

# Contested Authority

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It wasn't supposed to be this way...

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It wasn't supposed to be this way. Evangelical Christianity was not supposed to rise in the 1980s as a political force in the U.S. Militant Islam was not supposed to rear its ugly head in the '90s, developing into a global threat to America and the West. Nor was there supposed to be a world-wide religious awakening -- in South America, Africa and Asia, among other places -- involving major religious groups, not only Christian and Muslim but also Hindu and Buddhist.

At least none of these developments -- rooted in different social structures and cultures -- was supposed to happen from the perspective of enlightened and progressive opinion. Instead, democracy and modernization, gaining strength in the second half of the 20th century, were supposed to finish a job that began in the 17th and 18th centuries, sweeping away ancient superstition, dissolving inherited prejudice, installing reason as authoritative in moral and political life, and making man, at last, thoroughly at home in the world by totally secularizing it.

"The Stillborn God" -- Mark Lilla's sophisticated and compelling study of religion and politics in the modern West -- helps to explain where this supposition came from and why it has proved to be misguided. The book was not written in response to the political challenges of the moment, but it could not be timelier. Like the best histories of philosophy, "The Stillborn God" illuminates the promises and perils of the present by bringing into focus the intellectual origins of our current opinions -- and by reminding us of their forgotten alternatives.

However much American citizens may disagree about religion, we generally agree that political questions -- What is the proper extent of government power? Under what circumstances do we go to war? Whom shall we choose to lead us? -- should not be decided by appealing to God's will, scriptural interpretation or prophetic pronouncement. Religious arguments about political questions are not outlawed; we live in a free society, after all. But for the most part -- even when our political judgments are informed by religious faith -- we recognize the imperative of making our case to fellow citizens without the aid of divine revelation or theological speculation.

This understanding, Mr. Lilla stresses, represents a relatively recent innovation. The alternative -- political theology -- guided men for millennia in the West and still does in many parts of the world. Its great mission was to ground politics, publicly and definitively, in religious teaching. Political theology arises out of the effort to understand a mysterious

cosmos that nevertheless seems to behave, in many ways, in a regular, law-like fashion. In such a world, it is natural to want to settle weighty disputes about who should exercise authority -- and how it should be exercised -- by appealing to the highest authority of all.

According to Mr. Lilla, the decisive figure in the revolt against political theology -- in the West, that meant Christian political theology -- was Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). With the so-called Wars of Religion vividly in mind -- they dominated parts of Europe in the second half of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th -- Hobbes sought to separate politics from religion. Hobbes effected this "Great Separation," Mr. Lilla emphasizes, not only by making human nature itself the highest political authority but also by introducing a new understanding of man, nature and the cosmos.

In Hobbes's view, nature was mechanistic. God was not the Creator and Redeemer but at most an ultimate cause. Human nature was governed by amoral appetites and passions, and reason was an instrument for satisfying them. Religious belief, as the ancient Epicureans had taught, arose out of fear and ignorance. The best political order achieved peace -- self-preservation is the precondition for the satisfaction of individual desires -- by concentrating power in the sovereign. Above all, because differences over religion were the principal source of strife and war between nations, religion, in Hobbes's judgment, had to be radically demoted.

Later thinkers challenged Hobbes's demotion of religion but did not disturb the "Great Separation." Locke taught that peace and the protection of the individual could be better achieved through religious toleration and the separation of powers. Rousseau and Kant argued that men had religious needs that demanded respect but could not be fully satisfied by conventional religion. And Hegel sought to show that religious faith provided an indispensable vehicle for expressing crucial truths about the ethical life.

Political theology enjoyed a rebirth of sorts in 19th-century Germany, as Mr. Lilla shows. Championed by Protestant theologians, the new political theology -- or "liberal theology," as it came to be known -- found in the moral and political achievement of the modern German nation-state God's presence in history. Liberal theologians were sharply criticized in the 20th century by the German Protestant theologian Karl Barth and by the German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig for losing sight of the reality of biblical revelation and the promise of divine redemption. And then the guns and concentrations camps of World War II silenced the debate in Europe.

Where does that leave us now? Mr. Lilla concludes that "there is no effacing the intellectual distinction between political theology, which appeals at some point to divine revelation, and a political philosophy that tries to understand and attain the political good without such appeals." Even as he explains why other civilizations may well make different choices, he urges us to "keep our politics unilluminated by the light of revelation." But isn't that too stark, especially for a country whose Declaration of Independence grounds our unalienable rights

in God as well as nature? The great undertaking of the liberal West is to make a place for religion -- in public as well as private life -- without sacrificing individual freedom and political order. To be sure, this is no easy task, as Mr. Lilla shows, for religious belief has a way of making exclusive, and often political, claims.

Mr. Lilla elegantly reconstructs so much intellectual history that one can't help wishing that he had taken his narrative even nearer to the present, tracking the efforts of recent thinkers to understand the philosophical foundations of religion and politics. It would be instructive to learn, for example, how Mr. Lilla distinguishes his own understanding from that of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), who contended that Western civilization draws strength from the unresolved contest between reason and revelation. And it would be interesting to know what Mr. Lilla would make of Charles Taylor, the winner of the 2007 Templeton Prize in religion, who has long argued that many of modernity's greatest achievements draw sub terranean sustenance from premodern religious sources.

Another important question is whether the European tradition around which Mr. Lilla's argument revolves leaves out a crucial alternative, one embodied in the American experiment in liberal democracy. That alternative, championed by the Founders, provides religious reasons for separating church and state and political reasons for cherishing religion. This suggests that the challenge lies not in choosing between putting your trust in God or putting your trust in man but in choosing to give to each its due.

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