

## ARENDRT'S POLITICAL THEOLOGY – FROM POLITICAL RELIGION TO PROFANATION

Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong... (Machiavelli 2015: chapter XV, p. 48)

In *Between Past and Future* Arendt reflects over Machiavelli as a figure of transition that marks the threshold of our time. With Machiavelli is born the idea of the political and freedom, of political freedom. The religious and the political are severed from each other, and a space for human freedom and action is opened up. The Prince was no longer to govern in order to reach God-given goals but follow his own *virtu*. With Machiavelli, politics is about 'to learn not to be good' (Arendt 1977:137). Machiavelli does not advise the Prince to be vicious, only to act independently of the Church and follow the logic of the political rather the religious.

There is however an ambiguity here which regards freedom. Freedom was for Machiavelli the freedom to found a state. It is after having determined this that Arendt (1977:139) compares Machiavelli with Robespierre and Lenin. All three 'revolutionary' figures legitimized violence referring to the fact that one may kill in order to found a republic (Arendt 1977:139). In other words, freedom is a double-edged sword: it gives man the ability to act freely, but it also makes possible a violence of new dimensions. Terror is, in this sense, a modern phenomenon.

That Machiavelli is the thinker of freedom and violence is for Arendt an absolutely central idea. Nazism, after all, contained a perverted idea of human freedom. Perversion did not only consist in its transformation of freedom into an attempt to eliminate the human plurality, but also in the fact that with Nazism religion was resurrected as a man-made political religion. Secularism made it possible for the human to take the place of God. As God created the world out of nothing, man could now create the political community *ex nihilo*. This logic

found a perverted expression in the anti-utilitarian logic of the camps. The camps were the manifestation of a political sovereignty, which does not, as in Machiavelli, seek to establish a state but which turns certain groups' extinction into its prime target.

In this article we elaborate on Arendt's take on the religious and the political, on how the religious and the political interact and merge in modernity, especially in Nazism. Significantly in this respect, the religious appears in Arendt's work in three different forms. First, in the usual sense of the word, as a form of religiosity foreign to the logic of the political. Here religion is grounded in a specific sector (the Church) and a special logic (faith), that is, religion as Christianity or Jewish faith and the being Christian or Jew (being a Jew is something Arendt discusses at length but it is not a discussion that is important in this context).

Second, we have the secularized or political religion. 'Religion' in this sense occurs when man tries to act as a deity, as sovereign. Transcendence is denied in the attempt to become secular God, that is, to become the supreme and unconditioned ruler that can create a world without limits of any kind. Nazism and Stalinism are political religions in this sense. This political religion is an atheistic religion in its denial of any form of transcendence.

But there is also a third form of religiosity that we can, following Benjamin, call a weak messianism, which, on the one hand, stresses human exposure in relation to something that transcends the individual and, on the other hand, accepts that this transcendence can never take the form of a divinely ordained authority, of a rule set. Arendt's thinking of the republic, public deliberation, action and natality is infused with this 'weak messianism'. It is a secular transcendence that allows for a given community to stay open towards the coming of the new and towards the plurality of human political existence.

Both the classic understanding of religion, of abiding to religious authorities, and the political religion, of abiding to a *Führer* as a sort of secular God, deny human freedom. Thus, Arendt seeks to articulate that which lies beyond the individual on a profane basis, positioning herself both in opposition to the earthly sovereignty (the authority) and the divine (transcendence). That which transcends them both is the notion of the democratic political community: the republic.

For to live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be

confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behaviour, but the elementary problems of human living-together. (Arendt 1977: 141)

It is crucial for Arendt to stress that Nazism is not a new religion in so far as it lacks transcendence. If one coins this form of religiosity a political religion (or secular religion), the emphasis should be on the first word, the political, and on the fact of the this-worldly nature of the phenomena. But it is not just a denial of religion as religion, it is in being a totalitarian politics also a denial of the very essence of politics. Arendt is therefore highly critical of Voegelin's plea for a new political religion:

I know that problems of this sort can be avoided if one interprets totalitarian movements as a new – and perverted – religion, a substitute for the lost creed of traditional beliefs. From this, it would follow that some 'need for religion' is a cause of the rise of totalitarianism. I feel unable to follow even the very qualified form in which Professor Voegelin uses the concept of a secular religion. There is no substitute for God in totalitarian ideologies – Hitler's use of the 'Almighty' was a concession to what he himself believed to be a superstition. More than that, the metaphysical place for God has remained empty. The introduction of these semi-theological arguments in the discussion of totalitarianism, on the other hand, is only too likely to further the wide-spread and strictly blasphemous modern 'ideas' about a God who is 'good for you' – for your mental or other health, for the integration of your personality, and God knows what – that is, 'ideas' which make of God a function of man or society. This functionalization seems to me in many respects the last and perhaps the most dangerous stage of atheism.' (Arendt 1993: 406-7)

And she continues:

'Those [Voegelin among others] who conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents' (ibid.: 407)

So, what does (a politics of) real faith imply? Neither a sacralization of politics in the form of a political religion, nor a complete functionalization of religion which is the essence of atheism and which have been seen historically in the form of Nazis' and Stalinist regimes. Politics and religion should not become one and the same thing, a constitutive difference should be kept open. And the interval and openness, resisting becoming the same while insisting on the difference and on the importance of transcendence for politics, we call a weak messianism. Arendt's take on religion and politics is one of profanation which is a gesture that is as indebted to religion (or perhaps better theology, that is transcendence, but not in the form of a specific religious orientation) as it is to politics. It is a form of critique – and of action and community – that could not be thought of without some form of transcendence. So, essentially everything hinges on what 'weakness' here means. It is especially in order to clarify this in a non-speculative manner that we should read Arendt in relation to other thinkers of politics and religion today such as Vogelín, Derrida, Lefort, Agamben, Benjamin and Taubes. It is by investigating this weak messianism and its political negation in Nazism that Arendt makes it convincingly clear that some form of transcendence should still be respected.

