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The Politics of God

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I. "The Will of God Will Prevail"

The twilight of the idols has been postponed. For more than two centuries, from the American and French Revolutions to the collapse of Soviet Communism, world politics revolved around eminently political problems. War and revolution, class and social justice, race and national identity — these were the questions that divided us. Today, we have progressed to the point where our problems again resemble those of the 16th century, as we find ourselves entangled in conflicts over competing revelations, dogmatic purity and divine duty. We in the West are disturbed and confused. Though we have our own fundamentalists, we find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still stir up messianic passions, leaving societies in ruin. We had assumed this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.

An example: In May of last year, President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) of Iran sent an open letter to President [George W. Bush](#) that was translated and published in newspapers around the world. Its theme was contemporary politics and its language that of divine revelation. After rehearsing a litany of grievances against American foreign policies, real and imagined, Ahmadinejad wrote, "If Prophet Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Joseph or Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) were with us today, how would they have judged such behavior?" This was not a rhetorical question. "I have been told that Your Excellency follows the teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) and believes in the divine promise of the rule of the righteous on Earth," Ahmadinejad continued, reminding his fellow believer that "according to divine verses, we have all been called upon to worship one God and follow the teachings of divine Prophets." There follows a kind of altar call, in which the American president is invited to bring his actions into line with these verses. And then comes a threatening prophecy: "Liberalism and Western-style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today, these two concepts have failed. Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems. . . . 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 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. To understand them we need only interpret the language of political theology — yet that is what we find hardest to do. Reading a letter like Ahmadinejad's, we fall mute, like explorers coming upon an ancient inscription written in hieroglyphics.

The problem is ours, not his. 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. This assumption shapes the way we see political theology, especially in its Islamic form — as an atavism requiring psychological or sociological analysis but not serious intellectual engagement. Islamists, even if they are learned professionals, appear to us primarily as frustrated, irrational representatives of frustrated, irrational societies, nothing more. We live, so to speak, on the other shore. When we observe those on the opposite bank, we are puzzled, since we have only a distant memory of what it was like to think as they do. We all face the same questions of political existence, yet their way of answering them has become alien to us. On one shore, political institutions are conceived in terms of divine authority and spiritual redemption; on the other they are not. And that, as Robert Frost might have put it, makes all the difference.

Understanding this difference is the most urgent intellectual and political task of the present time. But where to begin? The case of contemporary Islam is on everyone's mind, yet is so suffused with anger and ignorance as to be paralyzing. All we hear are alien sounds, motivating unspeakable acts. If we ever hope to crack the grammar and syntax of political theology, it seems we will have to begin with ourselves. The history of political theology in the West is an instructive story, and it did not end with the birth of modern science, or the Enlightenment, or the American and French Revolutions, or any other definitive historical moment. Political theology was a presence in Western intellectual life well into the 20th century, by which time it had shed the mind-set of the Middle Ages and found modern reasons for seeking political inspiration in the Bible. At first, this modern political theology expressed a seemingly enlightened outlook and was welcomed by those who wished liberal democracy well. But in the aftermath of the First World War it took an apocalyptic turn, and “new men” eager to embrace the future began generating theological justifications for the most repugnant — and godless — ideologies of the age, Nazism and Communism.

It is an unnerving tale, one that raises profound questions about the fragility of our modern outlook. Even the most stable and successful democracies, with the most high-minded and civilized believers, have proved vulnerable to political messianism and its theological justification. If we can understand how that was possible in the advanced West, if we can hear political theology speaking in a more recognizable tongue, represented by people in familiar dress with familiar names, perhaps then we can remind ourselves how the world looks from its perspective. This would be a small step toward measuring the challenge we face and deciding how to respond.

II. The Great Separation

Why is there political theology? The question echoes throughout the history of Western thought, beginning in Greek and Roman antiquity and continuing down to our day. Many theories have been proposed, especially by those suspicious of the religious impulse. Yet few recognize the rationality of political theology or enter into its logic. Theology is, after all, a set of reasons people give themselves for the way things are and the way they ought to be. So let us try to imagine how those reasons might involve God and have implications for politics.

