

Separation Anxiety

David Hollinger

- *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* by Mark Lilla

‘To ask me to check my Christian beliefs at the public door is to ask me to expel the Holy Spirit from my life when I serve as a congressman,’ declares Mark Souder, a conservative Republican from Indiana, ‘and that I will not do.’ Such affirmations of the legitimacy of religion in the civic sphere are increasingly common in the United States, even among liberal democrats stung by accusations of secularist bias. The practical meaning of the separation of church and state has been contested since its enactment in the Bill of Rights. At what point does the First Amendment’s guarantee of the ‘free exercise’ of religion run foul of its prohibition on ‘the establishment’ of religion, and vice versa? These questions matter today, when the population of the United States is much more assertively Christian than that of any other nation in the North Atlantic West. ‘Either I am a Christian or I am not,’ Congressman Souder explains, and, as a Christian, he has ‘an obligation to change things’. The floor of Congress is a good place to act on this obligation.

Souder speaks in open defiance of what Mark Lilla calls the Great Separation: the sharp distinction between politics and God proclaimed by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century but rarely implemented as vigorously and decisively as Lilla would like. Deeply affected by the religious wars of early modern Europe, Hobbes wanted to ratchet down the stakes of political conflict. If adversaries no longer believed that eternal life or eternal damnation hung in the balance, they might be less inclined to butcher each other. Hobbes focused not on the theological question of God’s will, but on the psychological and social reasons for people’s belief in God and its consequences for political life. Holding that fear and ignorance were at the root of theism and of the ascription to God of absolute orders for the conduct of worldly affairs, Hobbes envisaged perpetual slaughter unless religion could be cordoned off from politics.

The Stillborn God is a history of the emergence and a defence of ‘modern political philosophy’, as opposed to the ‘Christian political theology’ that came before it and has threatened again and again to reassert its dominance. Believers in the secular public sphere in the US are now on the defensive. Lilla promises to clarify the issues, and to provide a solid theoretical and historical basis for their debate, not only in the United States, but in Western Europe and beyond. ‘We have chosen to keep our politics unilluminated by the light of revelation,’ Lilla concludes on behalf of separationists, and ‘if our experiment is to work, we must rely on our own lucidity.’

A big surprise in Lilla’s otherwise lucid history is that almost none of it deals with the United States, even though he acknowledges that it was the site of the Great Separation’s most complete enactment and the scene now of renewed challenges to its legitimacy. He

doesn't mention Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the great American theorists of church-state separation. He says nothing about the repeated efforts to amend the notoriously 'godless' constitution by inserting God's name in it, or the more recent claims that God has been hiding there all along, just not formally acknowledged. He ignores the copious constitutional arguments by means of which Americans, especially in the middle of the 20th century, kept alive the discussion of these matters.

Instead, Lilla takes us from Hobbes through a series of canonical European philosophers up to and including Hegel. Then he provides an account of liberal Protestantism in Germany from about 1800 to the Third Reich. The 'stillborn god' of his title is the result of the liberal Protestant effort to provide a god who could do something other than sanctify the state. The failure to do this paved the way for the worst state tyrannies, for 'the messiah of 1917' and 'the messiah of 1933'.

What Lilla has to say about these philosophers is incisive, and shows that the theoretical foundations of the Great Separation have always been precarious. Hobbes's own solution for bringing it about was too authoritarian: he advocated an all-powerful sovereign who would control public worship but refrain from asking what citizens actually believed. This was not acceptable to 'Spinoza, Locke, Mont-esquieu, Hume, the authors of the Federalist Papers, and Tocqueville, among others', who proposed instead 'a system based on limited government, separation of church and state, and religious toleration'. Hume reasoned that 'if the sects could be convinced that toleration would leave them free to save souls without interference, they would see that they have a greater stake in liberty than in the conquest of political authority.'

But Rousseau and Kant, while developing a less mechanical view of human nature, put these advances at risk. Rousseau attributed religious feeling not to fear and ignorance, but to conscience, which was a better moral compass than ostensibly divine revelation. Yet if he was right that 'religion is simply too entwined with our moral experience ever to be disentangled' from the way humans act in the world, Hobbes's separationism is hard to sustain. Kant accepted much of Rousseau's analysis but worried that irrational enthusiasms would flower in the absence of philosophical foundations more secure than those of sentiment and inner light. Given the human tendency 'to conceive of our obligations as a service performed for God', a community must obey the imperatives of human reason as if these imperatives 'were the commands of a God who is moral ruler of the world'.

