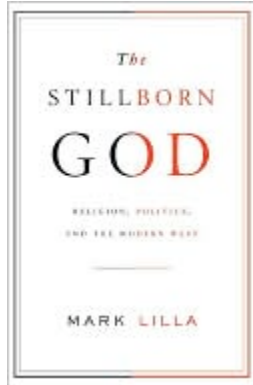




The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us today.

If you've been reading *The New York Times* lately, as I assume most of you have, then it is likely that you are familiar with Mark Lilla's erudite and timely article, "The Politics of God," which appeared in the Magazine Section on Sunday, August 19th.

His essay is an excerpt from his book, *The Stillborn God*, which he will be discussing at greater length shortly. In it he illuminates the promises and perils of present-day thinking about religion and politics. His book will, no doubt, influence discussions about politics and theology for years to come.

The Stillborn God is based on the Carlyle Lectures, which Professor Lilla delivered at Oxford University in 2003. These lectures address one of the more challenging issues of our time: the tension between political theology and modern political philosophy.

After a period in which religion seemed to be a declining force, matters of faith are once again in ascendancy in world affairs. In fact, far from fading away or retreating into private life, religion, especially in the case of Islamic fervor, is once again at the very heart of politics in many parts of the world. And because this phenomenon seems so strange, Professor Lilla believes we need to revisit our own history so that we can see how we emancipated ourselves from political theology in the past.

To do this, our speaker draws on a small number of exemplary European thinkers, such as [Hobbes](#), [Locke](#), [Rousseau](#), and others, whose work influenced crucial terms in debating the demands of politics, the claims of God, and ultimately the nature of man. In the end, these thinkers gave birth to the modern intellectual alternative to political theology that is familiar to all of us today.

Professor Lilla writes that he was guided by two questions: (1) what philosophical and theological moods make a return to political theology seem necessary; and (2) what does this argument reveal about the strengths and weakness about our present way of thinking about our political life? In the end, he wonders whether religious longing can be channeled in such a way as to avoid a dangerous moral and political fanaticism that is currently taking place in the Islamic faith.

Professor Lilla is not shy when it comes to examining topics of enormous scope. He is widely recognized

as a sophisticated essayist and world-renowned intellectual historian who concentrates on the history of ideas. In his first book, *G.B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* (1993), he examines an important figure in European counter-Enlightenment. In the 1990s, he wrote widely on 20th century European philosophy, editing with Thomas Pavel the New French Thought series of Princeton University Press. In *The Reckless Mind* (2003), he talks about how a number of important 20th century European intellectuals came to support tyrannical regimes and totalitarian political ideas.

After holding professorships at NYU and at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, he is now Professor of Humanities at Columbia.

If we accept the fact that we have now entered a period of religious revival, and if that a revival is having the profound impact on politics that is now presumed, then to have in our midst the one person who can provide us with the philosophical foundation necessary for understanding the reemergence of religion in political life, I would have to conclude that we are very privileged indeed.

Please join me in welcoming Mark Lilla.

Remarks

MARK LILLA: In the 20th century, we all thought we knew what the basic terms of political debate, political concern, and political conflict were: war, revolution, nationalism, class, race. In the 21st century, we seem to have transported ourselves somehow back to the world of the 16th and 17th century, where the questions that concern us are those of reason and revelation, toleration, martyrdom, and political messianism.

Just to give you an example—it's an example I quote in *The Times* article; you'll forgive me for quoting it again—also very timely, given events this week in New York up at Columbia [on 9/25/07 President Ahmadinejad spoke at Columbia University]—in May of 2006, President Ahmadinejad of Iran sent an open letter to President Bush that was translated and published around the world, discussed around the world, and generally ignored in this country, surprising to me, in which he made a threatening prophecy. I'm quoting him now:

"Liberalism and Western-style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today these two concepts have failed. Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shadowing and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems. Whether we like it or not, the world is gravitating towards faith in the Almighty and justice and the will of God will prevail over all things."

When we hear language like this, we are surprised. And I have to admit that I'm surprised by our surprise. I don't know why it is that we are astonished to learn that religion can still put fire in the minds of men and that it can lead them into acts that not only harm themselves but harm the societies that they live in.