Imagine human beings who first become aware of themselves in a world not of their own making. Their world has unknown origins and behaves in a regular fashion, so they wonder why that is. They know that the things they themselves fashion behave in a predictable manner because they conceive and construct them with some end in mind. They stretch the bow, the arrow flies; that is why they were made. So, by analogy, it is not difficult for them to assume that the cosmic order was constructed for a purpose, reflecting its maker's will. By following this analogy, they begin to have ideas about that maker, about his intentions and therefore about his personality.

In taking these few short steps, the human mind finds itself confronted with a picture, a theological image in which God, man and world form a divine nexus. Believers have reasons for thinking that they live in this nexus, just as they have reasons for assuming that it offers guidance for political life. But how that guidance is to be understood, and whether believers think it is authoritative, will depend on how they imagine God. If God is thought to be passive, a silent force like the sky, nothing in particular may follow. He is a hypothesis we can do without. But if we take seriously the thought that God is a person with intentions, and that the cosmic order is a result of those intentions, then a great deal can follow. The intentions of such a God reveal something man cannot fully know on his own. This revelation then becomes the source of his authority, over nature and over us, and we have no choice but to obey him and see that his plans are carried out on earth. That is where political theology comes in.

One powerful attraction of political theology, in any form, is its comprehensiveness. It offers a way of thinking about the conduct of human affairs and connects those thoughts to loftier ones about the existence of God, the structure of the cosmos, the nature of the soul, the origin of all things and the end of time. For more than a millennium, the West took inspiration from the Christian image of a triune God ruling over a created cosmos and guiding men by means of revelation, inner conviction and the natural order. It was a magnificent picture that allowed a magnificent and powerful civilization to flower. But the picture was always difficult to translate theologically into political form: God the Father had given commandments; a Redeemer arrived, reinterpreting them, then departed; and now the Holy Spirit remained as a ghostly divine presence. It was not at all clear what political lessons were to be drawn from all this. Were Christians supposed to withdraw from a corrupted world that was abandoned by the Redeemer? Were they called upon to rule the earthly city with both church and state, inspired by the Holy Spirit? Or were they expected to build a New Jerusalem that would hasten the Messiah's return?

Throughout the Middle Ages, Christians argued over these questions. The City of Man was set against the City of God, public citizenship against private piety, the divine right of kings against the right of resistance, church authority against radical antinomianism, canon law against mystical insight, inquisitor against martyr, secular sword against ecclesiastical miter, prince against emperor, emperor against pope,

pope against church councils. In the late Middle Ages, the sense of crisis was palpable, and even the Roman Church recognized that reforms were in order. But by the 16th century, thanks to Martin Luther and John Calvin, there was no unified Christendom to reform, just a variety of churches and sects, most allied with absolute secular rulers eager to assert their independence. In the Wars of Religion that followed, doctrinal differences fueled political ambitions and vice versa, in a deadly, vicious cycle that lasted a century and a half. Christians addled by apocalyptic dreams hunted and killed Christians with a maniacal fury they had once reserved for Muslims, Jews and heretics. It was madness.

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes tried to find a way out of this labyrinth. Traditionally, political theology had interpreted a set of revealed divine commands and applied them to social life. In his great treatise “Leviathan” (1651), Hobbes simply ignored the substance of those commands and talked instead about how and why human beings believed God revealed them. He did the most revolutionary thing a thinker can ever do — he changed the subject, from God and his commands to man and his beliefs. If we do that, Hobbes reasoned, we can begin to understand why religious convictions so often lead to political conflicts and then perhaps find a way to contain the potential for violence.

The contemporary crisis in Western Christendom created an audience for Hobbes and his ideas. In the midst of religious war, his view that the human mind was too weak and beset by passions to have any reliable knowledge of the divine seemed common-sensical. It also made sense to assume that when man speaks about God he is really referring to his own experience, which is all he knows. And what most characterizes his experience? According to Hobbes, fear. Man’s natural state is to be overwhelmed with anxiety, “his heart all the day long gnawed on by fear of death, poverty, or other calamity.” He “has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep.” It is no wonder that human beings fashion idols to protect themselves from what they most fear, attributing divine powers even, as Hobbes wrote, to “men, women, a bird, a crocodile, a calf, a dog, a snake, an onion, a leek.” Pitiful, but understandable.

