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THE SPLENDID IDOLATRY OF NATIONALISM

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This article addresses the question ‘Do we live in a secular, disenchanted world devoid of gods, or do we live in a world populated by new gods?’ Some cite Max Weber in assuming that disenchantment is a fact. Others cite Émile Durkheim who points to ongoing forms of enchantment and the development of new religious forms to take the place of Christianity. In this article I use the case of nationalism to examine this question. I analyse two arguments, one that sides with Weber, the other with Durkheim. I not only side with Durkheim, but argue that Weber sides with Durkheim, too. I then go beyond Durkheim, and argue, from a Christian theological point of view, that nationalism is not only a religion, but an idolatrous one at that.

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disenchantment, Émile Durkheim, idolatry, nationalism, religion, secularisation, Max Weber

Do we live in a secular, disenchanted world devoid of gods, or do we live in a world populated by new gods? The decline of Christianity in Europe – and increasingly in the United States – has led many to assume that secularisation is simply a fact in the Western world, as is a kind of disenchantment in which belief in the supernatural has given way to a thoroughgoing naturalism and rationalism. Others have pointed to ongoing forms of enchantment and the development of new religious forms to take the place of Christianity. The debate is often presented in terms of Max Weber versus Émile Durkheim, two of the founding pillars of the new discipline of sociology in the early twentieth century. Weber, so the story goes, documented the rationalisation of modernity and its disenchantment, while Durkheim saw the religious as primordial, protean and fundamental to all societies.

In this article I use the case of nationalism to examine this question. I analyse two arguments, one that sides with Weber, the other with Durkheim. I not only side with Durkheim, but argue that Weber sides with Durkheim, too. I then go beyond Durkheim, and argue, from a Christian theological point of view, that nationalism is not only a religion, but an idolatrous one at that.

1. WEBER AGAINST DURKHEIM

Although Durkheim wrote little on nationalism as such,¹ he makes it clear that the sentiments and rituals that bind the nation together are a modern species of religion. Though there is a strict distinction between the sacred and the profane in Durkheim, there is no simple religious–secular distinction, no separate secular realm of government and business and so on to which worship does not apply. According to Durkheim’s classic *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, ‘Religious force is only the sentiment inspired by the group in its members, but projected outside of the consciousnesses that experience them, and objectified. To be objectified, they are fixed upon some object which thus becomes sacred; but any object might fulfill this function.’² Durkheim is a functionalist, not a substantivist, defining religion not according to the substance of beliefs but rather their function in society. For Durkheim, the ostensible object or substance of religion is a matter of relative indifference; it can be a god or it can be a national flag. Religion is, furthermore, not a private matter, but is generated by a group. Religion can be explained sociologically, thought Durkheim, not as a human response to a transcendent reality or god, but as a dynamic inherent to collectivities. Religion, according to Durkheim, is in fact the self-worship of the group. The idea of nationalism, devotion to one’s own nation, fits easily within Durkheim’s concept of religion. Durkheim asks rhetorically, ‘What essential

¹ Anthony D Smith writes that although ‘Durkheim wrote little directly about nationalism or nationality problems, he became increasingly interested in the subject, and not only with the drift towards world war.’ Anthony D Smith, ‘Nationalism and Classical Social Theory’, *British Journal of Sociology* 34 (1983), 29.

² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965), 261.

difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ, or of Jews remembering the Exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?³ The implied answer is 'none'. Durkheim was a French patriot, who saw the deification of France as something that responded to basic impulses of human sociality. Robert Bellah called Durkheim 'a theologian of the French civil religion',⁴ though Durkheim attempted to resist mere national chauvinism by identifying French nationalism with a broader civil religion of humanity.⁵

There is a long history of scholarship on nationalism as a religion that can be considered loosely Durkheimian. Carlton Hayes, distinguished professor of history at Columbia University, published his seminal essay 'Nationalism as a Religion' in 1926. Although Hayes was a Catholic critic of civil religion – rather than a booster like Durkheim – Hayes, like Durkheim, recognised an enduring human 'religious sense' that has largely migrated in modernity from the church to the nation. The nation is the modern person's god, on whom they depend for protection and salvation. Hayes details the elaborate myths, feast days and liturgies surrounding the flag, national heroes and foundational events in the nation's history. Nationalism is built especially around theologies of sacrifice: 'Perhaps the surest proof of the religious character of modern nationalism is the zeal with which all manner of its devotees have laid down their lives on battlefields of the last hundred years.'⁶ Since Hayes' first explorations of this theme, Robert Bellah,⁷ Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle,⁸ Atalia Omer and Jason Springs,⁹ Anthony D Smith,¹⁰ and many other scholars have taken an explicitly Durkheimian approach to describe nationalism as a religion.¹¹

³ Ibid. 475.

⁴ Robert N Bellah, 'Introduction', in *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society*, ed. by Robert N Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xvii.

⁵ Josep Llobera, 'Durkheim and the National Question', in *Debating Durkheim*, ed. by Hermino Martins and William Pickering (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 145–158.

⁶ Carlton J H Hayes, 'Nationalism as a Religion', §6. Online: www.panarchy.org/hayes/nationalism.html. This essay can also be found in Carlton J H Hayes, *Essays on Nationalism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 93–125.

⁷ Robert N Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96, no 1 (1967), 1–19.

⁸ Carolyn Marvin and David W Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 'Nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries'. Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, 'Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no 4 (1996), 767.

⁹ Atalia Omer and Jason A Springs, *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 67, 'nationalism functions as a form of religion'.

