POLITICAL AND SECULAR RELIGIONS. NEW RISKS FOR SOCIETY?

MĂDĂLINA MĂNDIȚĂ[1]

ABSTRACT

Political religions represent a social reality that offers significant explanatory power for researchers in the humanities. E. Voegelin, C. Dawson, R. Aron, and J. Talmon are just a few key figures in this field; their analyses provide important historical and sociological insights into the origins of totalitarianism and its risks for society. We find these classic works highly relevant, especially as European societies confront the potential threat of neototalitarian movements amid migration, economic crises, armed conflicts, and remarkable advancements in information technology. It is crucial to remember that, as historian J. Talmon warned, sacrificing freedom for safety incurs immeasurable costs, as evidenced by the totalitarian regimes of the past century. Are societies on a one-way road, which means that *there is no alternative (TINA)*?

***Keywords*:** political religion, secular religion, totalitarian democracy, sacralization of politics, totalitarianism, TINA

INTRODUCTION

The concept of political religions, which emerged in the context of 20th-century totalitarianism, has been a topic of debate among humanities scholars since the interwar period, with significant contributions from thinkers such as Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron. However, the term itself dates back to the 18th century, arising alongside the socio-political changes initiated by the French Revolution. Disagreements regarding the adequacy of this concept persist, as specialists struggle to reach a consensus on the nature of the phenomenon. Since the 1990s, the concept has regained prominence in intellectual discussions, largely due to the socio-political shifts that followed the collapse of communism.

In this study, we explore the concept of political religions as analyzed by E. Voegelin and R. Aron. The latter of whom prefers the term secular religion.

[1] Researcher, Ph. D. Institute of Sociology, The Romanian Academy, e-mail address: mada_mnd@yahoo.com

Rom. Jour. of Sociological Studies, New Series, No. 1, p. 55–72, Bucharest, 2025

A significant contribution comes from historian C. Dawson, whose works, developed during the same period, examine the complex relationship between politics and religion. He observes the increasingly pervasive expansion of politics over society, noting the emergence of the total state, which he characterizes with sociological insight. Additionally, the research on the origins of totalitarianism conducted by historian J. Talmon is pertinent to this discussion, as he considers it a unique phenomenon in Western history.

The relationship between religion and politics is intricate and has manifested in various forms throughout human history. Historian E. Gentile categorized this relationship as the sacralization of politics. Following the fall of communism and the rise of terrorism in the 1990s, discussions regarding the interplay between politics and religion have reemerged in interdisciplinary research. We regard these foundational contributions as crucial reference points when evaluating the risk of neo-totalitarian political ideologies emerging in the global era.

In this study, we examine whether 20th-century totalitarianism can serve as a warning for contemporary society. Do the risks faced by modern societies create conditions conducive to new forms of totalitarianism? Are we in danger of consenting to the relinquishment of our rights and freedoms in the name of perceived security? To address these pressing issues, we revisit some of the most significant contributions to understanding the totalitarian phenomenon.

POLITICAL RELIGION

Although the concept had previously been applied to political movements that took on religious characteristics, Eric Voegelin is credited with introducing it into scholarly debate. As is common with many concepts in the humanities, there is no consensus on its definition or its application to politics, and extensive discussions continue regarding its appropriateness.[2]

[2] Maier, H. 2007. Political Religion: a Concept and its Limitations, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:1, pp. 5–16; Vliegenthart, D. 2020. (Re)Introducing "Secular Religion": On the Study of Entangled Quests for Meaning in Modern Western Cultures, *Numen*, 67(2–3), pp. 256–279; Burrin, P. (Fall 1997). Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept, *History and Memory*, Vol. 9, No. 1/2, Passing into History: Nazism and the Holocaust beyond Memory – In Honor of Saul Friedlander on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, pp. 321–349; Payne, S. G. 2005. On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and its Application, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:2, pp. 163–174; Seitschek, H. O. 2021/2. Totalitarianisms as Political Religions in the 20th Century. *Historical And Philosophical Reflections*, Pro Publico Bono – Public Administration, pp. 44–67; Barry, G. 2015. Political Religion: A User's Guide, *Contemporary European History*, 24, 4, pp. 623–638; Roberts, D. D. (Nov., 2009). 'Political Religion' and the Totalitarian Departures of Inter-War Europe: On the Uses and Disadvantages of an Analytical Category, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 381-414; Nyirkos, T. 2021/2. The Proliferation Of Secular Religions: Theoretical And Practical Aspects, *Pro Publico Bono* – Public Administration, pp. 68–85; Gentile, E. 2005. Political religion: a concept and its critics – a critical survey. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1, pp. 19–32.

In Political Religions, E. Voegelin (1938) observes that fascism and communism acquire increasingly prominent religious characteristics. As a result, the two fundamental aspects of social existence – religion and the state – intermingle, leading the political sphere to adopt an ever-growing number of traits traditionally associated with religion.