We address Arendt's political theology in four phases. First, we briefly dwell on Arendt's methodology. Then we discuss why interrogating Nazism is central to examine the relationship between politics and religion in modernity. This is followed by a discussion of Nazism as a type of political religion. We focus here on totalitarianism both as an idea and actual institution, the concentration camp. We conclude with an assessment of Arendt's weak messianism.

### **The burden of our time**

The Nazi horrors, of course, raise the question of how it could happen. But the problem is that, when one tries to answer this type of question, any explanation turns into an excuse. But Nazism was not inevitable. The German romantic tradition, 1930's crisis, anti-Semitism and the fetishization of the State were among the factors that made Nazism possible. But romanticism is not Nazism, anti-Semitism is not the same as genocide, and technology first becomes fatal when it is used in the context of warfare and genocide (see Arendt 2003: 20).

For the same reason, Arendt was never completely satisfied with the title of her masterpiece, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. An alternative title, which was also used for the first version of the English release, was *The Burden of Our Time* (Crick 1997). There were several reasons why Arendt preferred this title.

First of all, the idea of an origin marked a kind of causality, suggesting that the seeds of Nazism were existent in German history and thus reducing history to the unfolding of necessity. Such evolutionism was incompatible with Arendt's philosophy, which had the human capacity of action as its focal point. Her analysis of Nazism is not really a piece of history, it is an investigation into a specific form of the political, into politics in the very form of denial of politics (freedom). In her reply to Eric Voegelin review of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she writes:

‘Thus my first problem was how to write historically about something – totalitarianism – which I did not want to conserve but, on the contrary, felt engaged to destroy. My way of solving this problem has given rise to the reproach that the book was lacking in unity. What I did – and what I might have done anyway because of my previous training and the way of my thinking – was to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism and to analyze them in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary. That is, I did not write a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history; I did not write a history of anti-Semitism or of imperialism, but analyzed the element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself. The book, therefore, does not really deal with the ‘origins’ of totalitarianism – as its title unfortunately claims – but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism; this account is followed by an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarian movements and domination itself’.

Second, the title *The Burden of Our Time* underlines that what Arendt was interested in was the present and not the past history for its own sake. That it has happened means that it can happen again (Arendt 2003: 23). Third, and finally, Nazism was also a burden in a more palpable sense. Arendt wrote her book immediately after the Second World War. Surprisingly, a reckoning with those who were Nazis is virtually absent in the book. It came

first with the book on Eichmann. But there are two other groups that are strongly criticized in the book: the modern mass, those who flow with the current and only exhibit apathy in relation to the political, and the Jews, whose idea of being elected isolated them from the rest of the society and to some extent mirrored the Nazi racial propaganda.

Arendt's method was *via negativa*. It was precisely by analyzing the destruction of all humanity that Arendt saw what constituted the human as human and as a political individual. Indeed, 'it was by descending into hell, into the abyss that had opened up, in 'dwelling on horrors' of the concentration camps, that Arendt was able to see so lucidly what is fundamental and vital for action, politics and living a human life' (Bernstein 1996: 99). Only later Arendt attempted to articulate this common humanity positively. Thus, we have two types of works: those concerning Nazism and of the destruction of the humanity, such as *The Origins* and *Eichmann*, and those which, like *Life of the Mind* and *The Human Condition*, try to articulate human capacities and potentials in positive terms. In order to explicate Arendt's political theology, we must relate to both types of works. These books deal with, on the one hand, a politics of death (Nazism, Stalinism, the camp system) and a politics of life (natality, being in common, the republic) on the other, and with political religion and weak messianism as their justificatory horizon.

### ***Creatio ex nihilo***

It is commonly held that the idea of God does not seem compatible with modernity, with expert-scientific ideals and capitalist/utilitarian ideologies. However, the rejection of religion does not amount to a consistent atheism. With secularization, the energies redeemed by religion do not disappear. In this respect Arendt makes it clear that secularization is not enough to get rid of religion. A utilitarian world, which has 'deprived individual life of its immortality' (Arendt 1973: 320) is prone to new, this-worldly illusions, even new gods and idols. In a secular world, the modern mass may fall back upon a religious mood – but no longer via an awareness of a constitutive guilt, of limitations and insufficiency but a political religion in which one starts to behave like a secular divinity.

