

PREFACE

Man must & will have some religion; if he has not the Religion of Jesus, he will have the Religion of Satan, & will erect the Synagogue of Satan, calling the Prince of this world, God; and destroying all who do not worship Satan under the name of God.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, ch. 3: 'To the Deists'

I am minding my own business, travelling on the London Underground. I pick up a copy of the free newspaper, the *Metro*, which features a '60 second interview' with a well-known film actor, Jason Isaacs. He begins by telling us of his involvement with the Holocaust commemoration in Liverpool (January 2008); how remembrance is important, not least in the face of Holocaust deniers and the like. At the end of the interview, he is asked what he would do if he ruled the world. His answer? First, get everyone using Macintosh computers. Then 'abolish religion'.

Where to begin? As I am typing this on an iMac I suppose I am happy enough with the first sentiment. It is the casual illogicality of the second that causes dismay and needs attention. What I would call the John Lennon syndrome – 'and no religion too' – has become such a commonplace that it is hardly worth noting: a throwaway comment in a free commuter newspaper. And it certainly blends into the current intellectual and cultural climate, shaped not least by the prodigious output from writers who have been dubbed the 'new atheists'.¹

A vast, apparently unbridgeable gulf seems to be opening up between belief and unbelief, and it is not pretty. The splenetic

tenor of onslaughts such as *The God Delusion* by Dawkins and *God Is Not Great* (Hitchens) cannot, surely, be at the service of clear-sighted thinking, any more than religious belief is served by those who choose to respond in acerbic kind. The Germans have words for these things: the term *Kulturkampf*, or ‘culture struggle’, describes the conflict between Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and the Roman Catholic Church in Germany between 1871 and 1878 (for the record, Bismarck’s anticlerical policies largely failed). What we seem to have, in Britain and the USA, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, is another bitter *Kulturkampf*, this time between secular science and religious belief: in fact the term ‘culture war’ has already been in used in recent decades in the United States to describe the battle between secular liberals and religious social conservatives.

The present book is not specifically intended as a contribution to this current debate, though it is not easy to ignore the fireworks. My modest aim is to provide an introduction – for students of theology and religious studies, but also for a more general discerning readership – to the fascinating and contentious discipline of ‘political theology’. No subject more *aktuell*, again as the Germans say: more ‘relevant’. Yet genuinely useful resources for thinking sensibly about the relation between religion and politics are surprisingly scarce. I will go further, and suggest that much of the literature is useless, because it starts with an inadequate and unhelpful understanding of religion. In saying this I have no wish to take on Dawkins, Hitchens, or even Jason Isaacs, but in the case of the latter simply to point out the glaring discrepancy of commemorating the Holocaust, while at the same time wishing to exterminate religion.

To put this very simply, if the term ‘religion’ refers to a set of (probably mistaken) ideas, such as believing in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy, then desiring its abolition makes perfect sense. If the term ‘religion’ refers to an unhealthy but contingent socio-economic or medical condition, like urban deprivation or breast cancer, then, once again, desiring its abolition makes perfect sense. If, however, the word ‘religion’ is held to refer to complexes of belief, worship and action which are deeply embedded in practices and traditions, and which are felt to be crucial to

both individual and communal self-understanding and identity, then ‘abolishing religion’ is more like getting rid of sexuality or imagination. And it is very hard to see how this end can be achieved without ‘abolishing’ religious believers.

Here is the rub: believers themselves, of whatever epoch or faith tradition, cannot but regard themselves in this third category. Some, perhaps many people, may fervently wish that this was not the case: but to raise the question of religion in any other way, to simply *not see* that there is a chilling disconnect between wishing to commemorate the Holocaust and wanting rid of religion, is to embark on a strategy that is not only offensive but irresponsible. And too many of the current polemicists generate more heat than light because they work with one or both of the dubious premises: religion as a set of ideas, or religion as an external state of affairs, which can be surgically separated from the religious person like a dangerous tumour.

