

How to Live Together in the Time that Remains

Reflections on Paris

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There is a surprising resonance between St. Paul and John Rawls as regards the question how religious convictions should be reconciled with a secular socio-political order (the question as one may pose it following Rawls), or how the convictions of a minority religion can be reconciled with a socio-political order informed by the convictions and practices of a majority religion (the question as one might want to pose it following St. Paul).

St. Paul famously told the Christian community living in Rome to respect the laws of the (pagan) Emperor. In keeping with statements already issued by some of the Evangelists, he thus launched a theology that especially St. Augustine would later articulate in terms of the doctrine of the two cities, the City of God, and the earthly city. In terms of this doctrine, the earthly city reflected an interim phase of God's ultimate plan with his creation. During this phase, good and evil (as judged from a Christian point of view) existed alongside one another, and during this time, evil would often triumph over good in ways that would be incomprehensible to the faithful Christian. But the very meaning of faith, according to this Pauline/Augustinian theology and historiography, was to trust that God's justice will in the end – indeed when time finally comes to an end with the Day of Judgment – triumph over evil.

The question for the faithful thus becomes this one: how to live in the time that remains, the time in which one would often be confronted with a reality that is irreconcilable with that which is most

precious to one, namely, the moral and existential expectations that relate to one's understanding of complete or divine justice? And the Pauline/Augustinian response to this question was this one: entrust expectations of divine justice to God's own wisdom. Only on the day of God's judgment will God's justice become fully comprehensible to the faithful. In the meantime, don't take God's justice into your own hands. Do not think you can realise it on earth. Hence St. Paul's famous instruction in the 13th Chapter of the Letter to the Romans: Obey the laws and government of the (pagan) emperor. These laws and government are, in a way that one cannot yet understand, also part of God's plan. The upshot of this Pauline message is the principle of *hos me (as if not)* that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben expounds brilliantly in his book on St. Paul, *The Time that Remains*¹. The principle concerns Paul's instruction to the Christians in Rome to live in this world as if not really living in this world. Live in this world *as if* you are already living under God's justice, notwithstanding all the evidence that God's justice is not yet fully revealed and does not yet seem to prevail in the way the faithful may hope it might.

So suppose some young and not so young hot-headed pagan Romans running, let us assume in good faith, a satirical magazine in which they make fun of this new Christian religion in Rome that no longer respects and no longer practices their pagan rituals. One can imagine that some among the Christian faithful may well have had some *jihadist* emotions burning in their chests, some desires for standing up for God's justice and putting things right. But St. Paul tells them: Don't break the law, respect the emperor's rule. It's a pity his laws does

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Saint Paul writing, 9th century

not provide for higher standards of respect between all his citizens, but this too, this imperfect law, is part of God's plan with the universe.

St. Paul can in some respects be regarded as a shrewd pragmatist. He probably understood well that any resistance by the Christians to Roman authority would just lead to a massacre. But things changed later, when Constantine converted and Roman authority indeed became Christian authority. Perhaps because it had become redundant, perhaps because it even hampered the ambitions of an ascendant or triumphant Christian authority on earth, the Pauline message became largely forgotten. Christians no longer had much to fear from a Christian emperor, and later, Christian kings would embark on ruthless crusades against infidels to do something for God's justice on earth. And the idea that *one can do something for God and for one's own salvation* finally gave rise to corrupt exploitations of gullible Christians by Christian officialdom, exploitation that finally led to the Reformation. It was Luther who revived the Pauline message in radical fashion: There is nothing that you can do for God, but God can do a lot for you, was his basic message in response to the rackets that the Roman Church ran by exploiting the idea that salvation can be bought. And Luther would infamously also extend his wisdom to the

political turmoil of his time. Obey the laws of the kings and princes, he told the revolting peasants in typical Pauline fashion at the time. Trust the wisdom of God and do not take His justice into your own hands, was his clear message to them.