Lilla speculates that Kant may not have fully appreciated the opening he created for a Christian politics. After all, his concrete proposals for diminishing the violence caused by religious-political alliances were almost identical to Locke's: 'greater church-state separation, an end to public discrimination against particular faiths, freedom for theological speculation in the universities, and a strictly moral interpretation of the Bible's message and of the person Jesus Christ'. Yet by promoting a vaguely political role for the church, 'if only as a vehicle for advancing the stealth religion of moral progress', Kant built a vehicle that Hegel drove straight into the courtyard of the modern state.

The point of the Christian community for Hegel was not merely its Kantian service in encouraging people to behave properly, but its earthly embodiment of the divine. Protestantism had perfected the Christian community by embracing the world held at a distance by Catholics. Moreover, Protestantism's 'principle of spiritual freedom hastened the consolidation of the modern state', thereby, in Hegel's view, bringing to an end 'the millennial historical labours of Christendom'. The modern state 'actualises man's freedom completely', so that 'the church relinquishes its independent status and in return sees its basic principles infuse every aspect of modern life.'

After this convincing demonstration that even the most talented and resourceful thinkers have had a hard time keeping politics and God apart, Lilla might have addressed the destiny of the Great Separation in Britain and America. 'By the 19th century a consensus had grown up in Britain and the United States,' he observes with some exaggeration, 'that the intellectual and then institutional separation of Christianity and modern politics had been mutually beneficial'. But Lilla remains in Germany, gliding into an analysis of the 'obscure professors and preachers who laid the foundations for a genuinely modern political theology', which in turn inspired the 'modern eschatological politics' of 1917 and 1933.

Lilla's narrative of German Protestant thought from Schleiermacher to Karl Barth is sound, as far as it goes. He understands that, for Schleiermacher, religion was 'neither a kind of thinking nor a mode of practical activity', but 'pure intuition and feeling'. This emphasis meant the pushing aside of scripture, the historical particularities of which David Friedrich Strauss and countless others were just then demonstrating. Romantic conceptions of the self and *wissenschaftliche* approaches to the Bible combined to produce a liberal theology according to which the Bible was a cultural document rather than a series of commands, and the individual soul less an object of judgment than a site for religious emotions. Liberal theology 'divinised human religious yearnings as intuitions of a God who works through history', Lilla explains, 'and then divinised history as the sacred theatre where human morality is developed and realised'. The earthly moral progress of Christianity had produced German society, and even some German Jewish thinkers (for example, Hermann Cohen) joined in the theological celebration of it. Liberal theology thus became an authentic 'political theology', at the service of the state. In 1914, even Ernst Troeltsch, who more than any other theologian in this tradition worried that Christianity's authority was undercut when religion came to be seen as merely a cultural artefact, succumbed to crude nationalism and linked the Kaiser's call to arms with 'the living breath of God'.

No wonder, as Lilla observes, that after the war some theologians reasserted the existence of a huge gap between the earthly and the celestial city, and tried to take scripture more seriously. Barth's God had nothing in common with 'Rousseau's benevolent creator, Kant's moral lawgiver, or Hegel's self-developing spirit'. Barth's God, in Lilla's construction, 'is a deciding God', about whose decisions 'there is nothing rational, or even comprehensible.' Yet the individual soul has a decision to make, 'for himself or for God'. God's grace allows the individual to choose God, but the choice against the sinful self is real and the struggle ferocious. And this struggle, when institutionalised, 'threatens

to become an idol of worship'. No particular government 'can be considered satisfactory or legitimate in any ultimate sense'. The Christian must lead, but must not take politics too seriously. Hence Barth provides the Christian with only two, highly limited political modes: 'the prophetic scold and the citizen without qualities'. Both Barth and his Jewish contemporary Franz Rosenzweig, whose *Star of Redemption* outlined a politically passive notion for Jews of religious fulfilment through the performance of Jewish rituals, ended up in the same place: 'Man's ultimate destiny is not to be found in politics, only in divine redemption.'