The only way I can explain the surprise is that we live in a state of forgetfulness—not a kind of forgetfulness, or unknowingness if you like, about, or ignorance about, other traditions and other peoples; but rather forgetfulness about our own intellectual political history concerning these questions of religion and politics.

My book, if you like, is an effort at recovering memory. I try in the book to stay away from talking about the present challenges of political theology in our world—I talk about it a bit in *The Times* article—because I wanted to focus on the phenomenon itself. I wanted to find a way of conveying, through people that have names like us, who dress like us, who in many ways thought like us, but nonetheless were susceptible to the sirens of political theology, even in the modern West. By doing that, I hope to shed some light on this phenomenon, which I think is a permanent challenge in political life and cuts

across cultures and civilizations and is not located in one, certainly not just in Islam.

So what I thought I would do is offer you a short précis of the book and its argument, but not say too much so you don't buy the book, and suggest what sorts of lessons might be drawn by looking back at our own history on this question.

The most basic point I hope to make in the book is that the way we live now in the West politically is an experiment. Historically considered, most civilizations, in most times and places, have founded their understanding of law and basic political legitimacy on some kind of divine revelation or sanction. In the large sweep of history, the modern West is an extraordinary exception.

In these other times and places, what governed was what I call in the book political theology. What I mean by that is a view of a kind of divine nexus between God, man, and world that needs to be understood before we can understand how we are to organize life politically. So the understanding of the good society, the legitimate use of political authority, is all in reference to an understanding of how God, man, and world are connected. That's what political theology does.

What distinguishes the modern West in the history of these civilizations is the absence of political theology, not the absence of religion in political life. As we know quite well in the United States, and even in Europe—I can give examples—religion remains a force in social life and political life, and we have very different ways of coping with it. And not just in the United States. In this country, religious groups play a large role in party politics and are involved in devising policy in various ways.

That's not so true in Europe. On the other hand, in Germany ministers are paid out of public coffers, which does not happen here and which we would find very strange. There are European countries where you are allowed to wear the Muslim head scarf to school; there are countries where it is not allowed.

So there is tremendous variety within the West when it comes to thinking about and coping with religion in the public square. But what we share in the West is the understanding that political legitimacy rests with the people and that that legitimacy is not in any way established with reference to a divine revelation.

In the West, when it came to those questions of basic legitimacy, we have simply learned to let God be. Which is not to say we don't talk about God a lot in our politics, but the basic assumption is after we have finished talking about our politics, we take a vote and the result of the vote is legitimate.

I am trying to distinguish here two levels of where religion affects politics. At the first level, people think about it and vote and lobby based on their religious views. But at a deeper level there is this question of basic legitimacy. As long as everyone recognizes the legitimacy of our basic institutions, I think we are in fairly good shape.

We have learned to practice an art of separation, separating the question of legitimacy and leaving God out of that, while at the same time thinking a lot about God when it comes to debating what our laws ought to be regarding schools or abortion or any number of issues.

In the book I try to lay out how this art of separation developed in the West, a fairly conventional story, but also how it was challenged throughout the history of the modern West, and that's a story that has not been much told.

The familiar part of this story is this. The West arises out of Christendom. The original political theology of the West is Christian. But Christian political theology has always faced certain problems that are rooted in Christian theology itself.

At a very basic level, you can say that Christianity has always had a Messiah problem. The problem is this: the Messiah is promised, as in Judaism; then he comes, enters the world; then he departs. Now,

when you think about those three possibilities, it shuffles the deck in thinking about the connection between the divine and human.

Does the fact that Jesus came mean that somehow something has been revealed about the way we govern ourselves politically here and we're supposed to somehow establish God's kingdom on earth? Or is the fact that the Messiah departed tell us that the world remains lost in sin, we need to withdraw within ourselves, withdraw from political life, and wait for his return?

So the fundamental dynamics of Christian political theology are incredibly intense, because there are two impulses. One is to try to realize the kingdom of God on earth. The other is to reject the world as fallen and withdraw from political life—monasticism, for example.

Because of these various tensions, it was very difficult—indeed, I would say impossible—for orthodox Christianity—I don't mean Eastern Orthodox, but I mean orthodox Roman Catholicism, even the Reformation—to make sense of political life within its larger picture of the nexus of God, man, and world. There is no way to reach consensus on that. That, in my view, was one of the deeper roots of both the Reformation and the wars of religion.