That modernity has given birth to a type of malice of unprecedented dimensions is primarily due to the fact that the modern man has lost faith in the immortality of the soul. The masses no longer fear hell and no longer have an absolute and transcendent criterion for justice

(Arendt 1973: 446-7). Consequently, both paradise and hell turn into categories to be realized on earth. Nazism emerged in this context as a pseudo religion, as a religion without transcendence but with an earthly paradise (Thousand Year Reich) and hell (the concentration camp). A religion, where God is incarnated in people or in the Führer, the devil in the Jews. As such, the Nazi pseudo-religion was an answer to the orientation crisis of modernity, to the rootlessness of the masses (Ibid). This paradise and this hell are a 'flat' version without the proper religious transcendence. In her reply to Eric Voegelin, Arendt writes:

When I used the image of Hell, I did not mean this allegorical but literally: it seems rather obvious that men who have lost their faith in Paradise will not be able to establish it on earth; but it is not so certain that those who have lost their belief in Hell as a place of the hereafter may not be willing and able to establish on earth exact imitations of what people used to believe about Hell. In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more 'objective,' that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature. (Arendt 1994: 404)

When belief in a divine transcendence disappears there opens up a space for the totalitarian state. The 'totalitarian' must in this sense not only be understood as non-democratic, but also as a new phenomenon that differs from the classical despotism as defined rule without law by being a rule by law. With the totalitarian law, the distinction between human and divine rule disappears. Hence Führer's words, for Eichmann, amounted to a divine law (Arendt 2003: 43). In this sense, in Nazism, religion becomes plastic, it become an instrument used to subdue the masses. The same applies to the human nature; understood no longer as a limitation or condition, the human nature becomes something one can master and shape at will. Being bound to one's nature and having unlimited freedom amounts to one and the same in so far as the Arian essence is to create *ex nihilo*. And it is the secularization itself that enables this sacralization of the state, the race and the Führer.

As such, the idea of playing God is intimately connected with totalitarianism. But it should be noted that the concept of totalitarianism is, in many respects, problematic, and we must therefore clarify our own and Arendt's use. One can distinguish between two understandings of totalitarianism, corresponding to the two levels of the political. The first, and the most

common, is to understand totalitarianism as an institutional system in which total control is exercised. The total state is one in which there is no space for action and no freedom. But such a state has never existed. Even Nazism was far from being totalitarian in this sense. The relations between the Nazi organizations were often opaque, and the coordination between them deficient. Organizations constantly competed with each other, and which was to win was far from predetermined. One can speak of a kind of institutional Darwinism, where the individual institutions struggled for the Führer's favour (Arendt 1973: 368, 413). Further, this conceptualization of totalitarianism is problematic also because it is often used as an excuse for inaction rather than as an explanation. Hence Eichmann could argue that he only did what he could not avoid doing. If he had not executed the orders, another would have been put in his place. A state has, however, never total control over its subjects. There is always an opportunity to do something.

However, it is not the case that Arendt did not draw on this first understanding of totalitarianism. She does that especially in relation to the restriction of the rights and freedoms of the Jews (see Arendt 2003: 33). The point is rather that Arendt is not especially original here. Therefore, her use of the term in the second sense is of particular interest and especially in relation to our discussion of political religion and political theology. In this second sense the concept refers to the notion of self-creation, to the fact that the state, the people or the Führer, is given without reference to anything other than itself. As such, the concept is in tune with what Jean-Luc Nancy would call immanentism (1991: 56-57). Totalitarianism as immanence is the denial of any transcendence, be it in the thinking of the community, the law, obligation or responsibility. Totalitarianism in this prism is an ambition to eradicate everything that cannot be subsumed under a given project, replacing the endless dialectic of history with the notion of a goal that realizes itself in history. Thus, in Nazism, the law of race becomes the measure of everything else; in Stalinism, the laws of history. What we have here is a political-theological understanding of totalitarianism in contrast to the first, more institutional definition.

Crucially, propaganda, the totalitarian spectacle, plays a crucial role in this context. Propaganda is necessary for totalitarianism for it exists 'in a world which is itself nontotalitarian' (Arendt 1973: 342). Propaganda is its totalizing instrument based on 'sheer imagination' (Ibid. 371) fuelled by a 'contempt for facts' (Ibid. xxxii), and aims at creating 'a perfect world of appearances' (Ibid. 371):

Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. (Arendt 1973: 353)

Debord was to describe the spectacle as ‘the material construction of the religious illusion’ (1983: 20). Similarly, in Arendt, we have a perception of the totalitarian spectacle as superstition, which always originates in irrational, imaginary fears and unrealistic hopes. Superstition is grounded in ‘imagination’, in treating non-existing things as if they exist (Spinoza 1993: 55). In Arendt, too, superstition is a consequence of being subjected to one’s passions.

But superstition is not only an epistemological matter. There is an intrinsic relation between superstition and despotism. Though, unlike past despotisms, totalitarianism is a rule by law. Not a law in the traditional sense, something that restricts the individual, but instead a flexible law which is constantly re-created in its application. The totalitarian movement identifies itself with the law’s source. Arendt emphasizes that the totalitarian movement is always in motion; its movement becomes the law. The law ceases to be territorialized as something which delimits, and turns into something that realizes itself in history through this de-territorialization. And yet totalitarianism is not nihilism. The law is still something which must be obeyed and which asserts itself with a ruthless logic. Indeed, the law’s imperative, territorial de-limitation, unfolds in totalitarianism as escalating terror (Arendt 1973: 465).

