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Review of Jeffrey Kaplan, *Apocalypse, Revolution and Terrorism: From the Sicari to the American Revolt against the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2018)
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I spent a good deal of my youth in deep conversation -- with God. For the most part, this was a one-way affair. He (not yet, She) was there to hear my secret wishes, patiently endure my complaints, fears and worries, or to share moments of joy. But no heavenly voices called me to "Save France!", to be a prophet "unto the Gentiles," or even to swing at a 3-0 count. At the very most, there might have been that "still, quiet" voice, more a visceral contemplative sense of conviction or doubt, more a felt urge to action or restraint. But, for the greater part, these responses tended to take the forms of *signs*. The spot of good fortune, the non-stop hitch-hike ride all the way home, the kindly gesture, just when I needed it - to me, this was how God joined the conversation.

In a way the history of serious thought in the West presumes a stage-setting like that. Forget expressly religious or theological thought in the West for the moment, and consider only ethical, moral, political, even esthetic thought. Try to imagine what Western philosophy would be like without God either at its center or even just lurking on the horizon. Imagine what Western philosophy would be without the idea of the Infinite and Limitless, the One, *Ens-a-se*, Pure Being, the Prime Mover, the Uncaused Cause, the Ultimate Good, the creator and sustainer of the universe and all the elaborate schemes of reasoning going along with them?

Jeffrey Kaplan's *Apocalypse, Revolution and Terrorism: From the Sicari to the American Revolt against the Modern World* is a book whose main protagonists live in exactly the same kind of world I have just described. For many of them all their public actions are *sub specie aeternitatis*. God is a constant player in every move they make. He (yes, almost always *He*) has His hand in every event. He is the beginning and the end, the *alpha* and the *omega* of every deed. The limitless horizon of reality afforded by partnership with God lets the characters around which Kaplan has organized his book think *big* thoughts -- *really* big thoughts - and, more to the point, launch really big, consequential projects of action - revolutions, popular uprisings, daring schemes of assassination, declarations of millennial

transformations, and so on. Yet the boundless ambition actualized by the certainty of divine cooperation of these visionary actions, once felt to be failures, typically collapse into utter hopelessness. The Sicarii certainty of divine guidance in the First Jewish-Roman rebellion corresponded inversely to the despair of the mass suicides of last 900 Sicarii at Masada.

What, in Kaplan's mind, is his book about? In the opening paragraph, he confesses that it is not about terrorism, revolution, or apocalyptic – despite the book's title to the contrary. Yes, elements of all three enter into Kaplan's story, instead “At its deepest level,” Kaplan tells us his book

is about the religious consecration of the simple act of negation. Or, in less rarefied terms it is about apprehending that the world is a fallen place, distant from the Word and Will of God, and in so seeing, refusing to either accept or condone its truths– its accepted modes of governance or its ways of life. (1)

Recalling my own initial reflections here, this book is about violent, God-validated, movements of radical change, equally convinced of the world's need for fundamental transformation as they are of God's participation in all things concerning the human drama. Students of such movements will find Kaplan's chronicles of their beliefs, however unevenly realized, a valuable source of conformational data (including mention of massive bibliographic resources) on the global phenomenon Kaplan has isolated.

What Kaplan has done is to provide the foundations for taking the next step in understanding these movements. That is to say that he leaves the researcher with much, much more to be done. Kaplan is surely right that a possible real-life *Red Dawn* needs more attention by vigilant citizen-patriots than ever, given the Russian intrusions into the 2016 American elections, about which Kaplan writes with such passion and urgency (Chapters 3, 4). Kaplan's call to “education” (177) clearly makes sense; it cannot be restated too often. But the reader is left to decide what *kind* of education will help Americans most. The Finns may rank first in education, such as in the STREM subjects. But the Finns also rank at the top in alcoholism as well. Education may help us sift through the blizzard of information and

misinformation made possible by the massive digital resources of our age. But formal education alone will not improve our sense of *judgment*. Just logging hours in the classroom cannot possibly be the magic formula for sorting political myth from political reality, for fact-checking one's personal Facebook newsfeed, or for divining the malicious trolls launching swarms of tweets, ready to tempt minds willing and eager for contact and communication? Only good *judgment* can. During the 2016 election, many Americans watched more than their share of offbeat RT, got slowly taken in by Jill Stein's *faux* rectitude, or were charmed of Stephen Cohen's compromised contrarian approval of Putin in *The Nation*, or might have heeded Cornel West's self-inflated prophetic subversions of Hillary. These did not mark educational deficiencies, but lack of *judgment*. Too many Americans failed the test of having *good judgment*. They couldn't keep their heads clear while their hearts were beating to other more seductive rhythms. How formal education teaches *judgment*, I don't know. Why did Americans so badly flunk 'smell tests,' when it came to RT, Jill Stein, Stephen Cohen and Cornel West, I still do not know. I know even less how I would try to *educate* others so to do either. Kaplan is unarguably correct in elevating education. Great start. But someone now needs to tell us how to "educate" citizens into *good judgment*.