Voegelin begins with Hegel, who believed that the *state* was a manifestation of spirit in reality and that it held absolute power on Earth. This naturally gives rise to questions relating to order, service, obedience, and the relationship with the individual. Religion links human existence to the natural world, engendering emotions such as dependence on an omnipotent, superpersonal force, as well as feelings such as despair, hope, peace, and anxiety in relation to the world *beyond*. Those open to the totality of existence acquire an order and hierarchy within it. Therefore, when "reality reveals itself as sacred in religious experience, it becomes the primary reality, or *realissimum*" (Voegelin 2010, 86).

Voegelin analyzed the sacred symbols that emphasize the connection between the political and divine spheres. Hierarchy, in which power descends from God through rulers, is a fundamental means by which human governance is legitimized. Voegelin asserts that "the hierarchical order established by J. Bodin remained the structure of the internal state order of Europe" (Voegelin 2010, 106). He also notes the divinization of the worldly order of rule and its intramundane closure, which occurs simultaneously with the beheading of the transmundane divinity. A significant factor in the formation of intramundane communities is the separation of the spiritual and temporal dimensions, as exemplified by St. Augustine's concept of two kingdoms: the Civitas Dei and the Civitas Terrena. Voegelin contends that the political-religious world constitutes the foundational structure of Europe's development. He argues that "the Christian apocalypse of empire and the symbolism of the late Middle Ages form the historical basis for the apocalyptic dynamics in modern political religions" (Voegelin 2010, 120). This reality is a consequence of Christian monastic movements and orders of monks that sought to renew the soul and participate in the perfection of the Christian ideal in this world.

During the Middle Ages, the Western Christian Church fragmented into political subdivisions, leading to an increasing isolation of territorial states. Voegelin argues that the necessity of interpreting the new secular and sacred communities as being closely united renders the distinction between the temporal and the spiritual meaningless. According to Voegelin, the theologian who articulates this new reality is T. Hobbes, who conceptualized the symbol of Leviathan – "the omnipotent state situated immediately below God and acting according to divine order" (Voegelin 2010, 122–123) – based on the contractual theory of the Old Testament Covenant, in which individuals agree to have a sovereign above them. Consequently, the covenant that unifies the multitude under

one person (the sovereign) embodies the unity of the political community. This community emerges as an actor in history, rather than the chosen sovereign.

When "God is invisible behind the world, the world itself becomes the new god. When symbols of transcendent religiosity are forbidden, new symbols develop from the language of science to take their place. Like the Christian ecclesia, the intramundane community has its apocalypse, but the new apocalypse insists that the symbols created are scientific judgments" (Voegelin 2010, 133). The intramundane apocalypse eliminates the ultimate transcendent kingdom and fosters a perfected terrestrial humanity that advances collectively. The individual's objective is to engage in this collective progress, necessitating a fundamentally collectivist perspective. Voegelin underscores that this new symbolism is grounded in a supposed scientific character.

Voegelin concludes that "the life of men in the political community cannot be defined as a profane domain of action in which we are concerned only with legal issues and the organization of power. A community is also a universe of religious order, and knowledge of a political condition would be incomplete in one decisive respect: firstly, if it does not take into account the religious forces inherent in a society and the symbols through which they are expressed; or secondly, if it includes religious forces but does not recognize them as such and translates them into non-religious categories. Men live in political society, presenting all the features of their being - from the physical to the spiritual and religious" (Voegelin 2010, 150).

Voegelin will renounce the use of the concept of political religion, arguing that totalitarianism represents false religions that completely eliminate the transcendental aspect of existence. In his work, *Autobiographical Reflections* (2011), he contends that religion embodies a fundamental human experience along with its associated institutions. Voegelin employs the concept of *Gnosticism* to analyze contemporary ideologies, viewing it as the essence of modernity. He examines the totalitarian phenomenon and a range of contemporary spiritual maladies in *The New Science of Politics* (1952) and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (1959).

In the preface to the American edition of *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Ellie Sandoz emphasizes the continuity in Voegelin's thought regarding mass movements, modern totalitarian ideologies, and the anti-Christian Gnostic sects of antiquity, as well as contemporary movements such as positivism, Freudianism, and various other -isms that continue to emerge. These observations are grounded in two fundamental precepts: alienation from a hostile world and man's rebellion against the transcendent dimension of existence. From these precepts arise the characteristics of modern *Gnosticism* in the struggle for power, which is characterized by immanentist programs for world transformation, atheism, the elevation of man to the status of the superman, master of nature, and creator of history - all resulting from the exclusion of God from human existence.

The shock that modernity has inflicted on the social structure – encompassing the impact on communities, the Industrial Revolution, technological advancements, and democratic revolutions - has engendered a profound sense of alienation. This rupture compels individuals and societies to seek salvation. According to Voegelin, the means of this salvation is gnosis, a unique and revelatory knowledge essential for establishing a new order, which necessitates the dismantling of the alienated and corrupt existing order. In this new order, criticism, objections, and questions are strictly prohibited.