¹⁰ Anthony D Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Smith calls nationalism 'a new religion of the people. It is not a religion of the people because it has emerged from the common people, but because the people alone constitute the object of this new religion'. Ibid. 42.

¹¹ For more examples see Josep Llobera, *The God of Modernity: The Development of Nationalism in Western Europe* (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1994); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Talal Asad, 'Religion, Nation-State, Secularism', in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. by Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann

There is, nevertheless, resistance to the idea of nationalism as a religion from scholars who advocate for a 'scientific' study of religion. The sharp divide between secular rationality and religious irrationality or non-rationality is crucial for these scholars. Summing up this line of thought, José Santiago, writing in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, contends that functionalist definitions of religion are 'controversial' and notes that the choice of either a substantivist or a functionalist definition of religion reflects different conceptualisations of social life. Denial or affirmation of the status of nationalism as a religion depends in part on the conceptualisation of integration and differentiation in modern societies. Santiago divides sociological analyses of this question between Durkheimian and Weberian strands, and takes the side of Weber.

Durkheim thought that the sacred was a fundamental dimension of society. It was not an added transcendent dimension that could be sloughed off to leave a purely immanent remainder. Durkheim thought this not because he believed in a god or some other supernatural force, but because he thought that the sacred was simply a society's self-expression, which allowed it to maintain social cohesion. If the old religion of Christianity was fading, as he clearly thought it was, it must be replaced with another locus of the sacred. Durkheim thought a key moment in this transition was the French Revolution, in which the Jacobins created an overt cult of the nation.¹² The nation state and its rituals were just the adaptation of the primitive totemic clan to modern society.¹³ According to Santiago, Durkheim thought that social integration came about through cultural cohesion, that is, shared standards and values that serve as 'final signifiers that act as the Sacred Center of society'.¹⁴

Santiago, however, questions whether modern differentiated societies actually need cultural integration. Santiago calls on Weber, for whom 'the process of rationalization has created a world where social integration is no longer the result of consensus over religious standards and values. In the modern world, the coordination of social action may be the result of the mechanics of political domination or of the economic constraints of capitalism, neither of which need a cultural or religious framework. Social integration, therefore, does not require a shared 'sacred center'.¹⁵ Functional differentiation in fact

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 178–196; Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

¹² Durkheim writes: 'This aptitude of society for setting itself up as a god or for creating gods was never more apparent than during the first years of the French Revolution [...]. A religion tended to become established which had its dogmas, symbols, altars, and feasts'. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 244–245.

¹³ José Santiago, 'From 'Civil Religion' to Nationalism as the Religion of Modern Times: Rethinking a Complex Relationship', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no 2 (2009), 395–396.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 399.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Santiago's distinction between political domination and economic constraints on the one hand, and cultural and religious factors on the other, begs the question of how and why we make such distinctions between 'religion' on the one hand and 'politics' or 'economics' on the other. Santiago assumes that we know what 'real' religion is, and other things are only religions metaphorically or analogically. He provides no defence of the substantivist view of religion, which is just as 'controversial' as the functionalist view, nor does he recognise that the religious-secular distinction is a modern Western invention which is itself dependent on how power

necessarily ‘entails the inexorable loss of religion’s integrating function’.¹⁶ Santiago sides with Weber, for whom modernity is characterised by conflicting values, not a unity of values. ‘It is in this sense that we can conclude after all that modern societies are secular societies.’¹⁷ Nationalism is not a religion, because there is no ‘civil religion’ that unites a modern society. Modern societies are integrated by political or economic mechanisms, not religious ones, and nationalism is only called ‘religious’ by using an overly broad and imprecise definition of religion.

Catholic theologian R R Reno – editor of *First Things* and champion of Christian nationalism – accepts this Weber–Durkheim dichotomy, but, unlike Santiago, sides with Durkheim. In his 2019 book *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West*, Reno argues that the West rejected strong beliefs and loyalties in the wake of the World Wars, in favour of an ‘open society’. Weber regarded disenchantment as an iron cage, but the postwar consensus embraces it as liberating and redemptive; disenchantment will save us from the return of the strong gods.¹⁸ The postwar consensus is now breaking down, and rightly so, argues Reno, as people return to a sacred centre for the society, what Reno calls ‘strong gods’, powerful loyalties that bind people to their homeland and to one another. The postwar consensus was a failed attempt to do away with what Santiago, following Weber, says we no longer need.

In Reno’s telling, a key figure for the postwar consensus is Karl Popper, whose book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* set a course for the West to move away from the kind of tribalism and deference to authority that produced Nazism and Communism. Against the comforting collectivism that deifies the nation, Popper argued, we need to uphold the freedom of the individual. Against the notion of unchanging metaphysical truths, we need critical thinking and the courage to create our own meanings; as Popper writes, ‘facts as such have no meaning; they gain it only through our decisions’.¹⁹ Truth is limited to value-free facts; values and meaning are the realm of opinion. In the hopes of not exciting violent passions again, what Reno calls ‘strong gods’ like truth, religious faith, patriotism and the marriage covenant are under attack.²⁰ ‘The strong gods are the objects of men’s love and devotion, the sources of the passions and loyalties that unite societies.’²¹ Reno recognises that the strong gods can be beneficent or destructive; truth and patriotism are strong gods,

is exercised. His analysis does nothing more than simply declare that nationalism and capitalism are not religions, despite the similarities. A full genealogy of the religious–secular distinction and its construction by Western forms of power can be found in my book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 2.

¹⁶ Santiago, ‘From ‘Civil Religion’’, 399. Santiago draws on the work of Niklas Luhmann and Bryan S Turner to make these critiques of Durkheim.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ R R Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2019), 40.