Because of the wars of religion, Christendom faced a civilizational crisis that other civilizations based on a political theology did not face. There is no problem of church and state in Islam, for example. There is no problem of church and state in Jewish theology. There are problems of the law, comprehensive law, how they get established, but this tension that existed in Christianity was unique, and it led to unique and very bloody problems.

It was out of that that thinkers in the 17th century—and I pick on Hobbes in particular—decided that there had to be a way out of this, a way out of political theology as such. Not a way of tinkering with Christian political theology so that it might work better and be a little less violent, but rather to rethink what it means to establish the legitimacy of a political order. That's where Hobbes comes in.

Hobbes found a way to change the subject. That's the most important thing that a thinker can ever do—not add a new idea, but simply to change the subject so people stop talking about one thing and start talking about something else. What Hobbes did is, he said: Let's stop talking about what God wants for the political order and let's ask ourselves why do people believe that God wants X or Y to be the rule in the political order. He changed the subject from God to man's beliefs about God, and developed a picture of why people believe what they believe based on a psychology of ignorance and fear, which you all remember from your courses in the history of political thought. He shifted the basis from theology to religious anthropology, you might say.

Now, that was a decisive break. It opened up the policy that we could start thinking about establishing a political order without talking about God, but by thinking, given that so many people believe in God and draw so many political implications from it, how do we find a way to establish a government where we can short-circuit that? They can think what they want about God, but it is not going to bleed into their understanding of political order.

Hobbes had his own ideas, which were ideas we would find shocking right now, which is that there should be a single ruler with complete control over the polity and over religion.

But out of this break those who came to be called liberal thinkers began developing the notion that in fact you could have popular sovereignty, a system of law, limited government, transparent administration, and think about how we could tinker with the machinery of politics so that people who are driven by political passions, a lot of them religious, are no longer slitting each other's throats. So the problem of politics becomes controlling the passions that get set off by religion rather than realizing what those passions are aiming for.

Now, all of that is fairly familiar. What's less familiar, I think, was the rebellion against this understanding

of politics and this attack on political theology. Thinkers came along in the 18th and 19th century, beginning with Rousseau, and especially in Germany, who said: This can't be right. This can't be an adequate understanding of what religion is and what religion does. Hobbes says that we're religious because we're fearful and ignorant. How do you explain the beauty of the Gothic cathedrals? How do you explain Bach's music? How do you explain the loyalty of the Jewish people in Diaspora to the Torah over centuries; is that because of ignorance and fear?

No, Rousseau and his followers argue, that's not what religion is about at all. What religion is about is expressing our deepest and most noble moral instincts. Where religion inspires us to despicable acts it's because our religious ideas are corrupt. The problem is religion itself. Religious ideas need to be reformed. And if we reform our theological ideas and reform our political ideas, we'll discover that religion, properly reformed, can actually serve as a moral foundation for the modern political order.

Hobbes wanted to leave religion out. Rousseau and his followers wanted to reform religion and reinsert it as a foundation of modern political life. And they had a fairly good case. The case was based on, in fact, the more realistic sense, or a fuller sense, of what religion can do.

The problem with that turned out to be that it bred a fantasy. The fantasy was that if we only got our understanding of God right again, that there would be a kind of perfect marriage between religion and politics such that religion could be counted on to shape people morally for this modern political order and would give its blessing to the modern political order, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, that the state would not only recognize private religion, but somehow incorporate religious principles into its understanding of itself.

So there was a development of what's called liberal theology in the 19th century, especially in Germany, that was bred on this fantasy. There was a Protestant version that was very strong. There was also a Jewish version of it that has its own peculiar history. But the operative fantasy was: If we only got Protestantism right, clean it up, make it rational and moral, get rid of superstition, if we only did the same with Judaism, then we would be able to see that good Protestants and good Jews make the best Germans.

Things didn't turn out that way. And they didn't turn out that way not only beginning in Weimar in World War II but in World War I, because what happened in World War I was that this civilization that reformed Protestantism, and Judaism had extolled as the highest development of man and blessed by God, produced the worst war the human race had ever seen. Young Protestants and Jews who took their faith seriously were appalled that their teachers had not only blessed this civilization but even blessed the war and had become promoters of German war aims, both Jewish and Christian thinkers, during World War I.