And the debilitating dynamics of belief don’t end there. For once we imagine an all-powerful God to protect us, chances are we’ll begin to fear him too. What if he gets angry? How can we appease him? Hobbes reasoned that these new religious fears were what created a market for priests and prophets claiming to understand God’s obscure demands. It was a raucous market in Hobbes’s time, with stalls for Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Quakers, Ranters, Muggletonians, Fifth Monarchy Men and countless others, each with his own path to salvation and blueprint for Christian society. They disagreed with one another, and because their very souls were at stake, they fought. Which led to wars; which led to more fear; which made people more religious; which. . . .

Fresh from the Wars of Religion, Hobbes’s readers knew all about fear. Their lives had become, as he put it, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” And when he announced that a new political philosophy could release them from fear, they listened. Hobbes planted a seed, a thought that it might be possible to build legitimate political institutions without grounding them on divine revelation. He knew it was impossible to refute belief in divine revelation; the most one can hope to do is cast suspicion on prophets claiming to speak about politics in God’s name. The new political thinking would no longer concern itself with God’s politics; it would concentrate on men as believers in God and try to keep

them from harming one another. It would set its sights lower than Christian political theology had, but secure what mattered most, which was peace.

Hobbes was neither a liberal nor a democrat. He thought that consolidating power in the hands of one man was the only way to relieve citizens of their mutual fears. But over the next few centuries, Western thinkers like John Locke, who adopted his approach, began to imagine a new kind of political order in which power would be limited, divided and widely shared; in which those in power at one moment would relinquish it peacefully at another, without fear of retribution; in which public law would govern relations among citizens and institutions; in which many different religions would be allowed to flourish, free from state interference; and in which individuals would have inalienable rights to protect them from government and their fellows. This liberal-democratic order is the only one we in the West recognize as legitimate today, and we owe it primarily to Hobbes. In order to escape the destructive passions of messianic faith, political theology centered on God was replaced by political philosophy centered on man. This was the Great Separation.

III. The Inner Light

It is a familiar story, and seems to conclude with a happy ending. But in truth the Great Separation was never a fait accompli, even in Western Europe, where it was first conceived. Old-style Christian political theology had an afterlife in the West, and only after the Second World War did it cease to be a political force. In the 19th and early 20th centuries a different challenge to the Great Separation arose from another quarter. It came from a wholly new kind of political theology heavily indebted to philosophy and styling itself both modern and liberal. I am speaking of the “liberal theology” movement that arose in Germany not long after the French Revolution, first among Protestant theologians, then among Jewish reformers. These thinkers, who abhorred theocracy, also rebelled against Hobbes’s vision, favoring instead a political future in which religion — properly chastened and intellectually reformed — would play an absolutely central role.

And the questions they posed were good ones. While granting that ignorance and fear had bred pointless wars among Christian sects and nations, they asked: Were those the only reasons that, for a millennium and a half, an entire civilization had looked to Jesus Christ as its savior? Or that suffering Jews of the Diaspora remained loyal to the Torah? Could ignorance and fear explain the beauty of Christian liturgical music or the sublimity of the Gothic cathedrals? Could they explain why all other civilizations, past and present, founded their political institutions in accordance with the divine nexus of God, man and world? Surely there was more to religious man than was dreamed of in Hobbes’s philosophy.

That certainly was the view of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who did more than anyone to develop an alternative to Hobbes. Rousseau wrote no treatise on religion, which was probably a wise thing, since when he inserted a few pages on religious themes into his masterpiece, “Émile” (1762), it caused the book to be burned and Rousseau to spend the rest of his life on the run. This short section of “Émile,” which he called “The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar,” has so deeply shaped contemporary views of religion that it takes some effort to understand

why Rousseau was persecuted for writing it. It is the most beautiful and convincing defense of man's religious instincts ever to flow from a modern pen — and that, apparently, was the problem. Rousseau spoke of religion in terms of human needs, not divine truths, and had his Savoyard vicar declare, “I believe all particular religions are good when one serves God usefully in them.” For that, he was hounded by pious Christians.

Rousseau had a Hobbes problem, too: he shared the Englishman's criticisms of theocracy, fanaticism and the clergy, but he was a friend of religion. While Hobbes beat the drums of ignorance and fear, Rousseau sang the praises of conscience, of charity, of fellow feeling, of virtue, of pious wonder in the face of God's creation. Human beings, he thought, have a natural goodness they express in their religion. That is the theme of the “Profession of Faith,” which tells the parable of a young vicar who loses his faith and then his moral compass once confronted with the hypocrisy of his co-religionists. He is able to restore his equilibrium only when he finds a new kind of faith in God by looking within, to his own “inner light” (*lumière intérieure*). The point of Rousseau's story is less to display the crimes of organized churches than to show that man yearns for religion because he is fundamentally a moral creature. There is much we cannot know about God, and for centuries the pretense of having understood him caused much damage to Christendom. But, for Rousseau, we need to believe something about him if we are to orient ourselves in the world.

