RE-ENCHANTING LIBERALISM: ON THE PROSPECTS OF CIVIL RELIGION
Bruce Jennings

It is time to turn the page and open a new chapter in our collective autobiography—our story about the modernization, materialization, and secularization of the good human life out of which Enlightenment culture and political liberalism were born. We must rethink the relationship between religion and political power and come to see enchantment (imagination and wonder) and enlightenment (reason and control) not as antithetical but as complementary and mutually essential for a new ecological worldview.

The philosopher Charles Taylor has perhaps done more than anyone recently to think through this complexity and conundrum, as his magisterial recent work, *A Secular Age*, attests. In an earlier essay with the splendidly ambivalent title “A Catholic Modernity?” Taylor explored both the tensions inherent in what I am calling enlightenment and enchantment, and their essential, although not always perceived, interconnections.

At one level Taylor is concerned with the question of how the Roman Catholic faith can come to grips with the challenge of secular modernity. Yet on another level, he is equally concerned with the question whether the culture of modernity itself—with its rationalism, scientific worldview, technological power, individualism, tolerance, diversity, and separation of church and state—can offer a new kind of “catholic” (universal) faith. In other words, can we find a “civil religion”—a faith of universal rights and values grounded only on humanism, without any form of transcendent theism whatever—at least as far as the public realm is concerned?

Taylor’s answer is no. Modernity and secularization are insufficient: the faith of humanism is incomplete without something beyond man to worship. But at the same time, the faith (or is it an anti-faith?) of humanism is essential. Without secularism and modernity, Taylor argues, “the project of Christendom,” which he defines as “the attempt to marry the faith with a form of culture and a mode of society,” would never through its own unfolding have come to affirm universal human rights. He then poses the question in a most fruitful and daunting way:

The very fact that freedom has been well served by a situation in which no view is in charge—that it has therefore gained from the relative weakening of Christianity and from the absence of any other strong, transcendental outlook—can be seen to accredit the view that human life is better off without transcendent vision altogether. . . . The strong sense that continually arises that there is something more, that human life aims beyond itself, is stamped as an illusion and judged to be a dangerous illusion because the peaceful coexistence of people in freedom has already been identified as the fruit of waning transcendental visions. To a Christian this outlook seems stifling. Do we really have to pay this price—a kind of spiritual lobotomy—to enjoy modern freedom?

An interesting attempt to explore Taylor’s provocative question has been made by an intellectual historian, Mark Lilla. Lilla is a perceptive guide to the vicissitudes of grand theorizing in the twentieth century—the domain where metaphysics, political philosophy, and theology embrace, clash, and morph into one another. His book, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (2007), carries us through vexed intellectual and political landscapes with clarity and insight.2 (Lately, indeed, there has been a virtual intellectual explosion of new work on theology and politics, a perennial subject rendered more focused, raw, and edgy in recent years by both the rise of the religious right in American politics and the global recru-
We think that the Establishment Clause is written in the nature of things. It isn’t. It is written in ink that hadn’t even dried until after World War II. We think that increasing material wealth, economic growth, and the consumption-oriented life, not to mention the scientific and free-thinking education that goes with a rising standard of living, will inevitably convince people to regard belief and faith as superstition. They won’t.

The intellectual history Lilla narrates is essentially that of political philosophy from the sixteenth century on. The backdrop of Lilla’s narrative is the Latin middle ages. The political theology reflected in the medieval Roman Catholic social order and feudal kingship was not without its internal contention and strife, to be sure, but it was a consistent, logical system, rooted in Biblical Christianity, that functioned for a long time. Lilla drives home this point, lest we are facile enough to think that any society dominated by a hegemonic political theology of that kind is necessarily politically unstable and transitory. It was a simple, even rudimentary society from a technological and economic point of view, but politically it was not obviously or unarguably inferior to what has followed it for the past five hundred years. Ecologically speaking, it was a more benign and sustainable way of life than what has followed, perhaps because its religious worldview tended to suppress the rapacious scientific, technological and economic systems that the breakdown of this worldview unleashed. (The converse is no doubt also true: their rise led to its breakdown.)

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Lilla packs a remarkable amount of detail covering five centuries into his account, but he gives rather short shrift to a number of elements. What is glossed over is worth noting and may be as important as what he chooses to emphasize.