Appalled by this and by this liberal political theology, which was a weak political theology, they rejected that compromise and became interested again and drawn to a more intense messianic understanding of their own faith and a messianic understanding of political life. So the book tells the story of how the children of these liberal theologians in fact became sympathetic, many of them, to Nazism among the Protestants and to Soviet communism among the young Jews.

There was an attraction to apocalyptic thinking and messianic politics, a desire to wipe away all the pieces on the chessboard, and to spew the warm water of liberal politics and liberal theology out of its mouth. At the end of this story, you have young theologians arguing for communism and for fascism, and you are back exactly in the position that you were in when Thomas Hobbes started to write in the 17th century.

Now, the point of telling this story for me—there are several points, and I'll lay out a few of them before I stop—is, above all, to make us more humble and modest. The temptation of political theology is something that is always present, I would argue, especially in civilizations touched by the biblical tradition and by the messianic promise, and that it can rear its head, for understandable reasons, just about anywhere. So that what we are seeing in the Islamic world today is just one example of a problem and a

temptation that we ourselves, if not so dramatically, have had trouble putting aside. So I think we need this modesty at the present moment.

But apart from that, I think there are other lessons that we can draw. I'll just lay out a few.

The first, just to repeat myself, is that our way of separating political theology from political philosophy is an experiment. Historically, this is an unusual thing that we have accomplished. It depends on training people in this art of separation, of separating questions of basic legitimacy from questions of theology. There is no magic process of secularization that produced this break in our history. It was a chance thing that happened, because of the breakdown of Christendom and the rise of certain thinkers. There's no reason to think that there's some universal process at work there that's also going to be at work elsewhere in the world. It's not that contemporary Islam is the exception; we're the exception, historically speaking.

Once we understand that, I think we can start thinking about how to face challenges regarding religion and politics within the West and outside the West.

Within the West, I think it helps us to understand where the real challenges are and what's important. Every time I talk about the book, people immediately want to talk about—I've been doing a lot of radio shows, and the first question is always: Isn't [George Bush](#) just the same as [Osama bin Laden](#)? And then I get the question about [The Da Vinci Code](#), which I don't know how to answer. But the first question is about that.

However you feel about the role of evangelical Christians in contemporary politics, how you feel about abortion, stem cell research, the schools and all the rest, at the present time, in general, we are still all playing by the rules. All of these groups, legitimately in my view, can militate for particular policies, can vote, can raise money, as long as they recognize the rule of law and that when the votes are taken we know what the law is. I think we're in pretty good shape at that level, however you feel about the particular policies being promoted by various groups.

The thing to worry about is anything that raises deeper doubts about the very legitimacy of our constitutional process, that somehow we have drifted away from God to such an extent that we don't have to treat the laws of Congress or the decisions of the Supreme Court as legitimate, as binding law, anymore.

As we were talking over the breakfast table, I myself am less concerned about the role of various religious groups in the political process than I am about something like the home schooling movement, which my worry is will be training children and young adults not to understand or appreciate the basic legitimacy of the American Constitution itself. Public schools and private schools, schools outside the home, offer a place of learning about and exercising this art of separation. So I am more worried about something like that than I am about particular decisions on particular policies.

Now, outside the West. As I suggest in the article, we live on the other shore from nations and people who accept political theology as the only legitimate way to think about political life.

We face three problems: how to deal with Islamic states that are based on such a political theology; how to deal with the transnational Islamist ideology that's a political theology; and how to treat our fellow Western citizens who are Muslim. These are different challenges. They require different responses.

When it comes to dealing with states, I think mainly we have to drop any illusions we have that we share a common vocabulary when it comes to politics. That doesn't mean we can't deal with each other. I think it will make it easier to deal with each other if we don't have any illusions about the possibility of establishing a constitutional, liberal democratic order in an area of the world where people still accept the legitimacy of political theology. It's not going to happen.

