

# **VULNERABLE GODS**

**Politics and religion in the  
current crisis of the West**

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Daniel Bell has provided us with several fundamental insights about social life in general and about our contemporary Western societies in particular. Chief among them is his view of the disjunctive character of most societies, ours included, during long stretches of time. He points to the gap between normative (and analytical) models and really existing societies, and to the hybrid, contradictory traits our contemporary societies do have. In this context, Bell points also to the peculiar process of re-enchantment of the world which has been taking place, of late, in our advanced societies, what he refers to as the return of the sacred (Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage* [WP], 1980, 324ff.).

I think these are extremely valuable views which intimate and ask for further development and debate. I simply intend to contribute here to the task from a particular angle, as I suggest that a simulacrum of religion, a self-understanding of the West in the image of an elusive god, lies at the heart of the modern West, both its culture and its politics; and as I further imply that this self-understanding clouds, or may cloud, the West's views on the nature of its current challenges.

1

Quite often, we don't choose our enemies. Our enemies choose us. In today's war, the West has been selected to be defeated, possibly destroyed, by its self-proclaimed enemies. But, why are so many people in the West so slow to reckon with this rather simple fact?

Maybe the reason, or at least one of them, lies in the peculiar understanding the West has of itself. A rather distorted interpretation of its own history leads many westerners to entertain some grandiose views, a mix made out of a dose of sensible self-esteem and a dose of hubris. When leaning on the side of hubris, as it often does, the West sees itself 'top of the world', and of a world which is gradually being made in its own image. In other words, it sees itself god-like. This suggests one of the reasons for the West's reluctance to accept the fact of having deadly serious enemies, because who (in his/her sound mind) would be willing to have God as his/her enemy?

Even while there are nuances that mark off the self-understanding of god-USA from that of god-Europe, common to both is the premise that they both embody a promise of peace and prosperity, liberty and happiness for all men and women of good-will, to be

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delivered in due time. In the meanwhile, the twin gods keep the world on track, so that it is to be feared that, were they to disappear, the world would fall back into chaos, an abyss of violence, superstition, intolerance and darkness.

This god-like self-image is compatible with heavy doses of self-criticism, but with a caveat. The West works out its number of self-congratulation by splitting in two halves intent on criticizing each other under the guises of religious-minded and secularists, left and right, and others. But underlying their mutual critiques lies a mechanism of mimetic rivalry. Each side comes out with its own formula for the West to perform better its quasi-divine role, to be the leading character in the play of history, and lastly 'responsible' for the world's good order and prosperity, much as the absolute monarchs of the good old days pretended to be responsible for their subjects' happiness.

## 2

Western cultural elites have provided a complicated repertoire of creeds and moral intimations to back this self-understanding of the West.

On the side of the natural sciences, the main thrust is in the direction of giving support to the Western hubris. It has been strongly suggested that the growth of knowledge was of quasi-divine proportions, and that, having eaten from the tree of science our home will become, in time, a sort of earthy paradise. The facts that increasing knowledge meant, also, increasing awareness of our ever greater ignorance, and that the knowledge so acquired was bound to remain conjectural, that is, the limits of the sciences, were largely left out of focus in the public mind. The strong implication was, too, that science promised deliverance from much of our human suffering, and this promise was treated as grounds for an entitlement to be claimed by present and future generations. Economics, social sciences and formal education completed the picture, and expectations dully followed that a scientific organization of society and the polity would handle all sorts of problems, promptly and efficiently.

On the side of the humanities (philosophy, history and arts), the story has been somehow more confusing. The West tried a blend of sorts between the classical and the Christian legacies that remained open to question. Next to it came an uneasy combination of remnants of the old beliefs with a sort of new polytheism: moral and legal humanism

more or less attuned to an appeal to civic and liberal virtues coexisted with various appeals to romantic individualism, to all sorts of communal gods (nationalism, race, class, communism, and the like), to the cult of sheer power, wealth and fame, and all the rest.

At the end, out of confusion and out of a series of painful disappointments, many people make do with a sort of situational ethics, according to which different rules are applied to diverse circumstances. This makes for a return of people to Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage (to Bells's 'aestheticism': WP, 338). In it (a) there is a 'yes' and a 'no' to every moral alternative which may be both explored and enjoyed by turns and according to circumstances, for the sake of enriching our experience, engaging in an experiment in living, or bringing about our sentimental education. Besides, in it (b) we bracket the fundamental questions about the meaning of the world, and decide to 'keep going', as we define the human condition as both aimless and foundationless.

This cultural relativism may reinforce the self-understanding of the West as god-like by a roundabout way through two converging paths.

First, we in the West are transformed into the last instance, the ultimate source for the beliefs we hold: we 'create' our world of meanings, and lastly the world tout court. We do not adhere (and give our assent) to a world which is already there, and given to us by means of faith (a grace handed to us by a God we could not easily handle) or tradition, or both.

Second, by the affinities this cultural relativism has with a style of politics, which it reinforces. Politics comes herein to support the message of divine lightheartedness.

