

Book Review: Arvidsson, Stefan. 2019. *Religion and Politics under Capitalism. A Humanistic Approach to Terminology*

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For many decades, religion was widely considered as inevitably and drastically diminishing in influence across the various modern societies. Nonetheless, after a long period of being increasingly relegated to the background, religion – in one form or another – has made an important return in Western discourse. Thus, one is faced with the increasing popularity of alternative perspectives regarding the spiritual, from new religious movements and individual spirituality to personal growth, or even philosophical counselling, among others. The change which has occurred has had many interpretations and focus points, even as it remains to be seen if and to what extent this apparent re-enchantment will be sustainable in the 21st century. The book written by Stefan Arvidsson seeks to demonstrate the essential importance of the capitalist economy as the framework for understanding the relationship between religion and politics, all the while arguing in favour of a humanist perspective.

The first part is divided into three chapters, dealing with totalitarianism and political religion, mythic politics and the masses, as well as liberalism and capitalist religion. The first chapter takes into account the importance of the Political Religion School, including a number of authors linked to the study of 20th century totalitarianism. Arvidsson is right to draw the attention to the role of a hostile observer, correctly stating that while individual eye-witnesses could attribute religious features to totalitarian movements, this does not necessarily prove that they possessed a religious nature. The next chapter outlines his proposal for studying

the features understood as “political religion” under a new guise, namely, that of “mythic politics”. Significantly, the author argues that liberalism, which originally had “a mythopoetic production as impressive as any of the other ideologies” has withered during the 20th century, contributing to the idea that liberalism is “a sober and rational, nonmythic political project” (Arvidsson 2019, 31). This is expanded upon in the following chapter, introducing two provocative and somewhat problematic terms, which are partially based in the argument that capitalist society is more influenced by infrastructural market method of regimentation rather than by superstructural ideologies. Arvidsson uses “ideology” ideationally, and in a non-pejorative sense, which is not related to “cognitive misjudgement”, “the superstructure of a class”, “a more or less unconscious mentality, hegemony or habitus”, but as “a set of formulated ideas”, in a manner typical to political science (Arvidsson, 34). The first concept is “capitalist religion”, or “the mythic politics of liberal capitalism [...] a phenomenon that exists all around us” (Arvidsson, 45). This leads to the second concept, that of “capitalist totalitarianism”, which is considered in this manner because, according to the author, it operates on all level of society, with “neoliberal ideals about maximum profit for corporations, new public management and constant competition take control of education and welfare services”, depriving both democratic and theocratic alternatives of real power, and the people conceptualising themselves as commodities and brands, thus reinforcing the system (Arvidsson, 50).

The second part has chapters on the secular age and idealist scholarship, the concept of “everything religion” and the capitalist framework, ending with a humanistic view on religion. These chapters include analyses of the shortcomings of a number of secularisation theories, with Arvidsson focussing on Charles Taylor’s famous work, *A Secular Age* (2007). For instance, he criticizes Taylor’s “anti-modernism” and reliance on theology in his understanding of the history of religions, with Arvidsson suggesting instead that this history is to a far greater extent that of magic – in other words, practical-instrumental fertility magic, divination and healing rather than a dichotomy contrasting contemplative theology with secular instrumentality (Arvidsson, 73). The fifth chapter deals with an expansion of the author’s aim of placing the study of religion and politics within the conceptual framework of capitalism itself and its mode of production, while departing

from the idealist perspectives still found in the study of religion. The “everything religion” concept – ranging from politics, to arts, to sports – is criticised for its un-historical view that religion has remained essentially unchanged in its omnipresent nature, with the same criticism being reserved for perspectives insisting on the apparent novelty of secularity. The author therefore argues for a dialectical approach which recognises the existence of fundamental changes as well as of enduring nature of certain aspects, while avoiding being “limited by the horizons of the people analysed” (Arvidsson, 97) and surpassing cultural contingencies “*in the moment of questioning*” (Arvidsson, 98). The sixth chapter represents Arvidsson’s argument for how the study of religion should be approached in the humanities, while stating his preference for a humanist outlook. Among other things, the chapter raises interesting points with regards to the old warning of avoiding building a paradise on earth and how anti-totalitarian and anti-utopian authors seem suspicious not towards paradise itself but towards the earthly paradise (Arvidsson, 107).

The short third part then deals with analytic and ideational definitions, as well as with modern religions and political ideologies. Thus, in the seventh chapter, Arvidsson attempts definitions of religion and politics, while once again considering the difference between religious politics and political religion. In doing so, he comes to the conclusion that only those politics which have been proven to be concretely and fundamentally based on religious ideas should be categorised as “religious politics”, with ideology necessarily being theology in part (p. 129). The last chapter of the book seeks to portray religious modernism, religious traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism. This section briefly considers their stance on the modern, secular capitalist world and major modern political ideologies, while also including an analysis on Fascism and fundamentalism.

One of the most interesting cases in the book is the author’s investigation of interpretations of Fascism. For instance, in concluding his analysis of the Political Religion School, Arvidsson states that “the myth-like structure of a history describing the struggle between totalitarian *mythos* and liberal-capitalist *logos* [...] tends to direct scholars to different kinds of source material when analysing ‘mythic’ fascism (and other ‘political religions’) and when analysing ‘reasonable’, non-totalitarian ideologies”, or even threatening to put shots from *Triumph des*

Willens side by side with texts by John Rawls (Arvidsson, 34). At the same time, as is reiterated in other sections of the book, Arvidsson makes the important point that most of the literature has failed to take into account that the liberal opposite of totalitarianism has its own mythic politics. Significantly, the author proposes a new means of comparison departing from comparing dramatic “totalitarian myth-and-ritual politics” with “educated liberal texts”, whereby the comparison method “must begin by identifying where the ideological, mythic and post-political politics of a political culture is located; then it must describe them; and last, they must be compared with their isomorphic equivalents in other political movements” (Arvidsson, 33). Arvidsson believes that one should remain critical of schools of thought which portray Fascism as “a movement with an exceptional high density of mythic politics”, arguing instead for the need to study its relationship to “conservative mythology and religious fundamentalism” – with emblems and symbols of the traditional authorities already highly visible in early 20th century public life (Arvidsson, 137). He continues by stating that Fascism was innovative in its means and methods rather than in ideological content and that it essentially used “modern means against modern ideals”, including “hiking, uniforms, radio broadcasting, theatrical rallies, posters, charismatic leadership and rejection of traditional bourgeois lifestyles and sacred authorities” (Arvidsson, 139). The *new man* – which the author himself admits is not exclusive to Fascism and fundamentalism – is understood ideologically as a destroyer of decadence and as a true believer, with a certain *Männerbund* air found in both tendencies. Arvidsson is certainly correct to point out the way in which Fascism used modern means against what are considered typically modern ideals, yet herein lies an essential factor of a longer, complex discussion on totalist movements and their visions of an alternative modernity – when compared to that of many of their political rivals. This comes to the fore particularly when one is to involve what the author calls (modern) fundamentalism and linking this with “the fundamentalist-integralist criticism of secular societies (in some camps identified with ‘Western decadence’)” (Arvidsson, 139).

All in all, this work represents a useful take on some of the major religious-political trends, attempting to offer a useful historical framework in the context of a highly fractured contemporary scholarly effort which, in turn, sees various

premises, terminologies, and disciplines grow to the detriment of a more cohesive, harmonious perspective. Along with its effort at reminding readers of the original mythopoetic capacity of liberalism – and discussing its subsequent transformation –, it is in the attempt to portray discussions and terminologies on religion and politics that the book has its greatest merit.

Reference

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