Among modern thinkers, Rousseau was the first to declare that there is no shame in saying that faith in God is humanly necessary. Religion has its roots in needs that are rational and moral, even noble; once we see that, we can start satisfying them rationally, morally and nobly. In the abstract, this thought did not contradict the principles of the Great Separation, which gave reasons for protecting the private exercise of religion. But it did raise doubts about whether the new political thinking could really do without reference to the nexus of God, man and world. If Rousseau was right about our moral needs, a rigid separation between political and theological principles might not be psychologically sustainable. When a question is important, we want an answer to it: as the Savoyard vicar remarks, “The mind decides in one way or another, despite itself, and prefers being mistaken to believing in nothing.” Rousseau had grave doubts about whether human beings could be happy or good if they did not understand how their actions related to something higher. Religion is simply too entwined with our moral experience ever to be disentangled from it, and morality is inseparable from politics.

IV. Rousseau's Children

By the early 19th century, two schools of thought about religion and politics had grown up in the West. Let us call them the children of Hobbes and the children of Rousseau. For the children of Hobbes, a decent political life could not be realized by Christian political theology, which bred violence and stifled human development. The only way to control the passions flowing from religion to politics, and back again, was to detach political life from them completely. This had to happen within Western institutions, but first it had to happen within Western minds. A reorientation would have to take place, turning human attention away from the eternal and transcendent, toward the here and now. The old habit of looking to God for political guidance would have to be broken, and new habits developed. For Hobbes, the first step toward

achieving that end was to get people thinking about — and suspicious about — the sources of faith.

Though there was great reluctance to adopt Hobbes's most radical views on religion, in the English-speaking world the intellectual principles of the Great Separation began to take hold in the 18th century. Debate would continue over where exactly to place the line between religious and political institutions, but arguments about the legitimacy of theocracy petered out in all but the most forsaken corners of the public square. There was no longer serious controversy about the relation between the political order and the divine nexus; it ceased to be a question. No one in modern Britain or the United States argued for a bicameral legislature on the basis of divine revelation.

The children of Rousseau followed a different line of argument. Medieval political theology was not salvageable, but neither could human beings ignore questions of eternity and transcendence when thinking about the good life. When we speculate about God, man and world in the correct way, we express our noblest moral sentiments; without such reflection we despair and eventually harm ourselves and others. That is the lesson of the Savoyard vicar.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the Terror and [Napoleon](#)'s conquests, Rousseau's children found a receptive audience in continental Europe. The recent wars had had nothing to do with political theology or religious fanaticism of the old variety; if anything, people reasoned, it was the radical atheism of the French Enlightenment that turned men into beasts and bred a new species of political fanatic. Germans were especially drawn to this view, and a wave of romanticism brought with it great nostalgia for the religious "world we have lost." It even touched sober philosophers like Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. Kant adored "Émile" and went somewhat further than Rousseau had, not only accepting the moral need for rational faith but arguing that Christianity, properly reformed, would represent the "true universal Church" and embody the very "idea" of religion. Hegel went further still, attributing to religion an almost vitalistic power to forge the social bond and encourage sacrifice for the public good. Religion, and religion alone, is the original source of a people's shared spirit, which Hegel called its *Volksgeist*.

These ideas had an enormous impact on German religious thought in the 19th century, and through it on Protestantism and Judaism throughout the West. This was the century of "liberal theology," a term that requires explanation. In modern Britain and the United States, it was assumed that the intellectual, and then institutional, separation of Christianity and modern politics had been mutually beneficial — that the modern state had benefited by being absolved from pronouncing on doctrinal matters, and that Christianity had benefited by being freed from state interference. No such consensus existed in Germany, where the assumption was that religion needed to be publicly encouraged, not reined in, if it was to contribute to society. It would have to be rationally reformed, of course: the Bible would have to be interpreted in light of recent historical findings, belief in miracles abandoned, the clergy educated along modern lines and doctrine adapted to a softer age. But once these reforms were in place, enlightened politics and enlightened religion would join hands.