Political leaders are surrounded, protected and constrained by media, parties and civil servants, and try to be responsive to the demands and expectations of a volatile environment. So that, while they may pretend to be true to their name, and 'lead', most of the time they are survivors and pragmatic manipulators which look for openings in a rather opaque world. When they explain or exhort their public, they resort to the cultural repertoire of their times, and in particular of their immediate surroundings, and pick up the cultural *topoi* to be applied ad hoc to the different scenes of the *commedia dell'arte* of politics, mostly playing them on a melodramatic key. They are, by turns, Christians,

humanists, nationalists, market-oriented, social-minded, family men or women, law-and-order types or empathetic with all sorts of lost souls.

They are, say, ‘inclusive’, and ‘on the move’. What this means is that the key for their success is to keep most people on board and persuade them to move along with the situation.

The implicit background assumptions for this pattern of behavior are a focus on today’s events, short memories, and an easy (and, hopefully, contagious) optimism regarding the future, in which either there will a solution to every problem, or we will be able to live, anyway, with the problems for which there is no solution at all. But it is obvious that only people touched by the divine grace can live this way.

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Lightheartedness, however, requires fair weather. Faced with rougher times, such as the current ones, the West, has a tendency, getting serious, to find refuge in repeating the mantra of the West being home to ‘liberal democracy, markets, the rule of law, pluralism and tolerance’. This is, no doubt, a very healthy combination of institutions and values, which may go by the name of an open society (or a civil society in the broad sense of the term, or a free society, or an order of liberty). The problem is, this normative model covers a fair deal of what the West is, and tries to be, but it’s only half of the story. Here again we find that embarrassing tendency of many in the West to imagine that just by naming things, those things come into being. God’s words may create the world out of nothing, but humans’ words are not that powerful. In fact, ‘really existing’ Western societies are mixes of open, civil or free societies, and of something else.

The normative model of, say, an open society can be realized (under certain general conditions), in full or in part, as the outcome of dramatic confrontations between human agents; and this outcome depends crucially on how these agents interpret the situation they face. But the fact is, the normative model of an open society is not the only operative model human agents use in our Western societies. Far from it. An order of freedom provides a framework of rules and dispositions, but most people may use it in a merely instrumental spirit, in order to go after their own goals, be them self-concerned or other-concerned, but possibly with little thought to the common good (that includes,

among other things, the defense of that order of freedom against internal and external enemies). Thus, underlying the normative model of a free society, there is the (different, yet related) normative model of a *societas cupiditatis*. And this applies to all sorts of *cupiditates*, Quite often, they refer to the goals of maximizing power, wealth and status for the individuals and their closest kin and friends and comrades-in-arms. Sometimes, achieving these goals imply the use of violence and fraud, which are (as Bell reminds us: WP, xxiii) the key vices of the last two circles of Dante's Inferno.

The tension between the normative order of a 'well-ordered' free society and the 'antinomian' model of freedom to do whatever we may decide is good for each of us, is part of the game of a Western type of society, and cannot be otherwise. The price to pay for it *should be* the self-understanding of this kind of society as a very human (not god-like) and fragile construction, which may self-destruct. The fact is, after a period of experimentation with a half-liberal society for say a hundred years till the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the West nurtured two 'civil wars' which became world wars, engendered two totalitarian regimes, which, again, spread all over the world, threatened liberty and had to be put down; all at the same time that science, technology, formal schooling, economic growth and media communications (should we say 'modernity'?) were flourishing.

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It seemed that the West had left behind the totalitarian nightmares (or in any case it has been busy forgetting the experience: witness the speed with which the memory of communism is withering away, particularly on the left), but now the West faces an unexpected, lethal hatred on the part of many, which questions its own survival. The challenge comes from people the West can only ignore or underrate at its own risk.

Its enemies seem implacable and cruel, but also, we may add, quite 'spontaneous'. They are not cogs of any sort of totalitarian machinery; in fact, their hierarchical dependencies are rather tenuous. They have made free choices of their own. They enjoy killing and even seem to enjoy being killed in the process, as if they were intent to turn both our free society and our *societas cupiditatis* upside down. The West finds now that, to its surprise, its enemies' hatred may be as free as its friends' love. Or as the complicity of many who sit on the fence and wait for the fight to end and take advantage of the West's weakening. Or as the indifference of many bystanders.

5

The enemies of the West are skilled at what they do. Well trained, highly motivated, they adapt at the situation they are in, and, after deliberation, they act deftly and without hesitancy. Though the West call them fanatics and irrational, they do give reasons for what they do, try to be consistent with what they consider to be universalist principles, and look fairly methodical. Their deeds match their words, their moods and feelings, and their local environment.

In the end, the 'god-like' Westerners are finding, much to their surprise, that they are neither much loved nor much feared. They thought everybody wanted to be like them. Now, they hesitate: maybe it was never true, or maybe it was all too true, and mimesis has engendered ambivalence and a strategy of appropriation and, in the end (as René Girard would suggest), of destruction of that very same model.

In the process, people who challenge the West have come to suspect the West is weak, and that, once it stands on its own, down to its bare essentials, deprived from its military and technological gadgets, it is quite vulnerable.