One factor is nationalism—the creation of the modern nation state and the formation of imagined communities that have followed in the wake of this remarkable phenomenon. Another element is the Renaissance and the stirrings of a new sensibility of individualism and skepticism in Western European culture. Finally, perhaps most important of all, is the rise of modern science, with its materialistic and mechanistic world picture. This not only made modern technology and capitalistic economies possible, it also began the erosion of the Christianized, Aristotelian understanding of reality. Modern science turned nature into a different reality—one that is a field of forces, not the mirror of the Logos nor the Mind of God. It is not meaningful per se, and it is not teleological or eschatological. It is not going anywhere, and it is neither good nor evil. Nature is to be used, not sounded for clues to deeper meanings.

The story proper of modern political thought begins with the Reformation, and the terrible religious warfare of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The pivot point of Lilla’s narrative is the secularization of modern political philosophy, what he calls the “Great Separation.” This is the separation of church and state, religion and politics; the cleaving of political theology, de-sacralizing the latter and privatizing the former.

Very interestingly, and I think justly, Lilla places Thomas Hobbes at the root of this transformation. Hobbes, horrified at the century of warfare that came before and at the continuation of it in the English civil war that was bringing his own world down around his ears, redefined sovereignty. It is not about God, it is about man. Not about what really is, but about what we can hope to know. The prime mover in human life is insecurity: “The passion to be reckoned on,”
Hobbes said, “is fear.” We turn to religion not because we can know it is the truth (we can’t), but because it promises security and peace. In the 1640s, it had not been making good on that promise. Indeed, he considered it a con game perpetrated by “ghostly men” who hoodwinked the people for their own advantage. What is that advantage, and what is the solution? Power. Consolidate political power, harness fear to productive, orderly ends, and the *novus ordo seclorum* will emerge. Political theology will be replaced by political science—that is to say, political geometry and mechanics. Church and state are separate.

To be sure, the Great Separation did not catch on right away. But gradually it has become the intellectual basis for liberal democracy, as Hobbes’s insights have been appropriated into mainstream liberalism, domesticated, as it were, by milder thinkers from James Madison to Robert Dahl and David Gauthier, among many others in contemporary philosophy and political science.

Within a century an equally powerful counterpoint to Hobbes had arisen. The principal counterpoint to Hobbes is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the strongest successor to Hobbes in the social contract tradition. Rousseau protests the transposition of religion into power for two reasons. First, because he has a different philosophical anthropology than Hobbes, a different theory of human nature. For Rousseau human beings need religion (a sense of the transcendent) because they are fundamentally progressive, developmental beings with a built-in logic of moral and spiritual growth (that can also spiral downward into degeneration), and not fearful beings, frozen in a petrified, universal Hobbesian present. The second reason is that without a sense of the transcendent and the moral and with only a desire for power and order, human existence will remain mean, nasty, and impoverished, if not altogether brutal and short.

Rousseau concluded that Hobbes’s solution would not work and that politics needs theology, although he in fact agreed with Hobbes and the Great Separation on the idea this must come through a “philosophical” political morality—a political philosophy of reason, not a political theology in the traditional sense. But how did Rousseau try to deal with the flaw that he identified in Hobbes? If the answer to the problem of political theology, with its threat to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, is not the Great Separation, then what is the correct answer? Rousseau’s answer may not be workable, but it cannot be ignored today either. His answer was his notion of civil religion and his concept of the general will (*volonté générale*).

Rousseau was a political theorist who took democracy seriously—one of the few, in fact—but he was not a majoritarian democrat. He explicitly differentiated the general will from what he called “the will of all” (*volonté de tous*). The general will is a normative concept, not a numerical or procedural one. It has to do with the spirit, the intention, the moral orientation of the will of a political community. It is subject to ongoing and interminable interpretation. Indeed, Rousseau’s conception of citizenship is precisely the deliberative activity of interpreting the general will. He is a hermeneutical democrat.

Rousseau did not adequately develop the implications of his ideas about the general will or civil reli-
of community and a deliberate, reasoned commitment
to serve and sustain the common good that one shares
with others in the political community. Like Hobbes
before him, Rousseau believed that there needs to be
a consolidated power or authority to hold the political
community together. But for Rousseau this consoli-
dated power, this Sovereign, does not rule on the ba-
sis of fear or calculated self-interest; it rules by moral
conviction and conscience. And for Rousseau the Sov-
e reign is not a person or even a body of persons: it is
not a king, a parliament, or a democratic assembly. It
is the moral spirit, the driving force of a political cul-
ture and a way of life.

