook, *Literature*, p. 15.

Nevertheless, some authors think it will be only a matter of time before two-way traffic will be established between apocalypticists and jihadists. The historian and Islamologist Timothy Furnish suggests that Islamism

can be seen as a river that during parts of its course flows near a cliff hanging over the raging sea of Mahdism. When the riverbed is near this cliff, it might take very little to wear away the soil and allow the waters of fundamentalism to pour themselves into Mahdism.<sup>40</sup>

Furnish also points out that Osama bin Laden's father had set twelve million dollars aside to contribute at the return of the Mahdi.<sup>41</sup> And he points at statements by some prisoners at Guantánamo Bay saying that they consider Osama to be the Mahdi.<sup>42</sup> In a book titled *Usama bin Ladin: the Awaited Mahdi or Dajjal? The War of Extermination and the Barons of the CIA*, which was published in Cairo in 2002, the authors state that they themselves do not believe Osama bin Laden to be the Mahdi, but that there are plenty in the Middle East who do. Furthermore, the authors did see the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as the beginning of the end of time. Furnish therefore concludes:

All it would take for a Mahdist claim to materialize – and to be taken seriously by millions – would be for bin Laden to announce on his next al-Jazeera-taped interview that the Prophet had invested him as Mahdi and that the inevitable opposition of the American lapdog regimes in Riyadh, Cairo and especially Bagdad was just what the Mahdi was predestined to face.<sup>43</sup>

However, so far al-Qa'ida has refrained from such a claim. In 2003, the movement issued a statement, titled *God Does Not Entrust Knowledge of the Mahdi to Anyone before His Appearance*, in which the movement takes a stand against apocalyptic beliefs because those who believe in them do not come into action until they are convinced that the Mahdi has arrived. Furthermore, it states that many of the hadith about the Mahdi are of doubtful authority: 'The truth is, no one knows yet who will restore the caliphate and restore the ummah to prominence.'<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

I have come to the end of a sketchy story of the transmutation of the fanatic apocalyptic idea through the ages. Although apocalyptic expectations have been of all times and have repeated themselves over and over again, I think we cannot look upon present-day showings of it with a sanguine mood. As technology progresses, the possibility that apocalypticists will one day cause

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<sup>40</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>41</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, p. 157.

<sup>42</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, p. 157.

<sup>43</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, p. 160.

<sup>44</sup> Furnish, *Wars*, pp. 153-154.

their expectations to become true advances as well. In other words: If given the chance, apocalypticists may bring the world to an end.

Another worrying tendency is that it is no longer possible to see clear genealogies of apocalyptic thinking within one belief or system. Nowadays, they borrow from each other, influence each other and react upon each other. Islamic, Christian and Jewish apocalypticists all converge on and around Jerusalem. Therefore, it is maybe too somber a note, but I cannot conclude differently than stating that, both in time and place, the apocalypticists are getting closer to Armageddon.

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