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978-1-107-02731-2 - The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In his book *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*,<sup>1</sup> Mark Lilla observes that “In most civilizations known to us, in most times and places, when human beings have reflected on political questions they have appealed to God when answering them. Their thinking has taken the form of political theology. Political theology is a primordial form of human thought” (3–4). Lilla goes on to remark that “now the long tradition of Christian political theology is forgotten, and with it memory of the age-old human quest to bring the whole of human life under God’s authority” (5). We in the West have been “separated from our own long theological tradition of political thought by a revolution in Western thinking that began roughly four centuries ago. We live, so to speak, on the other shore. When we observe civilizations on the opposite bank, we are puzzled, since we have only a distant memory of what it was like to think as they do” (4). Lilla’s book tells the story of how “The Great Separation,” as he calls it, came about.

These remarks of Lilla may lead some readers to infer that whereas once upon a time one turned to theologians and theologically inclined philosophers for a lively discussion of the authority of the state, now one looks to secular philosophers and

<sup>1</sup> Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008). References are incorporated into the text.

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political theorists for that lively discussion. One would look in vain. The topic of political authority has very nearly fallen off the agenda of theorists generally. In *The Authority of the State*, the philosopher Leslie Green remarks about recent political theory that “the general problem of political authority is rarely regarded as being of primary importance.” He says that “there would not now be much agreement with T. D. Weldon’s claim,” made early in the twentieth century, “that ‘The aim of political philosophy is to discover the grounds on which the State claims to exercise authority over its members.’ Few of the most powerful contemporary thinkers . . . would accept this view.”<sup>2</sup>

Lilla argues, correctly in my judgment, that at the core of traditional political theology was the question of how God’s authority is related to the authority of the state. This present essay is an address to that question. It is thus an essay in that for which Lilla wrote the obituary, namely, political theology. More specifically, it is an essay in *Christian* political theology.<sup>3</sup>

Why would anyone want to resuscitate the moribund project of political theology? Why not let this comatose dog rest in peace? Why take up once again a project that for most people is “only a distant memory”?

One reason for once again taking up the project of political theology is that, for any theist who believes that both God and the state have authority, the question of the relation between these two forms of authority is inescapable. As Lilla remarks, “the question of God can present itself to any reflective mind, at any time. And once that question is posed, many others flow from it, including all

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Green, *The Authority of the State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Though the term “political theology” is traditional for the discipline in question, it is somewhat misleading. Political theology is not theology with a political cast; it is theology of or about the political, more specifically, theology of or about the state.

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the traditional questions of political theology. Political theology may not be a feature of every human society, but it is a permanent alternative to reflective minds” (19–20).

The answers given in the long tradition of Christian political theology to the question of the relation between divine and political authority cannot simply be rehearsed, however; the question has to be addressed anew. From around 500 CE until around 1600, almost all discussions in the Christian West of the relation between divine and political authority were conducted within the framework of the so-called “two rules” doctrine. As we shall see in due course, that doctrine is patently inapplicable to our present situation.

There’s another reason for once again taking up the project of political theology. Political theology is not as near-dead as Lilla suggests. It’s not vivacious, but it’s also not moribund. The reason Lilla and most other scholars and intellectuals regard it as near-dead is that it’s been flying under their radar. A book in political theology that has been enormously influential among Christian theologians, pastors and students ever since its publication in 1972 is John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*.<sup>4</sup> Yoder holds that the state has power but no authority; hence there can be no such thing as an account of the relation between God’s authority and the authority of the state. I regard that view as deeply mistaken. My aim is to develop an alternative.

In doing so I see myself as taking up a challenge that Jeffrey Stout issued to Christian thinkers in his fine book *Democracy and Tradition*. This is what Stout says in one place:

Every Christian is free to affirm God’s ultimate authority over every political community, including his or her own, whether or not others

<sup>4</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit agnus noster* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972; 2nd edn., 1994).