The phenomenon of *jihad* mentalities that announce themselves today in the name of the Islam religion could easily move some to suggest that there is nothing similar to the Pauline message in the Koran. No earthly Pauline pragmatism – don't do it, you will only get yourself killed – seems to stand any chance impressing those who believe Mohammed must be avenged against earthly insults. To the contrary, getting yourself killed would appear to be an added incentive from the perspective of this particular Moslem concern with salvation. All of this is doubtful. There is enough reason to assume that those who stress that Islam is a *modern* religion that can exist in peace with other religions and reconcile itself with secular governmental orders, accept something very similar to the Pauline message as part and parcel of this modern religion. Here too must there be significant acceptance of the *transcendental condition of religion*, namely the condition that makes religion as such an *other-worldly affair* that can only betray its essential *other-worldliness* when it gives in to temptations to realise itself in this world. And there is much room for better intercultural communication and understanding on this point. How does the Moslem faith articulate (assuming that it does) this principle that people with Christian convictions articulate with reference to St. Paul, St. Augustine and to Luther? Is there perhaps something like a common religious reason that one could come to articulate in this regard, in the way the liberal political philosopher John Rawls would articulate a common public reason? And is there a way in which such a thinking could be communicated better to the youths of all religious backgrounds in order to make them less prone to radicalism and fundamentalism?

These are interesting and important questions, but they surely do not address the problem that one is facing here fully or adequately. The depth of this question only becomes apparent when one looks at how Rawls "rearticulates the Pauline instruction" in the framework of his liberal political thought. Rawls also tells citizens of culturally pluralist and divided societies that they need to leave their religious convictions outside the public realm of politics and law. In this public realm, we need to communicate to another and to negotiate the profile of public space by sticking to essential principles of a public reason that everyone can be expected to share and respect. But Rawls knows there is a catch here. Public reason may well come to be experienced as *shallow*, he says,

when it categorically excludes all the convictions that stem from religion or similar “comprehensive worldviews” that endow our lives with deeper meaning. Are we then fatally confronted with the reality that we can only live together well under principles of public reason that we all share and respect, as long as we are prepared to accept the existential shallowness of reasonable coexistence? If so, the concept of public reason seems bound to fail, for it may well be the excruciating *experience of the shallowness* of civil existence, as we have come to understand it, that drive people into all kinds of radicalisations and fundamentalisms. It is the ultimately painful experience of everyday life as devoid of deeper purpose that may be causing the fatal foundering of the religious acceptance that every day civil existence cannot aspire to fulfil profounder desires for “God’s justice”, that we are seeing today. This fatal foundering may well be the critical point of entry for all radicalisms and fundamentalisms.

Let us look more closely at the problem of the shallowness of everyday life that may come to precipitate radicalisation and fundamentalism. The global capitalist world has basically come to accept market integration as the only kind of integration necessary for making civil existence possible. The concept of market integration that has become the dominant if not sole *raison d'être* of European integration is a case in point. Two observations regarding this market integration seem apposite: 1) Market integration has a ghastly record of dismal failure, all over the world, but also in Europe. 2) Market integration,

even when and where it seems to work to some extent, falls dismally short of addressing the yearning of citizens for deeper meaning. Large numbers of citizens may well be duped for considerable times into accepting materialist and consumer gratification as adequate existential fulfilment, but a significant contingent of all societies cannot be duped in this way, not for long in any case. There is a deep resistance, pervasive at that, against repetitive systemic consumption, and in this resistance, any good psychoanalyst will tell one, lie the germs of all religious or quasi-religious yearnings.