This is where Lilla's story takes its unexpected turn towards Bolshevism and Nazism. Lilla absolves Barth and Rosenzweig of having done anything actually to cause Nazism, but the need for this astonishing disclaimer is created by the responsibility he does assign to them: that they unwittingly helped to 'shape a new and noxious form of political argument, which was the theological celebration of modern tyranny'. Neither of them 'recognised the connection between the rhetoric of their theological messianism and the apocalyptic rhetoric that was beginning to engulf German society'. Barth's close friend and collaborator Friedrich Gogarten briefly sided with the Nazis in 1933. Lilla assures us that Barth had no cause to be surprised: Gogarten was a racist and nationalist, and 'any schoolchild' in Weimar Germany might have discerned that Barth's 'spiritual language of crisis' was 'suited to the political situation'. The German Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch, who embraced the Russian Revolution and eventually lived by choice in East Germany, represents for Lilla the Bolshevik variation on the theme. Barth 'helped to form' a generation that had no desire to compromise with the old liberal theology, 'longed to inhabit a chiaroscuro world of "either-or", not "yes, but"', and sought to 'experience the moment of absolute decision and to have that decision determine the whole of their existence'.

Lilla allows that 'in the Anglo-American orbit, a liberal theological outlook could grow up alongside a liberal politics whose principles derived from Hobbes's materialism,' but this passing comment is easily lost in his German-centred narrative and his sweeping generalisation that 'all political theologies eventually' have the same result: the sanctification of the state. One would have thought that the appeals to God made in debates about slavery would be grist for Lilla's mill, as would the inclusion of God in the constitution of the Confederate States of America in 1861. Relevant, too, is William James, who was no friend of political establishments but whose *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was even further from scripture than Schleiermacher's work was. Both Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr, the two most politically important American theologians of the 20th century, were, by ancestry and training, embedded in the German theological culture to which Lilla attends so closely. Niebuhr's ideas about government and religion continue to be earnestly and even heatedly debated in American magazines. But the story of how the social gospel theologian Rauschenbusch and the 'realist' Niebuhr found their own American ways out of that culture – each quite different from the other – is entirely absent from Lilla's book. Harvey Cox's 1960s classic, *The Secular City*, perhaps the most widely discussed work written by an American liberal Protestant in the generation following Niebuhr's, both tracks and deviates from the worldly trajectory of German theology in ways that scream for Lilla's attention. The

super-liberal Cox even acknowledged the sometime Fascist Gogarten and the resolute Stalinist Bloch as among his chief inspirations. Did he, an ally of various 1960s radical movements, sanctify the modern state? Lilla doesn't even ask the question. Martin Luther King, whatever else he may have been, was a liberal Protestant root and branch. Might he, too, be relevant to Lilla's story?

Some of what Lilla misses is encapsulated in the proceedings of a meeting of 377 American liberal Protestant leaders in March 1942. This gathering was convened by the Federal Council of Churches to think about what the world should look like after the anticipated defeat of the Axis powers. 'The Churches and a Just and Durable Peace', a document adopted by the conference, castigated 'the sin of racial discrimination', urged 'autonomy for all subject and colonial peoples', and endorsed basic human rights 'for racial and religious minorities in all lands'. It called on the world's political leaders to move towards 'a duly constituted world government', and resolved that a globe filled with 'unrestrained national sovereignties' amounted to 'international anarchy'. The United States could not be expected to play an effective role in a new global order, it held, unless it put its own house in order: the conference condemned the denial to 'American negroes' of equal access to education, employment, housing, transportation and 'the right to vote'.