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agree. Indeed, Christians who make this affirmation are bound to infer that Christ is now ruling democratic political communities providentially, no matter who acknowledges or fails to acknowledge his authority. The central task of contemporary Christian political theology is to discern how Christ's rulership of such communities manifests itself.<sup>5</sup>

Stout would view what follows as well short of a complete political theology. And he would be right about that. I deal with only a few of the issues that he later cites as issues that, in his judgment, contemporary Christian political theology should address. The issues I do address seem to me fundamental, however; what one says about the relation between divine and political authority determines the shape of almost everything else. My discussion also falls short of being a complete political theology in that my treatment of the issues that I do take up cries out for further development at many points.<sup>6</sup> What I offer is not much more than a sketch of an account of the relation between God's authority and the authority of the state. But sketches have their uses.

To the disappointment of some readers, no doubt, I do little by way of engaging other theologians who have written on the topics that I will be discussing. In the opening chapters I discuss Augustine and John Howard Yoder because, in each case, their thought poses a challenge to my way of framing the issues. And I discuss Calvin's interpretation of Romans 13 and his version of the "two rules" doctrine so as to have before us an articulate and influential statement of the mainline tradition that I will be departing from. My engagement with Augustine, Calvin, and Yoder is thus in

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> From Chapter 8 onwards I appeal to natural rights; in my *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton University Press, 2008) I develop a theory of rights. In Chapter 13 I employ a certain understanding of the liberal democratic state. I work out that understanding in my *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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service to my systematic interests; in no case do I give a full presentation of their political theology as a whole.

Initially I planned to engage prominent contemporary thinkers whose views differ from mine. I wrote a draft of a chapter on Oliver O'Donovan's book *Desire of the Nations*; and I anticipated engaging at some length Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and some contemporary Catholic theorists, especially Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray.<sup>7</sup> But eventually I came to the conclusion that though it would be illuminating to engage the views of these thinkers, pointing out affinities and highlighting where and why I disagree, doing so in this essay would clutter and impede the flow of the argument. Engaging those writers at length will have to await some other occasion.

As my thoughts developed concerning the relation between God's authority and the political authority of the state, I found a case for the liberal democratic state gradually emerging – albeit for a less individualistic understanding of the liberal democratic state than is common. This surprised me; I had assumed that an account of the relation between divine and political authority would be distinct from whatever case could be made for the liberal democratic state. Now I found the former topic segueing seamlessly into the latter. Thereby I unexpectedly found myself confronting the sour and caustic attitude toward the liberal democratic state expressed nowadays by a good many Christian scholars and intellectuals.

A standard line of critique goes as follows. Whereas in former days a political regime was the highest institutional expression of a community united in religion and morality – or in the days of

<sup>7</sup> The chapter on O'Donovan would have been a revision of my article "A Discussion of Oliver O'Donovan's *Desire of the Nations*," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54:1 (2001), 87–109.

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Christendom, one of the two highest institutional expressions, the church being the other – the liberal democratic state is the opposite of that. Though professing neutrality, it is in fact hostile to religion and destructive of morality, committed to secularism and to possessive individualism. It represents Weberian instrumental rationality gone berserk, a vast bureaucratic octopus, destroyer of tradition and community. It initiates and provokes war in order to stir up patriotism. The responsibility and loyalty of the Christian is not to this state but to the church.

Some readers will assume that I am speaking hyperbolically. Surely nobody actually says such things; or if they do, they don't mean them literally. Not so. All but one of these charges are documented and discussed in detail in Part 2 of Stout's book; no need to repeat them here. The charge that Stout does not take note of is the charge that liberal democracies initiate and provoke war so as to stir up loyalty. So let me quote what Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon say on this point in their book *Resident Aliens*:

States, particularly liberal democracies, are heavily dependent on wars for moral coherence. All societies may go to war, but war for us liberal democracies is special because it gives us a sense of worth necessary to sustain our state . . . We are quite literally a people that morally live off our wars because they give us the necessary basis for self-sacrifice so that a people who have been taught to pursue only their own interest can at times be mobilized to die for one another.<sup>8</sup>

Someone who, like myself, concedes that there is truth in this biting criticism but who believes, nonetheless, that the liberal democratic state is a jewel of great price waits for a "however."

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 35.