But the point is, if the gods themselves come to feel vulnerable, then this implies they are discovering they are gods no longer, only mortals and bound to disappear. Individuals, of course, will die; but the suspicion is, the entire way of life (that mix of the partially fulfilled normative model of an order of freedom, and a *societas cupiditatis* pointing in all directions) may be doomed.

## 5

The critical situation of the West is compounded by the recent and growing division between its two key parts, the US and Europe. But each part requires different treatment.

Being at a time when the US may be tempted to stick to a strategy fitting to a god-like personality while at the same time feeling threatened and vulnerable, asks for a careful understanding of the situation. But, looking at some of the tactical mistakes made by the US in the current war on Irak, and granted many of them could be near impossible to avoid in the heat of the situation, we may find helpful to speculate that these 'mistakes' may be taken as symptoms or cues that suggest that what is at work here is, sometimes, the

behavior that can be expected from people tempted to play god-like and overrate their powers.

This could possibly help explaining, at least in part, the carelessness of a diplomatic work made ‘from a distance’ at the time of establishing a coalition and persuading world public opinion (implicitly treated as a chorus which would stick to the script and keep to the sidelines); the (possible) infra-evaluation of danger that made for not having enough troops for the task of controlling the territory after the invasion (as if the mere presence of soldiers armed with sophisticated, ‘magic’ arms, and with ‘a halo of victory’ would be enough); the rather euphoric expectation that the troops would be greeted as liberators (again, an effect of ‘divine presence’); the excess of trust put on electronic intelligence (‘from a distance’, almost literally ‘from heavens’); the almost spot decision to dismantle the Iraqi army (thoughtlessly discarding the comparative advantage of people with [only] ‘local knowledge’ [lacking the necessary distance?], and with ‘down-to-earth motivations’ such as family survival and the need for an administrative job and a monthly salary [lacking purity of intentions, ideological clearances?]).

On the other hand, the way in which the debate has evolved in the US suggests a lack of self-confidence and a loss of ‘cool’ on the part of many that bodes ill for the future. It is disquieting to observe the 2004 presidential elections in which there are so many traces of a curious distrust that applies to both leaders’s ability to handle the situation. Maybe people distrust their leaders as much as they distrust themselves, who chose (and choose) them in the first place. The ideological polarization, the emotional divide, sometimes the vilification of the opponent suggest a sentiment of vulnerability, and anxiety on the part of people in search for a scapegoat.

Anyway, at least the US knows which its identity, its history and its borders are, and has proved willing and able to apply the means for a robust foreign and defense policy. In the case of Europe all these elements are missing; hence the process by which Europeans quasi-gods are learning their way back to reality is bound to be markedly different from that of the US. But this will have to be the matter for another discussion.

It seems unlikely that the West will learn to adjust to life under the new conditions, which implies accepting the fight its enemies impose on it (and to do so in its own terms, on the terrain of its choosing and according to its own rules) without going through even bigger traumas; since, say, the gods tend to overrate its power and the love and fear they inspire, and to underrate their enemies.

To begin with, the danger has to be dully named and recognized. The US, at least, knows first hand and from recent experience what a massively destructive attack means, and vaguely expects others to be much worse. Europe's memories of past horrors have become blurred, and now it keeps a low profile and hopes for the best, though at heart it possibly knows better. Many have a sense of being witness to a rehearsal of the 1930s. Some of our political manners become reminiscent of those times, including the resort to a rhetoric of moral indignation, ideological divides, and, last but not least, a somber mood in anticipation of difficult times to come and stay with us for long.

But then, the whole 'winding passage' will have to be traversed. Having journeyed that far, we may hope westerners will face the 'inevitable' in a mood of resolution, realism and humility. Humility in particular is needed in order to get rid of the simulacrum of religion that has fed, and still feeds, the West's fantasias of omnipotence. Those virtues are necessary for people to survive, and for their values and institutions to survive with them. They may require people to go back both to Kierkegaard's ethical stage and to his religious stage. Civic virtue as well as some form of religion are both needed for providing westerners with the courage to endure and face death in the name of something beyond ourselves.

To face up to grave and growing dangers involving risks of enormous proportions is in fact to face up to the limits of human control over the external world, and this task is both impossible and indispensable. It is an impossible task in that we can never guarantee the final result, no matter the extent of our resources. Human insanity or sheer malignity may always find a way: if not here, there and if not today, tomorrow. It is beyond the reach of any single society, however powerful it may be, or any generation on earth. But it is also an indispensable task, and we have to accept it.

We are bound together by bonds of mutual loyalty and respect, just as we are bound to the preceding generation which bequeathed us their world, and to the succeeding

one on which we shall bestow ours as their heritage. We may call the feelings involved in these bonds by many names, including the familiar Roman names of religion, *pietas* and subordination to a being higher than ourselves, or the Augustinian name of Love of God, as we move from a language of ultimate self-reliance to one of reliance on divine protection, and grace.

Thus, the 'return of the sacred' may be already among us, people of the West, not only in the forms of a moralizing, redemptive and mystical religion (Bell, WP, 348ff.), but also as a search to grounding not (only) our individual chances *in* life but (also) our collective chances *to* life, to keep on living, as members of a meaningful moral community.

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