

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

by Mark Lilla, Knopf, 2007, 352 pp.

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Also under review: *The Suicide of Reason: Radical Islam's Threat to the West*, by Lee Harris, Basic Books, 2007, 290 pp.; *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11*, by Matthias Kuntzel, Telos, 2007, 174 pp.

Two new books, Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God* and Lee Harris's *The Suicide of Reason*, argue that religious extremism imperils the liberal – and, as they see it, fragile – traditions of the West. Both books base much of their analysis on the writings of Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century English philosopher of public order. But they see the extremist danger coming from dramatically different religious directions. For Lilla, it radiates from unresolved tensions in Christianity, which can burst forth at any moment into millenarian madness. Harris, on the other hand, sees the threat coming from an Islamic fanaticism that the rationalist West is unable to comprehend, much less counter. Matthias Kuntzel shares Harris's fears. His *Jihad and Jew-Hatred* is a compelling historical account of how modern Islamic extremism has been informed by the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich.

Lilla, a Columbia University philosopher, has written the more original of the first two books. Though Lilla never mentions it by name, Norman Cohn's pathbreaking 1957 book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, clearly frames his argument. Augustinian Catholicism, Cohn wrote, had insisted that despite the limitations imposed by man's original sin, the Catholic Church provided a state of spiritual near-perfection on earth. But in the Middle Ages, what Cohn described as an 'underworld' of apocalyptic Christians emerged, convinced that the path to salvation was being blocked by nefarious agents of evil – Jews among them – who had to be extirpated. Cohn convincingly argued that twentieth-century totalitarian movements were the underworld's ideological children, which drew on a 'common stock of European social mythology' derived in large part from the biblical book of Revelation. 'When this underworld emerges from the depths and suddenly fascinates, captures and dominates multitudes of usually sane and responsible people,' he explained, 'it occasionally happens that this underworld becomes a political power and changes the course of history.'

Lilla, like Cohn, fears a new outbreak of millenarianism. For all the academic talk of how modern societies will inevitably grow more secular, the religious impulse is, he insists, an indelible element of human nature. But Lilla deals with Cohn's thesis only in passing. Instead, he locates Christian millenarianism in the unstable relationship between spirit and state. While originally a religion of the despised, Christianity already boasted a well-developed theology before the emperor Constantine's fourth-century conversion to the faith forced it to deal with the tension between ecclesiastic and secular power. Never effectively resolved, that conflict exploded in the religious wars set off by the Protestant Reformation. Perhaps, says Lilla, 'if Christianity had seen itself as the political religion it really was, presenting the pope as an earthly sovereign with full authority over secular matters,' those bloody, radically destabilizing wars might have been avoided by a Christianity fully willing to assert its power over this-worldly affairs. At this point, Lilla's argument bears resemblance to those of Catholic neo-medievalists like Charles Maurras; attracted to fascism, such thinkers attributed most of the problems of the modern world to Luther and Calvin.

But then the book takes a turn. It presents the philosophy of seventeenth-century proto-utilitarian thinker Thomas Hobbes as the path out of the madness of religious wars and millenarian irrationalism. Hobbes, Lilla writes, 'was the first thinker to suggest that religious conflict and political conflict are essentially the same conflict . . . because they share identical roots in human nature.' Caught up in the religiously driven English Civil War, Hobbes 'did the most revolutionary thing a thinker can ever do – he changed the subject, from God and his commands to man and his beliefs.' A man of science, Hobbes argued for what Lilla calls 'the great separation,' in which political matters would be organized around man's need for order, not his need to satisfy an unknowable God's commands. 'The truth is,' Lilla concludes, 'that the way modern liberal democracies approach religion and politics is unimaginable without the decisive break made by Thomas Hobbes.'

Some historians will grimace at the overstated claims that Lilla makes for Hobbes's singular and decisive role in separating religion from politics. And Lilla's tendency to leap from generalization to generalization is not the only problem with his arguments. Moving to a discussion of Rousseau's, Kant's, and Hegel's religious themes, he blames those thinkers for having reintroduced religion into politics by making romantic sentiment a respectable part of national religious identities. But religion had never left the political arena; rather, a shift occurred from European

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theology-as-politics – which persisted prior to the French Revolution – to politics-as-theology, which took hold afterward.

Lilla bypasses, for instance, the most politically influential writings of these three philosophers. He says nothing about Rousseau's idea of 'general will' and its influence on the Jacobins, Napoleon, and the Bolsheviks. Nor does he mention Kant's unintended influence – through Johann Gottlieb Fichte – on the growth of Volkish German nationalism, or the influence of Hegelianism on Marxist dialectics and twentieth-century statism. Instead, he projects the influence of Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel forward, focusing on what he acknowledges in his introduction 'was a minor intellectual episode, a sideshow': the revival of redemptive theology in the writings of the noted 1920s religious liberals Karl Barth, a Protestant, and Franz Rosenzweig, a Jew. Here Lilla completely loses the reader. Neither Rosenzweig nor Barth, he acknowledges, 'recognized the connection between the rhetoric of their theological messianism and the apocalyptic rhetoric that was beginning to engulf German society ... but they did unwittingly help to shape a new and noxious form of political argument, which was the theological celebration of modern tyranny.' The *Stillborn God's* nearly 300 pages then culminate in this sentence: 'Eschatological language,' referring to Barth's and Rosenzweig's writing, 'breeds eschatological politics.'