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We wait in vain. No “however” is forthcoming. Calvin was an extremely biting critic of the political authorities of his day; but always there was a “however.” Many if not most rulers are oppressive, says Calvin; however, government is an instrument of God’s providential care for humankind. Thus it is that Calvin says, in the concluding chapter of his *Institutes*, that “the Lord has not only testified that the office of magistrate is approved by and acceptable to him, but he also sets out its dignity with the most honorable titles and marvelously commends it to us” (iv.xx.4).<sup>9</sup> Some people, says Calvin, hold that it is on account of “human perversity that the authority over all things on earth is in the hands of kings and other rulers.” Not so. It is on account of “divine providence and holy ordinance” (ibid.). “Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men” (ibid.).

This citation from Calvin, with its hyperbolic praise of the dignity of civil authority, leads me to mention another thing that took me by surprise in the line of thought that emerged from my reflections. Since I regard Calvin as a typical representative of the traditional “two rules” doctrine, and since I know his texts better than those of anyone else in the long tradition of “two rules” thinking, I decided to take his formulations as representative of the tradition. (I also look briefly at Luther.) A historically oriented approach would survey a host of other figures as well; it would also look at the institutional documents in which “two rules” thinking was employed to deal with political issues facing the church.

<sup>9</sup> The translation of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that I will use is that by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950). References are incorporated into the text.

I knew in advance that what Calvin said could not simply be repeated in our day; it would have to be adapted to our situation. But given that I stand in the tradition of which Calvin was the most influential founder, viz., the Reformed tradition of Christianity, I anticipated that my line of thought would be “Calvinistic” in some way that I was not able to specify in advance. But the more I thought about the “two rules” doctrine and reflected on Calvin’s articulation of that doctrine, the more convinced I became that the doctrine is not just inapplicable to our present situation but was deeply mistaken in its own day. Ironic that the most influential founder of the tradition in which I locate myself should be the one who draws the most fire in these pages.

It is not some generically theistic account of political authority that I develop in this essay – what would that be? – but, as I mentioned earlier, a *Christian* account. I invite others to listen in; but it is to my fellow Christians that what I say is most directly relevant.

Is there any reason for others to listen in? I think there is. In a participatory democracy such as ours, it’s important that we each be open with and open to our fellow citizens concerning the deep sources of how we think about political issues. If there are distinctly Jewish ways of thinking about those issues, or distinctly Muslim or secular utilitarian ways, I want to hear about those. Not only does respect for my fellow citizens require that I invite them to tell me how they think about these issues and that I listen attentively to what they say; by their speaking and by my listening I get a sense of what they care most deeply about, and thereby some sense of what a politics that is fair to all would be like. And there is always the possibility of learning from them. I may not be able simply to take over what was said by someone of a different persuasion from my own; I may instead have to appropriate what



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I discern her, in her own way, to be getting at, place it in a different context, formulate it with a different conceptuality. But that's how learning from others often goes, maybe usually.

Some will reject this invitation to listen in because they firmly believe that if political theology is not yet dead, it should be dead. I am thinking of those who reason along the following lines. Reflection on political issues in theological terms was rampant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The result was intense disagreement on almost every topic discussed.

Eventually the idea emerged, with John Locke as its preeminent representative, that the only way forward was to find some way of discussing political topics that did not appeal to our diverse religious and theological convictions but appealed instead to what we all share in common. In Locke's view that was reason, reason including our capacity for rationally apprehending the fundamental moral principles that he called "the law of nature." Locke's vision lives on, of a politics based on shared principles, its most prominent contemporary manifestation being so-called *public reason liberalism* of which John Rawls is the most prominent representative. Be done with political theology and thus with all the intellectual disagreement and social conflict that it creates. Embrace public reason liberalism.

My response is twofold. First, why not think about politics using the resources of one's own religious tradition *and also* seek as much agreement as possible with those who do not share one's tradition? Why not do both? Second, contrary to the original hope, the resolve not to think about political issues in religious and theological terms has not produced agreement, either on principles or on practice. The dream has failed. Not only is there intense disagreement between public reason liberals and those who reject public reason liberalism in general; there is also intense

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disagreement among public reason liberals themselves. Yet the discussion is conducted entirely in secular terms; no one appeals to theology. Are these present-day disagreements less widespread and less intense than the disagreements among the political theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Hard to tell.