Voegelin identifies six characteristics that attest to the gnostic nature of modern currents (Voegelin 1968): 1. dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs; 2. the belief that this flawed reality is the result of a corrupt organization; 3. the belief that salvation from this evil is possible; 4. the order of human being must be changed in a historical process, making it possible to create a better world; 5. changing the order lies in the power of human action, salvation is possible through human effort; 6. changing the structure of the order into a perfect one is the task of the Gnostic, who possesses the knowledge necessary to accomplish this. Thus, we have "the formula for self-salvation and the salvation of the world, as well as the Gnostic's willingness to emerge as a prophet who will proclaim the knowledge about the salvation of humanity" (Voegelin 1968, 58). This process of immanentization is evident in all the movements analyzed by Voegelin.

SECULAR RELIGIONS

The sociologist R. Aron favored the concept of secular religion (Gordon 2011) when analyzing the origins of totalitarianism. This phenomenon serves as a substitute for lost religious faith and promotes the salvation of humanity through the establishment of a new social order. A defining characteristic of secular religion is that its ideological doctrine evolves into dogma, articulated in principles of faith that are regarded as the ultimate truth.

Secular religions absolutize the entities of the immanent world; the party becomes the instrument of the leader, and enemies must be eliminated to achieve the prophesied salvation. These *religions* "imitate soteriological religions. They attribute a religious character to the political sphere, replacing individual religious faith and prophesying a saved state after the current apocalypse. However, this salvation can only be attained through radical reorganization" (Seitschek 2021, 60). Another defining characteristic is their tendency to dislocate individuals from traditional communities to forge new ones, such as the state or the nation, as noted by H. Seitschek. The concepts of political religion and political messianism are more appropriate than totalitarianism for explaining the belief in totalitarian ideology, according to the philosopher.

In *The Future of Secular Religion* R. Aron introduces the concept of secular religion, describing it as "doctrines that replace in the soul of contemporary people the vanished beliefs, placing the salvation of humanity in this world or in the near future, in the form of a social order to be established" (Aron 2002, 178). The sociologist examines the secular religions that emerged after World War I, specifically National Socialism and Marxism. Although these two movements employed similar methods, they pursued different objectives.

These two pseudo-religions share the following similarities, as noted by the sociologist:

- ❖ They are based on the masses, although they employ different methods: some are rational, such as socialism, while others are irrational and pessimistic, like Nazism.
- ❖ They provide a strong sense of community.
- ❖ They hold Manichaean views of the world, where the struggle between good and evil encompasses the entire existential universe: socialism opposes capitalism, Nazism targets Jews and plutocracies.
- ❖ They advocate a doctrine of salvation centered on the concept of a thousant-year Reich, perceiving history as a struggle among races, with the survival of the fittest confined to a single nation. In contrast, socialism envisions a perfect society that is inclusive and universal, achieved through the defeat of capitalism and the end of the exploitation of individuals by one another.

Secular religions provide individuals with an alternative to the diminished sense of unity that arises from the pervasive crises of modernity. These secular religions emerge when traditional authorities become obsolete and the legitimacy of monarchies and aristocracies declines.

The hope of salvation, Aron emphasizes, has the potential to transform the social order through the spiritual significance and relevance it embodies. The sociologist warns that two aspirations are intertwined: "collective beliefs generate prophets, and Caesars create their own religions. Even if all representations of an earthly paradise vanish, the fundamental belief in a providential figure endures. When the empire was in decline, the Romans deified their emperors" (Aron 2002, 192).

The sociologist raises two objections to secular religions. First, they are religions of collective salvation that do not offer individuals the personal consolation and discipline found in traditional religions. Second, they are likely to either fade away or continue to elevate the collective and its leaders to a status of deification. From the beginning, these surrogate religions are vulnerable to underlying disbelief; they promote uncertainty and conflict, and their initial enthusiasm often devolves into cynicism and violence.

THE ORIGINS OF DEMOCRATIC TOTALITARIANISM

In *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952), J. Talmon examines two democratic political currents that have coexisted since the 18th century and have been in conflict: the liberal form and the totalitarian form, specifically liberal democracy and totalitarian democracy. These two forms differ significantly in their perspectives on politics.

- The *liberal* approach involves a process of trial and error, employing a pragmatic perspective on human needs while acknowledging the diverse individual and social dimensions.
- The *totalitarian* perspective asserts that there is only one exclusive truth in politics. This viewpoint is often referred to as *political messianism*, as it claims the existence of a perfect and predetermined plan toward which communities are irresistibly directed and that will inevitably come to fruition. This form of political messianism recognizes only one dimension of human existence: the political. Consequently, political ideas are not merely pragmatic; instead, they represent a comprehensive philosophy of human life, aimed at applying this philosophy to the entirety of social organization.

The common source of these two currents can be traced back to the French Revolution and the intellectual climate of the 18th century - a period during which traditional structures and social orders were dismantled, and religion lost its intellectual and emotional authority. From that point onward, the feudal hierarchy began to disintegrate, giving rise to new economic conditions. Whereas society had previously been organized around status and hierarchy, it now emerged as a collection of abstract individuals, with reason serving as the foundation of social utility rather than tradition.