Lilla seems to imply that these men were a significant philosophical source for National Socialism. The reader is left puzzled. What 'eschatological language' today could plunge us into the millenarian revival that Lilla fears? Christianity is dying in Europe, and *The Stillborn God* barely mentions Islam. But summarizing his book in an article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Lilla added a revealing coda. Referring to the supposed damage done by Barth and Rosenzweig, he wrote, '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.' Here again the reader is likely to rub his eyes. When exactly did this liberalizing tendency in Islam take hold?

Further, having written a book that decries the Protestant Reformation's plunging Europe into a century of religious war, Lilla does a 180-degree turn in *the Times Magazine*, inexplicably praising the Reformation as a model for Muslims. 'The complacent liberalism and revolutionary messianism we've encountered,' he writes, '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.'

Lilla ignores the fact that Sunni Islam has already experienced something akin to a Reformation, in the form of eighteenth-century Wahhabism, which called Muslims back to the unadorned faith first preached by Mohammed. But while the Western liberal tradition stands on the two legs of Athens and Jerusalem, the singular focus on submission to God's word in Islam – preached nowhere more intensely than in Wahhabi Islam – leaves no room for a second leavening tradition. What Islam has missed is not a Reformation, but an Enlightenment.

And whom does Lilla nominate to lead a renovated Islam? None other than Tariq Ramadan, the grandson and intellectual heir of Hasan al-Banna (about whom more later), the founder of the fascist-influenced Muslim Brotherhood, from which both the PLO and al-Qaeda descend. Lilla explains: '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.' But he does not explain how the Salafist Ramadan, who has close ties with Islamic extremists, is to be the bearer of good news.

My puzzlement grew as I stumbled upon another recent article of Lilla's for the *New York Times*, this one about his experiences as a Roman Catholic who became an evangelical Christian and now rejects both faiths. Lilla is still on a mission, albeit a very different one. He writes of a slight acquaintance who is hoping to be born again: 'I wanted to warn him against the anti-intellectualism of American religion today and the political abuses to which it is subject. I wanted to cast doubt on the step he was about to take, to help him see there are other ways to live, other ways to seek knowledge, love, perhaps even self-transformation. I wanted to convince him that his dignity depended on maintaining a free, skeptical attitude toward doctrine. I wanted . . . to save him.'

Lilla the Hobbesian has not explained, as far as I'm aware, how he squares secularism with his embrace of Tariq Ramadan's Islamism as the hope for the future. Perhaps it's the other Lilla – the one who wishes that Christianity had openly recognized its

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nature as a political religion – who has moved in Ramadan’s direction. But either way, his sentiments reveal the underlying logic of his book. In effect, he thinks it better to encourage Islam than to allow the malign fruits of Christianity to continue blooming. Given the choice between Hobbes and Christianity, he prefers Hobbes. Given the choice between Hobbes and Ramadan’s Islam, he’ll reluctantly take Islam. What he can never countenance is Christianity, which he seems to view as our most urgent threat.

For Lee Harris, Hobbes’s hopes for a society of rational individualists, impervious to all but self-interest, have been so successfully realized as to make it almost impossible for us to comprehend the tribal fanaticism that still defines much of the world. ‘Instead of grasping that the creation of a society of rational actors was the work of a tradition,’ he says, ‘we have come to think that all men are born rational actors.’ Sheltered by success and wide oceans, we assume that reason is ‘a universal endowment of mankind,’ which only needs to ‘be liberated from the shackles of oppression by an enlightened elite.’ It is the Westerners, and not the Islamists, Harris writes, who have been the exception over the course of history, as episodes like the Iraq War demonstrate.

Harris, a man of wide reading, shows us what a solemn, and not just a tactical, multiculturalism looks like. Westerners mistakenly assume, he says, that ‘modernity is to cultures what old age is to the individual, an inevitable stage of development.’ Darwin, for instance, who had witnessed the barbarism of the Tierra del Fuego Indians firsthand, assumed that as men moved beyond tribal loyalties, their sympathies would eventually expand to encompass all of humanity. But, asks Harris, what if tribalism, and an accompanying fanaticism of the sort that inspired past religious wars, are far more functional, far more effective modes of organization than we realize? When an Islamic terrorist insists that ‘we will win in the end because we are willing to die,’ we should take him at his word. Islamic fanaticism is not a relic of the past. It is, argues Harris, ‘a formidable weapon in the struggle for cultural survival . . . it has served as a powerful defence mechanism that has successfully thwarted all attempts by rival cultures to conquer, dominate, or even influence Islam.’ Nor can we take comfort in the assumption that the jihadists are outside the Islamic mainstream. On the contrary, Harris points out, a considerable body of orthodox Muslim jurisprudence buttresses them.