Protestant liberal theologians soon began to dream of a third way between Christian orthodoxy and the Great Separation. They had unshaken

faith in the moral core of Christianity, however distorted it may have been by the forces of history, and unshaken faith in the cultural and political progress that Christianity had brought to the world. Christianity had given birth to the values of individuality, moral universalism, reason and progress on which German life was now based. There could be no contradiction between religion and state, or even tension. The modern state had only to give Protestantism its due in public life, and Protestant theology would reciprocate by recognizing its political responsibilities. If both parties met their obligations, then, as the philosopher F. W. J. Schelling put it, “the destiny of Christianity will be decided in Germany.”

Among Jewish liberal thinkers, there was a different sort of hope, that of acceptance as equal citizens. After the French Revolution, a fitful process of Jewish emancipation began in Europe, and German Jews were more quickly integrated into modern cultural life than in any other European country — a fateful development. For it was precisely at this moment that German Protestants were becoming convinced that reformed Christianity represented their national Volksgeist. While the liberal Jewish thinkers were attracted to modern enlightened faith, they were also driven by the apologetic need to justify Judaism’s contribution to German society. They could not appeal to the principles of the Great Separation and simply demand to be left alone. They had to argue that Judaism and Protestantism were two forms of the same rational moral faith, and that they could share a political theology. As the Jewish philosopher and liberal reformer Hermann Cohen once put it, “In all intellectual questions of religion we think and feel ourselves in a Protestant spirit.”

V. Courting the Apocalypse

This was the house that liberal theology built, and throughout the 19th century it looked secure. It wasn’t, and for reasons worth pondering. Liberal theology had begun in hope that the moral truths of biblical faith might be intellectually reconciled with, and not just accommodated to, the realities of modern political life. Yet the liberal deity turned out to be a stillborn God, unable to inspire genuine conviction among a younger generation seeking ultimate truth. For what did the new Protestantism offer the soul of one seeking union with his creator? It prescribed a catechism of moral commonplaces and historical optimism about bourgeois life, spiced with deep pessimism about the possibility of altering that life. It preached good citizenship and national pride, economic good sense and the proper length of a gentleman’s beard. But it was too ashamed to proclaim the message found on every page of the Gospels: that you must change your life. And what did the new Judaism bring to a young Jew seeking a connection with the traditional faith of his people? It taught him to appreciate the ethical message at the core of all biblical faith and passed over in genteel silence the fearsome God of the prophets, his covenant with the Jewish people and the demanding laws he gave them. Above all, it taught a young Jew that his first obligation was to seek common ground with Christianity and find acceptance in the one nation, Germany, whose highest cultural ideals matched those of Judaism, properly understood. To the decisive questions — “Why be a Christian?” and “Why be a Jew?” — liberal theology offered no answer at all.

By the turn of the 20th century, the liberal house was tottering, and after the First World War it collapsed. It was not just the barbarity of trench warfare, the senseless slaughter, the sight of burned-out towns and maimed soldiers that made a theology extolling “modern

civilization” contemptible. It was that so many liberal theologians had hastened the insane rush to war, confident that God’s hand was guiding history. In August 1914, Adolf von Harnack, the most respected liberal Protestant scholar of the age, helped Kaiser Wilhelm II draft an address to the nation laying out German military aims. Others signed an infamous pro-war petition defending the sacredness of German militarism. Astonishingly, even Hermann Cohen joined the chorus, writing an open letter to American Jews asking for support, on the grounds that “next to his fatherland, every Western Jew must recognize, revere and love Germany as the motherland of his modern religiosity.” Young Protestant and Jewish thinkers were outraged when they saw what their revered teachers had done, and they began to look elsewhere.

But they did not turn to Hobbes, or to Rousseau. They craved a more robust faith, based on a new revelation that would shake the foundations of the whole modern order. It was a thirst for redemption. Ever since the liberal theologians had revived the idea of biblical politics, the stage had been set for just this sort of development. When faith in redemption through bourgeois propriety and cultural accommodation withered after the Great War, the most daring thinkers of the day transformed it into hope for a messianic apocalypse — one that would again place the Jewish people, or the individual Christian believer, or the German nation, or the world proletariat in direct relation with the divine.

