

SACRED RULERSHIP

Francis Oakley: *Empty Bottles of Gentilism: Kingship and the Divine in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (to 1050)*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 306. \$38.00.)

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When visitors to Washington, DC, come to the Lincoln Memorial, they confront a colossal human figure, gazing down at them with an expression of a benevolent God. The tomblike memorial that surrounds him refers to itself as a “temple” in which the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined.

That overtly christological trappings adhere to a democratically elected leader testifies to the enduring power of sacral kingship, the most common form of government throughout time. The staying power of sacral kingship is the central point that Francis Oakley makes (minus the Lincoln example) in his most recent book, *Empty Bottles of Gentilism: Kingship and the Divine in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (to 1050)*. Although few would dispute this observation, more might chafe at Oakley’s subsequent claim: that sacral kingship has provided the ideological roots of the modern secular state. To rephrase this in more immediate terms, the current Obama administration owes more to divine monarchical governance than it does to the era of the Greek polis, which, like the Roman republic, was “a fleeting episode, a beleaguered island lapped by the waves of an engulfing monarchical sea” (3).

The first of a projected three-volume series, *Empty Bottles* is both sweeping and ambitious, and I found it useful for thinking through historic notions of kingship and its relationship to other models of government. Oakley’s background in papal history—*Council over Pope?* (Herder and Herder, 1969), *The Conciliarist Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2003), and *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1979 and 1985), among others—makes him an ideal scholar to examine the notions of divinity that informed the ideology of Western kingship, and in particular kingship in the Middle Ages. That Oakley has already taken up this subject twice before—first in a lecture “Kingship and the Gods: The Western Apostasy” (University of St. Thomas, 1968) and then in *Kingship: The Politics of Enchantment* (Blackwell, 2006)—might cause some brows to be raised were it not for the expansion of his claims. It is one thing to argue for the universality of sacral kingship; it is quite another to connect it to democracy.

Oakley begins *Empty Bottles* in the second millennium BCE, but his argument gains its true momentum in the third chapter, titled “Abrahamic Departures.” Here, his narrative of sacral kingship starts in earnest, becoming at once focused and powerful. Citing the scholarship of mid- and late-twentieth-century scholars, Oakley considers the way that earlier

“cultic” rituals that link kingship with the divine undergirded Hebrew notions of kingship. Oakley then pushes back against these formulations to show the ways that “attitudes and ideas absorbed from the surrounding cultures could gradually be transmuted” (48). In short, the notion of one, omnipotent God inevitably limited the amount of sacrality that could adhere to an Israelite king. This building up of God (as a force) ultimately led to a reduction in kingly power, and this in turn had a desacralizing effect on the ruler and also on the political institutions necessary for the functioning of a political society. Thus Saul, while anointed by God to rule over his people, had also been installed in his office so that the Israelites could be “like other nations” (51).

Oakley follows this ambivalence about sacred kingship into the Christian Bible, where the desacralizing process gained momentum. The tendency of Christians to cordon off the spiritual from the political emerges most clearly in Jesus’s seemingly straightforward admonition to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Yet as Oakley reminds us, this tendency to separate the political from the spiritual was not wholesale, and in other places Christian dogma found ways to accommodate sacred kingship. For a writer such as Luke, who emphasizes “the coincidence of the birth of Christ with the reign of the first emperor, Caesar Augustus” (62), kingship still contained the impress of divine authority.

In the second part of *Empty Bottles*, Oakley’s argument really takes off. Looking at sacral kingship in Greek and Latin Christendom, Oakley moves carefully through Near Eastern writers such as Philo Judaeus (30 BCE–40 CE) and Eusebius (260/70–339), the first author of a “clearly stated . . . political philosophy of the Christian Empire” (89). Eusebius, a student of Origen, authored a *Life of Constantine* and *In Praise of Constantine*, both of which try to define an ideology of kingship. In both volumes Eusebius promoted “a correlation between monotheism and monarchy,” seeing human kingship (and in particular Constantine’s rule) as a continuation of God’s sovereignty (90). While the Eusebian legacy endured in the Greek and Russian East, it foundered in the Latin West. Nonetheless, the Eusebian notion of divine monarchy continued, albeit in changed form, through the writings of a “mature” (Oakley’s word) Augustine, whose glancing references to the ideal Christian emperor as “essential ministerial” became a touchstone for later scholars like Alcuin, who used it to elevate Charlemagne to a sacred status.

In *Empty Bottle’s* final three chapters, Oakley turns from Greco-Roman antiquity to “the early medieval West,” where he begins to look at shifting notions of sacred monarchy in the Germanic kingdoms that laid the groundwork for later European governmental models. Of particular interest is his analysis of feudalism, a system of governance that both elevated the king’s status and at the same time bound the ruler to his lords. While scholars have already noted the ways medieval, theocentric theories of kingship anticipate early modern, divine-right absolutism, fewer have charted the ways sacral kingship

contained the seeds “destined to germinate in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries into those institutional arrangements for constitutional restraint upon the abuse of executive power” (176). At the same time, sacral kingship found a new home among the late medieval popes, who, having first criticized lay rulers’ claims to the divine, “went on themselves to assume the role of fully fledged sacral monarchs in their own right” (222). It is this two-pronged shift—the desacralization of the royal courts and the concomitant sacralization of the pope—that Oakley will follow into his next volume.

For all its strengths, the book does have some weaknesses, the first of which is its chronological and geographical sweep. Oakley opens *Empty Bottles* by looking at early civilizations around the globe. Although this comparative impulse allows him to place Western monarchy in a global context, Oakley’s desire to stretch so far afield feels unnecessary. Asides on the Nigerian priest-king or references to the “geologic deposits of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist patterns of thought” (19) do not deepen his analysis of the Greek polis and Roman senate; they detract from it.

The second weakness lies in the way Oakley chooses to situate his argument. In his prologue Oakley laments the fact that “we are still reminded that Christianity made ‘purely political thought impossible’” (ix–x). But by “still reminding,” Oakley means scholars writing in 1932, 1937, 1962, 1966, and 1967. Only one person in his footnote (Canning, 1996) could legitimately be said to fall into the “still reminding camp,” and even this is stretching it. Oakley does not need such straw-man attacks to motivate such a probing study.

These quibbles aside, there is much to value in *Empty Bottles*, and I eagerly await the next installment in Oakley’s series.

–Jenny Adams

END TIMES

John R. Hall: *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*. (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2009. Pp. 285. \$24.95.)

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In a sweeping way throughout *Apocalypse*, the sociologist John R. Hall (University of California at Davis) covers the range of the apocalyptic imaginary from its onset in Zoroastrian Persia and ancient Israel through the incipency of Christianity, the emergence of Islam, medieval Europe, and the early modern centuries to the totalitarian regimes of terror in the twentieth century, and the new manifestations of apocalyptic end times in the Islamic