Introduction

Religion as a Political Problem

Religion is a pesky problem. The "wicked problem" is now a staple of strategic discourse and social science research.[1] Wikipedia defines it as: "a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize."[2] Acknowledging the existence of wicked problems, accepting that not all problems could be reduced to a set of resolvable parameters and variables, permanently changed philosophy, social planning, mathematics and various other fields. Religion is not a wicked problem, not least for its appropriation of "wicked" in other contexts. If anything, many see religion as too complete, too stable and not sufficiently contradictory or open to critical inquiry. Religion is a pesky problem because it will not go away.

The West, and with it the international community created in the Western image, have invested significant effort in distancing themselves from religion. A separation of church and state is de rigueur for the modern nation-state. Religion is seen, ideally, as a private pastime. Faith can shape one's outlook but it cannot shape one's social or legal obligations. This barrier is enforced with differing intensities. France considers the state an alternative to the communal coherence and positive values of organized religion, and thus curtails the possibility of religious expression

[1] While there are different accounts regarding the coining of the term "wicked problem," it was famously used in Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Polity Sciences* 4, 1973, pp. 155–169. It is available online at: http://urbanpolicy.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Rittel+Webber_1973_PolicySciences4-2.pdf (last accessed on October 18, 2016).

[2] See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem (last accessed on October 18, 2016).

in state-sponsored public space. Consider, for example, the debate in France over the permissibility of wearing a burkini.[3] The British state, with its tradition of civic laissez-faire, allows ritual to enter public space. In October 2016, London's Oxford Street was pedestrianized for a commemorative march on Ashura. The tenth day of the month of Muharram is the most important holiday of the Shi'i Muslim year, being the anniversary of Imam Hussein's death in AD 683 at the hands of superior Sunni forces. In Iran and Iraq, the Ashura march is known for scenes of weeping and self-flagellation. In London, the marchers carried signs denouncing terrorism and proclaiming Islam a religion of peace.[4] Despite the obvious differences, both the British and the French (and the countries on the spectrum between them) consider religion a potentially positive force if and when it affirms the avowedly non-religious social order already in place.

Still, religion will not go away. In fact, the spectrum of separation I've just described demonstrates the insistent tenacity of religion as a public force. The French, apparently, fear the potential adverse effects of religion so much that they are willing to violate basic tenets of individual freedom in their struggle to keep religion in its place. The British apply the carrot rather than the stick, but the extraordinary measure of restricting the use of public space (Oxford Street) speaks volumes on the desire to hold the line before the advancement of religion. It is indeed seen as "Religion," a somewhat monolithic entity including within it all those who find themselves reserved with regard to the potential for fulfillment offered by the modern, liberal order. Is the non-religious side of the equation as clearly definable?

Christoph Schmidt suggests, in a fascinating introductory article to a Hebrew volume on political theology and Jewish modernity, that the modern liberal order itself is based on a conflation of modernity with the coming of the kingdom of God:

> While the … Church saw the kingdom of God as a transcendental kingdom, the modern revolutionaries – from Lessing to Friedrich Hegel and from Heinrich Heine to Ernst Bloch – turned it [the kingdom of God] into the purpose of human history, a utopia. In other words, the thinkers of modernity established

[3] See www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/europe/burkini-france-us-germany-africa.html?_r=0 (last accessed on October 18, 2016).

[4] See www.standard.co.uk/news/london/ashura-day-traffic-at-marble-arch-and-oxford-street-brought-to-a-standstill-as-muslims-march-on-holy-a3367501.html (last accessed on October 18, 2016).

an "eschatological" theory, directed toward the utopian purpose of history, as the realization of the kingdom of God.

One can consider the interpretative act of modernity in a much more radical light: when modernity removes the kingdom from its heavenly birthplace and wishes to establish it as a real political kingdom, it effectively inherits the apocalyptic tradition of John in the New Testament:

1 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."[5]

Schmidt frames the debate about the metaphysical heart of modernity as a struggle between eschatology and apocalypse, the peaceful resolution of history against its violent upheaval, both inspired by the growing proximity (perhaps the actual presence) of the kingdom of God. The philosophical discussion he describes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took on overt political relevance during the first decades of the twentieth century. Carl Schmitt, a German jurist and political theorist,[6] reintroduced the classical term "Political Theology"[7] into Western political theory in 1922, with a slim, paradigm-shifting eponymous volume.[8] Schmitt suggested that the Western liberal state leans on weak, secularized imitations of theological-political tenets. Schmitt rejected the liberal notion that sovereignty comes from the democratic representation of the state's citizens. Instead, he suggested, sovereignty is the ability to

[5] See Christoph Schmidt and Eli Schonfeld (eds.), *God Will Not Stand Still: Political Theology and Jewish Modernity* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009), pp. 18–19 (in Hebrew). The translation of the passage from Revelation 21:1–4 may be found online at: www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%2021 (last accessed on October 18, 2016). I expanded the original quotation in the Hebrew volume.