Young Weimar Jews were particularly drawn to these messianic currents through the writings of Martin Buber, who later became a proponent of interfaith understanding but as a young Zionist promoted a crude chauvinistic nationalism. In an early essay he called for a “Masada of the spirit” and proclaimed: “If I had to choose for my people between a comfortable, unproductive happiness . . . and a beautiful death in a final effort at life, I would have to choose the latter. For this final effort would create something divine, if only for a moment, but the other something all too human.” Language like this, with strong and discomfiting contemporary echoes for us, drew deeply from the well of biblical messianism. Yet Buber was an amateur compared with the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who used the Bible to extol the utopia then under construction in the Soviet Union. Though an atheist Jew, Bloch saw a connection between messianic hope and revolutionary violence, which he admired from a distance. He celebrated Thomas Müntzer, the 16th-century Protestant pastor who led bloody peasant uprisings and was eventually beheaded; he also praised the brutal Soviet leaders, famously declaring “ubi Lenin, ibi Jerusalem” — wherever Lenin is, there is Jerusalem.

But it was among young Weimar Protestants that the new messianic spirit proved most consequential. They were led by the greatest theologian of the day, Karl Barth, who wanted to restore the drama of religious decision to Christianity and rejected any accommodation of the Gospel to modern sensibilities. When [Hitler](#) came to power, Barth acquitted himself well, leading resistance against the Nazi takeover of the Protestant churches before he was forced into exile in 1935. But others, who employed the same messianic rhetoric Barth did, chose the Nazis instead. A notorious example was Emanuel Hirsch, a respected Lutheran theologian and translator of Kierkegaard, who welcomed the Nazi seizure of power for bringing Germany into “the circle of the white ruling peoples, to which God has entrusted the responsibility for the

history of humanity.” Another was Friedrich Gogarten, one of Barth’s closest collaborators, who sided with the Nazis in the summer of 1933 (a decision he later regretted). In the 1920s, Gogarten rejoiced at the collapse of bourgeois Europe, declaring that “we are glad for the decline, since no one enjoys living among corpses,” and called for a new religion that “attacks culture as culture . . . that attacks the whole world.” When the brownshirts began marching and torching books, he got his wish. After Hitler completed his takeover, Gogarten wrote that “precisely because we are today once again under the total claim of the state, it is again possible, humanly speaking, to proclaim the Christ of the Bible and his reign over us.”

All of which served to confirm 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. It has inspired people to endure suffering, overcome suffering and inflict suffering on others. It has offered hope and inspiration in times of darkness; it has also added to the darkness by arousing unrealistic expectations and justifying those who spill blood to satisfy them. All the biblical religions cultivate the idea of redemption, and all fear its power to inflame minds and deafen them to the voice of reason. In the writings of these Weimar figures, we encounter what those orthodox traditions always dreaded: the translation of religious notions of apocalypse and redemption into a justification of political messianism, now under frightening modern conditions. It was as if nothing had changed since the 17th century, when Thomas Hobbes first sat down to write his “Leviathan.”

VI. Miracles

The revival of political theology in the modern West is a humbling story. It reminds us that this way of thinking is not the preserve of any one culture or religion, nor does it belong solely to the past. It is an age-old habit of mind that can be reacquired by anyone who begins looking to the divine nexus of God, man and world to reveal the legitimate political order. This story also reminds us how political theology can be adapted to circumstances and reassert itself, even in the face of seemingly irresistible forces like modernization, secularization and democratization. Rousseau was on to something: we seem to be theotropic creatures, yearning to connect our mundane lives, in some way, to the beyond. That urge can be suppressed, new habits learned, but the challenge of political theology will never fully disappear so long as the urge to connect survives.

So we are heirs to the Great Separation only if we wish to be, if we make a conscious effort to separate basic principles of political legitimacy from divine revelation. Yet more is required still. Since the challenge of political theology is enduring, we need to remain aware of its logic and the threat it poses. This means vigilance, but even more it means self-awareness. We must never forget that there was nothing historically inevitable about our Great Separation, that it was and remains an experiment. In Europe, the political ambiguities of one religion, Christianity, happened to set off a political crisis that might have been avoided but wasn’t, triggering the Wars of Religion; the resulting carnage made European thinkers more receptive to Hobbes’s heretical ideas about religious psychology and the political implications he drew from them; and over time those political ideas were liberalized. Even then, it was only after the Second World War that the principles of

modern liberal democracy became fully rooted in continental Europe.