The real delicate matter is what to do about fellow citizens who themselves may still accept the

legitimacy of Islamist political theology but are living with us as fellow citizens. This is not a large problem in the United States at the moment. In Europe it's an enormous problem. Due to the immigration policies that European nations have pursued for the past 20 or 30 years, there is a large population, by some estimates up to 20 million, of Western Muslims, not all of whom accept the legitimacy of democratic institutions. We've made our bed. We have to sleep in it.

My view is that now that we share Europe with people who may not accept the legitimacy of our system of government, we need to draw lines and we need somehow to accommodate ourselves to this fact. I am not terribly hopeful about the possibility of an easy, simple liberal reform of Islam—not because of anything about Islam, but because of the story I've just told about the failed liberalization of Protestantism and Judaism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The paradox is this. The moment you liberalize a religion in order to reconcile it with the present political order, the more that religion becomes implicated in whatever happens in that political order. If things turn out badly, there is a tendency for people to abandon that liberal religion for a more messianic one, to bring the judgment of God down on a political order that is not just. I do not think that this easy liberalization that we are hoping for will happen because it sets off this dynamic of apocalyptic and messianic yearning.

That's why, unlike some of my adversaries in the press now I've been arguing against, I am more hopeful about thinkers like [Tariq Ramadan](#) and [Abou El Fadl](#), who are trying to renew an understanding of Islamic law from within, not accommodated to our taste of the present, but to reinterpret it in such a way that makes it easier for believing Muslims to live in the modern world without feeling that they're abandoning the core of their faith. I wish them well.

But in the end, we have to realize that none of this is in our hands, that we do not share the basic presuppositions of those who are promoters of and believers in political theology. There's a gap separating us. We live on the other shore. The best way to navigate in the present is to understand that there's no bridge that's going to connect us.

Thank you very much.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you very much. Like Hobbes, you too may take our thinking in a different direction. I thank you for your comments.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: More of a comment. As you know, I was the congressman who represented the University of Notre Dame. That's where Tariq Ramadan was supposed to have spoken, before the State Department would not let him.

A few years ago, I was in Morocco and spoke at a conference and said that most people who live in Manhattan never meet a Muslim other than a Bangladeshi or Pakistani taxi driver, and that I thought we really needed to learn a lot more about Islam. We have now established at New York University a Center for Islamic Studies.

I just have a thought that I'd like your judgment on. I don't know if it makes sense. What about organizing a consortium of universities with Islamic study centers, which might be in the United States—and also I know at Oxford there's an Islamic studies center—to exchange scholars and students and mount symposia, and reach into the Middle East as well, so that we can try to develop—and maybe this is a Western liberal democrat speaking, with the lower case as well as upper case—trying to encourage rational discussion on the part of persons concerned with the role of Islam in the world? Is there anything to be said for that kind of an approach?

MARK LILLA: I actually have little hope that that would contribute. The reason is that it's not that there's a lack of rationality. On the contrary, Islam has a long and deep and rich tradition of rational thought about [Shariah](#). It is a highly rational system. But it is based on a presupposition that is not questioned, and that is that of the revelation of the Qur'an itself.

There is no bridging that difference. If you try to bridge the difference by saying, "Can't we agree on certain principles of toleration while leaving the question of God out?" then you are essentially talking the language of this liberal theology that I was discussing earlier. That kind of reform that is inspired by a desire to accommodate in an easy way religion and revelation to the present will, in my view, almost always backfire, because it will not be taken as authentic by those who order their lives completely in this regard.

Whatever happens has to come from within the world of Muslim political theology. I was for Ramadan coming, not because I thought that we would establish some liberal understanding, but because I thought it was important for Muslim believers who take him seriously to see that we both respect what's there and we respect that it's different, and that we might provide a space for the development of these ideas within the Muslim context, and not think that we are going to build bridges that are not going to stand. That's my view.

QUESTION: First of all, thank you very much both for this article and your presentation this morning, both of which I thought were just superb. I just kind of want to draw you out a little more on this sentence, which I guess is the core of what you said this morning, that "we need to recognize that coping is the order of the day, not defending high principle."

I wonder what you mean by "coping," because in your response just now you've kind of said, well, dialogue isn't going to really lead anywhere, this is an internal matter. On the other hand, the West, put very broadly, has a huge political issue with the Islamic world, which is that it wants to somehow bridge some of these gaps, at least not to have this sort of endless disconnect going on. So I wonder if you could say a little bit more about what "coping is the order of the day" means.

