

## Lilla Misses God

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In its August 19, 2007 issue, *The New York Times Magazine* published an article by Columbia University professor Mark Lilla titled “The Politics of God.” The article is adapted from his book, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West*.

Lilla begins by quoting Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who wrote in a long letter to President Bush: “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.” This, says Lilla, “is the language of political theology, and for millennia it was the only tongue human beings had for expressing their thoughts about political life. It is primordial, but also contemporary: countless millions still pursue the age-old quest to bring the whole of human life under God’s authority, and they have their reasons.”

However, most Westerners have trouble understanding Ahmadinejad, says Lilla, because we no longer engage in political theology. It is a foreign tongue because “a little more than two centuries ago we began to believe that the West was on a one-way track toward modern secular democracy and that other societies, once placed on that track, would inevitably follow. Though this has not happened, we still maintain our implicit faith in a modernizing process and blame delays on extenuating circumstances like poverty or colonialism.”

How, then, are we to understand the continuing vitality of political theology in our world today while holding on to “our implicit faith in the modernizing process”? Lilla’s argument is sophisticated and very modern, telling the old story of how Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and other modernizers helped Westerners realize that our speech about God is really about our own experience. Lilla’s approach, in following Hobbes, is to hold tight to this modernist faith (without explaining or defending it), even though he admits its fragility.

On that basis, however, Lilla cannot avoid confusion. The first is his assertion that secular, liberal-democratic political systems owe their legitimacy primarily to Hobbes. Lilla states in a prior paragraph, however, that Hobbes was “neither a liberal nor a democrat.” Hobbes called for an absolute ruler—a Leviathan—to quell religious conflict and “relieve citizens of their mutual fears.” Apparently, what Lilla means by giving so much credit to Hobbes is that Hobbes led the way to removing God from politics, and that is the source of liberal democracy. Yet in making that judgment, Lilla affirms the priority of human autonomy (even if it leads to totalitarianism) over liberal

democracy. Lilla's naïve faith is that once humans have started out on the modernizing road, they will eventually arrive at the goal of democracy without need of God. But why should one hold that faith in the face of so much contradictory evidence?

This is where Lilla's second confusion arises. Since religion won't go away, he wants to reconsider it from a modernist perspective. He does this by postulating that "moral needs" lead many to want religion, and in that sense, perhaps "faith in God is humanly necessary." God may be only a figment of our imagination, but perhaps he is a useful figment. Yet, strange as it might seem, Lilla then goes on to criticize Protestant liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century for having come up with a "stillborn" god, who could not "inspire genuine conviction among a younger generation seeking ultimate truth." In other words, a god who is only a human projection can inspire only as much trust as people can put in human beings, and that kind of faith is fragile indeed.

Lilla then turns to Karl Barth, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian who revolted against liberal theology's sterility. Barth "wanted to restore the drama of religious decision to Christianity and rejected any accommodation of the Gospel to modern sensibilities." Barth wanted to talk about a truly transcendent God, not about the stillborn god of liberal imagination. But Lilla immediately points to two other German theologians of Barth's time who went along with Hitler, and that is enough to prove to Lilla the truth of "Hobbes's iron law: Messianic theology eventually breeds messianic politics. The idea of redemption is among the most powerful forces shaping human existence in all those societies touched by the biblical tradition."

What Lilla has *not* done, however, is to seriously engage the biblical texts on their own terms about God's redeeming work (which is not human self-salvation). And consequently, he cannot recognize that Hobbes's messianism, Hitler's messianism, and Marx's messianism were not the extensions of messianic Christianity but were counter-Christian religions arising from the new faith in self-sufficient humanity. Barth was not the cause of Hitler's followers. A more likely candidate is Hobbes.

A second thing Lilla has not done is to consider any of the West's Christian-democratic movements where Christian faith and the "quest to bring the whole of human life under God's authority" serve as the basis for defending open societies, democratic representation, religious freedom, and the rule of law. Contrary to Lilla's belief, it is possible to talk about God and human political responsibility at the same time—and connected to one another—if one isn't blinded by modernist prejudices.

In the end, Lilla does little to account for his own modernist faith or to ask why humans, who slaughtered more of their neighbors in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, should be trusted more than the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ as the ultimate authority in government and politics.

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