Responses to Schwehn, Vukomanović, Knutsen and Gray

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Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to all the symposium contributors for their thoughtful comments on my book. While I cannot possibly answer all their objections, I would like to say something in response to the remarks of Phillip Gray and Mark Schwehn.

Phillip Gray seems disappointed that I did not address more mainline political theologians concerned with the "truly theological," rather than reviewing the "odd examples" of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. I understand his frustration, for a comprehensive book would treat all the options exhaustively. I simply remind him that *The Stillborn God* treats the history of a *particular argument*, developing out of Hobbes and then making its way through modern European thought, until it reached a point of return to political theology, in both liberal and messianic forms. It is an attempt to answer the question: how did we get there (Barth, Rosenzweig) from here (Hobbes)? Granted, that leaves out a large number of thinkers who were not part of this trajectory of argument.

As to modern totalitarianism, Gray is right to remind us that the worst crimes of modern political memory had nothing at all to do with political theology, as I've defined it. But he leaves the impression that, had we remained within the ambit of (Christian?) political theology, it might have acted as a brake on the modern divinization of the state. He seems to be working with a hydraulic model of divinization — much like the counter-revolutionary and counter-enlightenment figures of the early Nineteenth century, and the early Voegelin — in which there is constant pressure causing divinization, and when it is not released by belief in a transcendent God it will be released by belief in a divine state or ruler.

But why should we assume that? Why shouldn't we assume that the divinized states of the twenty-century were the result of a theological hangover that would eventually pass — that centuries of political theology had distorted our thinking about politics for much longer, making us seek things that politics cannot deliver. That would have been Hobbes's argument, I suspect. He was under no illusion about men being angels; he simply thought belief in angels made them worse men, more cruel and

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irrational in politics. Only a decoupling of divine authority from human political authority could open the possibility of seeing politics clearly, for what it is. That men find other, non-theological reasons to be cruel and irrational, or to divinize the state, should not surprise us — nor would it have surprised Hobbes. But why give them more reasons than occur spontaneously, before God is invoked?

Mark Schwehn voices similar concerns in his sharp response to *The Stillborn God*. But he also comes to the defense of Karl Barth and a theologically based Great Separation. On Barth, I do indeed hold him "slightly guilty by verbal association," because Barth himself did after the fever of *Romans* passed (see his *mea culpa* in *The Humanity of God*). Barth is not Niebuhr, though the latter learned much from him; it was Niebuhr, not the Barth of the *Romans* years, whose "attitude to politics was not only ironic, it was also prophetic." I think my formulation of the political attitude of *Romans* is better: in that work, Barth offers the reader an alternative between being a "citizen without qualities" or a "prophetic scold." How different the attitude of Niebuhr, whose long meditation on Augustine helped him take the autonomy of politics seriously enough to develop a complex view of the institutions needed to deal with fallen men, and the necessity of force in international affairs. Even in his latter years, Barth never descended from his prophetic perch long enough to take such matters seriously and get his hands dirty learning what, for lack of a better term, might be called political science.

But Schwehn is surely right to say that those who support the Great Separation for religious reasons might help those who support it for other reasons. We need all the help we can get; my concern is that a messianic fever might lead them to forget why such a separation is necessary. I also wonder the following: if God "simply gave us our reason, thereby giving us all that we would require freely to govern ourselves," why do we need this fact revealed to us? Doesn't he become a hypothesis we can do without? And can't we then conduct political philosophy, and establish legitimate political authority, as Grotius said we could, *etiamsi daremus non esse deum*?

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