¹⁹ Karl Popper, quoted in *ibid.* 8. Likewise, Popper writes, in italics, ‘*Although history has no meaning, we can give it meaning.*’ Ibid.

²⁰ Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods*, 51.

²¹ Ibid. xii.

but so are fascism and racism. In the attempt to do away with the latter, we have attacked the former with openness, disenchantment, and the ‘gods of weakening’.²² We have bought into the false notion that strong loves lead to oppression and weak loves are necessary for liberty and prosperity. This conviction is not Popper’s alone, but is embraced in one way or another by a host of intellectuals who promote individualism and attack the notion that we have access to transcendent metaphysical truth.

The consequences of this embrace of the weak gods are dire.

[O]ur societies are dissolving. Economic globalization shreds the social contract. Identity politics disintegrates civic bonds. A uniquely Western anti-Western multiculturalism deprives people of their cultural inheritance. Mass migration reshapes the social landscape. Courtship, marriage, and family no longer form our moral imaginations. Borders are porous, even the one that separates men from women. Tens of thousands die of heroin overdoses. Hundreds of thousands are aborted.²³

The antidote to this devastation is the ‘virtue of solidarity—the sense of fraternity and common destiny among all members of a society’, which is based on shared convictions that unite rather than diversify.²⁴ For Reno, then, the ‘fundamental question’ is: ‘What is the role of the nation in the twenty-first century?’²⁵ Devotion to the nation is the main antidote to the dissolution of society. The need for a home is an indelible aspect of human nature, and nationalism is among the most significant expressions of that need. Devotion to the nation, like all shared loves, draws us outside of our individual selves: ‘The strong god of the nation draws us out of our ‘little worlds.’ Our shared loves—love of our land, our history, our founding myths, our warriors and heroes—raise us to a higher vantage point.’²⁶

Two things are notable here: the focus on ‘us’ and ‘ours’, and the transcendence associated with that collective self. As Reno puts it ‘the ‘we’ touches on sacred things’.²⁷ The ‘miracle of the ‘we’” makes group solidarity more precious than our universal humanity, such that we will gladly sacrifice our lives for our fellow citizens. The ‘we’ transcends our biological families and incorporates us into a larger political entity. Because the ‘we’ is not simply biological, it must constantly be reinforced and defended. ‘The ‘we’ is an end in itself that asks us to do what is necessary to sustain and promote our shared loves, all of which harken to the call of strong gods.’²⁸

²² Ibid. xiii.

²³ Ibid. ix.

²⁴ Ibid. 120.

²⁵ Ibid. 144.

²⁶ Ibid. 154–155.

²⁷ Ibid. 148.

²⁸ Ibid. 150.

The first section of the final chapter of Reno's book is a laudatory reading of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The unity of society, says Durkheim, draws upon the power of the sacred, and according to Reno, the Bible agrees. 'In Judeo-Christian tradition, governing powers are not deities, but their dictates are tinctured with divine legitimacy.'²⁹ Though they are not deities, and civic rituals and monuments are 'not religious in the sense in which we now use the term', they nevertheless 'reach for the transcendent'; though modern gods can be false idols, 'the sacralizing impulse in public life is fundamental. Our social consensus always reaches for transcendent legitimacy'.³⁰ Whereas Santiago denies that nationalism is a religion in order to protect secularism, Reno denies nationalism is a religion in order to protect Christian nationalism from the charge of idolatry. But once this caveat is registered, Reno goes on to praise Durkheim's analysis of the essentially religious nature of social unity. 'Durkheim was right. To be human is to seek transcendent warrants and sacred sources for our social existence.'³¹

Reno is especially appreciative of Durkheim's diagnosis of the weakness of the West. He quotes from a famous passage in the conclusion of Durkheim's book³² that laments the passing of the old gods that 'filled our fathers with enthusiasm', while the new gods have yet to be born. Reno agrees with Durkheim that neither Christianity nor Enlightenment devotions can be restored to their former place in the West.

Biblical religion can surely endure and its soulcraft will continue. It may even see a season of revival that enlarges its influence. I certainly hope it does. But it cannot resume its old place in society. The same is true for naïve Enlightenment pieties. "But neither is there any reason," Durkheim continued, "for believing humanity is incapable of inventing new ones." The death of old gods in no way means the death of the sacred. We are social animals, and public life requires the aroma of the sacred.³³

The apparent death of the Christian God, in public anyway, has left us no choice but to create new gods. They can be destructive and evil gods, like fascism and communism, or they can be benevolent gods, like the shared love of the American nation, but we cannot live without strong gods, even if we have to invent them. The only difference between this conviction and Popper's post-metaphysical belief that humans create their own meanings is that for Popper the individual is the main agent for creating meaning, while for Reno it is the 'we'.

²⁹ Ibid. 135.

³⁰ Ibid. 136.

³¹ Ibid. 139.

³² Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 475.

³³ Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods*, 137.

2. WEBER WITH DURKHEIM

I think that, in one important respect, Reno is right and Santiago is wrong: Durkheim is a reliable guide to the continuing presence of the sacred in the kinds of civil religion that bind nations together. At the same time, I think that both Reno and Santiago are mistaken to set Weber against Durkheim in the way they do. I think that Weber himself, despite his occasional language of disenchantment, did not think that modern societies had shrugged off the old gods, and that in fact a 'sacred centre' was still at the heart of modern societies.

