



Keeping God Out of It

Two new books consider the modern and historical separation between religion and politics in the Western world.

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[The Stillborn God: Religion Politics, and the Modern West](#) by Mark Lilla (*Alfred A. Knopf, 2007*)

[A Secular Age](#) by Charles Taylor (*Harvard University Press, 2007*)

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There is a scene in one of Ian Rankin's marvelous Inspector Rebus detective novels at which a young English police-woman, freshly posted to Rebus's Edinburgh, errs in her choice of soccer team. She gets a short tutorial on the importance of religion in the contemporary world. There are different teams, she's told, "'wherever you've got Catholics and Protestants in the same place.' Manchester had United (Catholics) and City (Protestant), Liverpool had Liverpool (Catholic) and Everton (Protestant). It only got complicated in London. London even had Jewish teams."

Liberals and (most) conservatives in America and Europe share pride in a political order that places most questions about religion beyond political debate. With exception of some [Regent University alumni](#), few among us openly wish a return to pre-Enlightenment days of theocratic rule. And yet, the old animosities still sing in the blood, just in new registers. That, I think, is Rankin's point: On the soccer pitch, the ancient antagonisms between of Huguenots and Catholics, Anabaptists and Anglicans, surface -- laced also with a nasty note of anti-Semitism that those who've lived in Britain will recognize.

Since September 2001, the question of religious loyalties, and the ability of our political structures to handle and limit such loyalties, has come to the fore. Al-Qaeda appeals to a transnational religious identity, the *ummah*, which trumps national fealty. The question of whether this vision appeals to some in Europe and America, and if so what is best way to counter that appeal, seems ever more pressing each day.

And yet, the lens is rarely turned inward in the way Rankin does. Notwithstanding the increasingly public role of evangelicals in American politics, particularly in mobilizing voter and setting the agenda for the Republican Party, we generally assume that we have settled the relation of church to state, and that the opaque brevity of the First Amendment's Religion Clauses provides a solution.

Two new intellectual histories suggest otherwise. While Mark Lilla and Charles Taylor approach the issue from different philosophical angles, both provide quasi-historical accounts of the intellectual development of what Lilla calls "the Great Separation": the decision to abandon efforts to ground political legitimacy and community on a religious basis, and instead to separate politics from religion.

I use the term "quasi-historical" for a reason: both Lilla and Taylor give us genealogies of ideas, not events. Neither provides a full account of how account of how ideas impinge on and shape the twists of historical contingency. Lilla will thus describe ideas as "decisive" without quite exploring *what* they decided. And his account of German liberal theologians between the World Wars raises more questions than it answers about the relation of thinkers to their political context. To be fair, Lilla, who is an intellectual historical and now a professor at Columbia University, is well aware of the difficulties of correlating philosophical trends with the politics of the day. He has written compellingly on this very topic in an earlier book *The Restless Mind*. It is a shame he did not do so again in *The Stillborn God*.

McGill University philosopher Taylor, by contrast, does address the connection between the ideas he describes and the historical events that accompanied them, but somewhat unsatisfactorily. Two-hundred-odd pages into his picaresque text, he breaks the narrative to give an oblique account of how ideas change what he calls the "social imaginaries" that people share. Taylor has written previously at length on the idea of a "social imaginary" as a sort of presiding spirit of an age. But his explanation of how it changes in the "social imaginary" yielded different practical outcomes is frustratingly brief.

Yet despite the frustrating opaqueness about why ideas matter, both books contain illuminating accounts of how different aspects of the "Great Separation" arose. Both Lilla and Taylor conclude, moreover, that this modern consensus is more contingent and more fragile than is generally assumed.

Lilla's *The Stillborn God* is a sober book, drawn from lectures delivered at Oxford University in 2003, which chart different solutions to what Lilla calls

Christianity, of course, is not the only faith to suffer early schism based on different visions of political authority: The split between Shia and Sunni in early Islam also reflected different views about political authority, as a marvelous recent book by Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad*, recounts. But Lilla nevertheless claims that medieval Christianity produced a uniquely "vast kingdom of darkness," which in turn led to the need for a new political solution to religious conflict. This came in the form of Thomas Hobbes' work of political philosophy, *Leviathan*, which repudiated political theology. In Lilla's marvelous phrase, Hobbes simply "changed the subject" -- focusing politics on psychology and away from theology.

What is startling in this account is how quickly the Great Separation faded: It is not so long, that is, from Hobbes to Hegel. And whatever the influence of their ideas, Lilla is surely right to contend that the roots of secularism have not thrust deep into European or American soil.

In an idiosyncratic blend of the philosophical, the historical, and the speculative, Taylor describes the shift from a world brim-full with spirits and magic to a world where divinity is absent. His account resists the idea that the rise of secularism is a process of subtraction, of loss, and of disenchantment. Rather, Taylor describes secularity's birth as the migration of ideas, subtle changes in those ideas, and the opening of new possibilities. If Taylor's communitarian scholarship celebrated historical and social rootedness, *A Secular Age* is an encomium to the sheer happenstance of how those circumstances arose.

What Taylor as much as Lilla communicates is the surprising richness, the historical back-and-forth, of ideas of faith, identity, and politics in American and Europe. Both books contribute to the important realize that the "Great Separation" remains tenuous today. So we should not be surprised when faith surfaces on the soccer pitches of Liverpool, or the streets of Belfast, or even the corridors of the White House. We have not vanquished political theology -- only sedated the beast, while we wait with baited breath, hoping that it does not again awake.



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