This conference was not the work of a splinter group, but amounted to a summit meeting of the leaders of the national, informal 'Protestant Establishment'. It was chaired by John Foster Dulles, who a decade later would be named secretary of state by Eisenhower. The delegates proclaimed their identity as Americans, but were highly conscious of their independence. A resolution declaring that 'the Church as such is not at war' was vociferously debated, and after passing in committee, 64-58, was voted down in plenary session. That such a resolution could even be discussed three months after Pearl Harbor marks the distance from Troeltsch's comparison of the Kaiser's call to arms with 'the living breath of God'. The text accepted in plenary session declared the church to be 'an ecumenical, supranational body, separate from all states, including our own national state', and recognised 'the particular rights and responsibilities of the state in connection with the secular order'. It called on 'Christian citizens' to 'create a public opinion which will ensure that the United States shall play its full and essential part' in bringing humanity into conformity with the moral law. The preamble asserted a belief 'in the eternal God revealed in Christ' who is the 'source of moral law', and affirmed 'faith that the kingdom of the world will become the Kingdom of Christ'. Those attending the conference, like many of Lilla's subjects, fuzzed up the Great Separation.

The point is not that these church leaders were so wise about politics (often they were not), or that they were capable of sustaining their critical edge under more pressing circumstances (during the Cold War, Dulles was prominent among those who decided that Communism, not imperialism, was the big problem). Nor is it to deny that American liberal Protestantism, broadly construed, spawned a variety of complacent, status-quo-celebrating initiatives, such as Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, a 1925 bestseller in which Jesus of Nazareth is presented as a good salesman. This 1942 conclave simply shows that the liberal Protestant theology generated largely in Germany in the late 18th

and early 19th centuries possessed a looser logic than one would guess from *The Stillborn God*, and bequeathed a more diverse legacy.

Lilla's aloofness from the history of the Great Separation in the site of its most complete enactment is remarkably glib. He attributes to a 'strong constitutional structure and various lucky breaks' the US's ability to avoid dominance by political theologies of the sort that have caused havoc in Europe and elsewhere. The closest he comes to explaining what he means by this is a reference to 'a wholly unique experience with Protestant sectarianism in the 17th and 18th centuries' common to 'Britain and the United States'. Thus is the American Revolution erased, along with centuries of argument through which Americans have contested one another's interpretation of the church-state separation and achieved the holding operation to which *The Stillborn God* can be construed as a contribution.

Lilla also ignores the United Kingdom's experience. There is the small matter of an established church: he never mentions the Church of England. His focus on the arguments of theorists conditioned by both a tradition of political absolutism and a monolithic sense of the Volk is extremely valuable, but less valuable than it would have been had it included arguments developed in religiously and ethnoracially diverse societies like the United States and Canada. The problem with *The Stillborn God* is not that it fails to provide a comprehensive history of the relationship between politics and religion in the West – this would, as Lilla observes, 'fill many volumes' – but, rather, that his central claims cannot be sustained on the basis of the selection he has made of episodes in that history.

If the God of the liberal Protestants in Germany proved to be stillborn, what kind of God, if any, does Lilla want? Is the best kind one whose demands on political life can be kept at bay? 'An honest God is the noblest work of man,' observed the great 19th-century American agnostic Robert Ingersoll. Parodying Alexander Pope, Ingersoll offered his ironic support to a liberal Protestant theology that he judged less destructive than its orthodox predecessors. He understood the liberal Protestant God to sympathise with advances in science, industry, commerce and standards of living, and to offer instructions clear enough to be understood by people who knew better than to read scriptures literally. Overall, this new God was a pretty decent sort. Ingersoll knew that the direction of politics depended to some extent on the character of the specific religious ideas held by his fellow citizens. And so it remains today.

There is good reason to keep track of the internal disagreements of religious believers. Lilla is right to observe that 'for many believers in the biblical religions', even today, it is a betrayal of God to break the connection between politics and revelation because God's commands are understood to be comprehensive. These people are Lilla's real enemies, while some of his allies are found among the religious liberals he patronises. He dismisses liberal theology for preaching 'good citizenship and national pride, economic good sense, and the proper length of a gentleman's beard', but would do well to take account of the actual alignments in the debate in the United States today. Prominent among religious liberals is Barack Obama, who, while calling for a 'spiritual awakening'

that might give secularists pause, distinguishes sharply between private motivation and public warrant:

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all . . . Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God's edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.

This is a long way from Souder's determination to bear religious witness through his votes in Congress. Whether or not he agrees with Obama's theism, Lilla has a stake in the labours of liberal Protestants like Obama, who are the heirs not only of 'various lucky breaks', but of a long history of political theorising in the United States.

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