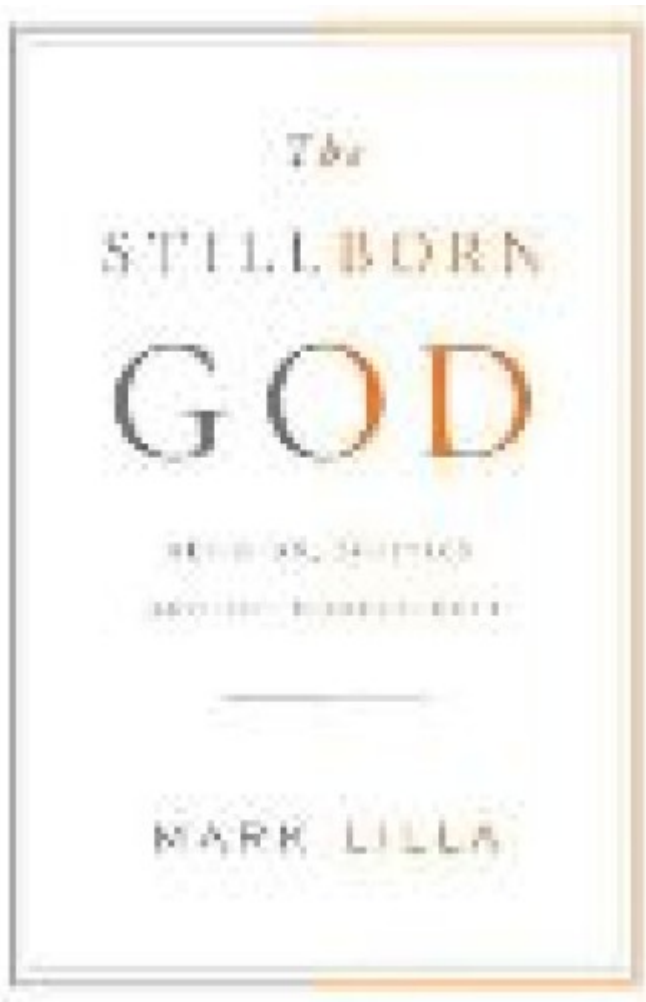


A place for passion

By [William C. Placher](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West

Mark Lilla
Knopf

A lengthy prepublication excerpt in the *New York Times Magazine*, quotations on the back cover from famous scholars using descriptions like “profound,” “elegant and

erudite” and “landmark in political philosophy”—short of selection for Oprah’s Book Club, it is hard to imagine how a book could come trailing more clouds of importance than *The Stillborn God*. Political philosopher Mark Lilla, recently departed from the University of Chicago for Columbia University, thinks that politics needs to be saved from religion, and his odd argument for that conclusion will probably be getting a lot of attention.

“In most civilizations known to us,” Lilla writes, “in most times and places, when human beings have reflected on political questions they have appealed to God when answering them.” We should not be astonished when Pat Robertson or Osama bin Laden understands politics in religious terms; in most of history, they represent the norm.

In response to the 16th century’s devastating wars of religion, however, some intellectuals in Western Europe moved away from “political theology,” and it is the story of this “great separation” and its aftermath that Lilla wants to tell. Above all, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Lilla’s hero, wrote “the most devastating attack on Christian political theology ever undertaken.” Thinking belief in God silly, Hobbes based his political theory on human nature: human beings will keep trying to kill their neighbors before their neighbors kill them unless they are restrained by an all-powerful sovereign. Rational people will therefore give up their freedom to such a sovereign not because the sovereign has been installed by God, but because they recognize for themselves that accepting such a sovereign is the only way to avoid a “war of all against all.” Efforts to introduce God back into the picture as someone whose commands might overrule those of the sovereign only weaken the sovereign and lead back into chaos—as Hobbes thought had happened during his own lifetime amid the religious fanaticism of the English civil war.

For the “children of Hobbes,” Lilla contends, “a decent political life could not be realized within the terms set by Christian political theology, which bred violent eschatological passions.” The road to peace and prosperity had to involve separating religion from politics. From John Locke to David Hume to most of the American founders, Hobbes’s children would disagree about much else, Lilla declares, but they would all accept that separation.

In contrast, Lilla presents the “children of Rousseau.” The mysterious vicar Rousseau introduced in his novel *Émile* thinks that claims to revelation are not to be trusted, but he believes a vague deism can be socially and ethically useful as well as

personally comforting:

If the children of Rousseau are right, there may still be room for theology in thinking about the ends and means of political life. Not for traditional Christian political theology, which relies on revealed claims that cannot sustain the scrutiny of modern philosophy, but for a new kind of theology based on facts that even the philosophers recognize. Like the fact that man is a religious animal seeking psychological and social reconciliation.

Lilla traces such patterns of thinking from Rousseau through Kant and Hegel to the liberal Christian and Jewish thought of 19th-century Germany.