The rationalisation of modern society, in Weber's telling, has a long history that begins with ancient attempts to manipulate the gods and other occult forces through the practice of magic and ritual. Salvation religions take this attempt to rationalise the mysterious to a different level by positing an otherworldly sphere in which the irrationality and injustices of this world can be reconciled, by punishing evildoers after death, for example. This opens a gap between this world and the other world; as the great religions become otherworldly, the realms of politics, economics, and so on take on increasing autonomy, eventually pushing religion to the margins. The world of fact is split from the world of value. The process of rationalisation that begins with religion eventually pushes religion to the private sphere of values and leaves an autonomous disenchanted world of fact governed by science, the state and the capitalist market.³⁴

For Weber, the split between fact and meaning or value is both a fact and a serious problem, because we urgently want to know what the meaning of our lives actually is. Weber quotes Tolstoy approvingly: 'Science is meaningless, because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?''³⁵ Disenchantment does not mean the complete loss of meaning in the world, but rather its individualisation and interiorisation. As Weber writes: 'The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.'³⁶ The search for meaning withdraws from the public to the private and interior realm.

Weber characterises the situation of the present day not as atheism or secularism but as 'polytheism'.³⁷ He translates Tolstoy's question: 'What shall we do, and, how shall we arrange our lives?' into: 'Which of the warring gods should we serve? Or should we serve perhaps an entirely different god, and who is he?'³⁸ Polytheism is a direct consequence

³⁴ I am summarising Weber's argument as found in such sources as Max Weber, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H H Gerth and C Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 267–301.

³⁵ Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', in *From Max Weber*, 143.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 155.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 147.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 152–153.

of the process of rationalisation. The absolute divorce between fact and value means that ‘the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other’,³⁹ with no factual basis for adjudicating their rival claims. Such conflicts can only be decided by non-rational means. The final product of the long process of disenchantment and rationalisation is not an entirely rationalised world, but a world in which the rational is haunted by the irrational from which it has been sundered.

We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disencharnted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disencharnted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity.⁴⁰

Here it is important to note that Weber seems to observe no difference in the empirically observable behaviour of ancient versus modern people. The difference lies in the presence or absence of some ‘mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity’ to which Weber mysteriously claims access.

On the one hand, Santiago is right about Weber: he seems to think that there is a plurality of values, a ‘polytheism’, in modern society, and the individual, not society as a whole, must simply make a sheer, groundless choice. Weber begins from ‘one fundamental fact, that so long as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another. Or speaking directly, the ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice’.⁴¹ On the other hand, the reason that this charismatic moment is precious for Weber is that it stands out against the backdrop of the dreary constraints under which such a choice is made. The gods that can be chosen must struggle not only against each other, but against the gods that are simply *given* to us. Weber writes: ‘Today the routines of everyday life challenge religion. Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disencharnted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.’⁴²

By Weber’s own account, rationalisation and disenchantment have not eliminated the enchanted elements from the modern polity and economy. Indeed, in some respects, rationalisation has produced a more intense form of irrationality, a new and more powerful sacred centre. Consider, for example, the importance of violence in Weber’s account of rationalisation in the political sphere. The resort to violence has always been essential for the protection of the tribe and polity, Weber explains. It is only with the rise of rationalised

³⁹ Ibid. 147.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 148.

⁴¹ Ibid. 152.

⁴² Ibid. 149.

salvation religions that this necessity has been called into question, for such universalist religions, gathered around the worship of a God of universal love, reject violence as a compromise with the world. Weber contrasts the Sermon on the Mount and its injunction to resist no evil with the nation state's imperative to claim a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, which is the very essence of the state, and to employ violence to do justice within its borders and protect its borders from outside attack.

According to the inescapable pragmatism of all action, however, force and the threat of force unavoidably breed more force. "Reasons of state" thus follow their own external and internal laws. The very success of force, or of the threat of force, depends ultimately upon power relations and not on ethical "right," even were one to believe it possible to discover objective criteria for such "right."⁴³

Here we see the split between the objective and the subjective, fact and ethics, rational and irrational. The more rationalised religion becomes, the more it is pushed into the irrational sphere of ethics. Politics and religion come into conflict because while, in this case, Christianity tries to cling to its love command from the mouth of God and reject violence, the rationalised nation state must do what everyone but the most otherworldly mystic acknowledges that it needs to do: employ the threat and use of violence on a purely pragmatic and non-ethical basis. Violence here is a mere means to the end of protecting the polity.

The same pragmatic logic dictates, however, that violence will unavoidably breed more violence, according to Weber. Not only this, but violence becomes an end in itself. The modern polity, precisely in and through the logic of violence, will come to resemble the religious community.

As the consummated threat of violence among modern polities, war creates a pathos and a sentiment of community. War thereby makes for an unconditionally devoted and sacrificial community among the combatants and releases an active mass compassion and love for those who are in need. And, as a mass phenomenon, these feelings break down all the naturally given barriers of association. In general, religions can show comparable achievements only in heroic communities professing an ethic of brotherliness.⁴⁴

As this last line makes clear, the nation state at war out-religions religion; the nation state at war offers the sense of unconditional brotherly love that is achieved by religion only in monastic communities. Weber continues on to argue that the nation state does a better job than religion in giving meaning to death. Ordinary death is inscrutable; it is a fate that befalls everyone, but no one can say why it comes to any individual precisely when and why

⁴³ Max Weber, 'Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions', in *From Max Weber*, 334.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 335.

and in what manner it does. Death in war offers a meaningful death – the soldier believes he is dying *for* something.