By lawful government we understand a body politic in which positive laws are needed to translate and realize the immutable *ius naturale* or the eternal commandments of God into standards of right and wrong. Only in these standards, in the body of positive laws of each country, do the *ius naturale* or the Commandments of God achieve their political reality. In the body politic of totalitarian government, this place of positive laws is taken by total terror, which is designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature. (Arendt 1973: 463)

Nazism was 'religious' in a more conventional sense, too. That National Socialism used many religious metaphors is widely known. This use cannot be explained as merely an expression of cynicism and power politics. Nazism tried to create a new Church: *Mein Kampf* would be the new *Bible* and Der Führer the new Prophet who brings the revelation further. Likewise, the dishonourable Christian cross, a symbol of suffering and failure, is replaced with the swastika (see Goux 1980: 4). Essential in any religion is the notion of the divine and sublime, an instance, which values human life, turning it into a part of a larger goal. Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf*:

Any idea may be a source of danger if it be looked upon as an end in itself, when really it is only the means to an end. For me and for all genuine National-Socialists there is only one doctrine. PEOPLE AND FATHERLAND. What we have to fight for is the necessary security for the existence and increase of our race and people, the subsistence of its children and the maintenance of our racial stock unmixed, the freedom and independence of the Fatherland; so that our people may be enabled to fulfil the mission assigned to it by the Creator. (Hitler 1966: 148)

The Nazi were 'called', they were the people who must realize God's Kingdom on Earth (the thousand year reich). That this is the Nazi's mission must be understood in the light of the imagined rivalry between the German and the Jewish people. Many have thus understood the symbolism of National Socialism in relation to the jealousy, which the Arians felt towards the Jews as God's elected people (Rubenstein 1990; Hansen 1982; Goux 1980). The paradisiacal life, which Hitler was to bring back to the Germans, had the character of a life in accordance with the Aryan nature. The divine body in National Socialism was thus not as Yahweh or the Christian God, transcendent, but instead present as nature. It's not faith, creating man, but man as race, which 'creates' the faith. God is in man, when it follows the laws of nature. God's will is revealed in the German blood.

According to Hitler's chief ideologue Rosenberg's opus magnum, 'The Myth of the Twentieth Century', the Jewish belief that God created the world, as separate from himself, is objectionable. He contrasted this idea with the Aryan religion, in which the human being is constituted in its struggle against chaos. The principle for the structuring of this chaos was nature itself. This nature lived in man, expressed in the form of races (Pois 1986: 42). The religious, as such, expressed itself in man qua race, and the Jewish-Christian divide between

spirit and matter was thereby reconciled. The notion that human beings were equal before God or arose from the same source (from the monkey) was nonsense. Only the Aryans had the opportunity to live a dignified life in accordance with their qualities as mythically creative race. This life was an obligation, and any non-Aryan act was to desecrate God's creation (Hitler 1966: 182). An example of an atrocity could be artificially keeping the weak alive (Ibid. 98). Humanism was an expression of an unnatural, therefore un-Aryan, attempt to intervene in nature. You cannot resist nature, neither your own. No matter what disguise one uses, one's true essence will express itself (Ibid. 192)

In short, religion is for Nazism a religion of race, a religion where the divine is in the race. By the same token, human individuality and capacity to act are denied. The human is reduced to a carrier of tendencies. The Nazi way of choosing enemies reveals their contempt for the human being as an actor, as a responsible moral agent. The extermination of the Jews was not grounded in what the Jews had done but in what they were (Arendt 2003: 33). In the previous forms of despotism people were killed if they threatened the powers to be. The Jews, in contrast, were killed because they existed. People were no longer judged on their actions, as individuals. Agency and plurality became irrelevant. Thus, Nazism and Stalinism were a crime against the fundamental human condition as such, the human plurality; against 'the fact that men, not man, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (Arendt 1989: 7).

### **Evil – radical and banal**

Arendt's political theology is most visible regarding the conceptualization of radical evil and the camps, which she saw as a manifestation of radical evil. Of radical evil she writes that it occurs in a system where man has become superfluous: where one person allows herself to be replaced with another, as if they were things (Arendt 1973: 438, 457). This fundamental violation of humanity surpasses the standards of any previous evil, which is why it is 'radical'. Arendt considers that we are without critical grip when we need to describe this evil. The philosophical tradition and Christianity have in the past always understood evil as given by a defect, as a secondary phenomenon (Arendt 1973: 459). On the other hand, the Holocaust expresses a decided ill-will that cannot be explained in other ways than that is simply evil. It is not 'pathological' but grounded in blind rule following, an evil which has no interest but the realization of a divinely given plan.

Arendt's thesis on radical evil consists of several interrelated elements. Firstly, she argues that radical evil is radical for it transcends human sense. It is also radical in the sense of being unforgivable, as something that one cannot reconcile oneself with (Arendt 1973: 433, 459; 1994: 13-14). This claim is not based on the number of deaths but on the fact that there was no justification for killing Jews. Which is the second reason why radical evil is radical. The Holocaust broke with any utilitarian doctrine and with the notion that the human being had an intrinsic value. The camp, the 'guiding idea' of totalitarianism (Arendt 1973: 438), is also a symbol of this radical evil:

It is not only the non-utilitarian character of the camps themselves – the senselessness of 'punishing' completely innocent people, the failure to keep them in a condition so that profitable work might be extorted from them, the superfluousness of frightening a completely subdued population – which gives them their distinctive and disturbing qualities, but their anti-utilitarian function, the fact that not even the supreme emergencies of military activities were allowed to interfere with these 'demographic policies.' It was as though the Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win a war. (Arendt 1994: 233)