As for the American experience, it is utterly exceptional: there is no other fully developed industrial society with a population so committed to its faiths (and such exotic ones), while being equally committed to the Great Separation. Our political rhetoric, which owes much to the Protestant sectarians of the 17th century, vibrates with messianic energy, and it is only thanks to a strong constitutional structure and various lucky breaks that political theology has never seriously challenged the basic legitimacy of our institutions. Americans have potentially explosive religious differences over [abortion](#), prayer in schools, censorship, euthanasia, biological research and countless other issues, yet they generally settle them within the bounds of the Constitution. It's a miracle.

And miracles can't be willed. For all the good Hobbes did in shifting our political focus from God to man, he left the impression that the challenge of political theology would vanish once the cycle of fear was broken and human beings established authority over their own affairs. We still make this assumption when speaking of the "social causes" of fundamentalism and political messianism, as if the amelioration of material conditions or the shifting of borders would automatically trigger a Great Separation. Nothing in our history or contemporary experience confirms this belief, yet somehow we can't let it go. We have learned Hobbes's lesson too well, and failed to heed Rousseau's. And so we find ourselves in an intellectual bind when we encounter genuine political theology today: either we assume that modernization and secularization will eventually extinguish it, or we treat it as an incomprehensible existential threat, using familiar terms like fascism to describe it as best we can. Neither response takes us a step closer to understanding the world we now live in.

It is a world in which millions of people, particularly in the Muslim orbit, believe that God has revealed a law governing the whole of human affairs. This belief shapes the politics of important Muslim nations, and it also shapes the attitudes of vast numbers of believers who find themselves living in Western countries — and non-Western democracies like Turkey and Indonesia — founded on the alien principles of the Great Separation. These are the most significant points of friction, internationally and domestically. And we cannot really address them if we do not first recognize the intellectual chasm between us: although it is possible to translate Ahmadinejad's letter to Bush from Farsi into English, its intellectual assumptions cannot be translated into those of the Great Separation. We can try to learn his language in order to create sensible policies, but agreement on basic principles won't be possible. And we must learn to live with that.

Similarly, we must somehow find a way to accept the fact that, given the [immigration](#) policies Western nations have pursued over the last half-century, they now are hosts to millions of Muslims who have great difficulty fitting into societies that do not recognize any political claims based on their divine revelation. Like Orthodox Jewish law, the Muslim Shariah is meant to cover the whole of life, not some arbitrarily demarcated private sphere, and its legal system has few theological resources for establishing the independence of politics from detailed divine commands. It is an unfortunate situation, but we have made our bed, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Accommodation and mutual respect can help, as can clear rules governing areas of tension, like the status of women, parents' rights over their children, speech offensive to religious sensibilities, speech inciting violence, standards of dress in public institutions and the like. Western countries have adopted different

strategies for coping, some forbidding religious symbols like the head scarf in schools, others permitting them. But we need to recognize that coping is the order of the day, not defending high principle, and that our expectations should remain low. So long as a sizable population believes in the truth of a comprehensive political theology, its full reconciliation with modern liberal democracy cannot be expected.

VII. The Opposite Shore

This is not welcome news. For more than two centuries, promoters of modernization have taken it for granted that science, technology, urbanization and education would eventually “disenchant” the charmed world of believers, and that with time people would either abandon their traditional faiths or transform them in politically anodyne ways. They point to continental Europe, where belief in God has been in steady decline over the last 50 years, and suggest that, with time, Muslims everywhere will undergo a similar transformation. Those predictions may eventually prove right. But Europe’s rapid secularization is historically unique and, as we have just seen, relatively recent. Political theology is highly adaptive and can present to even educated minds a more compelling vision of the future than the prospect of secular modernity. It takes as little for a highly trained medical doctor to fashion a car bomb today as it took for advanced thinkers to fashion biblically inspired justifications of fascist and communist totalitarianism in Weimar Germany. When the urge to connect is strong, passions are high and fantasies are vivid, the trinkets of our modern lives are impotent amulets against political intoxication.

