

Symposium

Political Theology in the Twenty- First Century: An Introduction

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In his “Preface to Hobbes *politische Wissenschaft*,” Leo Strauss writes about the relationship between religion and politics as the “theologico-political problem”—the problem of political authority.¹ Is political authority to be grounded in the claims of revelation or reason? Do monarchies owe their authority to divine right? Do princes have the authority to suppress heretics? Is natural law ultimately rooted in divine law? These and other questions have shaped much of the discussion among political philosophers during the medieval and modern periods.²

With the emergence of liberal democracy, divine political authority gave way to consent-based approaches; Christianity became fragmented into competing religious communities; and secularization made religious beliefs and arguments impotent in persuading one’s fellow citizens about politics.³ Today in the West citizens take for granted that the authority of the state is located in the people, that religious tolerance is revered, and that religious beliefs and arguments can be challenged and rejected. However, religion has not disappeared in spite of the predictions of those who have advocated the secularization thesis for the West.⁴ This raises such questions for political philosophers as what role religion should play in the justification of state authority. Do religious believers perceive politics differently from those having nontheological perspectives? Does the term “political theology” make any sense to describe such an approach to politics?

While political theology has been used since Augustine to describe a religious believer's relationship to politics, the most prominent and recent invocation of this term is by Carl Schmitt. In his *Political Theology*, Schmitt contends that the main concepts of modern politics are secularized versions of older theological concepts.⁵ Schmitt's influence can be found in today's debate in America about Catholic integralism, whose proponents argue that the modern state should adopt the principles of the Christian faith as the basis of its public law and policy.⁶

The integralist position runs contrary to what is sometimes referred to as the "standard view," where philosophers like Rawls, Habermas, and Nussbaum argue that religious reasons can play only a limited role in justifying the state's coercive laws.⁷ In other words, secular reasons can justify state coercion, but religious reasons cannot. Religious reason can influence the public square only if they were to overlap with, map onto, or be translated into secular reasons. To justify this position, philosophers cite the threat of religious warfare, the fear of civil and political divisiveness, and the need for respect for one's fellow citizens as grounds for supporting this view.

In our symposium, "Political Theology in the Twenty-First Century," we explore these questions by examining the political thought of Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Pierre Manent, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Stanley Hauerwas, and Muhammad Iqbal. In these thinkers we see not only a challenge to the standard view of political theology but, with most of them, a rejection of the integralist position too. Each thinker charts a new path for religion in the modern world and why religion is still needed for our politics. If politics is essential to our existence because we cannot escape it, then the enduring power of religion is a testament of its necessity for our human flourishing. Our symposium examines both indispensable features of our condition so that we can learn from them.

Notes

1. Leo Strauss, "Preface to Hobbes *politische Wissenschaft*," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 453–56.
2. Cary J. Nederman, *Inventing Modernity in Medieval European Thought, ca. 1100–ca.1550* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan Medieval Press, 2019).
3. Edward Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
4. Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage, 2007).
5. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
6. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).
7. John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997): 765–807; Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–25; Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Perseus Books, 2008).

