The Task of Liberal Theory after September 11

By J. Judd Owen

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, presented liberal societies with grave practical challenges. Yet, they also exposed the single most profound theoretical challenge since liberalism's origins: the challenge of illiberal revealed theology. Today's challenge is, in fact, a variety of liberal theory's original antagonist. The radical renewal of this old challenge, in a form markedly different from that which the early liberal theorists faced, requires fresh consideration from liberal theorists today.

The perennial root of the challenge is this: Whatever place liberalism may reserve for religion, it does not and cannot cede authority over political questions to alleged divine command or revelation. Here is the central and irreducible difference between liberalism and radical Islam. According to Sayyid Qutb, one of the movement's intellectual leaders, radical Islam sees the basis of Western society as "opposition to God's rule over the earth and to the major characteristic of the Divinity, namely sovereignty," which, instead, is invested in human beings.[1] By what right, by what arguments or approach, can liberalism deny the claims of such sovereignty? Would not divine command, if genuine, claim an authority far superior to the grounds claimed by liberals for their own institutions, whether the will of the people, moral "intuition," or even reason?

Prior to September 11, 2001, these were questions that we political theorists may have convinced ourselves had long been definitively settled by philosophy or science, or at least been made irrelevant by history. Whatever controversy Francis Fukuyama may have ignited by announcing the "end of history" and the final victory of Western liberal capitalism, wouldn't most have agreed (had the question ever been raised) at least that

illiberal revealed theology was out of the historical running? Liberalism's struggles over the last century have instead been with other distinctly modern (and therefore essentially secular) ideologies: communism and fascism. In the confrontation with radical Islam, however, the core philosophical and theological issues that preoccupied the early liberal philosophers are revitalized for us.[2] We are confronted with what now appears to be a perennial problem for liberal theory (to say nothing of political science as a whole), albeit in a distinctive form worthy of fresh consideration.[3] The new version of this antagonism ought to preoccupy liberal theorists today every bit as much as the older version preoccupied the early liberal philosophers.

It is not that liberal theorists have altogether ignored important questions posed by the continued presence of fundamentalist and "old-style" religion within liberal society—questions such as abortion; the teaching of creationism in public schools; weighing the rights of religious organizations against the rights of individuals; and, more generally, the accommodation of religion. But these questions have tended to arise fully within the framework of liberal principles. The very language of "accommodation" supposes the political (if not complete) subordination of religion to liberal constitutionalism, and it is precisely this belief that Qutb rejects in the statement quoted above. In its fullest sense, illiberal revealed theology contests liberal constitutionalism at its very foundations. It is a challenge that cannot be met by accommodation or by otherwise finding a place *within* liberal constitutionalism, but only by a direct engagement with the revealed theology that underlies the political challenge. This challenge, in other words, requires grappling with foundational theological questions such as: What is the relation between divine law and civil law? Do human beings need revelation (divine law) for political guidance or can human guidance suffice? What *is* revelation? And what is its relation to human reason? Political theory cannot ultimately insulate itself from political theology.[4] Nor must liberals allow themselves either to ignore such a foundational challenge or to reply with a dogmatic (and hence illiberal) dismissal.

Let me be clear: In pointing to September 11, I do not mean to place the theoretical focus on the terrorism. Nor do I mean to imply an inherent connection between terrorism and illiberal revealed theology. The question of illiberal revealed theology is at once much broader and much narrower than

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the question of religious terrorism. The main issue I wish to raise does not concern the violence of the terrorists, but rather the most radical ground of their opposition to liberal constitutionalism, ground shared by a far greater number than the terrorists themselves—a number that includes peaceful and thoughtful believers far removed from the terrorists. Terrorist violence is a sign, to be sure, of how grave and earnest that opposition can be, and it serves to awaken us to a much broader political phenomenon that is too widespread to be dismissed as anomalous.