The why and the wherefore of his facing death can, as a rule, be so indubitable to him that the problem of the “meaning” of death does not even occur to him. At least there may be no presuppositions for the emergence of the problem in its universal significance, which is the form in which religions of salvation are impelled to be concerned with the meaning of death. Only those who perish “in their callings” are in the same situation as the soldier who faces death on the battlefield.⁴⁵

Once again, the nation state at war out-religions religion. Salvation religions will see this kind of ‘inner-worldly consecration’ in a negative light, as merely glorifying fratricide. Nevertheless, Weber says: ‘The very extraordinary quality of brotherliness of war, and of death in war, is shared with sacred charisma and the experience of the communion with God, and this fact raises the competition between the brotherliness of religion and of the warrior community to its extreme height.’⁴⁶

Religion and the modern nation state are only in direct competition with one another because of the similarities between them. Both are the products of a long process of rationalisation that, in different ways, issues from the same source: the human search for meaning. And both address that search for meaning, in remarkably similar ways: by gathering people into loving communion, consecrating life in this world to a sacred cause, offering the sacrifice of that life unto death, and solving the problem of the meaning of death. At the same time, Weber’s contrast between an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of ultimate ends guarantees that the state will win this competition. Precisely because ‘the decisive means for politics is violence’, religion must withdraw from politics, to preserve the purity of its devotion to an ethic of universal love from compromise with the world.⁴⁷ What I think this means is that a sacred centre has not been drained out of the modern polity; it has migrated from the church to the nation state. This is Weber’s unthought. Weber’s own discussion of war indicates that disenchantment as a historical process is more of a dislocation than a quantitative diminution. Indeed, sacred violence escalates in modernity on Weber’s account. Of course, there are many qualitative differences; the holy changes when it migrates. But in Weber’s account of political violence, the two terms in each of his antinomies – rational–irrational, disenchanted–enchanted, fact–value,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 336.

⁴⁷ Weber makes this argument in his ‘Politics as a Vocation’, in *From Max Weber*, 77–128. The quote is from 121. Anthony Carroll situates Weber’s insistence on the proper ‘objectivity’ of politics within the context of German Protestant anti-Catholicism. In politics, objectivity was most threatened by confessional parties, especially the Catholic Center Party. Anthony Carroll, SJ, ‘Disenchantment, Rationality and the Modernity of Max Weber’, *Forum Philosophicum* 16, no 1 (2011), 117–137.

politics–religion, etc. – mirror each other to such an extent that the antinomies themselves threaten to break down.

Modern capitalism provides a similar and related sacred centre. Weber points to the similarity between the depersonalisation of the love ethic in religions of salvation – one loves everyone, regardless of who they are – and the depersonalisation of economic transactions in modern capitalism. Money is not simply impersonal, but ‘the most abstract and ‘impersonal’ element that exists in human life’.⁴⁸ According to Weber, capitalism is impersonal precisely insofar as it is rational. By impersonal, Weber does not just mean cold and lacking compassion, but primarily lacking personnel: ‘For this reason one speaks of the rule of ‘capital’ and not that of capitalists.’⁴⁹ Humans are not in charge, but are being ruled by a god of their own making. As is the case with all forms of bureaucracy, the element of dehumanisation is key for Weber. And this dehumanisation can be read not as a degradation to the subhuman, but as an exaltation to the divine. As Peter Ghosh notes, Weber thought that Christianity in the West has been replaced by capitalism, ‘an order that is ultimately as *irrational* in its foundation as Calvinist religion, because capital like the Calvinist god is an impersonal power ruling over the individual person according to its logic and not theirs’.⁵⁰

In conjunction with his overarching narrative of rationalisation, Weber frequently points to the irrationality of the capitalist economic order. In *The Protestant Ethic*, for example, he describes the way that business has replaced church for the German bourgeoisie, and that their expressed motive of ‘providing for my family’ has in fact been replaced with business as an end in itself. ‘That is in fact the only possible motivation, but it at the same time expresses what is, seen from the view-point of personal happiness, so irrational about this sort of life, where a man exists for the sake of his business, instead of the reverse.’⁵¹ This is what has become of the Protestant notion of ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’. Weber notes that there is no hedonistic or even eudaimonistic motivation here; the businessperson does not make money as a means to enjoy life. ‘Earning more and more money’ is the *summum bonum*.

It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural

⁴⁸ Weber, ‘Religious Rejections’, 331.

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *Die Börse I*, *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* I/5.148, quoted in Peter Ghosh, *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 300.

⁵⁰ Ghosh, *Max Weber*, 285, italics in the original.

⁵¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 70.

relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence.⁵²

Note the theme of transcendence. Capitalism has not apparently reduced all to the merely immanent and mundane. The fact that the making of money has become an end in itself means that the capitalist is the very opposite of a materialist. The capitalist's focus is not on the material things that he or she can buy with money, but on money itself, which, as Weber has said, is the most immaterial and abstract element in modern life. When Weber says at the end of *The Protestant Ethic* that 'material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history',⁵³ he does not seem to have in mind a Marxist critique of commodity fetishism. Weber's subjects are not focused on material goods themselves, except as a means to the making of money. This end is 'entirely transcendental' both in the sense of its immateriality – the way that it goes beyond merely immanent and mundane reality – and in the sense that it is the object of the capitalist's devotion. Just as the Calvinist God was the end that must be served for God's own sake, so money is the end toward which human activity must be directed. Like the Calvinist before God, humans are 'dominated' by money-making, 'subordinated' to acquisition. Weber makes clear that this is not a conscious ethical choice by individuals; rather: 'The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him, at least as an individual, as an unalterable order of things in which he must live.'⁵⁴ This capitalistic 'cosmos', like the earlier Christian cosmos, constitutes a sacred centre; it transcends the individual and subordinates him or her to its inscrutable providence. As Ghosh comments: 'Transcendence was ever-present in [Weber's] eyes (even if it was by no means an unmixed blessing), and again we see why to describe the historical movement he portrays as secularization, with its implications of radical qualitative change, would be deeply misleading.'⁵⁵