Talmon explores how 18th-century ideas influenced the development of totalitarian democracy while neglecting to analyze liberal democracy. Unlike the absolute power wielded by monarchs, modern totalitarian democracy is characterized as “a dictatorship based on an ideology and the enthusiasm of the masses, it is the outcome, as will be shown, of the synthesis between the 18th-century idea of the natural order and the Rousseauist idea of popular fulfillment and self-expression. By means of this synthesis, rationalism was made into a passionate faith” (Talmon 1952, 6). Thus, Rousseau’s concept of the general will, which is valid a priori, is both exclusive and unanimous. It serves as the foundation for totalitarian democracy and gives rise to numerous antinomies and conflicts.

The differences between left-wing and right-wing totalitarianism lie in their respective views and conceptions of the individual, as explained by the historian.

- For *left-wing totalitarianism*, the primary focus is on the individual, his reason, and his salvation. It is individualistic, atomistic, and rationalistic

in its definition of the class or the party as social actors – artificial groups. This ideology promotes a universal doctrine, asserting that humanity consists of a collective of rational individuals. It proclaims the inherent goodness and perfectibility of man; even when employing force, such actions are deemed justified as they expedite humanity's journey toward progress and harmony. This is why it is legitimate to use the word democracy for this totalitarianism.

- For *right-wing totalitarianism*, the primary social actors are collectivities, the state, race, and nation – essentially social entities. This ideology denies the existence of a universal doctrine regarding humanity or universal values. It adopts an existential approach rooted in collective momentum and mass emotions, utilizing myths while perceiving man as corrupt and weak.

"Both may preach the necessity of coercion" (Talmon 1952, 7). For Talmon, it is essential to recognize people's enthusiasm for a modern messianic system "that makes them experience submission as deliverance" (Talmon 1952, 8). "The modern secular religion of totalitarian democracy has had unbroken continuity as a sociological force for over a hundred and fifty years," (id.) and the persistence and sociological influence of this phenomenon are overwhelming.

In contemporary messianic movements, the emphasis is on the individual, who is guided by personal reason and will in the pursuit of happiness on Earth, achievable through social transformations. Although the focus is temporal, it aspires to the Absolute of millenarian movements.

Talmon's study defines "a state of mind, a way of feeling, a disposition, a pattern of mental, emotional, and behaviouristic elements, best compared to the set of attitudes engendered by a religion" (Talmon 1952, 11). Attitudes that once crystallized form the substance of history through concrete elements, actions, and policies. For Talmon, these elements represent a form of secular religion. The most pressing issue is how the concept of freedom conflicts with the idea of an exclusive messianic pattern, which exerts a considerable sociological influence on historical events. Talmon emphasizes the importance of perceiving modern secular religion as an objective reality; only then can we fully understand the interactions among social actors, social contexts, and political dynamics.

Therefore, the concept of totalitarian democracy has its roots in 18th-century thought, characterized by the belief in an outcome shaped by social crises – a fundamental aspect of totalitarian democracy. This form of democracy relies on coercion and centralization, as it is founded on a perfectionist view of man. Individuals must be liberated from social traditions and any form of enslavement to attain rights and freedoms, free from dependence on traditions or institutions, in pursuit of an egalitarian social ideal. For these aspirations to become a reality, man had to destroy inequalities, privileges, and social statuses, as well as the various centers of power and loyalties, including social classes, professional groups, and local communities.

in its definition of the class or the party as social actors – artificial groups. This ideology promotes a universal doctrine, asserting that humanity consists of a collective of rational individuals. It proclaims the inherent goodness and perfectibility of man; even when employing force, such actions are deemed justified as they expedite humanity's journey toward progress and harmony. This is why it is legitimate to use the word democracy for this totalitarianism.

- For *right-wing totalitarianism*, the primary social actors are collectivities, the state, race, and nation – essentially social entities. This ideology denies the existence of a universal doctrine regarding humanity or universal values. It adopts an existential approach rooted in collective momentum and mass emotions, utilizing myths while perceiving man as corrupt and weak.

"Both may preach the necessity of coercion" (Talmon 1952, 7). For Talmon, it is essential to recognize people's enthusiasm for a modern messianic system "that makes them experience submission as deliverance" (Talmon 1952, 8). "The modern secular religion of totalitarian democracy has had unbroken continuity as a sociological force for over a hundred and fifty years," (id.) and the persistence and sociological influence of this phenomenon are overwhelming.

In contemporary messianic movements, the emphasis is on the individual, who is guided by personal reason and will in the pursuit of happiness on Earth, achievable through social transformations. Although the focus is temporal, it aspires to the Absolute of millenarian movements.

Talmon's study defines "a state of mind, a way of feeling, a disposition, a pattern of mental, emotional, and behaviouristic elements, best compared to the set of attitudes engendered by a religion" (Talmon 1952, 11). Attitudes that once crystallized form the substance of history through concrete elements, actions, and policies. For Talmon, these elements represent a form of secular religion. The most pressing issue is how the concept of freedom conflicts with the idea of an exclusive messianic pattern, which exerts a considerable sociological influence on historical events. Talmon emphasizes the importance of perceiving modern secular religion as an objective reality; only then can we fully understand the interactions among social actors, social contexts, and political dynamics.