MARK LILLA: Essentially, I was arguing against people like people I respect, who are friends, people like [Paul Berman](#), [Christopher Hitchens](#), those who have been arguing that somehow we need to bring the ideas of Western democracy to the Muslim world, that there are people there who are just waiting to get it—fight, fight, fight—and don't be distracted by figures like Ramadan, who are dicey anyway because it's not clear where they stand on these issues.

What's peculiar about their position, in my view, is that there were people who were rather sanguine about the levels of Muslim immigration into Europe. But once they had this large population, they essentially wanted to bludgeon people into becoming liberal democrats and didn't know how to cope with the fact that they were in their own space. So those who were attacking Ramadan were attacking him on the grounds that he does not accept the basic principles of liberal democracy. Of course. He's a political theologian. He believes in the truth of the revelation of the Qur'an, that it provides, properly interpreted, a blueprint for the ideal society. There's no way to efface that.

However, if you have people like that, you can cope by saying: We don't share those basic presuppositions. But look, we want to get along. We're going to tone it down. We are willing to have some way of coping with speech that people find offensive, or representations of the Prophet, or something like that. We have ways of coping with these things, in the way we have ways of coping with speech about Holocaust denial and hate speech and all the rest.

We're coping. We are not somehow appealing to a higher principle here. We know what the principles are. We simply need to figure out a way to interpret them in a way that makes sense, given this vast difference that exists within our communities.

Similarly, when it comes to dealing with a nation that is in the grip of a political theology, it is not to try

to convince it of the principles of liberal democracy, but rather simply to see if there are ways we can get along, where we have common interests and all the rest, without having any illusion that we are appealing to a common principle. We aren't.

So it is simply false to say that the alternative is getting clear on our principles and realizing them at home and abroad, or utter chaos and civilizational war. Those are not the choices.

QUESTION: This was so enlightening, but of course we have questions. I'd like to begin with Germany in the 19th and 20th centuries, since you mentioned that twice.

First of all, you had to be schematic to get all of this in. But not all Protestants became Nazis and not all Jews became Communists. And you didn't mention the Catholics, who were so important in southern Bavaria, southern Germany, as a center for Nazism.

Secondly, on modern-day Islam, we know that Saudi oil money has financed many [Wahhabist](#) schools that teach a fundamentalist approach. Since oil money is also modernizing some of the emirates and some of the other countries and so forth, are there examples of other kinds of schools that are based on the interpretations of Shariah and remembering the great Islamic civilization of 1000 years ago?

MARK LILLA: Good questions.

Just to be clear, I'm not trying in the book to explain the rise of fascism, and the attraction in general to Soviet communism. Rather, this is the history of a debate. In a sense, I'm following the possible chess moves that could take place, and in fact did take place; that once Hobbes said what he said, then it turned out that Rousseau had something to say which was a new position, and then people came along and thought that they could develop a liberal theology. It turned out that those who reacted against it, some of them, found that they could reinvent a messianic political theology. Those are just steps in an argument.

Now, it doesn't cover everybody. It's not meant to cover everybody. The story of German Protestantism is not the story. It certainly is pretty much the story of the liberal theologians. That pretty much was in 19th century Germany the general shared sense of what modern Protestantism was.

But the rise of this Messianic thought in the Weimar years, that was very few people. But what's interesting is that they were able to figure out that that was the next step. So I'm interested in how people make the next chess moves, so to speak.

As for Catholicism, I say at the beginning I leave Catholicism out because the Catholic church, for various internal reasons, especially after the French Revolution, simply was not part of this chess game; that, because of the structure of Catholic education, the turn within itself in the 19th century, it never took up the challenge of Hobbes or took up the challenge of Rousseau and tried to make sense of it. So it was not part of this intellectual debate.

You put your finger, though, on where the problem is when it comes to thinking about other schools of Islamic thought. That is Saudi funding of the Wahhabists. If you read people—not Ramadan; I'm guessing that he's trying to keep good relations with them for his own purposes—but someone like Khaled Abou El-Fadl, if you ever read his books—he's a professor at UCLA Law School and has done more than anyone to try to recover this rich tradition of Islamic law that was just mentioned in this country. He is scathing on the Saudis and how they have fostered what for him is an ignorance about the wealth and the possibilities of Islamic jurisprudence.

