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Critical Dialogue

The Stillborn God. By Mark Lilla. New York: Knopf, 2007. $26.00 Cloth

The Born-Again God

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The question of whether or not to order political affairs in light of divine revelation is "an enduring question that all societies must implicitly face," Mark Lilla writes in *The Stillborn God*, his often incisive and provocative account of the vicissitudes of political theology in the West. After an intricate story of the birth of political theology and its own tangled and internally diverse history within both the Christian and Jewish traditions, the narrative reaches its crucial turning point with Thomas Hobbes and his "Great Separation" of political from religious discourse. Then, after extended discussions of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, all of whom followed Hobbes in focusing upon humanity rather than God but all of whom were much more nuanced and positive in their understanding of the motives and potentialities of religious belief than Hobbes was, the story culminates with an analysis and critique of two of the most significant critics of the "Stillborn God" of nineteenth-century liberal theology, Karl Barth and Franz Rozensweig.

Lilla is right to insist that citizens always face a choice between the Great Separation and some sort of return to political theology. He is right as well to warn against the complacency, so prevalent in Europe today, that ignores or underestimates both the persistent fragility of the Great Separation and the contingent character of the historical process that led to its achievement and endurance over time. In order, however, to make well informed and hopefully prudent choices between such stark and momentous alternatives, citizens should be as alert to the dangers implicit in various formulations of the Great Separation as they are to the dangers implicit in the various formulations of political theology that Lilla critically analyzes in his book.

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The Stillborn God is an extended brief in favor of the resourceful vigilance necessary to preserve, intellectually at least, the Great Separation. Its success depends in part upon Lilla's ability to remind readers of the violence, chaos, and persecution that characterize many regimes that have not separated the political from the religious. But what about societies that have favored authoritarian regimes, consistent with Hobbes's picture of an all powerful sovereign, that have agreed with some version of Hobbes's analysis of religion as arising simply from fear and ignorance and that have concluded that the only way really to insure a Great Separation is to attempt a Great Extirpation, i.e., to eliminate the beliefs and practices of religion altogether? What has been the fate of such regimes and their populations, and to what extent can we rightly claim that the Great Separation, even though it neither foresaw nor advocated the extirpation of religion, was bound to lead to such catastrophes?

Lilla has shown that thinkers such as Locke did much to soften and democratize the Great Separation, suggesting that Hobbes's success in severing political from religious discourse did not depend upon the authoritarian, materialistic and egoistic rhetoric in which it was embedded. Fair enough. We should note, however, that the democratizing of the Great Separation invariably and inevitably included, according to Lilla, profound re-estimations of the motives of religious belief, combined with assertions of its often salutary civic consequences. Such reappraisals of the motives and consequences of religion by thinkers like Rousseau and Hegel led, often inadvertently, to new versions of political theology. At times, it seems as though Lilla's story impales the reader on the proverbial horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, one might choose a durable Great Separation but only at the risk of authoritarianism and an eventual Great Extirpation. On the other hand, one might choose a democratized but invariably evanescent and provisional Great Separation that must sooner or later result in a return to political theology. The history of the United States, as Lilla well knows, suggests that there might be and indeed have been happier alternatives, but *The Stillborn God* seems considerably less optimistic.

Lilla repeatedly argues, against philosophers like Hegel or theologians like Barth, that even though they themselves wanted no part of a return to political theology of the kind that the Great Separation brought to an end, their rhetoric often "unwittingly" led to a return to one or another dangerous version of political theology. The reader is sometimes uncertain as to whether robust theological formulations like Karl Barth's must

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necessarily lead to a return to political theology of the sort that their advocates themselves would have eschewed, or whether unpredictable contingencies sooner or later lead, especially in cases of counter-cultural theologies, to terrible results that no one could have foreseen, much less prevented. If the latter is the case, if robust, orthodox theology seems especially vulnerable to the ironies of history, we need to have some reason to think that arguments and institutions that have been constructed to support the Great Separation are any less vulnerable to perversion, abuse, and decay. Otherwise, how can we choose responsibly between the stark alternatives that Lilla sets before us?

Lilla's treatment of Barth is worth examining in some detail for two reasons. First, it casts some doubt upon the wisdom of attributing alarming consequences even to those theological systems that are explicitly against a return to the practice of deriving politics from the allegedly revealed truths of sacred scriptures. Second, Barth represents the culmination of a tradition of defending a Great Separation *on theological grounds*, a tradition that began with Luther but that Lilla for the most part ignores, even though such a tradition might well be both more durable and more democratic than the one that began with Hobbes. It may be that our choices are finally neither so stark nor so categorical. Those who, like me and Lilla, would choose the Great Separation might also have to choose between a version of it that is grounded theologically and a version that is grounded humanistically.

Lilla readily acknowledges that Barth and Hobbes were in complete agreement in thinking that "there can be no constructive political theology, no social blueprint to be found inscribed in scripture or in God's created world" (276). And Lilla is quite right to characterize Barth's stance toward the political order as being both prophetic and ironic (a stance not at all unlike Lilla's own stance if we substitute "critical" for "prophetic"). What then is the problem, and does Barth not represent either a theologically grounded version of the Great Separation or perhaps a "third way" between the two alternatives that Lilla poses to us?