Therefore, the concept of totalitarian democracy has its roots in 18th-century thought, characterized by the belief in an outcome shaped by social crises - a fundamental aspect of totalitarian democracy. This form of democracy relies on coercion and centralization, as it is founded on a perfectionist view of man. Individuals must be liberated from social traditions and any form of enslavement to attain rights and freedoms, free from dependence on traditions or institutions, in pursuit of an egalitarian social ideal. For these aspirations to become a reality, man had to destroy inequalities, privileges, and social statuses, as well as the various centers of power and loyalties, including social classes, professional groups, and local communities.

"Nothing was left to stand between man and the state. The power of the State, unchecked by any intermediate agencies, became unlimited" (Talmon 1952, 250). This new vacuum between the individual and the state, as Talmon specifies, leads to conformity, which is incompatible with participation in the multitude of groups and the diversity that existed in traditional societies until that time.

The historian notes the inherent incompatibility between an all-encompassing idea of human social existence and freedom, for man has two fundamental instincts: salvation and freedom. The attempt to realize both leads to *democratic totalitarianism*. The exclusivist tendency of a doctrine contains within it the inevitability of conflict, the potential to unleash terror in order to impose and defend it, and the noblest impulse degenerates into terror, for man has two fundamental instincts: salvation and freedom. The attempt to achive both leads to a form of democratic totalitarianism. The exclusivist nature of any doctrine carries within it the inevitability of conflict and the potential to unleash terror in order to impose and defend its tenets, causing even the noblest impulses to degenerate into acts of terror.

In addition to the growing intensity of political centralization and economic organization, the limited nature of freedom in a totalitarian democracy is primarily attributed to its adversaries – the opposition – which must be eliminated. This reality renders "the promise of freedom meaningless. Liberty will be offered when there will be nobody to oppose or differ – in other words, when it will no longer be of use. Freedom has no meaning without the right to oppose and the possibility to differ" (Talmon 1952, 254).

The sociologist, according to the historian, "may be able to attack the human urge which calls totalitarian democracy into existence, naming the longing for a final resolution of all contradictions and conflicts into a state of total harmony. It is a harsh, and none the less necessary task to drive home the truth that human society and human life can never reach a state of repose. That imagined repose is another name for the security offered by a prison, and the longing for it may in a sense be an expression of cowardice and laziness, of the inability to face the fact that life is a perpetual and never resolved crisis" (Talmon 1952, 254–255).

SACRALIZATION OF POLITICS

Emilio Gentile examines the phenomenon of political religions through the lens of the *sacralization of politics*, a reality that has endured throughout human history. This phenomenon takes on distinct characteristics in modernity, when, under the impact of secularization, it comes to manifest itself in the form of totalitarianism, of *political religions*. A religion of politics, he asserts, refers to the appropriation of sacred qualities by political entities. It comes to "claim for itself the prerogative to determine the meaning and fundamental aim of human existence

existence through an obligatory system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols"(*ibidem*). Since the 1920s, they have been viewed as political or secular religions, reflecting the unique characteristics of the totalitarian regimes that came to power.

The 20th century was marked by wars, revolutions, and the sacralization of politics through various political movements that infused human existence with meaning and value in the struggle against *evil*, positioning themselves as representatives of *good*. This sacralization of politics did not end with World War II; instead, it continued to manifest even in democratic states, often through civil religions or the emergence of leaders who were revered by the masses. In Africa and Asia, this phenomenon was particularly pronounced due to decolonization and the rise of liberation leaders. While totalitarianism is not an inevitable outcome of the sacralization of politics, as Gentile points out, it carries significant weight and importance in contemporary history.

This distinctive sacralization of politics coincides with the rise of mass society, which utilizes rituals, symbols, and formulas similar to those in religion. It also features leaders with redemptive qualities, intangible dogmas, and a mission of salvation.

Gentile identifies the following characteristics of this phenomenon (Gentile 2006, 138–139):

- It consecrates the primacy of a collective secular entity, placing at its core a system of beliefs and myths that define the ultimate goals of social existence. Additionally, it offers principles for distinguishing between good and evil.
- It encompasses an ethical and social code that links the individual to the sacred entity, instilling loyalty, devotion, and a spirit of sacrifice.
- The followers constitute a community of the chosen ones who perceive political action as a messianic mission aimed at the benefiting of humanity.
- It establishes a political liturgy for the veneration of the sacred collective, centered around the cult of personality that embodies it and through the symbolic representation of its history. This is accomplished by employing rituals that evoke significant events in the history of the chosen community.

The study of political religions is complex, particularly with the emergence of new forms that pose a genuine threat due to various instances of the sacralization of politics. These social realities are increasingly likely to arise in the context of crises affecting democracies, where phenomena such as social disintegration, anomie, weakened social solidarities, migration, and a range of acute social problems become prevalent. Gentile argues that the risk of new social dangers categorized as political religions remains unpredictable. Understanding totalitarianism and political religions can provide insights into contemporary sociopolitical issues

during a time of rapid social change, which leaves individuals and society vulnerable to new forms of totalitarian thinking with unpredictable manifestations.