German theological liberalism accepted the separation of revelation from politics but “left the faint odor of revelation hanging over its celebration of modern political and cultural life, implying that it had been divinely blessed.” Lilla finds this boring and ineffectual. He dismisses the scholars of the 19th-century Protestant tradition, from Schleiermacher to Harnack and Troeltsch, as “obscure professors and preachers” who are, “by present lights, minor.” “It is as difficult to overestimate the impact of Schleiermacher on the nineteenth century,” he remarks, “as it is to feel his power today.” Liberal Jews like Hermann Cohen—Lilla seems to assume that there were no liberal Catholics until Vatican II—were an even sadder case, hoping desperately for assimilation into a society that would end up murdering them. Lilla concludes that liberal theology could not inspire anyone and that its optimistic project collapsed in the battlefields of World War I.

From Lilla’s point of view, however, something much worse followed—a return to political theology. Christians like Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten and Jews like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig reintroduced all the passions of apocalyptic religion. Lulled by a couple of centuries in which religion had been a moderating force of calm, and angry when their liberal theological teachers went along with German policies of aggression in World War I, they had forgotten

that religion can also express darker fears and desires, that it can destroy community by dividing its members, that it can inflame the mind with destructive apocalyptic fantasies of immediate redemption. Neither the young Karl Barth nor Franz Rosenzweig thought of redemption in political terms. But once the theological discourse they helped to shape took an eschatological and apocalyptic turn following the First World War, it was

only a matter of time before those inspired by it began speaking of the political crises of Weimar in the very same language.

Here Lilla comes about as close as any presumably sane person can to blaming Barth and Rosenzweig for the origins of Nazism.

Lilla really does mean something like that. He grudgingly acknowledges, “Their books did nothing to cause that political development, which had much deeper sources.” Then in his next sentence he adds, “But they did unwittingly help to shape a new and noxious form of political argument, which was the theological celebration of modern tyranny.” For Lilla, it is almost entirely ideas, not social forces or economic crises, that make history happen—or in this case not so much ideas as rhetoric. Obviously neither Barth nor Rosenzweig supported Nazi ideas, but they kept using words like “shock,” “upheaval” and “crisis,” and challenging the comfortable assumptions of bourgeois culture. Once introduced, rhetoric like that “could just as easily be used to defend a decision *for* the Nazis.”

As proof, Lilla cites Emanuel Hirsch (translator of Kierkegaard, brilliant historian of theology and anti-Semite), Gogarten (early collaborator with Barth and later briefly a supporter of Nazi church policy) and Ernst Bloch (Jewish atheist who stuck with communism through the worst of Stalin). “The stillborn God of the liberal theologians could never satisfy the messianic longings embedded in biblical faith, so it was inevitable that this idol would be abandoned in favor of a strong redeeming God when the crisis came.” The proclamation of that God opened the door for messianic dreams that would take the darkest of turns.

In sum: liberal theology cannot inspire, and its theological opponents are dangerous. Therefore Hobbes was right; we need to keep God out of politics altogether: “It is wiser to beware the forces unleashed by the Bible’s messianic promise than to try exploiting them for the public good.”

It will have become obvious by now that I think that Lilla’s analysis goes badly astray. I believe that books and ideas can make a big difference in history, but I doubt that they (rather than economics or politics) dominate the story quite as much as he claims. And among the books and ideas of the period that he discusses, he tells a very limited story. He pretty much leaves Karl Marx out of this account of 19th-century thought, as well as John Henry Newman’s Oxford Movement, an influential group convinced that it was religion that needed protection from politics,

not the other way around. Nietzsche gets hardly a mention—after all, it would be hard to blame religious writers for the reintroduction of apocalyptic language after discussing an atheist who had already done just that.

Lilla thinks of religion in purely utilitarian terms. Is it useful for the sake of peace and social order, he worries, to talk passionately about the judgment of God? Suppose God is judging us and finding us in pretty sad shape. Should we not face that truth? Lilla seems not to allow that religions might make claims that are true, even if socially disruptive.

In Lilla's own utilitarian terms, moreover, the story is at least more complicated than he admits. During the period he discusses, William Wilberforce and others made the case against the slave trade out of religious passion. More recently, the civil rights movement drew its deepest strength from Christian roots. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from the Birmingham jail that he "gained a measure of satisfaction" in being called an extremist, like Amos, Jesus and Martin Luther—all of them extremists before him. He warned that "the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound," likely to "be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century" unless it found a stronger and, yes, a more passionate voice.

As the "moderate" white clergymen to whom he wrote that letter had noted, such rhetoric could stir things up, could cause trouble. Lilla shares their nervousness about the dangers of passionate preachers challenging the political order. But might not one argue that sometimes trouble needs to be caused? Yes, introducing non-wishy-washy religious assertions into political and social life risks raising the rhetorical stakes to dangerous levels. Refusing to do so, however, risks lowering the stakes so that evil is redefined as merely something "contrary to my own preferences." Those in my generation who first got into politics in passionate, religiously based protests against the war in Vietnam recognize that we bear a responsibility for the decrease in civility in American political life. But some of us still think we were right.

Yes, radical Islam is scary. Yes, George W. Bush's appeals to religion in defense of his policies are scary too. Out of that scariness comes much of the appeal of Lilla's book. But just now we especially need religious voices speaking for peace and justice and against torture with all the passion we can muster. Maybe that is better than leaving the public square to religious warmongers and to those who dismiss religion altogether.