Radical evil is an evil out of principle: an evil, the Nazi were prepared to take to extremes even though they knew that it would eventually lead their own downfall. Indeed, the Nazi did not decrease but increased the speed of the exterminations when they understood that they were to lose the war. In this way crucial resources were drained, which otherwise could have been used in combat. Thirdly, radical evil was radical because it did the human beings redundant. It was an attack on the humanity of the human being. Thus, when Agamben claims that the Holocaust is indescribable, it is with reference to Arendt's and Levi's understanding of the Holocaust as an event that goes beyond the limits of any previously seen evil. Many have cited this central stanza from Arendt's *Essays in Understanding*:

Before that we said: Well, one has enemies. That is entirely natural. Why shouldn't a people have enemies? But this was different. It was really as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends could somehow be made for everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not for this. *This ought not to have happened.* (Arendt 1994: 13-14)

The camps verified the politics of Nazism, the essence of which was to make the impossible possible. As God created the earth out of nothing, the Nazis created their world by their own efforts. The Aryan essence or nature was their creative force. Owing nothing to anybody, they were their own masters. The camps, along the same lines, were the result of a freedom of action, which did not justify itself with reference to anything other than the fact that it was a sovereign act of will. A distorted perception of self-interest could perhaps explain the desire to kill the Jews, but not the systematic humiliation and torture.

However, radical evil must be thought together with the banality evil in order to understand totalitarianism as a system. What was most disturbing in Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem was his claim that in practice he had followed Kant's categorical imperative. Arendt believed that Eichmann's was an evil emanating not from a will (to do evil) but from a lack of thinking, of moral reflection. Eichmann was not a pathological criminal; 'banality' was a quality of his being rather than of his evil, which was 'monstrous' (Arendt 1978: 4). Eichmann followed the law, but did so 'blindly', without ethical reflection. Eichmann was frighteningly normal. The problem was that he did not 'think', that is, he was not able to reflect morally. He did not have the capacity to put himself in others' place and thus he did not doubt the words of Führer. He was 'banal' in the sense of thinking in rigid terms and his dependency on others. Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of his time (Arendt 1992: 287-8).

Lack of thinking, however, need not, automatically, lead to the inhumane treatment of the other. That is, Eichmann's rigidity may explain his adherence to the *Fatherland* but not the denigration of the Jews. In this regard, Eichmann transposed the distinction between the human and the nonhuman onto another distinction, that of between the private and the public. In private, he could behave morally; in the public sphere, he behaved instrumentally. As a cynic, Eichmann knew very well that the Nazi ideology is a construction, that the Führer was not God, and that the Jew was not a devil. Nevertheless, he carried on, in practice, as if these were uncontested truths. On several occasions he even distanced himself from anti-Semitism. For instance, he claimed several times that he personally had nothing against Jews (Ibid. 26). He even helped some Jews privately. However, helping an individual (private)

Jew does not immunize one against the (public) ideology. Eichmann's 'distance' did not undermine but merely sustained his anti-Semitism. It is precisely through the (mis)conception of a 'I' outside the reach of ideology that the ideology is sustained. The exceptions to the public rule (e.g. helping individual Jews privately) sustain the rule (extermination of the Jews). Thus, Eichmann's world had to stop at the gate to the camp. In a way, one could say that in Eichmann and perhaps also in Nazism as such one finds a dangerous form of religion: not a stubborn adherence to religious dogma but a religion without belief; not a religion that imposes limits grounded in dogma but one that allows for an unlimited form of sovereignty.

### **The concentration camps**

Once the Nazi regime had defined the Jews and the other marginalized groups as objective enemies without human qualities, they were brought to the camps to verify this ideology. In the camps it was made impossible for the inmates to remain human by eliminating freedom and spontaneity. The totalitarian rule is an experiment in breaking down the human individuality, in denying the fact that the individual is an irreplaceable and unique human being.

For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events. Nothing then remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dogs of Pavlov's experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react. (Arendt 1973: 455)

The camp signifies the reduction of the human beings from actors to reactive bodies. This took place in three phases. The first step is to eliminate the Jews' legal status, which is done through a double manoeuvre. On the one hand, they were positioned outside legal protection; on the other hand, they were simultaneously subjected to judicial regulation. In this sense the camps were not within a criminological domain. The two systems, prisons and camps, were kept strictly separated. The suspension of an individual's legal status was incompatible with the status of a prisoner in jail who remains a subject of law. When, later, the Nazi began to send criminals, too, to the camps, their difference to other prisoners was always marked.

The next step in the elimination of the prisoners was to annihilate them as moral actors. Arendt writes that martyrdom no longer makes sense in the camp (1973: 451). In the camps all hit the bottom. Those who have escaped this fate did so by stealing from other prisoners, by working in the *Sonderkommando* which kept the death machine running, or by performing police functions. It was impossible to maintain one's dignity and self-respect. The prisoners found themselves within what Levi described the gray zone. In this zone the differences between executioner and victim, good and evil, worthy and unworthy cease to make sense.