H. Maier (2007), a prominent scholar in the study of totalitarianism and political religions, adopts a comprehensive approach in his works, emphasizing the contemporary significance and relevance of this phenomenon. Maier views modern totalitarian regimes as "forms of faith—quasi-religious subjugations to a higher, even absolute authority" (Gentile 2006, 9).

Maier questions whether the categories used to understand religion can be applied to these political phenomena. He observes that, although the dictators did not establish religions and were often anti-religious, they were perceived as authentic religious leaders. They inspired veneration, their teachings were regarded as sacred, and their followers viewed their activism as *fundamentally religious*. The followers were effectively baptized into a new ideology, serving the regime with fervor. These realities are difficult to explain without recognizing the extreme loyalty, obedience, and conviction to fulfill a mission, even at the cost of one's own life - traits that closely resemble religious phenomena. Maier concludes that totalitarian regimes were not intended to function as parallel structures to the church; rather, they represented a complete unification of church and state.

Philippe Burrin (1997) traces the genealogy of the concept of political religion, which originated during the French Revolution in the writings of Condorcet. With the establishment of political regimes in Italy, Germany, and Russia, the study of the relationship between religion and political power is reexamined. During this period, contributions from Voegelin, who discusses the impact of secularization, and Aron, who perceives it as a secular religion manifesting as a future salvation through a constructed social order, initiate the debate on the phenomenon of political religions and totalitarianism.

J. P. Sironneau, from the perspective of political sociology, defines political religions as a revolutionary form of millenarianism that emerges in turbulent, secularized historical contexts, during which the sacred dimension is transferred from religion to politics. The author argues that the value of this concept lies in its ability to stimulate and provoke further research. Consequently, research can explore several areas: the process of institutionalizing political religions and their relationship with the religious culture of the respective context; the study of politics in analogy with religion, including clerical structures (such as those of the Catholic Church) that resemble political parties, as well as their affinities with Gnostic movements; and the ways in which political structures utilize the religious culture of a society to establish an absolute mission and social authority (Burrin 1997).

In a social and political context marked by a resurgence of politically motivated violence, R. Griffin deems it timely to engage in a scholary debate about 20th-century totalitarianism. He views it "as an inherently unstable and

destabilising Western modernity (a term embracing capitalism), which after the First World War gave rise to various types of authoritarian regimes and totalitarian movements bent on overthrowing parliamentary democracy in the name of restoring stability or creating a new order" (Griffin 2004).

TOWARD THE LOST COMMUNITY: THE TOTAL STATE

In 1934, historian C. Dawson analyzed the growth of state power in relation to the individual in his article *Religion and the Totalitarian State*. He argues that the modern state increasingly conquers various spheres of social life, becomes more centralized, and leads to the politicization of society and culture. As a result, contemporary politicians today face a growing array of sociological issues, unlike in the past when their primary responsibilities were to maintain internal order and to defend national borders, as Dawson emphasizes. One of the most significant consequences of this shift is the establishment of a universal education system, which is now under state control to shape and influence public consciousness. Additionally, the introduction of compulsory military service and state control over the economy are critical developments. Dawson identifies these factors as essential, partly due to the influence of socialism and the organizational demands of industrial society. The state's encroachment into various aspects of society is a universal trend that transcends any single political party, whether communist or fascist. Notably, the foundational elements of the totalitarian state were established by liberalism long before, as a consequence of the French Revolution.

With regard to religion, the historian notes the violence with which the communist state operated, acquiring unlimited power and control, while Christianity was perceived *as a rival alternative* for salvation. Communism evolves into more than just a mere political system; it transforms into a profound spiritual creed, a comprehensive system of thought, and an ideological philosophy. In the context of scholarly inquiry, the fascist paradigm emerges as the most exemplary, given its clear advocacy for the necessity of a robust state apparatus. The totalitarian regime does not deliberately antagonize religion. In Italy and Austria, for exemple, the regime has recognized religion in a manner similar to that of any other democratic state.

If one seeks to research the concept of total state, the fascist type is the most representative, as it proclaimed the necessity of the total state. The totalitarian fascist state is not inherently hostile to religion; in Italy and Austria, it acknowledged religion like any other democratic state. In Germany the situation is different because "there is a strong strain of racial and political mysticism in National Socialism, which involves a serious danger of conflict

between Church and State. It is not that the Nazi movement is anti-religious. The danger is rather that it has a religion of its own which is not that of Christian orthodoxy" (Dawson 1934, 8).

What form will the new state take? Dawson inquired. It will be universal, omnipotent, accompanying citizens *from cradle to grave*. It will not tolerate interference in education by other organizations; it will control public opinion through propaganda, the press, and the film industry. In democratic totalitarian states, "there will be no department of life in which the state will not intervene and which will not be obliged to conform to the mechanized order of the new society" (Dawson 1934, 12).

