

Reason and Religion in the Dusk of a Waning Age

by [Conor O'Brian Barnes](#) (August 2025)



St Jerome in the Wilderness (Leonardo da Vinci, 1490)

Religion is an all or nothing proposition. It is either the total denial of reality, or reality's purest realization. This paradox underpins the enduring tension within the Western spiritual tradition, a tradition marked by the struggle between the divine and the human, the infinite and the finite, faith and reason.

The religious yearning begins to subvert Reason's hegemony when reason honestly admits its incapacity to ascertain the ultimate. Rationality's triumph is won—and religion's defeat undone—when the mind discovers it is limited by the infinite and cannot triumph over it. Schleiermacher said, "No great man ever lived, no great work was ever done, save in an attitude toward the universe which is identical with that of the religious man towards God." To be is to believe. The human heart cannot find ultimate happiness on earth because it is incapable of ultimate satisfaction on earth; it dwells in a world, or the illusion of a world, beyond the real world—or its illusion.

This world is fully real to the West because it is the crucible man must pass through if he is to reach that other, even more fully real world—the Kingdom of God. Though man can strive for salvation by resisting evil in the here and now, he can never totally overcome it because its darkness dwells cancerously in the seed of his sinful nature. Because of Original Sin, evil can infest, maggot-like, the good, or what intends to be good, and feed on it from the inside.

The downfall and ruin of modern political ideologies that attempted to replace traditional religion with their own quasi-religious systems of scientism—the Leftist sects of the Enlightenment—was their insistence that man has the power, by virtue of his formidable intellect, to eradicate insidious evil from without, when, in truth, he is barely able to prevent it from eradicating himself from within.

The radical Enlightenment's soaring disdain for religion arose

from its yearning to escape the anguish of being human, of having to grapple with the excruciating awareness of being other than the ultimate. Nothing beneath the divine is beyond the devil. Satan is in what never loves nor submits to anything other than itself. Scientism diabolically ridiculed and excoriated God because somewhere beneath the fragile ice of its contempt it feared He was the truth, and knew it had to crucify the deity it hated if the Promethean "humanity" it created was to rule in His stead.

Scientism closed off the transcendent because it did not want to be reminded of man's weakness before the divine. Dreading the abyss beckoning beyond the circumference of the knowable, it sought to confine man in Reason's prison because it needed to believe a comprehending humanity, rather than an unintelligible God, was the loftiest force in the universe.

For all its mawkish enthusiasm, however, for all its giddy optimism, scientism's idolatry of the abstraction "humanity" was only superficially a manifestation of its confidence in man's capacity to be a god. More deeply, it was a desperate attempt to evade the nihilism and suicidal despair awareness of the impossibility of being divine engenders in those who themselves need to be supreme. The first thing about which man is sentient when he cries in his cradle, the first thing he learns as a living being (and the first thing he yearns to forget), is that he is not the Almighty.

The most radical expressions of enlightened thought subconsciously sought to make man God. By reducing the phantasmagoria of existence to intellect's confines, to what can be perceived, measured, and scrutinized by human minds, scientism sought to deceive man into believing that somehow through "Reason" he could fundamentally understand existence, and thereby stand above it. Yet how can man stand above life; how can his mind, ignorant of its own foundation, understand life's ultimate foundation?

Scientistic thought systems like Marxism and positivism, which believed rationality could grasp the highest reality, retained western religion's emphasis on man's centrality to the cosmic drama, yet drew the curtains on the omnipotent God ethically obligating man to something higher than himself. Scientism strove to usurp the divine throne and place man alone at the center of the universe. "If all that exists is contained, or can be contained, by theories in man's mind," it hypothesized, "is man not then central to life? Does he not then deserve to be God?"

This impulse found its apex in logical positivism's verification principle—the demand that expressions of faith be analytically or empirically substantiated. Yet this seemingly dispassionate standard is deeply emotive in origin, since it wants man to be God, to contain all creation in the cosmos of his own "omniscience." To assert the necessity of scientific verification is only to assert the necessity of science, and thus of scientists, its prophets and priests.

The claim that scientific verification alone can validate religious belief is anchored in the all too passionate lust to elevate science to the status of the One True Faith. Logical positivism, the radical Enlightenment's logical conclusion, is merely a rationalization of the scientistic fanatic's desire to dominate, a putsch intended to foist atheistic intellectualism into power.

While the existence of a loving God cannot be denied because it is "unverifiable," neither can it be proven by rational argumentation. In the final analysis, faith begins with the realization that man is broken and needs to be fixed. Religion and its concomitants—philosophy, science, literature, and the arts—are man's attempts to come to terms with life's wrongness. Man's life is either a monstrous error, and no God exists to mend its brokenness, or it is a penance, something for which man must atone. If it is the latter (and there is no solace but death if it is the former), man has the power,

through his contrition, to appeal to God to heal his condition.

Satan's greatest victory is beguiling man into believing he is strong enough in himself and owes nothing to a God beyond the bounds of his own being. Modernity's essential assertion that man is untainted by Original Sin (whether theologically or biologically understood) was a diabolical deception. The secular humanist intellectual and political ideologies that dominated the modern era, Marxism and liberalism being exemplary, differed from their pre-modern antecedents in that they saw man as the master of all he surveys, beholden to no law above himself save inexorable historical "progress."

Even modern anti-progressive doctrines, like the various Fascist systems Nietzsche inspired, shared with their rationalist rivals the presupposition of human supremacy. Both flanks of the atheistic phalanx, Right and Left, believed man is "beyond good and evil" because as the sovereign of being he is not morally constrained by any deity. From his high horse in the godless universe, he determines his own reality. To atheistic and materialistic modernity, "good" and "evil" are not objectively real forces existing independent of human experience, but conceptual phantoms man creates to interpret and explain the inherently meaningless sensations of pleasure and pain.

Inborn in ideologies that doubt God exists lurks the terror that nothing is external to us save exterminating nothingness. Though they confidently claimed that man is limited by nothing, modern atheists subconsciously feared they might be right in a paradoxical sense: If man is limited by *nothing*, what is strongest is what is not, and devouring death is supreme.

Unable to stoically accept the meaninglessness of a world in which death is supreme, enlightened atheists like Comte and Marx (and later atheistic adversaries of the Enlightenment

like Nietzsche) propagated the myth of human limitlessness because they needed to believe man could become anything he desired in God's absence.

Founded on the proposition that man's nature is infinitely malleable (and thus theoretically perfectible), atheistic modernity was an attempt to confute the basic Christian contention that man is limited by a moral and spiritual order he did not himself devise. Whether in the guise of the Left or Right, atheistic modern ideologies—with the brightest angel's boldness—sought to storm the ramparts of Heaven and usurp the throne of God. Like Lucifer, lustrous and mighty modern man attempted to escape the moral order confining him to a secondary status in existence, the necessary condition of a created being.

Yet, despite the dark shadow cast by modernity's atheistic hubris, the human heart persists in its quest for the numinous. This quest reveals an innate hunger not merely for knowledge, but for a wisdom that acknowledges human limitation, embraces mystery, and hopes for a transcendent realm it can only view through a glass darkly.

To live authentically in this era of spiritual crisis and anti-human techno-barbarism is to accept that the fullness of reality surpasses the bounds of rational inquiry, and that the divine cannot be reduced to a mere concept or formula or theory. God is not an equation soluble by cerebration. Whatever it is, it will be what it is.

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