Realizing this, a number of Muslim thinkers around the world have taken to promoting a “liberal” Islam. What they mean is an Islam more adapted to the demands of modern life, kinder in its treatment of women and children, more tolerant of other faiths, more open to dissent. These are brave people who have often suffered for their efforts, in prison or exile, as did their predecessors in the 19th century, of which there were many. But now as then, their efforts have been swept away by deeper theological currents they cannot master and perhaps do not even understand. The history of Protestant and Jewish liberal theology reveals the problem: the more a biblical faith is trimmed to fit the demands of the moment, the fewer reasons it gives believers for holding on to that faith in troubled times, when self-appointed guardians of theological purity offer more radical hope. Worse still, when such a faith is used to bestow theological sanctification on a single form of political life — even an attractive one like liberal democracy — the more it will be seen as collaborating with injustice when that political system fails. The dynamics of political theology seem to dictate that when liberalizing reformers try to conform to the present, they inspire a countervailing and far more passionate longing for redemption in the messianic future. That is what happened in Weimar Germany and is happening again in contemporary Islam.

The complacent liberalism and revolutionary messianism we’ve encountered are not the only theological options. There is another kind of transformation possible in biblical faiths, and that is the renewal of traditional political theology from within. If liberalizers are apologists for religion at the court of modern life, renovators stand firmly within their faith and reinterpret political theology so believers can adapt without feeling themselves to be apostates. Luther and Calvin were renovators in this sense, not liberalizers. They called Christians back to the fundamentals of their faith, but in a way that made it easier, not harder, to enjoy the fruits of temporal existence. They found theological

reasons to reject the ideal of celibacy, and its frequent violation by priests, and thus returned the clergy to ordinary family life. They then found theological reasons to reject otherworldly monasticism and the all-too-worldly imperialism of Rome, offering biblical reasons that Christians should be loyal citizens of the state they live in. And they did this, not by speaking the apologetic language of toleration and progress, but by rewriting the language of Christian political theology and demanding that Christians be faithful to it.

Today, a few voices are calling for just this kind of renewal of Islamic political theology. Some, like Khaled Abou El Fadl, a law professor at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, challenge the authority of today's puritans, who make categorical judgments based on a literal reading of scattered Koranic verses. In Abou El Fadl's view, traditional Islamic law can still be applied to present-day situations because it brings a subtle interpretation of the whole text to bear on particular problems in varied circumstances. Others, like the Swiss-born cleric and professor Tariq Ramadan, are public figures whose writings show Western Muslims that their political theology, properly interpreted, offers guidance for living with confidence in their faith and gaining acceptance in what he calls an alien "abode." To read their works is to be reminded what a risky venture renewal is. It can invite believers to participate more fully and wisely in the political present, as the Protestant Reformation eventually did; it can also foster dreams of returning to a more primitive faith, through violence if necessary, as happened in the Wars of Religion.

Perhaps for this reason, Abou El Fadl and especially Ramadan have become objects of intense and sometimes harsh scrutiny by Western intellectuals. We prefer speaking with the Islamic liberalizers because they share our language: they accept the intellectual presuppositions of the Great Separation and simply want maximum room given for religious and cultural expression. They do not practice political theology. But the prospects of enduring political change through renewal are probably much greater than through liberalization. By speaking from within the community of the faithful, renovators give believers compelling theological reasons for accepting new ways as authentic reinterpretations of the faith. Figures like Abou El Fadl and Ramadan speak a strange tongue, even when promoting changes we find worthy; their reasons are not our reasons. But if we cannot expect mass conversion to the principles of the Great Separation — and we cannot — we had better learn to welcome transformations in Muslim political theology that ease coexistence. The best should not be the enemy of the good.

In the end, though, what happens on the opposite shore will not be up to us. We have little reason to expect societies in the grip of a powerful political theology to follow our unusual path, which was opened up by a unique crisis within Christian civilization. This does not mean that those societies necessarily lack the wherewithal to create a decent and workable political order; it does mean that they will have to find the theological resources within their own traditions to make it happen.

Our challenge is different. We have made a choice that is at once simpler and harder: we have chosen to limit our politics to protecting individuals from the worst harms they can inflict on one another, to securing fundamental liberties and providing for their basic welfare, while leaving their spiritual destinies in their own hands. We have wagered that it is wiser to beware the forces unleashed by the Bible's messianic promise than to try exploiting them for the public good. We have chosen to keep our politics unilluminated by divine revelation. All

we have is our own lucidity, which we must train on a world where faith still inflames the minds of men.

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