In 1935, C. Dawson published *Religion and the Modern State*, a seminal work in the field. In this publication, Dawson analyzed the relationship between the state, religion, and church in the context of totalitarian ideologies, an outcome of the movement triggered by the French Revolution. According to the historian, the conflict is not between democracy and totalitarian regimes. Rather, conflict exists in reality because of the existence of the state itself and its manner of relating to the entire social structure, including religion, culture, and the economy. The state is undergoing a process of increasing complexity as a result of the uniformizing forces that are transforming the human culture. This phenomenon is evident in various regions, including the United States, England, Germany, and Italy, where there has been a noticeable increase in mechanization of human activities. Therefore, "we might expect to see the rise of democratic totalitarianism which will make the same universal claims on the life of the individual as the totalitarian dictatorship of the continent." (Dawson MCMXXXIX , 3).

Resistance to these increasingly total forces, contained in the institution of the state, cannot come only from politics because its roots are cultural and spiritual, and therefore through forces that transcend the strict manifestation of politics. As the impact of modernity on the dissolution of traditional social structures attests, there is no longer any intermediary power between the individual and the state to temper its power. These social changes, which have a major impact on individuals and communities, are documented by the founders of sociology, with the state increasingly imposing itself on the individual and society, up to totalitarian political regimes. Therefore, Dawson proposes a solution that goes beyond the sphere of politics to exercise resistance, the causes of which are deeply cultural. Politics is the dimension in which the effects of these cultural crises manifest, and the solution cannot be strictly political.

The total state claims the individual in its entirety, does not conceive of a rival, it wants "to go beyond the practical utilitarian functions of the individualist State and to embraces the whole of life. It seeks to be, not meerly an association for the maintenance of peace and order and the rights of property, but a spiritual community, a fellowship through which the individual attains a higher and more complete life than he can realize by any form of private association" (Dawson MCMXXXIX, 131).

CURRENT IMPLICATIONS OR *TINA*?[3]

The study of totalitarianism remains challenging for researchers, particularly in the context of the emergence of new forms of totalitarian thinking. The contemporary social and political landscape is characterized by the emergence of extremist movements, political and military violence, and rapid progression of artificial intelligence. The lessons of the past, as highlighted by historians, writers, sociologists, and philosophers who directly experienced the emergence of the total state, remain relevant today.

Warnings about the uncontrolled powers of the state (or supra-state structures) over the individual, the sacrifice of freedom in the name of security, the disintegration of communities (large-scale migration), and the emergence of communication systems (vulnerable to manipulation and censorship) can be understood through lessons from the last century.

Among the characteristics of political religions, one can recall the proclamation of absolute truth, the awareness of a major deficiency in society, the implementation of concrete measures and actions to resolve the crisis, the use of violence to fulfill the mission, the annihilation of opposition/criticism, and military state structures to impose a new socio-political order. In this phenomenon, two crucial poles emerge: the savior elite and the popular masses composed of equal individuals. The declared objective is realized through mechanisms that encompass centralized power, submission to the prevailing will, physical control of individuals, eradication of opposition, and deconstruction of social structures that imperil the prevailing order.

As Voegelin illustrates, political religions are rooted in various forms of *Gnosis*. He points out that a deficient social state results from a corrupt organization, along with the belief that this state can be altered through the brutal transformation of both the individual and the social order into a more desirable state.

The state, the main actor in the implementation of totalitarianism, can be saved through radical reorganization in a struggle in which the self-proclaimed *good* confronts the *evil* that has been observed in the past. That is why R. Aron prefers the concept of secular religions. As J. Talmon demonstrates that the tradition of totalitarian democracies has a continuity of more than a century in European culture, and the receptivity for a messianic political system has determined the experimentation of *submission as deliverance* (Talmon 1952). The sociological impact of this concept is significant.

As demonstrated by J. Talmon, this reality "is another name for the security offered by a prison, and the longing for it may in a sense be an expression of cowardice and

[3] Slogan used by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, promoter of neoliberal policies in Philip Mirowski, Dieter Plehwe, *The Road from Mont Pelerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Harvard University Press, 2009; Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste, How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown.* London, New York, Verso, 2013.

laziness, of the inability to face the fact that life is a perpetual and never resolved crisis" (Talmon 1952, 254–255). Moreover, C. Dawson identifies three key characteristics of totalitarianism: the authority of the party, a hierarchical organization, and the complete submission of its members, as the state intervenes in every aspect of society.

If state power peaked in two totalitarian forms–fascism and communism – then the current challenge lies in identifying the risks associated with the emergence of new totalitarian ideologies and expressions. Given that state powers have diminished in the era of globalization, do the risks of reinstating and supporting totalitarian manifestations also lessen? Is the era of totalitarianism over due to the weakening of state power, or do conditions still exist for the emergence of neo-totalitarian manifestations in society?

The answers to these questions must consider current technological advances and the development of artificial intelligence systems. New paths to individual and collective salvation may be developed, making the concept of secular religion a challenging topic for researchers.

We consider the concept of *political religion* to be adequate for understanding and explaining 20th-century totalitarianism, with the following elements: the state as the main actor; the masses; a doctrine of salvation with total and indisputable truth; actions, behaviors, and institutions to achieve an objective and a state of perfection for man and society; and the necessity of sacrificing human life, with any form of violence being justified.

