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Introductory Remarks

Kevin P. Lee

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KEVIN LEE

John Milbank begins *Theology and Social Theory*,¹ his influential study of the theological significance of modern social thought, with the observation that in the beginning, the secular did not exist. It was not even a pre-natal thought waiting to be born. Human beings were, and are, by nature and everywhere, religious. Throughout much of European history, they expressed their religiousness in and through the institutions, traditions, rituals, and practices of the Abrahamic religions. The secular emerged from this hermeneutic horizon. It was a creation of human beings living in particular historical circumstances, responding to particular political, social, and economic conditions. The focus of this Symposium is the interrelationship between that form of modern, secular political theory known as classical liberalism and the Christian religious beliefs that were the context from which it arose.

Two extreme views frame this Symposium. At one extreme is the view that modernity is an expression of a passage from adolescence to adulthood. According to this view, the secular state emerged from the naiveté of childhood during the traumas of the Wars of Religion of the late 17th and early 18th centuries.² By the end of 18th century, a cautious acceptance of adulthood was worked out in the reception of modernity as a more responsible and competent condition than what had preceded it. The genesis of the modern liberal democratic state marked a triumph that was not fully achieved until the adoption of the United States Constitution, which became the institutionalized embodiment of an agreement among responsible adults to live as adults in a world stripped

1. JOHN MILBANK, *THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL THEORY: BEYOND SECULAR REASON* 9–10 (Oxford Univ. Press 2006).

2. For the view of modernity as an escape from childhood, see, e.g., MAX WEBBER, *SCIENCE AS A VOCATION* (1971).

of the enchantments and the vulnerabilities of an overly innocent childhood.

Another extreme view of modernity holds it to be what must be called a psychotic mental condition, brought about among philosophers by the humiliation they felt after the successes of the natural sciences (particularly the ordered certainty and mathematical perfection of Newtonian mechanics). According to this account, the humanities, lacking corresponding successes, suffered from acute anxiety.³ Beginning with Descartes, modern philosophers developed their characteristic methodological skepticism in order to explain away their embarrassment, and thus relieve their anxiety, by treating the human condition as an intellectual difficulty. According to this view, the medieval synthesis continues to hold insights into the nature of the person, society, and the state. The authority of law, and therefore the limit of the state's legitimate authority, are inseparable from the Crucifixion and the Eucharist. These Christian events are the paradoxes that define the comprehensive meaning of any human body, broken by an indifferent political power. Here, the significance of Christ's death and resurrection are not jejune fantasies. One can resist Christianity, but in the end, its words are correct.

This Symposium plays out in the space created between these two extreme accounts of the modern state. We are concerned with the origins and foundations of the American form of liberal democracy. Does either one of these two narratives offer an apt understanding of the constitutional history and democratic theory of the United States? Are we to view the Founders as the Third Generation of the Enlightenment, working out a plan for a mature, competent state? Or were they Christians, seeking to secure the dignity of the person against the psychosis of modernity? Or, more likely, do neither of the extreme views hold their ground. Do we need more nuanced and cautious accounts of the relationship between Christian and modern political thought? Accounts that are shaped by the detailed complexities of intellectual history?

Our panelists brought a wealth of interdisciplinary perspectives to explore the territory mapped by these questions. The first set of papers drew from political theory. Three of the presenters are professional political theorists: Bruce Frohnen, Barry Shain, and John Inazu. They explored the commitments within classical liberalism that led to the

3. The psychological view of modernity was introduced by Sigmund Freud in *Civilizations and its Discontents*. Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* advances a similar view.

Enlightenment and to the foundations of modern liberal democracy. They each argued that the conceptions of limited government and positive rights that are today identified as characteristic of liberal democratic theory arose within and depended upon Christian conceptions of the dignity and sinfulness of person, the nature of authority, and the distinction (even separation) between a chiliastic order and the state. In different ways, they suggested that the vitality of classical liberalism today depends upon maintaining contact with these foundational commitments, without allowing the Christian foundations to become a civic religion.

Similarly, John Inazu explored the similarities in the thought of two Colonial era figures, Roger Williams and William Penn, to two contemporary political theologies, that of Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauserwas. Inazu argued that “some significant embodiments of conscience in the American colonies can neither be squared with individualistic liberalism . . . nor appropriated in the service of arguments that collapse the distinction between church and state.” He suggested the task of respecting the dignity of others remains a complex issue that legal systems can only partially resolve.

A contrary perspective was advanced by the fourth speaker, Donald R. McConnell, who disagreed with the élan shared by Frohnen, Shain, and Inazu. McConnell took a much more favorable look at civil religion, using the case of *Perry v. Walker* as his focus, he argued that liberalism represents a rival claim to Christianity that ought to be tamed by “a new political settlement” that can restrain rivals to Christianity “while at the same time allowing into the public square the reasons and ideas necessary for just civil government.” For McConnell, the danger posed by Christian rivals justifies the civil religion and a weakening of the separation between Church and State.

A second group of essays focused more on philosophical issues, drawing on questions of epistemology and metaphysics to explore the contributions that religious faith can make to public discourse. John Breen commented on remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI at Westminster Hall in September 2010, where the pope noted that “the role of religion in political discourse is not so much to supply [moral] norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers, . . . but to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.” Breen’s essay explored the meaning of Pope Benedict’s claim that religion helps to “purify” reason in public life and applies these insights to the Supreme Court’s recent decision in *CLS v. Martinez*.

Similarly, Michael Scaperlanda began with the theological claim that “God poses a significant threat to [political] power because the wild faith of the martyr cannot be tamed by civil authority.” He argued that while religion is at odds with political authority, the tension has been resolved in the west by a democratic pluralism that draws deeply from the Christian sources to legitimate a robust pluralism. Scaperlanda favored religious diversity in public discourse that deepens democratic participation.

A final group of papers focused directly on human rights. Scott Pryor argued that Reformed theology contributed to the development of the idea of human rights. He developed an account of rights from within a Reformed theology, while acknowledging that “[h]armony on a single account for human rights is not feasible in this pluralistic age.” He believed that his account of rights has several advantages to secular accounts. Finally, Anthony Baker offered a trenchant counterpoint to the optimistic pretensions of rights discourse. Retelling the account of Frederick Douglass with his “master,” he wove a critique of classical liberalism’s claims to be protectors of individual rights and human dignity. He questioned the ability of Christian and secular liberalism as systems if thought to secure the protections of persons who are marginalized and disenfranchised.

These essays reflect the diversity of thinking about foundational issues in contemporary social thought. The themes of limits—of reason, faith, historicity, power, and violence—have purchase on contemporary readers because they point toward unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, tensions that mark the human condition.