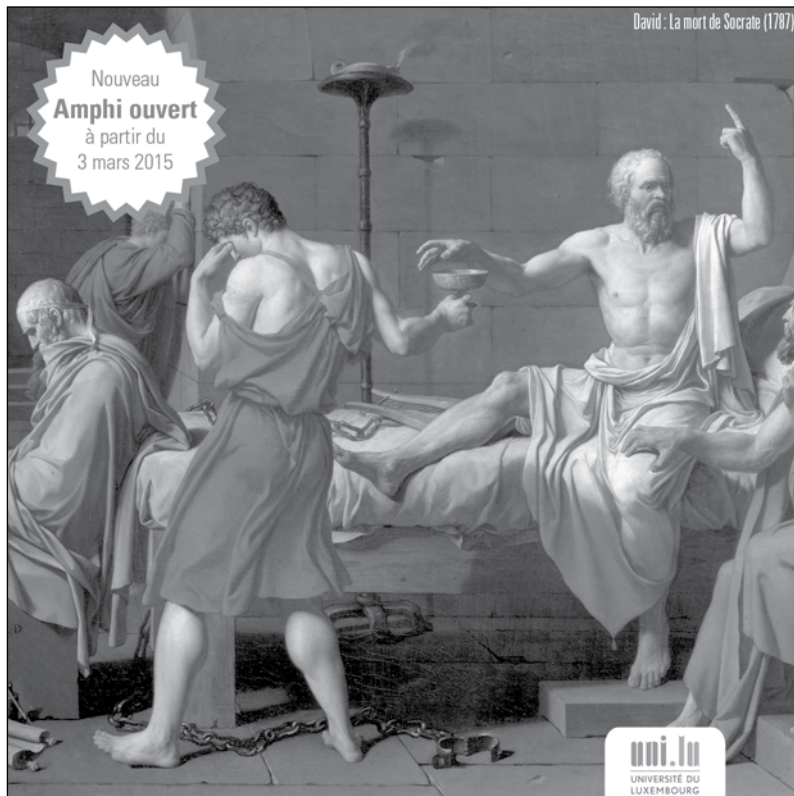
With regard to 1): The evidence that most of the youths prone to radicalisation come from socio-economic circumstances that offer them no hope of ever having a stable job, not to mention a decent job, is irrefutable. They have no prospects of ever sharing in the material benefits of civil society. As long as current conceptions of free market capitalism continue to fail to come to terms with this reality, we will have to simply make ourselves ready for the reality of more and more young people who have nothing to lose but tedious lives of bare survival. That the idea of dying as a religious hero or martyr could become appealing to them, cannot surprise anyone.

With regard to 2): Not all the youths who have turned to radicalisation and jihadist self-projections come from these camps of bare survival in the suburbs and slums of major cities. Some come from better integrated families from where the prospect of securing some stable employment is realistic. What

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Graff à la mémoire de Charlie Hebdo (ID Number THX1139 – CC BY 2.0.)





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Si la toxicologie m'était contée

Robert Wennig

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Robert Wennig est ancien chef du département de toxicologie au Laboratoire National de Santé, expert judiciaire aux tribunaux et professeur associé à l'Université du Luxembourg.

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drives these individuals to radical religion? What drives them away from the acceptance of earthly imperfection that St Paul proposed to the Christians in Rome? This question requires much more thinking and research than is currently granted to it. And one cannot expect to cast much light on this problem in a short intervention such as this one is designed to be. But perhaps we can draw one quick point of reflection from Agamben's book on St. Paul for purposes of concluding this short reflection. Agamben seems to be aware of the precariousness of the Pauline wisdom. He seems to be aware of the reality that the indefinite postponement of fulfilment of the desire for deeper meaning expects too much of mortals for whom the experience of life slipping away meaninglessly remains a crisis, despite their religious belief in the afterlife that would ensue when time ends. The temptation to act in response to this experience of meaninglessness remains real and significant. Agamben therefore seeks and ultimately proposes a kind of substitute fulfilment in the *The Time that Remains*, namely, literary or aesthetic fulfilment. He indeed contemplates the idea that a life engaged with literature – with a certain fictional and vicarious fulfilment, one might say – may contribute to the ability to bear the excruciating burden of indefinite postponement of earthly meaning that religious faith demands.

The context in which I am invoking Agamben's thought in this regard may make it seem ridiculous. I seem to be proposing the organisation of book clubs and art circles as a way towards combatting religious radicalisation and towards integrating our societies better. It does sound ridiculously naïve when one looks at it in this way. But here is the deeper and perhaps cogent thought that is lurking under this apparently ridiculous proposal: Political leaders and social elites may well want to look towards cultural integration that promises deeper aesthetic and poetic fulfilment than market integration can ever hope to offer as a way towards combatting radicalisation. I have no concrete suggestions right now as to how this thought can be taken further, apart from saying that further thinking may well have to begin here. It is perhaps time that the political and social elites who are currently so content to let the battle against radicalism lie with the meagre promise of embarrassingly low levels of market integration, themselves begin to think somewhat more *radically* about the concept of integration. ♦

1 *The Time that Remains*, Stanford University Press, 2005