Accurate though he is in his sense of Islam’s capacity to resist modernity, Harris’s pessimism pushes him in an untenable direction. ‘The only cultures that have

succeeded in driving back the inroads of Islam,' he notes, 'have been those cultures that have adopted the Muslim principle of fanaticism to serve their own purpose. The Catholic reconquest of Spain, for example, could have only been achieved by a religion that adopted the same ethos that had animated Islam.' This is exactly the argument of those who, during World War II and the cold war, insisted that we could only win by becoming much more like our enemies. They were wrong then, and Harris, and Lilla in a different way, are mistaken now; we are far less fragile than such pessimists assume.

Matthias Kuntzel's *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11* effectively brings together the political theology central to Lilla's book and the tribalism and fanaticism central to Harris's. The small, independent Telos Press deserves kudos for publishing this book by a German historian little known in America. Better than anyone before him, Kuntzel makes sense of the deep and entangling historical ties between European National Socialism and the Muslim Brotherhood. 'The idea of using suicide pilots to obliterate the skyscrapers of Manhattan originated in 1940s Berlin,' he notes. 'Hitler envisioned having kamikaze pilots fly light aircraft packed with explosives and with no landing gear into Manhattan skyscrapers.' Like the 9/11 bombers, Hitler wanted 'not merely to fight a military adversary, but to kill all Jews everywhere.'

Tariq Ramadan's grandfather, Hassan al-Banna, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate. The Brotherhood became to Islamism what the Bolsheviks were to Communism: 'the ideological reference point and organization' for future radical movements. Al-Banna's famous article, 'The Industry of Death,' argued that 'to a nation that perfects the industry of death and which knows how to die nobly, God gives proud life in this world and eternal grace in the life to come.'

Al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood were a profound influence on the founder of the Palestinian political movement – Haj Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who, drawing on the underworld-come-to-the-surface that Cohn described, was 'the first to translate European anti-Semitism into an Islamic context.' Kuntzel explains that 'although Islamism is an independent, anti-Semitic, anti-modern mass movement, its main early promoters – the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Mufti ... in Palestine – were supported financially and ideologically by agencies of the German National Socialist government.'

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The Mufti, who spent the Second World War in Berlin broadcasting propaganda for the Nazis while recruiting Bosnian Muslims for the SS, translated Palestinian political interests into an extension of Hitler's intentions to wipe out the Jews. The Mufti pointed to passages in the Koran referring to Jews as dangerous and inferior, as well as to Mohammed's own behaviour in beheading the entire male population of a Jewish tribe and expelling the other Jewish tribes from Medina. The Mufti and al-Banna exemplify the fanaticism that Harris writes about. Kuntzel describes how they relentlessly killed off liberals and moderates who might impede their Islamic agenda. Their success has been the tragedy of the modern Middle East.

Apologists for Islamism argue that, if only we can resolve the conflicts in Chechnya, Palestine, Kashmir, Nigeria, Southern Thailand, the southern Philippines, East Timor, and the cities of Europe for that matter, all will be well. But what's at the heart of the Islamic conflict with modernity is the unvarnished political theology of Islam, which assumes that Muslims are destined to rule the earth. Hassan Butt, a former British Islamist, explains in his memoirs: 'When I was still a member of what is probably best termed the British Jihadi Network ... I remember how we used to laugh in celebration whenever people on TV proclaimed that the sole cause for Islamic acts of terror like 9/11, the Madrid bombings, and 7/7 was Western foreign policy ... they also helped draw away any critical examination from the real engine of our violence: Islamic theology.'

Of these three writers, only Kuntzel takes Islamic theology seriously, which is why his book is so deeply informative. Lee Harris is right to argue that we are unlikely to make serious progress in opening the culturally autarkic Arab and Islamic worlds to the pleasures of modernity, given their ferocious and time-tested defence mechanisms. That's why it's all the more important for Europeans unambiguously to defend Western values on their own terrain, rather than abasing themselves before the likes of Ramadan – who, like the Nazis, is a reactionary modernist, and who hopes not to modernize Islam but to Islamicize modernity. But maybe that's all right for the Mark Lillas of the world.

Fred Siegel is a professor of history at the Cooper Union for Science and Art. This review first appeared in *City Journal* on 19 October, 2007, as 'Anti- and Anti-Anti-Islamists: The West and the challenge of Islamic fanaticism,' October 19, 2007. Thanks to the editors and Fred Siegel for granting permission to reprint the review.