Pace Santiago, Reno and countless others, Weber did not think that societal differentiation was a process of secularisation, and he did not think that a shared sense of the sacred had simply collapsed in modernity. It had rather migrated from the churches to the nation state and the market. In Weber's account, sacrificial violence for the nation state produced a community of shared meaning that traditional religion could only envy. And the capitalist economic order was an overarching cosmos into which one was born and in which one learned to obey money: the most perfect – because the most abstract and ubiquitous – of gods. It is true that Weber did hold out the hope that moderns could assert their freedom

⁵² Ibid. 53. The language here is reminiscent of papal social teaching. See, for example, John Paul II's warning of the 'onesided subordination of man to material goods alone' in his 1979 address to the UN General Assembly. §16. Online: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791002_general-assembly-onu.html

⁵³ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 181.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 54. He continues: 'It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action.'

⁵⁵ Ghosh, *Max Weber*, 290.

and submit to a god of their own choosing. But any such god would be hemmed in by other gods, most especially the gods of state and market which – from the individual’s point of view – were not chosen but were *given*, whether the individual acknowledged them or not. In this sense, Weber and Durkheim were singing from the same hymnal.

3. SPLENDID IDOLATRY

I have so far argued that even Weber could not avoid the conclusion that Durkheim put forward explicitly: a sacred centre has not disappeared from modernity, and devotion to the nation state is one such sacred centre. If one takes this conclusion seriously, however, then one has two choices: either conclude – as did Durkheim and Weber – that gods are merely projections of human sociality, or, if one believes that there is a true God among the many false ones, analyse nationalism in terms of idolatry. Reno’s language of the ‘strong gods’ is helpful insofar as it raises the issue of idolatry in explicit form. In its most acute form, idolatry is the explicit worship of gods other than YHWH, but it can be used in a broader sense to describe excessive devotion to created things that are not God. It is in the latter sense that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* warns of the ‘idolatry of the nation’.⁵⁶ As a Christian, Reno recognises the danger of idolatry and would certainly claim that ‘gods’ is merely a metaphor, but, as my analysis of Durkheim and Weber I hope makes clear, what people *claim* to believe is not as important as how they *actually* behave. For both Durkheim and Weber, it matters little whether people actually think that the flag to which they pledge allegiance and for which they sacrifice their lives is an actual, supernatural being. What matters is how it functions to structure their social lives. As we have seen, Reno tries to protect himself from the charge of idolatry by invoking the religious–secular distinction, claiming that civic rituals, though they ‘reach for the transcendent’, are ‘not religious in the sense in which we now use the term’.⁵⁷ Durkheim’s functionalist definition of religion, however, disallows the separation of civic rituals from religious ones. If Reno is going to take Durkheim seriously, he must face the charge of idolatry and explain the relation between the strong gods and God.

For Reno, nationalism is a manifestation of a basic Augustinian theme: people are united by shared loves. We are made for love, and love breaks down the barriers that surround the self. ‘It impels us outside ourselves, breaking the boundaries of me-centered existence. Love seeks to unite with and rest in that which is loved. This outflowing of the self makes love the engine of solidarity. The strong gods of public life are quite simply the objects of our shared loves. They are whatever arouses in us an ardor to wed our destinies to that which we love.’⁵⁸ Reno calls upon Augustine’s definition of the *res publica* as rational

⁵⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §57.

⁵⁷ Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods*, 136.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 139.

creatures bound together by common agreement on the objects of their love.⁵⁹ According to Reno's Augustine, the Romans' dual love of freedom and honour set the template for the modern West's love of self-government. 'If it is 'nationalist' to cherish self-government, then we should be nationalists. The strong god of self-government and sovereignty, which calls upon us to use our freedom and reason, is ennobling.'⁶⁰

Devotion to the nation undoubtedly calls forth real virtues of love of neighbour, self-sacrifice, and love of something larger than oneself. Philosopher Jean-Luc Marion has remarked in passing on the 'splendid idolatry' of paganism, in which the idol calls forth a kind of worship and self-giving that breaks through the boredom and indifference we associate with the modern self. Such idolatry seems to summon seriousness, dedication – perhaps virtue – which is real, though limited, and not quite yet the summit of revealed virtue. Marion worries that Westerners no longer have 'the means for such a splendid idolatry'.⁶¹ Reno has the same worries, but evades the charge of idolatry by distinguishing, as we have seen, religion from politics, in a way that Durkheim would not. For Durkheim, it matters not if people deny that the nation is a god; what is decisive is whether or not they direct their devotion to it.

According to Durkheim, the group consciousness of the nation – Reno's sense of the 'we' – must be objectified, 'but any object might fulfil this function'.⁶² According to Thomas Aquinas, however, the object of worship is what distinguishes true religion from idolatry.⁶³ Aquinas allows that, in one sense, *latria*, or worship, can be applied univocally to either true or false worship, but in another sense, he says, it is applied equivocally, because those things that share the matter of religion – the reverential rites and sacrifices – but not religion's end, are vices, not virtues.⁶⁴ The vice contrary to the virtue of religion by excess, according to Aquinas, is superstition, 'not that it offers more to the divine worship than true religion, but because it offers divine worship either to whom it ought not, or in a manner it ought not'.⁶⁵ What appears to be a virtue, no matter how splendid, is in fact a vice if it is directed to the wrong end; *latria* is a vice if it is directed toward anything other than the true God. Idolatry, which is giving worship to something created, is a species

⁵⁹ Ibid. 150.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 154.