But they have the money, and I know of no countermovement to fund schools that would provide an alternative. The first questioner asked, Well, could we do this here? I don't think we can do this here. It wouldn't be treated as legitimate. But if you know a Middle Eastern prince with a little money on his hands, this would be an excellent suggestion, to set up madrassas that would recover what seems to be

the genuine rich tradition there.

QUESTION: I have two questions. I have to preface my first one by saying I'm a little bit skeptical about your thesis that we are the exception. If you take a longer history of Western thought, from the Greeks and the Romans and carried forward into the modern period by [Machiavelli](#), it seems to me that that's a secular tradition that is not God-centered. The legitimacy comes from the political unit and an agreement among people, rather than from an outside force. And it seems to me that the Chinese tradition is similar; that is to say it's not God-based. That covers a lot of history and a lot of the human race. Having expressed this skepticism, I want to ask you: How do you factor in that part of the Western tradition?

My second question is about how do you decide who's in charge. You do this in terms of a separation and different bases of legitimacy. But I would think about it a little bit differently. That is to say that it's a struggle for power, and that if the state is in charge, it is state authority that is the arbiter of what the role of religion is. On the other side, if religion is in charge, then religion is the arbiter.

I think, for example, in the United States that it's the secular authority, the state power, that determines what the role of religion is, whereas in Iran it's the religious authorities that determine what the role of religion is.

But there are many Muslim societies that follow the rule that the state is in charge. Malaysia, for example, has an official state religion of Islam, but it is the state that determines what the role of Islam is in that society. It indicates in law what people need to believe and the kinds of rules that they need to follow.

Would you react to this notion that, rather than simply a difference in legitimacy, it's a question of power, of which authority is the arbiter?

MARK LILLA: As to the first question, the focus of the book and the problem, is on those civilizations that have been nations, that have been touched by the biblical tradition, which really raises the intensity of thinking about political theology to a higher level.

However, if you loosen a bit the conception of what political theology is and look at emperor cults in China, in Japan; if you look at the ancient Near East; if you look at the history of Egypt—there was in subtle ways always this sense that at some point legitimacy was bestowed from beyond; it doesn't rise from below, but it descends from above and then trickles down in some way. Now, since World War II, those political theologies, sort of weak political theologies that lay in the background, disappeared—in China, Japan.

All I mean to suggest is that I actually think that we're theotropic creatures and that there is a tendency still to want to climb back up the ladder, so that there is always a risk or a way of doing that. If you keep your eye on world politics, you can see little efforts in this way. If you look at the rhetoric of the Hindu Nationalist Party in India and what they're trying to do with certain Hindu notions, they are trying to fashion a kind of political theology to legitimize a new kind of political order.

So I think that this temptation is always lurking out there, though it is true that there are areas of the world where it has simply not been intense because religion doesn't look like religion looks here. But if one scratches the surface and the history, I think one sees that most of these civilizations were founded with some kind of myth that looks like political theology.

On the second question, on the state as the arbiter on religion, I think you are absolutely right. You can multiply examples—not only Malaysia, but you can look at Turkey, you can look at Indonesia. What strikes me, though, is that if one thinks of political theology as an ideology, one can see that in all of these areas there are threats right now to the basic legitimacy of these regimes among people who are appealing to Islamic political theology. So that challenge is always there. It doesn't disappear.

That's not to say that these nations, just because they're Islamic, are being driven by a certain obscure political theology. That's not the case, as you mentioned, in Malaysia, or I would add Turkey or Indonesia. But it's interesting to see how the power of these ideas is such, and are so attractive among people who are dissatisfied with the present order, that there is a thirst for a messianic alternative that one has to beware of.

QUESTION: You mentioned the fact that liberal Protestantism and liberal Judaism in Germany backfired because of the First World War, which seemed to raise questions about the fundamentals of that liberalism. And then I think you said that the problem about trying to have a reformation in Islam, just trying to make it modern, is that the same will repeat itself. Well, the reason liberal Protestantism and Judaism didn't work is because of the catastrophe of the First World War.