The problem with Barth was, according to Lilla, at least two-fold. First, his rhetoric was easily appropriated by others in discursive contexts that diverged from Barth's and it was therefore deployed for different and more dangerous purposes. Though words like "shock" or "upheaval" or "crisis" or "decision" had a theological meaning for Barth, they were given very different meanings by others. For some, the collapse of European civilization was the "shock"; for others, the Russian Revolution was the "upheaval"; and for still others economic depression

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was the "crisis" (276–277). Tracing the fate and filiation of ideas is always a treacherous business, and Lilla ordinarily manages it with great care and dexterity. However, his analysis of the rhetorical dangers inherent in Barth's theology comes close to a kind of guilt by verbal association. And Lilla goes so far as to suggest that Barth's "theological messianism" and the rhetoric he used to express it "did unwittingly help to shape a new and noxious form of political argument, which was the theological celebration of modern tyranny" (278). Though Lilla strongly insists in more than one place that Barth did "nothing to cause" this later theological development, and though he fully appreciates Barth's role in formulating the Barmen Declaration, he treats Barth's own efforts to disentangle penultimate matters like politics from ultimate ones like the salvation of souls as "unwittingly" dangerous.

A stronger case against Barth's theology is Lilla's suggestion that messianic and eschatological vocabularies always have and always will lead to the kind of violence that Hobbes deplored. Since Barth's own vocabulary was undeniably shot through with messianic and eschatological rhetoric, his theology was therefore vulnerable to Hobbesian critiques. "Eschatological language breeds eschatological politics, no matter what dogmatic limits theologians try to impose on it. On this point Hobbes was surely right" (285).

But was he? Unless we accept some version of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, we have many good reasons to think that Barth's theology was and remains free of such dire consequences. Those, like Gogarten, who perverted Barth's insights and who did advocate an eschatological politics have been discredited, not only by the consequences of their own thoughts and actions, but also by the vast majority of the Protestant and Catholic theological guilds. Moreover, Barth was a universalist: *all* human beings were saved by a God who was "with them" from the beginning of time and who would remain with them for eternity. By drastically reducing the stakes of political differences based upon differences of religious conviction, this crucial theological insight at one stroke removed the power of eschatological theological language to sanction or cause an eschatological politics. For Barth, the crucial distinction was not between those who were saved and those who were damned but between those who were saved and knew it and those who were saved but unaware of it or unwilling to believe it. The whole of Barth's monumental *Church Dogmatics* was addressed to the church, to those who knew that they were saved and who sought guidance to how fully to comprehend God's word and to show the appropriate

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gratitude and praise to God for their salvation through the way they lived here on earth.

Centuries before Barth, Luther had argued that human beings live simultaneously in two kingdoms. The kingdom of the right is exclusively concerned with matters of the salvation of souls. Within this kingdom, human reason avails us nothing and we are justified by God's grace through faith. The kingdom of the left, though it too is ultimately subject to God, is radically different from the other kingdom. Here fallible human reason reigns supreme, and one cannot and should not attempt to ground arguments for one or another preferred form of political or economic order upon scripture. Though Luther probably did not utter the dictum often attributed to him, namely that it was better to be governed by a smart pagan than a dumb Lutheran, most Lutheran theologians have thought that he should have said it and that it captures the spirit of his thinking about the relationship between the political and the religious.

Barth was drawing upon this Lutheran tradition of reflection on politics when he formulated his own arguments in favor of a Christian stance of ironic detachment from politics and when he insisted, as noted earlier, that there can be "no constructive political theology." Unlike some of his Lutheran contemporaries, however, the Swiss Reformed theologian never countenanced the version of the two kingdoms teaching that led either to political quietism or to the disturbing view that whatever political regime was at any time established was somehow ordained by God and was therefore deserving of unquestioning obedience. On the contrary, as Lilla himself notes, Barth's attitude to politics was not only ironic, it was also prophetic. If and only if the state sought to become a religion unto itself, an idol seeking to supersede all and any of the great religious traditions, Christians must protest, refuse to cooperate, and be willing to endure martyrdom. Nazism was, Barth argued, systematically idolatrous in just this way and he therefore opposed it on theological grounds.

To be sure, a Barthian approach to politics requires consistently judicious readings of the times and calls for a great amount of prudence. There can be and there have been arguments among Christians as to whether a given moment in time is really a *kairos* moment or not and whether a given regime really does merit condemnation like that provided in the Barmen Declaration. Such moments and situations are rare, however. For the vast majority of the time and in the vast majority of places, Christians of a Barthian persuasion would and should behave precisely like partisans of the Great Separation, though on theological rather than humanistic grounds. Thus, whether one prefers to call Barthian

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views of politics another version of the Great Separation or a "third way" in addition to the stark alternatives set out by Lilla, it would seem that the choices that lie before us are both less categorical and more complex than Lilla's account of them would allow. Moreover, the most solid insurance against the success of the sort of religious fanaticism that threatens to surprise complacent liberals, and the most effective support for a Great Separation that would be both durable and democratic, might well come from an alliance of those who defend the Great Separation for religious reasons with those who support it for non-religious ones.

Barth showed how and why the God of the liberal theologians was indeed stillborn. But he also gave the world again a God born in a manger who was with humankind from the beginning and who, far from dictating to us how we should set about arranging our political affairs, simply gave us our reason, thereby giving us all that we would require freely to govern ourselves.

Separation and Dialogue

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Mark Lilla's *Stillborn God* is the God of liberal theology, the outcome of an unsuccessful compromise in the European history of ideas after the Great Separation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lilla meticulously explores the origins of this compromise in the works of Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and later German philosophers and theologians (H. Cohen, Troeltsch), including Karl Barth's response to liberal theology. Apart from its careful, nuanced scrutiny of the epochal challenge posed by the Great Separation and subsequent reactions to it, this book presents a profound criticism of the liberal theology aspiration to provide a sort of "third way" between political theology and secular political philosophy. Lilla uses a powerful metaphor to demonstrate the futility of any attempt to bridge these two domains: "The river separating political philosophy and political theology is narrow and deep; those who try to ride the waters will be swept away by spiritual forces beyond their control."

The Stillborn God reminds us of our philosophical predecessors, by assessing their arguments and revealing their theoretic and practical

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