⁶¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15.

⁶² Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 261.

⁶³ The language of 'object' here can be misleading, because Aquinas uses 'object' for the rites of religion, and 'end' for that to which religion is directed, that is, God.

⁶⁴ 'The term *latria* may be taken in two senses. On one sense it may denote a human act pertaining to the worship of God: and then its signification remains the same, to whomsoever it be shown, because, in this sense, the thing to which it is shown is not included in its definition. Taken thus, *latria* is applied univocally, whether to true religion or to idolatry, just as the payment of a tax is univocally the same, whether it is paid to the true or to a false king. On another sense, *latria* denotes the same as religion, and then, since it is a virtue, it is essential thereto that divine worship be given to whom it ought to be given; and in this way *latria* is applied equivocally to the *latria* of true religion, and to idolatry: just as prudence is applied equivocally to the prudence that is a virtue, and to that which is carnal.' St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.94.1ad2.

⁶⁵ Ibid. II-II.92.1.

of the vice of superstition. Devotion to the nation, I have argued, shares the same matter with religion, both in terms of reverence and external rites, but is directed to the wrong end. Aquinas notably includes under idolatry Augustine’s category of ‘civil theology’, the deification of the Roman *civitas*.⁶⁶

Reno borrows theological language from Augustine to describe the longing for what transcends us. ‘Our hearts remain restless. They seek to rest in loyalty to strong gods worthy of love’s devotion and sacrifice.’⁶⁷ But when Augustine famously stated that our hearts are restless, he added ‘until they rest in You’, not ‘us’. Augustine’s statement took the form of a confession and prayer to God, the God of Jesus Christ, not any of the many strong gods on offer. It is hard to see that Reno is any less post-metaphysical than those he critiques. What seems to matter is not the identity of the god or gods to be worshiped, but rather their relative strength or weakness; it is a matter of degree, not kind.⁶⁸ Reno relegates metaphysical claims about which of the many available gods is true to the realm of ‘religious belief’. ‘Let us leave aside religious leadership, which is explicitly ordered to the service of the divine, and focus on political leadership and the sacred sources of the civic ‘we’.’⁶⁹ Reno divides American piety into private religious expressions like Christianity and the public cult of the nation. The God of Jesus Christ, the God whose power is made perfect in weakness (II Cor. 12:9), makes virtually no appearance in the book amongst the strong gods. Reno confesses himself a Catholic, but Christianity appears only as a prop to the social order. ‘I’d like to see a widespread revival of Christianity in the West. Until that happens, unbelievers need to wake up to the perils of a faithless society.’⁷⁰ A healthy political culture depends on the moral discipline that faith communities provide. Religious faith provides a home, resting in God’s arms, that makes believers ‘stable and stalwart citizens’, resistant to ideology. Religious faith prepares people to endure trials. Faith communities have ‘pinioned the nation from above’, equipping people to sacrifice on its behalf. ‘The solidarities of domestic life and religious community are not at odds with the civic ‘we’. On the contrary, the strong gods can reinforce each other, preparing our hearts for love’s many devotions. A man who makes sacrifices for his family or for his faith is likely to be ready to give the full measure of devotion to his country.’⁷¹ Despite Reno’s call

⁶⁶ Ibid. II–II.94.1. Aquinas concludes in II–II.94.3 that idolatry is the gravest of sins, but he distinguishes between objective and subjective senses of gravity. Objectively, idolatry is the gravest of sins, but subjectively, on the part of the sinner, idolatry committed through ignorance is a less grave sin than heresy committed knowingly. In the following article, II–II.94.4, Aquinas considers the causes of idolatry and presents a somewhat sympathetic account of why humans become idolaters. Humans commit idolatry because of inordinate affections, natural pleasure in representations and ignorance of the true God.

⁶⁷ Reno, *Return of the Strong Gods*, 152.

⁶⁸ The fact that Donald Trump, the very embodiment of the post-truth society, appears as something of a hero in Reno’s book – a flawed hero, but a hero nonetheless – only amplifies the Durkheimian message that the divine is whatever gives strength to the ‘we’. Trump’s victory in 2016 for Reno signals the return of nationalism and the rejection of the postwar consensus on weakening. Ibid. xvi, 125, 131–133.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 150.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 160.

⁷¹ Ibid. 160–161.

for adherence to metaphysical Truth, God is reduced to God's usefulness for the social order, and theology is reduced to sociology. Treating the 'we' as 'an end in itself', in Reno's words, is pure Durkheim. In the absence of a theological account of idolatry, and in the absence of anything but a sociological account of 'transcendence' and 'the sacred', Reno's book effectively reduces the divine to the social dynamics that constitute the 'we'. In the absence of any Christian theology or Christian God, the strong gods take over, and become much more than a mere metaphor.