Much of what keeps this commitment to the com-
mon good or general will alive is the activity of republi-
can citizenship itself—active, interested, engaged, car-
ing. But Rousseau (who was not an optimistic thinker)
did not think that the praxis of citizenship alone would
be enough. In the first place, he felt that it would be
necessary to sustain it with a domestic sphere based
on the influence of a strong matriarch, a “republican
mother,” whose family-centered role left her no time
and no place in the male-dominated public sphere, but
whose cultural function was deeply and fundamental-
ly political.

Moreover, he felt that it would have to be sus-
tained by the institution of a civil religion to which all
citizens (both citoyens and citoyennes) would have
to profess their belief, regardless of what their other,
private religious beliefs and practices might be. Rous-
seau nowhere assumes, much less argues, that private
religion will wither away. But he was keen to keep it
subordinate to a higher public religion, a religion of
commonality and the good of life.

Rousseau never wrote a theology for his civil re-
ligion. Indeed, rather like Robert Bellah in our own
time, he approaches it more from a sociological than
a theological point of view. This was not adventitious
on his part: theological elaboration of the civil religion
was precisely what he did not want, for that was what

The kind of political order within which human
beings can fulfill their moral and spiritual potential—
which Rousseau called a “republic”—requires a sense
led religion either to merge with political sovereignty (forming a theocracy) or to set up a kind of state within the state—a rival sovereignty that undermined the unity that Rousseau was seeking above all, in both the political community institutionally and in each citizen psychologically.

Rousseau changed the question from, “Why does religion have to be made private?” to “How can religion be made civic?” That is to say, his was a religion that offered people what they yearned for in terms of transcendent meaning and spiritual fulfillment, but it did so under the terms and conditions of what we would now call “human rights,” especially equality of civic respect and toleration.

From what little he says about it, one must infer that Rousseau’s conception of civil religion was exceedingly thin theologically. As citizens he asks us for only a few abstract beliefs, a sparse catechism, without commentary or theology to develop them. Why this odd requirement? Evidently so that each person inwardly could supply his or her own content. But that inward content has nothing to do with the public sphere where solidarity, not difference, must prevail. It is not the believer, but the intolerant believer that the political community cannot tolerate. Citizens may disagree with one another’s religious beliefs, but they cannot reject one another morally or ontologically—viewing others as non-persons—because of those beliefs. Rousseau was convinced that such intolerant sentiments and people must be excluded from the citizenry due to the grave danger they posed to it. Here is what he tells us about his conception of civil religion:

The dogmas of the civil religion ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, without explanations or commentaries. The existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, foresighted, and providential divinity; the afterlife; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and the laws. There are the positive dogmas. As for the negative ones, I limit them to a single one: intolerance. . . . one should tolerate all those [private or personal] religions that tolerate others insofar as their dogmas are in no way contrary to the duties of the citizen. But whoever dares to say there is no salvation outside of the church should be chased out of the State.5

This is indeed a religious law that can be recited while standing on one leg, and there is no commentary. But where does it come from? Not from visionaries or a priestly class. It is the distillate of a culture and a tradition; it comes from the moral learning of enduring ways of life, molded like a dynamic ecosystem across time and generations in response to changing landscapes and challenges. A civil religion is in constant dialogue with human becoming.

Rousseau tropes this as a personification; the source of civil religion is the figure he calls the “Lawgiver” (le Législateur). He has in mind the ancient examples of Moses, Lycurgus, and Numa. Rousseau’s Lawgiver does not found the political system, he founds
the culture, the manners and morals, upon which the ideal political system will later depend for its proper functioning and sustainability. The Lawgiver founds the implicit values upon which a community of human self-realization can be founded; a civil religion does not merely or even primarily codify those values so much as it provides a form of practice that can embody those values in the lives of the citizenry. Having no power in his own right, the Lawgiver forms the shape that political power will take.