[6] Schmitt was also a senior Nazi, teaching at the University of Berlin and fulfilling senior roles in the legal establishment of Nazi Germany before and during World War II. It is, perhaps, evidence of his stature that he was not tried after the war, but continued to teach, write and publish. For an interesting biography of Schmitt, see Reinhard Mehring, *Carl Schmitt: A Biography* (Polity Press, 2014).

[7] For a historical review of the concept, before and after Schmidt, see the introduction by Hent De Vries to Hent De Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (Fordham University Press, 2006), particularly pp. 25–47.

[8] See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

determine the occurrence of an emergency. That is, the sovereign is the one capable of severing the regular run of the mill in favor of extraordinary circumstances. This sovereign has the power to curtail the regularity of institutional order, trivializing the stability of the state before larger, violent and volatile forces. This, Schmitt proposed, is a human approximation of divine authority as it appears in scripture.

Schmitt's notion of "political theology" has, in many ways, defined scholarly approaches to religion in the political sphere. Speaking broadly,[9] the relationship between religion and institutional politics is often seen to include dimensions of deception, impersonation and misdirection. Prodding religion in politics, one may expose foundational fallacies at the core of the liberal order, describe the ultimate weakness of secularization or consider the spiritual potentialities of a virtual world. The threat of religion described above may seem clearer if religion and the state are understood to support and undermine each other in intricate, surreptitious ways. Religion must then be approached with caution, in scholarship and policy both, so as not to unravel the core of the social fabric. Of course, this understanding refers predominantly to religion as practiced in a "Judeo-Christian" world. In this world, religion and politics are elaborately woven below the surface, at the level of primeval foundations.

But the most urgent religious threats to the modern order are less elaborate. As I suggested earlier, the case of Islam, from the Middle East to the heart of Europe, is often framed dichotomously. Muslims are seen as "objectively" different, possessing different values and a potentially contentious attitude. This may be because Islam is popularly perceived as a total civilization, requiring obedience in every aspect of life.[10] It may be related to feelings of disenfranchisement among Muslims in the West, leading to anything from a demand to observe Muslim ritual in public to terrorist attacks. It may have something to do with the brutal displays of violence on the part of organizations like IS and Al-Qaeda. In all three (and other) cases, the role of Islam in the political sphere is considered distinctly, removed from the structures and essence of that political sphere itself. Islam is "religion," encroaching on a "civil" tradition, each

[9] Intentionally so, in full awareness of the rich and diverse discourse on religion and politics in multiple disciplines, from sociology and political theory to literature and philosophy.

[10] See, for example, the website politicalislam.com, suggesting that the totality of Islam creates, by necessity, a totalitarian civilization that has been engaged in subjugation since its inception, 1400 years ago: www.politicalislam.com/totalitarian-islam/ (last accessed on October 18, 2016).

bearing very different strategies and values. The project of "political theology" is irrelevant to the issues raised by the Muslim world.

This, of course, is true not just with regard to Islam. Political Judaism also provides an acute challenge to the sensibilities of "political theology." The establishment of the state of Israel was a revolution and a rupture in Jewish history. The historical evolution of Judaism as a religion had taken place mainly in diasporas, where Jews did not enjoy political sovereignty. Israel necessitated a rethinking of Judaism as a tradition of such sovereignty. Israel's 1967 victory over its Arab neighbors jumpstarted a religious-political movement that promoted legitimate nation-state interests – borders – using undisguised religious arguments for legitimacy. The settler movement installed the Israeli state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in fulfillment of God's biblical promise to the patriarch Abraham. The settlers and their unabashed rhetoric (and actions) drew (and still draw) attention from the spiritual components of secular Zionism. Many secular Israelis and outside observers consider the settler version of the Israeli narrative, an unfolding of divine redemption, to be an all-out challenge to Israeli civil society and to the heritage of a less apparently political Judaism.