Reno never spells out the relationship of the strong gods to God. Reno would no doubt contend that 'strong gods' is just a metaphor, and he acknowledges that strong gods can be false idols.⁷² He never discusses how to tell the difference between devotion to idolatrous strong gods and devotion to benign strong gods, however, and advocating devotion to gods that are not God is not a very helpful metaphor if one is trying to sort out idolatry from true worship. Given the almost complete absence of the Christian God from his narrative, and given his Durkheimian identification of the divine with social unity, 'strong gods' appears less as a metaphor and more as simply a frank recognition of the idolatry of nationalism. In this sense, Reno is right: devotion to the nation is devotion to a god, a strong one. But this god is not the true God; the strong gods are the wrong gods. Rather than a return to Truth, the strong gods continue to tell what World War I poet Wilfred Owen called: 'The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori.*' That is, it is sweet and fitting – let us say splendid – to die for one's country. As Aquinas makes clear, a virtue directed to the wrong end is a vice. *Religio* directed to a false god is idolatry.

Christian patriots can always rebuff the charge of idolatry by claiming that their own devotion to the nation is tempered by, and secondary to, their belief in the biblical God. Political idolatry in the Bible is a matter of degree. One can be loyal to an earthly king and be loyal to YHWH at the same time as long as the king is subordinate to God and one's loyalty to the king is weaker than, and subordinate to, one's loyalty to God. Loyalty to the king is not idolatrous if it is kept in check by loyalty to God. The problem for Reno is that loyalty to God in this biblical view appears as yet another agent of weakening the bonds of solidarity. He wants to push for strengthening such bonds for strong loyalties. But in the biblical view, the stronger the loyalties to created things that are not God, the more they tend toward idolatry. Reno's language of 'strong gods' captures this dynamic precisely: the stronger the loyalties to group solidarity, the more such loyalties tend to become gods for people, false idols that violate the first commandment to worship only the LORD.

The only way to get around this dilemma is to identify the true God with the nation; worshiping God will not distract from social solidarity if social solidarity is identified with God. Reno knows better than to attempt to provide biblical warrants for such an identification, for there are none. He turns instead to Durkheim for a universal account of how divinity is identified with the strong loyalties that bind groups together. But the

⁷² Ibid. 136. 'We can critique these modern gods—and we should; they are often false idols—but the sacralizing impulse in public life is fundamental.' Elsewhere Reno acknowledges that the strong gods can be destructive; *ibid.* xii, 150.

identification of God with the 'we' is a blatant form of idolatry: it is collective narcissism. Augustine analyses idolatry in terms of individual narcissism, the self-love that can see only its own reflection in created things.⁷³ Devotion to the nation seems to break one out of the confines of the idolatrous self by calling forth a kind of self-giving and neighbour-love, to the point of self-sacrifice for others. It is 'splendid' in the sense that I have been using the term, to indicate the giving of oneself to something larger than oneself. When that something larger is nothing more than the 'we' of the group, however, it is still narcissism, but narcissism writ large, a collective narcissism.⁷⁴ Religion, Durkheim thought, is just the self-worship of the group. For Durkheim, a French patriot and a non-believer in God, this was not a problem; it provided a tidy explanation for why groups of people invented gods who do not actually exist. For someone who believes that there is one true God, however, the self-worship of the group is simply idolatry, a violation of the paramount commandment to have no other gods. It might be splendid idolatry, but it is idolatry nonetheless.

4. CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that both Durkheim and Weber are helpful in showing that we do not in fact live in a secularised world devoid of gods, but that other gods have arisen to take the place of the God that inspired devotion in formerly Christian countries – for better and for worse – for so many centuries. Reno is just one example of those who believe that a resurgent devotion to the nation is a cure for what ails the modern world, but Reno's work is especially helpful in that it makes clear what the stakes are for those who believe in God. The strong gods who, in Weber's phrase, 'ascend from their graves' compete for devotion with the one God who is King. The solution, however, is not theocracy, a return to some idealised past age when the Christian God was identified with civic power. The scriptures

⁷³ As Richard Miller writes: 'For Augustine, narcissism and idolatry are two sides of the same coin, forged together by the self as the reference point for conceiving of both God and neighbor.' Richard B Miller, 'Evil, Friendship, and Iconic Realism in Augustine's *Confessions*', *Harvard Theological Review* 104, no 4 (2011), 391.

⁷⁴ In a 2020 article entitled 'Nationalism as Collective Narcissism', social psychologists Aleksandra Cichočka and Aleksandra Cislak apply earlier more general work on collective narcissism to the current resurgence of nationalism around the globe. They point out that political ideologies have become less important than ethnic and national identities. The nationalist demand for respect fits the concept of collective narcissism, which they define as 'a grandiose in-group image that is contingent upon external recognition of the in-group's worth'. Like Narcissus, the nationalist falls in love with an image of the nation, that is, not simply the reality of the nation but an idealised image of it, often based on a fictionalised history of the nation. Collective narcissism, like individual narcissism, is driven by perceived shortcomings – a lack of self-esteem, unmet needs and a lack of control. Under such conditions, people derive their sense of self-worth from the respect accorded to the group. The nationalist demand for respect can lead to violence linked to an exaggeration of threats and a propensity for hostile responses to such threats. Nationalism is not just about the 'we', in other words, but needs a 'they' to oppose to the 'we', an out-group to oppose to the in-group. Aleksandra Cichočka and Aleksandra Cislak, 'Nationalism as Collective Narcissism', *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2020), 69–74.

present us a better solution in the weak God, Jesus Christ, the one whose very self-emptying (Phil. 2:7) is the universal Truth, the manifestation of his Lordship (Phil. 2:9–11). To worship such a paradoxical God is to cultivate the virtues that make nationalism splendid – the self-sacrificial dedication to something larger than oneself – but direct them toward the service of the true God, the one who absorbed the violence of the world and inaugurated a new type of kingdom, one of reconciliation, justice and peace.

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