This brings us to Lilla’s concluding thoughts. He underscores how unusual and even weird the Great Separation of the liberal democratic West is in the world today. He sees in the United States the only example where an energetic and pervasive religious sensibility and culture has flourished alongside an equally deep commitment to the Great Separation. In a companion essay to The Stillborn God, entitled “The Politics of God,” he writes, “it is only thanks to a strong constitutional structure and various lucky breaks that political theology has never seriously challenged the basic legitimacy of our institutions. Americans have potentially explosive religious differences . . . yet they generally settle them within the bounds of the Constitution. It’s a miracle.”

For the most part liberalism has chosen to protect people from evil and harm rather than to make them good. And yet, we know that liberalism is just wrong in its atomistic individualism and in its belief that society can be a morally neutral space—that it can avoid, in one way or another, the moral transformation of it members. There is something skewed about the notion that we must not engage in ontological discourse in the face of diverse and incommensurable fundamental beliefs, or that there is no civic possibility for any consensus about how we ought to live morally—how we ought to treat one another and non-human nature. We need a civic religion of the common good, of the land, and of rights and the law.

In the United States, our public religious discourse is remarkably skewed in favor of socially and economically conservative voices, but then our public secular discourse is skewed in that direction, too. However, the national media culture may give one a mistaken impression about the moral and spiritual pulse of America. Something much more akin to Rousseau’s civil religion—a theology of caring, love, social justice, and human rights—is articulated within houses of worship every week, as well. And this Word, which does not lobotomize the spirit, is also living outside the overtly religious venues of our civil society, especially in grassroots organizations that derive from the combined religious and social movements of our time, advocating for civil rights and justice for the underserved and the disenfranchised, and stewardship and conservation for the natural world.

The voices that understand how to combine enchantment and enlightenment—a sense of the sacred and the transcendent with democracy, tolerance, diversity, and personal liberty—should be more prominent in the public square.

Civil religion did not die with Rousseau. It has lived a back-channel existence, flowing like an underground stream in our political culture. One of its core tenets is our blindness toward and neglect of creation. Both politics and religion are social phenomena in the sense
that they create imagined worlds and meaningful symbolic structures for looking upward and outward in the world of human beings. Religious disputes about the rules of human living are remarkably inattentive to the natural world where that living takes place. We are so concerned about what the Creator wants us to do, we forget about the Creation, which is both the setting and the precondition for the possibility of our imaginary, meaning-making, and cultural doings.

Can it be that the vertical dimension of being is bisected so that human connections downward, with the earth, have no bearing on our relationships upward, with the divine? Can it also be that they have no bearing on our relationships sideways, with our fellow human beings—our connections of justice, caring, and community?

I do not believe that. The arm of our moral and spiritual compass is not bisected but continuous. History seems to teach that politics can be infinitely plastic and malleable. Political theology can bend politics to its will—at great human and moral cost perhaps, but morality never seems to say, “Enough.” Nature can and does say, “Enough.” Unlike politics and human rights, ecosystems can only be abused up to a certain point. Of course, individual human beings die of torture, neglect, and mistreatment, and whole peoples can be extinguished by genocidal violence. But it seems that no form of moral pollution is fundamentally incompatible with human life and human survival as such. In extreme cases, environmental pollution and ecosystemic degradation are. When we degrade them, we undermine the very foundation of our biological existence.

Rousseau’s notion of a flourishing politics, ethics, and religion most definitely included the downward vertical connection. If we cannot become fully human in the absence of a right relation to the sacred and a just relation to our fellow humans, then neither can we do so in the absence of a caring, respecting, beautiful relationship with nature around us. So important was this to Rousseau that he sometimes got carried away and speculated rather wildly about what kinds of moral cultures were possible in various natural landscapes and surroundings. The tropics did not fare well in his theories, and neither did cities. Swiss mountain valleys were his cup of tea. But his geographical determinism aside, he made an important point. His civil religion was also a natural religion. If God and politics were to be reconciled, so, too, must nature and culture be.

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NOTES

4 Rousseau filled in such content in his book on education, Emile, in a section called “The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar.” This remarkable text anticipated many elements of romanticism and transcendentalism in thinkers such as Goethe, Emerson, and Whitman. Theologically, it denied the doctrine of original sin and got Rousseau into deep trouble both in Catholic France and Calvinist Geneva.
5 J.-J. Rousseau, Of The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right (1762), bk. IV, ch. Vi.