Now, hopefully, we can avoid a similar catastrophe now. And maybe a way of avoiding a similar catastrophe is to liberalize Islam through a reformation, which would avoid perhaps the clash of civilizations that could be a catastrophe.

MARK LILLA: My prediction is this, that any liberal Islam would have to bless the political order that is within. That is, that it says that: We have reformed ourselves in such a way that we no longer stand outside the present political order, but we are now part of it, we've reconciled ourselves to it, we've accommodated ourselves to each other.

But the chances of having a stable, just political order in that part of the world that everyone will find attractive is very slim. As soon as things turn out badly—you don't even need a catastrophe as bad as World War I. All you need is one unjust tyrant, and if the head religious leaders are in tight with him and have reconciled themselves to that regime, you have simply sown the seeds of a messianic reaction against that among those who say, "Not only do I reject this unjust regime, I reject these religious leaders who accommodated themselves to it. Back to the Bible, back to the Qur'an. Let's bring God's judgment back down."

Most of our political history is the history of failure and injustice. The religions that cope with that best are those that keep themselves apart and keep an attitude of severe judgment on it, not those that accommodate themselves and think that somehow they have squared the circle.

QUESTION: If I understand you correctly, and what concerns me very much, is in your description of the range between orthodoxy and liberal religious views, I think that you are saying that the regression to the mean does not come to the mean, it comes to the extreme, and that dynamic, intertwined with what's going on outside of the Western tradition, is just an inflammatory situation. And I think you are saying it is structural.

MARK LILLA: Yes, it is. For those of you who haven't studied economics, I'll explain what that means: that there's not a compromise position here, that there is a tendency to go to the radical extreme, if you are playing the game of political theology. If you're not, if you manage to convince people of a need for a great separation between political theology and modern political philosophy, then it seems to me that these other possibilities at the genuine mean can exist theologically because there is no perverse dynamic between religion and politics.

So you have liberal Christianity and liberal Judaism in this country that are non-problematic politically. They're problematic because they can't fill the pews and they don't reproduce. But there is not a political problem there because everyone accepts the basic presupposition of the great separation. If you don't accept that, you get the situation you just described.

QUESTION: I'm going to ask you a rather parochial-sounding 21st century, "think 2008" question. You've talked very thoughtfully about the legitimacy of certain religions. I don't understand how we can even cope with the notion of Islam as a very proselytizing religion if we have trouble in our own country coping and accepting certain religions. We finally got a first Catholic president. We now have a born-again

evangelical in the White House. And we now have a candidate representing the Mormon religion. Is that a legitimate religion? It certainly sounds, from what you've said, like a religion based on divine revelation, and yet we have a large piece of our society that can't even accept that somehow this is a religion, even though it long ago refuted polygamy and represents a large, respectable establishment in one state. How can we get beyond that so we can even cope with what you're talking about, Islamism?

MARK LILLA: Just to be clear, I was not talking about the legitimacy of religions, but rather the legitimacy of a political constitutional order. But I take the spirit of the question, which is that one of the signs of our having successfully absorbed the implications of the great separation is that eventually we did have a Catholic president.

But both with the Catholic president, with [Kennedy](#), and now with [Romney](#), there is a question that needs to be raised. It was a good question back then and it's a good question now. That is, is your understanding of your theology such that you accept the principles of the great separation or not? Given the history of the Catholic church, that was not an obvious answer.

It was a good question to ask Kennedy, and he gave the best possible answer to it. Case closed.

The same question has been posed to Mitt Romney, and he has handled it well. He has made clear where his commitments are.

It's not a question of prejudice. In fact, the history—there was a very good article about this in *The New Republic* last year or the year before by a guy named Damon Linker, just about the theology of the state that exists in Mormonism. One sees this even in the story of [Joseph Smith](#). Joseph Smith, just before he was murdered, decided he was going to run for president and called for the abolition of our present institutions and the creation of what he called "prophetic democracy," with the Prophet at the top.

Now, that is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the way we do business. No Mormons have picked that up since then. But nonetheless, the question is floating around. Romney faced it. The fact that that's possible shows that that's not where the problems lie with us. It's not dealing with our religious fellow citizens here. Our deeper problem is coping with a challenge that is completely different out in the rest of the world.

JOANNE MYERS: The topic of political theology is obviously very difficult, but I thank you for making it so accessible.

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