The title The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West by Mark Lilla is misleading. As Lilla, a Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University, says in the Introduction, the book “is not a comprehensive study.” It focuses on “a particular argument,” “an argument about religion and politics that stretched over four hundred years in the West, beginning in seventeenth-century England and ending in twentieth-century Germany; it is “highly episodic.” (9) Most of the discussion is lucid and persuasive, but the analysis of twentieth-century Germany is problematic, and the broader discussion of “religion, politics and the modern West” referenced in the title is superficial and flawed.

After the Introduction, Chapter I gives the volume a shaky start with its discussion of politics and theology in the West from the Emperor Constantine to the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The problem here is not in what Lilla says but what he omits. Although medieval Europe had nothing like the modern disestablishment of religion, religious and temporal powers were almost always distinct. Indeed, the existence of the papacy necessitated a separation of powers because neither monarchs nor prelates could control completely. And in the secular realm the rule of monarchs was not absolute but was curbed by the privileges of the nobility, the charters granted to many cities, and a measure of representative government, as in the English Parliament.

Likewise, although personal liberty was narrower then than now, some individual rights were acknowledged. Even serfs were not slaves and had certain rights. Magna Carta, ignored by Lilla, is recognized as a wellspring of modern freedom. Although direct challenges to secular and priestly authority were suppressed, considerable latitude in religious practice and scholarly discourse was generally tolerated. Later, although Protestants were often intolerant in practice, many Protestant thinkers preached a freedom of individual conscience that was hard to square with that intolerance.

More important, individual liberty and correlative limits on authority found justification in theology, as in Thomas Aquinas’s influential concepts of a natural law that was accessible to all reasonable
people, not just to Christians.\(^1\) Lilla disregards all this and says the Enlightenment “began instead by observing human nature in all its variety” (71), thus treating it as a total break with the past rather than as an evolution.

The rest of Part I and all of Part II of *The Stillborn God* analyze the treatment of politics and religion by the great seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers Hobbes, Hume, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel. Here Lilla is remarkably adept at explicating philosophical discourse that is often impenetrable to all but experts. His discussion of these philosophers is also useful in belying the simplistic claims of many contemporary secularists that since the Enlightenment all intelligent thinkers in the West have insisted that religion is a private matter and must be excluded from the public square.

Hobbes does embrace that principle, and indeed goes further: “The sovereign would have a total monopoly over ecclesiastical matters... He would also declare that the only requirement for salvation was complete obedience to himself.” (86) This is not what contemporary secularists have in mind.

The other philosophers discussed by Lilla all favored disestablishment of religion; they wanted to evict the clergy from government but not to ban religion from public discourse. On the contrary, as Lilla acknowledges, they viewed independent religion as an inevitable and to some extent desirable influence on government, although their views on how that influence would be manifested were varied and often complex.

In the concluding Part III, Lilla’s scope narrows. He focuses on the rise of liberal theology in nineteenth-century Germany after Hegel and its fall there after World War I, ignoring developments elsewhere in the West. Again, as intellectual history, this is lucid, perceptive, and persuasive. Trouble arises, though, when Lilla puts this theological evolution in the context of the plague of National Socialism. The question of how the Nazis overthrew liberal democracy is hotly debated. If Lilla had simply left it alone, his discussion would be fine. Instead, without offering a formal, comprehensive answer to the question, he suggests that the Nazis’ conquest occurred because liberal theology was “unable to inspire genuine conviction among those seeking ultimate truth.” (301) It “could never satisfy the messianic longings embedded in biblical faith.” (308) “And so, in the wake of the catastrophic First

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World War, liberal theology was swept away.” (302)

This analysis is far-fetched in two ways. First, in what sense, if any, did liberal theology fail in Germany in the 1920s and ’30s? Lilla focuses on a few theologians, but he does not show that they represented a broader trend among intellectuals, much less in the wider population. Second, there were many other reasons for the takeover by the Nazis, including the collapse of the German economy, the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the simultaneous mugging of liberal democracy by the Communists, the stupidity and incompetence of liberals, and the personal charisma of Hitler. To suggest that the weaknesses of liberal theology made even a substantial contribution to the triumph of the Nazis is extremely dubious.

The second major problem with The Stillborn God also arises when Lilla ventures beyond his close reading of philosophers and theologians and into what he labels “the Great Separation.” What he means by this is indicated by many different statements, some of which are true, some of which are problematic. At one point, he says that we in the West 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. (308-309)

That statement is basically true, but even it leaves much room for religion to participate in political debate about, for example, what are “harms,” what are “fundamental liberties,” what is “basic welfare,” and what is the realm of “spiritual destinies” with which the state may not interfere. Do pornography and prostitution inflict “harm”? Does abortion violate the “fundamental liberties” of the unborn child? Does individual control of one’s “spiritual destiny” require the state to allow parents to choose a religious school for their children, or may the state pay for secular education only?

At times Lilla says that the Great Separation means that we “separate religious questions from political ones.” (3) As the preceding list of issues suggests, this is plain wrong. Certainly in America, religion has always played a major role in politics. The Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements are just two prominent examples. And, as these two examples show, almost no one categorically opposes religion’s participation in politics. Who complained about the religious content of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech? But it is the appeal to faith that gives the speech (sermon?) remarkable power; without religion, it is less interesting than a position paper from a liberal think tank.
This silence (inconsistency? hypocrisy?) of separationists is not surprising, however, since it is hard to see how they could object. Like other separationists, Lilla is vague about what are the proper principles of politics once they are purged of religion. He says that the “new approach to politics focused exclusively on human nature and human needs.” (58) However, Aquinas and many other theologians would have no problem with that principle.