At the same time, the basic structure of the new type of totalitarianism concerns elements such as established truth/doctrine, international supra-state power centers, means of imposition (economic, political, force through control of communications and elites designated to promote specific values), and atomized popular masses (public/target groups). In these new forms, we find the decreeing of an absolute, incontestable, and supreme truth, which cannot be questioned or criticized; supra-state institutional and power structures to which states are accountable; various transnational masses with economic or socio-cultural transformation goals; consolidated force institutions, national or private (army/private force structures); and communication based on new information technologies, with allowed or blocked communications according to a pre-established truth.

We consider these neototalitarian manifestations as the *new secular religions* of the globalization period, an era marked by what has been called *inverted totalitarianism*[4]

[4] Wolin, S. S. 2008. *Democracy Incorporated, Managed Democracy, and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press. "A new type of political system, seemingly one driven by abstract totalizing powers, not by personal rule, one that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, that relies more on 'private' media than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events" ' (p. 44). In a *managed democracy*, "the advanced stage of the art of opinion construction and its manipulation is indicative of the forces molding the political system. It combines advanced technology, academic social science, government contracts, and corporate subsidies" (p. 60).

or the consequences of *post-democracy*[5]. The current reality of the new secular religions can be seen in the creation of numerous currents of total social thinking in various fields by promoting specific ideologies applied to atomized individuals organized into client masses subject to manipulation or computer censorship. We have an ideology of nutrition, body discipline, the reconfiguration of identities, the challenge of climate change, transhumanist ideology, the inevitability of salvation through artificial intelligence, the ideology of personal development psychology, and diverse types of spirituality.

If *political religions* are easy to identify, with ideologies, borders, and armies, neototalitarianism (*new secular religions*) is much more fluid, without physical borders, developing particular types of thinking in the form of a single salvation/alternative. Thus, the argument *TINA* – there is no alternative – or opting out becomes impossible or extremely difficult. The risks of new types of neototalitarian realities are becoming a reality.

REFERENCES

ARON, R. (2002). *The Dawn of Universal Humanity, Selected Essays from a Witness of the Twentieth Century*. Basic Books.

BARRY, G. (2015). Political Religion: A User's Guide, *Contemporary European History* 24 (4): 623–638.

BURRIN, P. (1997). Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept. *History and Memory* ½ (9): 321–349.

DAWSON, C. (1929). *Progress & Religion, An Historical Enquiry*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press.

DAWSON, C. (1952). *Undestanding Europe*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press.

DAWSON, C. (1972). *The Gods of Revolution*. Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press.

DAWSON, C. (1934). Religion and the Totalitarian State. *The Criterion, A Litarary Review*, vol. XIV, No. LIV, october.

DAWSON, C. (MCMXXXIX*). Beyond Politics*. London: Sheed &Ward.

GENTILE, E. (2005). Political religion: a concept and its critics – a critical survey. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (1): 19–32.

GENTILE, E. (2006). *Politics as Religion*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

GONTIER, T. (2013). From "Political Theology" to "Political Religion": Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt. *The Review of Politics 75*, pp. 25–43.

GORDON, D. (2011). In search of limits: Raymond Aron on 'secular religion' and communism. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, pp. 1–16.

GRIFFIN, R. (2004). Introduction: God's counterfeiters? investigating the triad of fascism, totalitarianism and (political) religion. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, pp. 291–325.

[5] Crouch, C. *Coping with Post-Democracy.* (2012, 07). Retrieved from Fabian Society: https://www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Post-Democracy.pdf

MAIER H. (ed.) (2007). *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Volume III, Concepts for the comparison of dictatorships: theory and history of interpretation*. Routledge.
MAIER, H. (2007). Political Religion: a Concept and its Limitations. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (1): 5–16.
NYIRKOS, T. (2021). The Proliferation Of Secular Religions: Theoretical And Practical Aspects. *Pro Publico Bono – Public Administration*, pp. 68–85.
PAYNE, S. G. (2005). On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and its Application. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (2):163–174.
ROBERTS, D. D. (2009). 'Political Religion' and the Totalitarian Departures of Inter-War Europe: On the Uses and Disadvantages of an Analytical Category. *Contemporary European History* 18 (4): 381–414.
SEITSCHEK, O. H. (2021). Totalitarianisms as Political Religions in the 20th Century. Historical And Philosophical Reflections. *Pro Publico Bono – Public Administration*, pp. 44–67.
TALMON, J. L. (1952). *The originis of totalitarian democracy*. London: Mercury Books.
VLIEGENTHART, D. (2020). (Re)Introducing "Secular Religion": On the Study of Entangled Quests for Meaning in Modern Western Cultures. *Numen* 67 (2–3): 256–279.
VOEGELIN, E. (1959). *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism, Two essays*. Washington: Regnery Publishing, INC.
VOEGELIN, E. (2010). *Religiile politice.* București: Humanitas.
VOEGELIN, E. (2011). *Autobiographical Reflections*. Columbia and London: University Of Missouri Press.