This simplistic, dichotomous understanding breeds willful ignorance of political theologies arising in Judaism and Islam. Most significantly, a dichotomous understanding depicts these theologies as, at best, two-dimensional and less than real. Such theologies can be reduced to mere derivatives of historical circumstance or spiritual necessity, explained as mere realizations of ulterior forces. This book is an attempt to address these political theologies head-on, respecting their internal complexity and coherence on their own terms. I would like to present these political theologies not as realizations, but as theologies of the real.

I will present three such theologies, from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel and the Islamic State (IS). My argument is straightforward. I propose that these theologies share a profound commitment to realness. That is, these theologies emphasize their grounding in the real world, highlighting emergence, uncertainty and complexity as the main components of reality. Where they are seen by many as trite in their binary extremity, I would like to approach and engage them as elaborate, devoted celebrations of the real. I will return most frequently to the political expressions of this realness, particularly the concept of sovereignty as it is understood and practiced in physical and institutional space. The challenge these theologies present to the West is very often to be found in their conceptions of sovereignty and authority.

My method in all three cases will be similar. Following historical and conceptual introductions, I will present, and closely read, a seminal text (or texts) composed within these emerging political theologies. An English translation of the original texts will be closely followed by my analysis and interpretation. I have two main reasons for this methodological choice. First, texts are the preferred medium of articulation and persuasion in the political traditions of Judaism and Islam. Interpretation and study are prized mechanisms for producing meaning and preserving communal and intellectual memory in these traditions. The experience of closely reading a text will allow us access to the language of these theologies, language understood but also performed and spoken. Access to the experiential dimension of these theologies is, I think, important when attempting to transcend the traditionally limited scope of their analyses by others.

My second reason for choosing texts is my desire to engage with these theologies in as immediate a fashion as I could muster. The relationship between religion and politics, when it comes to Islam and Judaism, is often consigned to the realm of security and strategy. When it is not, the sentiments of faith driving these theologies are condensed into a discourse of historical/social/political context and circumstance. In both cases, those qualified to consider and analyze within both strategy and scholarship are experts. The price of entrance to these expert arenas is high, requiring detailed knowledge and disciplinary training. This emphasis on expertise, particularly the neutrality required for its effective practice, diminishes the immense relevance and vibrancy of these texts (and these theologies) for the lives of ordinary Muslims and Jews. I am not suggesting that the theological discussions in this book are similar to ones regularly held by lay Muslims or Jews. Still, my presentation of texts in their entirety (in close reading) is an attempt to provide my readers with all they need in order to engage with these theologies without the mediation, and often the restriction, of purely expert knowledge.

The cases presented are not similar, and I do not pretend to draw a comprehensive model of *a* theology of the real. These theologies are evolving, unfolding phenomena, occurring in real time in the here and now. The Israeli case is significantly longer than the Iranian and IS cases, because the Israeli theology of the real was formulated in oppositional response to powerfully dominant national narratives. I found it necessary to draw the contours of these dominant narratives, also through the reading of seminal texts, in order to situate the theology of the real and shed light on its urgency and power. The Iranian case considers a

text written in 1988, in a unique situation of crisis and loss. It is formulated as a theology of mourning and coping, but also of resurgence in the face of adversity. The Islamic State's theology of the real will be the only "organizational" case, not generated by a single person in an affirming or subversive engagement with his environment.

My point, if I may be explicit, is that engagement with these theologies of the real should precede attempts to "resolve" or "handle" them. Engagement requires a suspension, as broad as possible, of biases and prejudices. I do not mean to say that one should approach IS as nonviolent. It is an extreme organization, violent and (pardon the unscientific language) scary. Not dismissing this perfectly understandable fear, I would like to chip at the solid conviction that phenomena like IS, or like Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran, are simple reactions against the progressive complexity of the non-religious order and are thus easily understandable if not easily resolved. Reading nearly whole texts from beginning to end, I've chosen to provide these theologies with a comprehensiveness that is, almost by its very nature, complex and dynamic. The book rarely provides "answers," because I believe the need to ask proper questions with regard to these theologies is much more urgent. Proper asking can and should, with further application and development, lead to effective answers.