Moreover, fact and reason alone can not tell us what “human needs” are. Hume realized that one cannot derive an “ought” from an “is” and that “any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought at first to be rejected as presumptuous and chimerical.” Consider the doctrinal basis for the American republic, the Declaration of Independence. It says:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the governed, . . .

The premise is explicitly religious. As science, the proposition that “all men are created equal” and have “certain unalienable rights” is clearly false. Without those principles, there is no reason for anyone to recognize rights of others or to respect democratic rule of the majority. Of course, metaphysical justification of human rights and equality are possible without religion, but once one recognizes that the justification must be metaphysical, it is hard to see why religion should be excluded.

It is appropriate, then, that Lilla occasionally recognizes that the Great Separation may not even be possible: “[I]f Rousseau is right . . . [r]eligion is simply too entwined with our moral experience ever to be disentangled from the things touching on morality.” (131) Even if we can remove religion from our thinking about morality, what resources can we employ instead? Many prominent thinkers deny that human rights can be persuasively justified without resort to religion.

Lilla is surprisingly reticent about what happens when religion is excluded from politics. Beginning with the fiercely anti-clerical French Revolution, atheist regimes have often been murderous and repressive. The worst slaughters in history have been committed in Communist China under Mao, in the Soviet Union under Stalin, and in Nazi Germany. The first two, largely ignored by Lilla, were aggressively atheist. The last attracted some support from some religious leaders who rejected liberal theology, as Lilla details. Nonetheless, National Socialism was officially atheist. Violence and repression in atheist regimes is hardly surprising. Hobbes wanted to extirpate religion (except as dictated by the ruler) from politics, but, as Lilla documents, he believed people were and would continue to be motivated by fear. Or, as the famous atheist Nietzsche said, “The world is the will to power—and nothing besides.”

Of course, the disappearance of religion from politics does not necessarily lead to atrocities, as conditions in western Europe now show. However, that example raises questions about the long-term fate of societies that shun religion. Birth rates in western Europe are so low as to pose daunting economic problems in the near future. Perhaps this is not surprising. Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor says “Without a stable conception of the object of life, man would not consent to go on living, and would rather destroy himself than remain on earth, though he had bread in abundance.”

Although individual Europeans are not killing themselves, their refusal to reproduce may constitute collective suicide.

Simultaneously, Muslims who reject the Great Separation and wish to establish their religion are multiplying rapidly. We can only guess what these opposing trends will bring. As Lilla concedes, “religion has the power to forge social bonds that no other force seems to possess.” Can secularist Europeans muster the will to avert an Islamic takeover?

Even if societies can survive without either atheist atrocities or substantial religious participation in public life, there remain questions about how satisfying life in such societies will be. The main substitutes for religion and atheist commitment to the all-powerful state seem to be material consumption and popular entertainment. These should not be automatically despised; compared with the poverty, ignorance, and lack of freedom experienced by most people in history, consumer culture is

quite attractive. Nonetheless, many reasonable people wonder whether there is not more to life, something deeper in the “human nature and human needs” (58) to which Lilla refers. And in seeking greater meaning in life, many people look to religion.

Similarly, although few secularists want a Communist or Nazi dictatorship any more than a theocracy, they may care little about others. Again, Lilla perceives that “religion has the power to forge social bonds that no other force seems to possess.” (303) Where American politics have embraced concern for others, as in the abolition and Civil Rights movements, religion played a key role. Without religion, individuals may care only about their own creature comforts. In a democracy, mutual self-interest may protect the welfare of a majority with similar needs. The interests of minorities with special needs, however, may be ignored. Participation in public life may also decline. Even the minimal civic function of voting makes little sense on a cost-benefit basis since the odds that one vote will change the outcome of any election are virtually nil.

These possibilities seem to be emerging in America—inequality of wealth is growing while government efforts to promote equality are declining, as is civic involvement. It is hard to say whether these trends stem from advancing secularism, but the rising political influence of evangelicals may be the exception that proves the rule—they have succeeded largely because they attract a higher voter turnout than other groups.

Lilla closes The Stillborn God by drawing from the experience of Germany between the wars the lesson that the Great Separation is a fragile experiment still limited primarily to the West. (308-309) Although we should not be complacent, neither should we exaggerate our fragility. Despite constant skirmishes over specific issues, we in the West enjoy a broad consensus about the public place of religion. No significant faction (other than some Muslim immigrants) wants to establish religion or to destroy freedom of worship in the West.

Lilla also says that the Great Separation is still limited to the West and a few non-Western countries (like Japan) that have adopted Western political and economic systems. This, too, is misleading, if not plain wrong. Theocracy exists or is a threat only in some (not all) Muslim countries. Religion is a source of strife in some other countries, although in nearly all those countries, one side of the strife involves

Muslims—primarily against Hindus in India, and against Christians in several African nations. In most of the world, theocracy and religious strife are not serious problems.

Mark Lilla’s *The Stillborn God* is an outstanding work of intellectual history. Read it for its illumination of great philosophers and the evolution of elite thought about the role of religion in politics. Ignore the pratfalls it suffers when it trespasses beyond this terrain and pontificates on larger political developments and issues.

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