When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family - how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could solve the moral dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed? (Arendt 1973: 452)

Another important aspect in the destruction of human morality and the sense of self was the lack of space, which prevented the prisoners from having a minimal private life and maintaining personal hygiene. Typically, four shared a bed section. The prisoners were so close that they often could not remove those who died during the night. One had to fight for everything: for space in the bed, for access to latrines, for time at the sink, and so on. In Birkenau, for instance, there was one sink per 7,800 prisoners and one latrine per 7,000. Prisoners often suffered diarrhoea or dysentery, but they were only allowed to use the latrines at certain times and for a maximum of 10 minutes. Thus, everybody came to smell excrement, they were extremely dirty and filled with fleas and other parasites. And all this was intentional. Thus, one could reduce human beings to *untermenschen*. Then one could say: 'You see, they are animals, and the worst species, as well. You've been told this. They are ugly, they stink, they are weak, they are cowards and they fight each other to eat. No aryan would do such a thing' (Hitler, quoted in Razac 2002: 93-4). In this sense the camp was the space of a self-fulfilling ideology.

The third step consisted in eliminating the prisoners' individuality and initiative, in reducing them to biological bodies. Arendt notes that nothing was worse than watching the prisoners

marching to their death like lemmings. There was virtually never any rebellion in the camps. This is no more evident than in the so-called '*muselmann*', whose life was reduced to a struggle for survival. The *muselmann* testifies to the fact that the Nazi's power stretched out longer than to death. The *muselmann* was living dead, robbed of even his own death. The *muselmann* is a product of the exercise of absolute power. In Hegel's master-slave dialectic, death is the limit of power; when the slave dies, the master's power over him also ceases. The Nazi maintained their power over the Jews even into death. In the camps, no one died as individuals but as part of an industrial production of corpses, as a number.

To reflect upon the different ways to die indicates in itself a (minimal) distance from death. In this context it is worth noting that suicide was very rare in the camps. Suicide, after all, is a fundamental human act. What makes a human beings human is their ability to start something anew, their spontaneity, which Arendt calls natality. Suicide would have been a spontaneous action, which broke with the logic of the camp, and thus a minimal form of resistance. In the camps even this kind of initiative was denied. A survivor of the camps recounts in his memoirs about his attempt to commit suicide by joining a group to be gassed. The attempt was discovered by the guards and prevented. As they thrashed him, the guards were crying out: 'You bloody shit, get it into your stupid head: we decide how long you stay alive and when you die, and not you' (Stark 2001: 97). This despite the fact that their project was to eliminate the Jews from the surface of the earth.

The Nazis thought that everything was possible for them, which found a paradoxical expression in their attempt to prove that everything can be destroyed (Arendt 1973:459). The camps, in this sense, expressed the idea of creating something out of nothing. It was a perverted conception of free action and, for Arendt, this perversion has a religious aspiration. The concentration camp is literally a hell on earth.

### **An atheist religion**

For Arendt the answer to totalitarianism must be political, for only political action, accountability and common political institutions can act as a bulwark against the radical evil. Protection against this evil does not lie in turning one's gaze away from this world. On the contrary:

The hope for man in his singularity lay in the fact that not man but men inhabit the earth and form a world between them. It is human worldliness that will save men from the pitfalls of human nature. (Arendt 1990: 175)

Here we come to the final essential element of totalitarianism. We see what we saw in the concentration camps, albeit in a less radical form, among the populations of the totalitarian systems, the modern masses, who have lost the ability for political reflection and action. Although Arendt's criticism of the Jews is at times very harsh, her main criticism is aimed at the many, who, through their inaction and apathy, make totalitarian systems possible. Only through political action, which totalitarianism denies outright, we can create a vivid and vibrant society. It requires that we do not blindly follow totalitarian ideologies and systems of faith or the hope for a future paradisiacal condition. We have an obligation to the world as it is here and now.

Arendt insists on this world. Ours is a secular world that has doubt as its starting point (Arendt 1994:369). This secularism is a counter-measure to totalitarianism as a political religion. Arendt is opposed to fanaticism, mysticism and romanticism associated with the Nazi 'spirituality.' But there is another kind of religiosity, where the category of doubt is central. Here Arendt makes a distinction between the ethical and the religious, or between 'faith' and 'belief'.

Modern religious belief is distinguished from pure faith because it is the 'belief to know' of those who doubt that knowledge is possible at all. It is noteworthy that the great writer who presented to us in so many figures the modern religious tension between belief and doubt could show a figure of true faith only in the character of *The Idiot*. Modern religious man belongs in the same secular world as his atheistic opponent precisely because he is no 'idiot' in it. The modern believer who cannot bear the tension between doubt and belief will immediately lose the integrity and the profundity of his belief. The justification of the apparent paradox of calling atheism a religion, in brief, derived from the mental familiarity of the greatest of modern religious thinkers – Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky – with atheistic experience. (Arendt 1994: 371)

This zone of uncertainty and undecidability between the religious and the atheistic emerges also in Arendt's understanding of political community. Arendt relates the finality, or the

reflection on limits which doubt manifests, to the political community as natality. Action and thus freedom arise from the fact that human beings can always begin something anew. It is this characteristic that gives the individual its unique character and manifests its freedom. Arendt quotes the *Bible* in this context: 'Onto us a son is given' (1978: 247). Natality is a weak form of messianism for it does not take the form of sovereignty. It is about being in the world without asserting oneself in it (Gottlieb 2003: 139). It's concerned not with production but with action, with activities that point towards and constitute a larger community. Arendt unfolds this thought in the form of a critique of Plato. In Plato, the beginning (*arche*) and governing (*archein*) are intimately connected. The one who governs is the creator. In Plato's time, this was seen as completely natural, also because the two words stem from the same root. Later, however, the difference between the two meanings has been forgotten (Arendt 1973: 224-225). Indeed, it is exactly what happened under Nazism. In totalitarianism natality, the ability to start something anew, is subsumed under the Nazi movement. Thus, the beginning takes the form of sovereignty through which the beginning and governing merge together. Arendt's project is to separate *arche* and *archein* from each other, and to think governing, *archein*, in a new way, on the grounds of human freedom and plurality.