This medical image occurs in one of the more thoughtful, if still problematic analyses, Mark Lilla’s *The Stillborn God*.² Lilla defines ‘political theology’ as ‘discourse about political authority based on a revealed divine nexus’, which he regards as a malignant growth in the body politic. In seventeenth-century Western Europe this growth required drastic surgery, what Lilla calls the ‘Great Separation’. He regards Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) as the first attempt at a formal disentanglement of theological ideas from political concerns. A tradition of political philosophy that Lilla locates in the ‘children of Hobbes’ (John Locke and David Hume) developed and consolidated this innovative separation. Unfortunately, another line of thinkers, the ‘children of Rousseau’, meaning Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, did not perform the necessary operation with the same rigour. Though these thinkers agreed in principle with the Great Separation, the cancer of political theology remained latent in their work – only to break out as the terrible tumours of twentieth-century messianic politics, Hitlerism and Stalinist Marxism.

It is curious how persistently the challenge of the ‘theologico-political’ (to use one of the jargon phrases) has been presented in binary, oppositional terms. A famous formulation by Pope Gelasius in the fifth century declares: ‘two there are, by which

this world is governed'. Yes, but two *what?* Two Cities (Augustine)? Two Swords (medieval political theology)? The King's 'Two Bodies' (ditto)? Two Kingdoms (Luther)? Church and State? Jesus or Satan (Blake)? Christ or Caesar – or Hitler, for that matter? For Lilla, it is a straight choice: political theology or political philosophy.

Is he right? Wikipedia thinks not, since its entry on 'political theology' intriguingly describes 'a branch of both political philosophy and theology that investigates the ways in which theological concepts or ways of thinking underlie political, social, economic and cultural discourses'. If this is so, we have a curious hybrid discipline, one which, it is hoped, can stimulate believer and non-believer alike to the kind of reconsideration which Mark Lilla calls for, when he says we need to 'revisit the tension between political theology and modern political philosophy' (9) – even if we may have reservations about the way he has set up the discussion. Suffice to note here that the principal weakness of *The Stillborn God* has to be the one mentioned above: the ingrained habit of Lilla, who is after all a historian of ideas, to see 'religion', and therefore political theology, as almost exclusively an intellectual concern. As he admits himself, understanding political theology is hard for us, because we are on the 'other shore' of the Great Separation. Lilla's contribution to the *Kulturkampf* runs as follows:

The story reconstructed here should remind us that the actual choice contemporary societies face is not between past and present, or between the west and 'the rest.' It is between two grand traditions of thought, two ways of envisaging the human condition. We must be clear about those alternatives, choose between them, and live with the consequences of our choice. That is the human condition.

(Lilla, 2007:13)

Contemporary political theologians will dispute Lilla's account, as we shall see: for example, William T. Cavanaugh reads differently the history that preceded the Great Separation. To speak of the horrendous conflicts between 1550 and 1648 as 'Wars of Religion' is an anachronism, says Cavanaugh, one which serves

to bolster a useful myth about the nation state as our ‘saviour’ from religious fanaticism. If Cavanaugh is correct, then Lilla’s ineluctable ‘choice’ between political theology and political philosophy is false. Yet another perspective, set out in John Gray’s *Black Mass*,³ draws a line of continuity (not rupture) between the apocalyptic dimensions of historical Christianity and those modern political projects that have aimed at radical, and inevitably violent, transformations of the human. Gray lists the French Revolution; Nazism; Soviet and Maoist communism; and most recently the attempt, in the name of American ‘exceptionalism’, to impose democracy in Iraq:

Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion ... The greatest of the revolutionary upheavals that have shaped so much of the history of the last two centuries were episodes in the history of faith – moments in the long dissolution of Christianity and the rise of modern political religion. The world in which we find ourselves at the start of the new millennium is littered with the debris of utopian projects, which though they were framed in secular terms that denied the truth of religion were in fact vehicles for religious myths. (Gray, 2007:1)

Gray insists that ‘the political violence of the modern West can only be understood as an eschatological phenomenon’; that the dominant (though not exclusive) strands of Western thought have looked to alter the very nature of human life, an aspiration which has always tended to violence (35). He offers a devastating critique of the ‘faith-based’ ideology that led the USA and Britain into the disastrous war in Iraq, but there is much else of importance in this short book, not least a withering counterblast to the ‘new atheists’. The militant Darwinism of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett is a pale imitation of the relatively nuanced critiques of Marx and the French Positivists: ‘[c]ontemporary atheism is a Christian heresy that differs from earlier heresies chiefly in its intellectual crudity’ (189). One consequence of this view is the need to re-think the secularist agenda:

Those who demand that religion be exorcized from politics

think this can be achieved by excluding traditional faiths from public institutions; but secular creeds are formed from religious concepts, and suppressing religion does not mean it ceases to control thinking and behaviour. Like repressed sexual desire, faith returns, often in grotesque forms, to govern the lives of those who deny it ... Human beings will no more cease to be religious than they will stop being sexual, playful or violent. If religion is a primary human need it should not be suppressed or relegated to a netherworld of private life. It ought to be fully integrated into the public realm, but that does not mean establishing any one religion as public doctrine. (190, 209)

Gray reminds us that ‘at its best religion has been an attempt to deal with mystery rather than the hope that mystery will be unveiled’. But it is precisely this reticence, this ‘civilising perception’, which has been lost in the clash of fundamentalisms, leaving little prospect of a future that is not shaped by violent faith (210).

In all of this it is hard not to be reminded of the theology of the *wager*. Blaise Pascal famously posed the question of belief in these terms: he argued that theism is the rationally correct option for every individual, since betting my life on the assumption that there is no God cannot benefit me if I ‘win’, and could be disastrous if I ‘lose’. Not everyone finds this argument convincing! As we shall see, contemporary Christian political and liberation theologians posit another argument from belief, this time a *mutual wager* between the poor and God. The poor trust in God as their champion, the one who will liberate them from their suffering, while God ‘wagers’ on humanity, by daring to enter, repeatedly, into political partnership (covenant) with human beings, and by handing over his Son (Bell, 2001; Kirwan, 2006).

Still we await the outcome of these wagers, the first especially. Are the ‘losers’ of history, all those mutilated and forgotten victims, really losers – or will God vindicate them, as wonderfully and spectacularly as he vindicated his dead Son?

But it is not just the religious believer whose life is at hazard. For John Gray, the future of humanity depends on the choice of

non-utopian over utopian forms of politics. For Mark Lilla, we are faced with the claims of political philosophy and political theology: '[w]e must be clear about those alternatives, choose between them, and live with the consequences of our choice'. It seems we have no option but to stake our claim: on God, on humanity, on some understanding of divine and human interaction. The parameters of Enlightenment hope itself, as set out by Immanuel Kant, are strictly demarcated by Kant's own version of the 'divine wager', to which he gave the name 'postulates of practical reason'. Kant claimed that to live ethically – and by extension politically – we must either trust in God, or run the risk of a terrible moral despair; like the liberation and political theologians who came after him, Kant turned his eyes to the biblical figure of Job.⁴

The twentieth-century heirs of Kant's Enlightenment, writing 'in dark times', found themselves suspended over the same abyss: our noble aspirations for conviviality, drowned out in a 'land of screams'. For Lilla and Gray it is the temptation of 'utopian' political religion, recurrent like a cancer, which leads to Auschwitz. Contemporary political theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz argue the opposite: the Nazi catastrophe, above all, demonstrates the absolute indispensability of religious hope.

The consequences of getting the wager 'wrong' will be all too apparent – in this world, not the 'next'. Can a *polis* exist, be sustained, without God? The advocates of the Great Separation say that it can and must: we must rely on ourselves alone. But how, then, does such a polity and its leaders avoid placing themselves on the Messiah's throne – how do we prevent an Enlightenment which 'radiates disaster triumphant'?

My ambition is for this book to be a straightforward, largely unpolemical introduction to this fascinating and sometimes bewildering area of theology. To this extent the treatment is mainly expository, and I do my best to avoid technical theological terms. This book was written during a sabbatical term in the summer and autumn of 2007, which enabled me to spend time with my brother Jesuits in Guyana, South America, and with the seminarians and staff at the regional seminary of St John Vianney and the Ugandan Martyrs, Trinidad. My

thanks to all, for their wonderful hospitality and superb witness.

And my sincerest gratitude goes once again to the students and colleagues of Heythrop College, London, who have helped me over the years with their insights and suggestions; above all to the undergraduates and postgraduate classes of 2006–7, whose insights I enlisted specially when planning this work (a special thanks, with much love, to Sarz and Muttley). My apologies to those students – few, I hope – who were not able to follow my ramblings, and my regrets to all, because we did not move closer to the abyss, nor were our memories dangerous enough.

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