Again, Kaplan serves up plenty of basic information. His sketch (1) defining those who appeal to God to sanctify murder and mayhem, *sub specie aeternitatis*, all in the interests to transforming a corrupt earth consecration of the simple act of negation, helps us identify people worth watching. Not only the Sicarii, Kharijites, the Old Man of the Mountain and his murderous *Hashashin* of old, but also the Ku Klux Klan, Al Qaeda, ISIS, Phineas Priesthood, and devotees of *The Turner Diaries*, *Hunter*, *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, or *The Bible's Book of Revelation*. Since the ambitions of these movements may be so much qualitatively greater than their abilities either to realize them or even control their impact, we want to know who these folks are. Kaplan's assembly of a roster of the different figures advancing these impossible aims - "a parade of seemingly stupid ideas held by idealists, fools, and fanatics who dreamed that, with God at their side, they could bring perfection to a fallen world" (25) also serves as a warning. In another vein, Kaplan, also spells out the recurrent motifs informing the worldview of these movement that he

believes continue to bedevil humanity. Such works like the aforementioned *Turner Diaries* and *Hunter*

perfectly exemplified forms of post-apocalyptic literature which sees no alternative to the End, and therefore it embraces the inevitable cataclysm in the faith that the millennial future will bring at long last perfect peace and terrestrial perfection. (58)

By attending to such a pattern, the vigilant can equip themselves to repel or escape these negating movements. Finally, for Americans troubled by the energy of such movements in their own country, Kaplan names names now notorious on the American political scene.

What this book takes away from the whole sorry episode are the contributions of InfoWars and WikiLeaks in destabilizing the American political scene- InfoWars in pursuit of a partisan agenda and WikiLeaks in support of something more global in nature. (96)

It would be ungrateful perhaps to end this review with what may seem a quibble. However, it was Kaplan's deferential allusion to Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* -- a book that I have often taught to many different groups of students, and which Kaplan likens to his own -- that prompts my concluding remarks. The comparison of Kaplan's book to Cohn's will be immediately obvious to anyone having read both. In a summary statement, Kaplan confesses his bafflement by the "parade of seemingly stupid ideas" (25) these negating movements propagate; deferring to psychoanalytic metaphors, Cohn declares that in millennial movements he sees only "paranoid fantasies"(Cohn, 1970, p. 73). Either way, we are dealing with what both authors essentially regard as ruinous social pathologies, refractory to reason and empty of compassion. Now, both authors excel at *describing* these associations in great detail, but neither, I would submit, make a major effort to *explain* them. Although Cohn and Kaplan may differ about why they think they do back off explanation, they may have more in common than meets even their eyes. Cohn, the historian, can conceivably be quite content with bringing to light an *historical phenomenon* that he could also justifiably feel has been overlooked. Having done that, he could reasonably feel that he's done enough. Given the

longevity and celebrity of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, it would be churlish to question Cohn's assessment. Kaplan emerges from the academic culture of *empirical* social science and political philosophy. Perhaps, he feels his job's complete once he's established the integrity of a certain class of facts, as well? Perhaps having demonstrated certain comparative likenesses and differences – all of which he usefully does – Kaplan, too, may feel it's time for someone else to take the baton and run a different sort of race?

I wouldn't be surprised, however, if readers, now sufficiently disturbed by what Kaplan has revealed will cry out for *more*! That "more" will demand *theorizing* the "why" of these movements. Theorizing would raise questions of the following kind. *Why* do these movements need necessarily to operate *sub specie aeternitatis*? In a given situation, is there no other choice? Is there no other choice if one seeks radical change than to *transcend* the limits of the natural and conventional – to exercise the "nuclear" -- religious -- option, and go all the way? Since only *some* movements of change take a religious – theistic -- shape upon which both Kaplan and Cohn focus, why do other movements not do so? Are these only movements lacking sufficient ambition to do *big* things? Beginning to raise theoretical questions such as these would, I am suggesting, enable scholars to capitalize on the foundational work Kaplan, Cohn and others have done in putting together the factual accounts of these disturbing religious and social movements.

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Cohn, N. (1970). *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. New York City: Oxford University Press.