Arendt follows here Judaism; man's task is not to build a divine empire on earth. Arendt is not a millenarist (Gottlieb 2003: 139). But this does not necessarily mean that she has no religious sensibility. Hence her weak messianism where action coincides with a messianic figure that 'is decidedly *in* the world but not at all *of* the world – without ever forsaking the world for the sake of otherworldly salvation' (Ibid. 148). Being in the world, but in such a way that the individual maintains a commitment to something beyond itself. Salvation is, in other words, not beyond but is worldly. To be religious in an atheistic way, the faith must be weak. But it is precisely this weakness that enables one to put a distance to political religions.

As such, Arendt's weak messianism prefigures Derrida's 'messianicity without messianism', a messianicity which does not depend on any messianism, any Abrahamic religion, and does not follow any revelation. A messianism, which is not reducible to religion through any deconstruction. What is irreducible in 'messianism without religion' is an experience of the 'emancipatory promise' (Derrida 1994: 74). Likewise, in Arendt, the promise is grounded in a new beginning. In contrast to religion, the content of this promise is not determined. The 'new' cannot be foreseen and precisely as such, its absolute newness

forecloses in the return of the absolute as a religious figure. The Last Judgment will not occur. Non-religious messianism is a promise of the new independent of the monotheistic religions. The consequence of which is twofold. First, it becomes both possible and necessary to distinguish religion and faith; faith is not reducible to religion just as religion is not necessarily faithful. And second, since such messianic faith is a necessary but external condition for religion, it follows that that its religious appropriation (sacralization) is not an unavoidable process. In other words, profanation becomes possible.

### **Profanation**

Thus, while Arendt preserves the place of faith, she also ‘profanes’ religion, redefining religious terms in immanent terms, as profane relations. Since the origin of the sacred is the profane, the appropriation or sacralization of the common world, there is always a possibility for profanation, a potential ‘atheism to be extracted from a religion’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 92). Consider Arendt’s treatment of religious categories such as immortality and virtue. Against the postulates of conventional theology Arendt asserts that the soul can be immortal through ‘appearance’ in the public sphere, just as true virtue is related to ‘assuming a public role’ (1973: 77). In this way, as she profanes the religious concepts while preserving their affirmative core, politics becomes an alternative to religion. What religion calls ‘immortality’ is in fact something this worldly, which is grounded in politics. Effectively, ‘immortality’ can no longer be considered to be the property of a sovereign God, and becomes a common, universal virtue that is immanent. Only when it is captured by religion and institutionalized as a ‘sacred’ property of religion, separated from the domain of the commons, ‘immortality’ turns into an apparatus of regulation and domination. Seen in this prism, the problem Arendt articulates is how to think and act outside the religious apparatus. Human life does not have a predetermined purpose; it is the very absence of aim that makes it possible for human beings to dedicate themselves to praxis. It is this freedom to act which the governmental machine has separated from life and sacralised. But although it has captured praxis from within the domain of the profane, religion creates the illusion that the possibility of action is enabled by religion. As such, religious appropriation/alienation designates not merely an external force (juxtaposed to the profane) but a strategic field of formation in which religion seeks to govern the profane itself. Since religion is an apparatus

of capture, its power is always in relation with the profane, the world of the commons. Therefore, religion can always, in principle, appropriate, or 'capture' any idea, any force from this domain. Hence the two senses of religion: excluding the profane and appropriating it.

In this sense Arendt is a contemporary case for the political/philosophical re-appropriation of religious images. Everything depends, in this procedure, on the notion of immortality: overcoming the limitations of one's biological life through public/political action and speech. If we can think of immortality in materialist terms, we have no need for God or for the Sovereign. Along the same lines, in a profaned horizon, faith becomes the idiot's 'belief to know.' 'Salvation' can be understood in terms of political appearance. And 'evil' can be re-articulated as apolitical blindness, automatic rule-following and the loss of reality. In this way, Arendt's conceptual apparatus opens up the religious imagination to political thought and action. Instead of turning her back to religion, Arendt 'politicizes' its imaginary truths, accommodating them in her own discourse. In the same movement, the promissory aspect of religion is re-inscribed in the political tradition. It has absolutely nothing to do with Arendt's Jewishness. It is rather an insistence on a common political future that escapes the logic of identity. It is the transcendence of the divine inscribed within the political as that which enables and opens for the new. It is not a promise of an otherworldly salvation but one to be strived for in this life in and through the political community.

And yet, the differentiation between religion and politics cannot bring a full reconciliation. Religion in Arendt cannot access the political realm without perverting both politics and itself. In other words, the relationship between politics and religion cannot be symmetrical. Further, two very different understandings of salvation or immortality are juxtaposed here. On the one hand, Arendt contends that religion invented the individual immortality on the basis of an 'unpolitical, non-public' community (1973: 53), but on the other hand, true salvation consists in the rediscovery of the idea of immortality in modernity; 'without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics' (1973: 55). And most importantly, salvation can be attained in the actual world. In a sense, therefore, Arendt demonstrates that there is another, profaned path to salvation which politics alone can establish. In this sense Arendt's philosophy is antagonistic towards religion. Profanation necessarily obliterates the religious symbolic hierarchy. If one can be immortal for rational reasons, for reasons other than obeying divine commands, then politics itself can become a

way of life. Consequently, one could say, politics in Arendt not only tends but also intends to take the place of religion by re-appropriating its terrain.

