

## Book Reviews

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Francis Oakley, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism: Kingship and the Divine in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (to 1050)*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. 320. \$38.00 cloth (ISBN 978-0-300-15538-9).

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I wish I could recommend this book. I admire its author greatly. I share his distaste for the hyper-skepticism of much revisionist historiography. And I support his two overarching goals: first, to correct a tendency by modern political theorists to ignore medieval political discourse as irrelevant because it is not secular; second, to write a history of medieval political thought that is informed by issues in present-day political theory. Nevertheless, not only can I not recommend the book, I worry that it is dangerous, for I fear that Oakley's intended audience of non-specialists will take his reputation, his tone of thoughtful expertise, and his familiar grand narrative at face value, and decades of fine scholarship will be undone. As the first of a projected three-volume study, the book traces ideas about monarchy and political society from Mesopotamia to the eve of the Gregorian Reform. The basic lineaments of Oakley's story are clearly set forth. Sacral kingship is one of the oldest and most durable forms of social organization. Against its *longue durée*, the kind of Greek democracy and Roman republicanism that so attract modern political theorists were mere interludes, old notions of sacral kingship quickly reestablishing themselves, somewhat transformed, with Hellenistic and Persian monarchies and the Roman Empire. True, the Old Testament shows discomfort with sacred kings and tends to reserve sacred kingship for God alone, a tendency that was reinforced under the Hasmoneans. Heirs to this tradition, New Testament authors, while voicing support for earthly rulers, still left true kingship to God. Later still, Augustine's doctrine of the Two Cities evacuated almost all immanent sacredness from earthly political institutions, even the visible church. Yet these tendencies toward the construction of earthly kingship as "secular" were repeatedly countered by even more powerful tendencies to re-inject sacredness into kingship and imperial authority. This was true of post-apostolic ecclesiastical writers such as Origen and Tertullian, who found a way to give the Roman Empire an essential role in providential history. But it was especially true of Eusebius (whose

whole-hearted Christianization of the imperial office Oakley rightly finds as unprecedented as it was important) and, in the West, of Visigothic and Frankish kings and bishops, culminating in the Christianized empire of Charlemagne and continuing on to the Ottonians and Salians, with whom old sacral kingship was still visible in the clericalization of the emperors. What made Western political thought distinctive in this period therefore did not come from any frontal assaults on sacral kingship. It came from other sources that tended to restrict tendencies to absolutism by Western rulers. Limitations came, that is, from the papacy and its claims to a moral authority separate from and superior to that of kings (although in the process, the papacy ended up reconstituting old sacral monarchy to its own benefit). More important, limitations came from “feudalism,” that is, the ability of vassals to demand that kings respect their own rights and the increasing construction of the feudal bond in terms of mutual rights and obligations that bound both rulers and their vassals.

As informed readers can tell, this is really a very old grand narrative, and Oakley’s footnotes show its age: despite passing nods to Janet Nelson and Eric Goldberg, most prominent are Fritz Kern, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, F.-L. Ganshof, Otto Höfler, Walter Schlesinger, Percy Schramm, Ernst Kantorowicz, Henri d’Arquillière, George Williams, Lynn White, Jr., Raoul Van Caenegem, Walter Ullmann, and even the scholars of the Cambridge myth-and-ritual school. By relying on such a dated bibliography, Oakley’s accounts of many events and institutions are unusable, *particularly* in the crucial chapters on the early medieval west. It would be hard to find many historians who can accept straightforwardly his notion of “Germanic sacral kingship,” still less his insistence on its lineal continuity with later kingship. His brief narrative of the Carolingian take-over of 751 would now be recognized as wrong in both details and interpretation (including his comparison of the cart in which the Merovingians travelled to the one that transported the “Germanic fertility goddess” Nerthus). When he writes that his account of “feudalism” is familiar from our “textbooks,” he unwittingly points to the problem: based largely on Joseph Strayer, it shows no deep familiarity with either primary or recent secondary sources and even repeats old clichés about regression into a self-sufficient manorial economy in which money played no role. His earlier discussion of New Testament attitudes toward political authority is surprisingly brief and again seems to take little account of recent discoveries, notably the complex agendas that went into not just the New Testament as a whole but even its individual books. If I largely agree with Oakley’s account of Augustine’s political thought, including its internal tensions, I cannot see why he presents it as something of a discovery: it is very basic to most recent understandings of Augustine.

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