In short, then, seen as a disjunctive relation, doubt (reason) and faith are, first, different and irreducible to one another, but they can co-exist in the domain of profane politics. Second, they can conflict with one another (as is the case with superstition versus natality). And finally, each is necessary. It is significant in this framework that the polarization between politics and religion, between political freedom and political-theological authority, is not only an antagonism but also a relation of agonistic action and speech.

## **Conclusion**

But we must recall that the relation of appropriation runs both ways. Just as politics could lead to profanation, to re-appropriation of the commons from the domain of the sacred, what is common is always prone to be appropriated or captured by religion or political religion. Such appropriation is what lies in the origin of totalitarianism. The difference between profanation and secularization is essential in this respect:

Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus, the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact. Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized. (Agamben 2007: 77)

Nazism's political theology is paradigmatic with respect to secularization for it regards modern political concepts as secularized derivatives of theological concepts which re-introduce the transcendent, magical into modern politics. In this sense secularization is ultimately a religious category. To be sure, the paradigmatic theorist in this context is Carl Schmitt who has claimed that 'all significant concepts' of modern political theory are merely 'secularized theological concepts' (1985: 36). Modern politics consists in re-instating the essentials of theology in a modern context, translating 'devil' into 'enemy' for instance,

‘miracle’ into ‘decision’, and so on. Even modern revolts and revolutions, in this prism, bear the mark of theology; ‘Prometheus arises in the shadow of Christ’ (Taubes 2009: 89).

In the context Arendt’s work performs a profane intervention into the problem of religion in modernity. She shows that political theology has always already been a political theory of power. The history of religion demonstrates the way in which a *political* theory of power and government has emerged in the guise of *theology*. In this sense one could claim that, contra Schmitt, all concepts of theology are political. If, in this prism, modern political theory has any significance, it is its attempt to profane the religio-theological mindset. As evidenced again and again, this mindset is deeply rooted in our culture and still defines the human condition today. Its strength is what proves why profanation is a significant category. And herein lies the real significance of Arendt’s work today as an intervention into the problem of religion in modernity at a time that contemplates the ‘return of religion’ with an intriguing passivity.

Arendt criticized the political religion fiercely. She thought obligation as an obligation to this world. And she saw natality as a response to the totalitarian destruction of the human world. Nazism sought to destroy this world, but every ending contains a possibility of a new beginning. The birth for Arendt is exactly something that points beyond the individual. As such it also holds a form of spirituality. It is therefore also crucial that Arendt ends her book on totalitarianism with a quotation from Augustine:

*Intitum ut esset homo creatus est* – ‘that a beginning be made man was created’ said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man. (Arendt 1973: 479)

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio (1998): *Homo Sacer. Sovereignty Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio (2007): *Profanations*. New York: Zone Books.
- Arendt, Hannah (1973): *Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Arendt, Hannah (1977): *Between Past and Future*. London: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah (1978) *The Life of Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace

- Arendt, Hannah (1989): *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah (1990): *On Revolution*. London: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah (1992) *Eichmann in Jerusalem - A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah (1994): *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Arendt, Hannah (2003): *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bernstein, Richard (1996): *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Crick, Bernard (1997): 'Hannah Arendt and the Burden of Our Times', *The Political Quarterly*, 68(1): 77-84
- Debord, Guy de (1983): *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix (1994): *What is Philosophy?* London: Verso.
- Derrida, Jacques (1994): *Specters of Marx*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel (2003): *Society Must Be Defended*. London: Penguin.
- Gottlieb, Susannah Young-ah (2003): *Regions of Sorrow. Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Goux, Jean Joseph (1980): 'Freud og nazismens religiøse struktur', *Sprog, Subjekt og Ideologi*, nr. 3, s. 1-12.
- Hansen, Nils Gunder (1982): 'Om Antisemitisme', *Litteratur og Samfund*, 35: 9-15.
- Hitler, Adolf (1966): *Min kamp*. Viborg: Jacob Paludans Forlag. English version: *Mein Kampf*. Translated by James Murphy. <http://www.greatwar.nl/books/meinkampf/meinkampf.pdf>
- Houellebecq, Michel & B-H Lévy (2011): *Public Enemies*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Kohn, Jerome (2003): 'Introduction', pp. vii- xxx i Hannah Arendt: *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo (2015): *The Prince*. Wisehouse Classics.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (1991). *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pois, Robert A. (1986): *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature*. London: Croom Helm.
- Razac, Oliver (2002): *Barbed Wire: A Political History*. London: Profile Books.
- Rubenstein, Richard C. (1990): 'Religion and the Origins of the Death Camps: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation' pp. 1-44 in Roger Gottlieb (ed.) *Thinking the Unthinkable - Meaning of the Holocaust*, Mahway: Paulist Press.
- Spinoza, Baruch (1993): *Ethics*. London: Everyman.
- Schmitt, Carl (1985): *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stark, Jared (2001): 'Suicide After Auschwitz', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14(1): 93-114.
- Taubes, Jacobba (2009): *Occidental Eschatology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.