What, speaking broadly, is "illiberal revealed theology"? We must begin with no easy task, namely, to clarify what we mean by "illiberal" and "revealed." Illiberal theology does not accept basic liberal principles of government. It either rejects the separation of church and state in favor of theocracy—as in Iran, early colonial Massachusetts, and the ancient Hebrew nation under Mosaic law—or it emphatically subordinates temporal political concerns to religious ones—as was typically maintained by the medieval Christian church. In either case, there is a willingness or duty to foster, protect, and otherwise politically support orthodoxy. This does not necessarily mean a rigid intolerance, but it does mean that toleration is of secondary importance at best. This also typically involves a far greater concern with the notion of orthodoxy—literally, "correct opinion"—and therefore such things as heresy, apostasy, schism, infidelity, and heterodox beliefs and practices.

At the core of such orthodoxy is revelation (hence, illiberal revealed theology). The precise meaning of the term "revelation" is difficult to determine, but let us tentatively define it as extraordinary or supernatural communication of God to human beings, most evident in, although perhaps not limited to, prophecy. According to John Locke, "Faith . . . is the assent to any Proposition, not . . . made out by the Deduction of Reason; but upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering Truths to Men we call Revelation."[5] The challenge posed to liberal constitutionalism, therefore, is rooted in claims whose source transcends that of liberalism's claims for its principles.

The challenge posed by revealed theology (whether illiberal or not) cannot be settled within liberal constitutionalism itself, i.e., while taking the validity of liberal constitutionalism for granted. To illustrate this point, consider the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Reynolds v. U.S.*, in which the Court confronted a far less radical challenge from Mormon revealed theology to a federal ban on polygamy. In *Reynolds,* the Court acknowledged the defendant's claim that God had commanded the practice of polygamy for Mormons in scripture and through direct revelation to Joseph Smith, and that the divine sanction for disobedience according to that revelation was damnation. Yet, the Court argued, such claims of divine command could not be respected by the U.S. Constitution. The principal reason given by the Court was that each religion would then become a law unto itself, rendering liberal democratic law impotent. To defer to (alleged) divine command, said the Court, "would be to make the professed doctrines of religious belief superior to the law of the land"; and "govern-

ment [i.e. liberal constitutional government] could only exist in name under such circumstances." The successful functioning of liberal constitutionalism requires that it not respect any (claim to) divine command as higher than itself.[6]

This argument is no doubt valid, as far as it goes; but it takes for granted that liberal constitutionalism has a higher political claim than (alleged) divine command. The Court does not address the question of the decision's true basis—i.e. those arguments, whatever they may be, that permit it to set aside (alleged) divine command. And it would seem that it could *not* address this question within the confines of liberal constitutional law. The Court has repeatedly asserted that it will not take up theological questions, a requirement that seems to be imposed upon it by the principle of separation of church and state. But one could not establish the priority of liberal constitutionalism over (alleged) divine command without taking up theological questions, including that of revealed theology. It is therefore necessary to return to the political philosophers that laid the foundations of liberal constitutionalism for help in framing our question.

The turn to the early liberal theorists is made necessary, moreover, by the neglect of our question by recent liberal theory. In fact, it is unclear whether our leading schools of liberal thought would be in a good position to take up the challenge if called upon. The most prominent school of liberal theory today stems from John Rawls's "political liberalism." Critics have argued that religion has no place in political liberalism, a charge that Rawls and his defenders have rebutted. Whatever the case may be, Rawls has explicitly denied that his doctrine does or can have anything to say to those who do not already accept liberal political principles as somehow "intuitive." As for the question of revelation, "political liberalism" is intended to be "political, not metaphysical," meaning that it will not even broach such a question.[7] Political liberalism, therefore, implicitly denies that the "metaphysical" (including the theological, and therefore revelation) is or can be political. Yet, it is precisely the claim of illiberal revealed theology that the political is rooted in theology or revelation, in "metaphysics." By its own self-understanding, political liberalism fails to meet the challenge.

If we seek an alternative school of contemporary liberal theory, we are likely to find far greater hostility to "metaphysics" among the more multifarious (and by no means exclusively liberal) antifoundationalists. The antifoundationalists are profoundly skeptical of human understanding, particularly if allegedly scientific or rational. All human belief is said to be without solid foundation. For reasons that would divert us to develop here, the hostility to metaphysics among the antifoundationalists is not, in every case, simply antitheological. It does, however, entail a denial of the possibility of theoretical access to the foundational philosophical and theological issues in question. And in the case of our leading antifoundationalist liberal theorist, Richard Rorty, our question is dismissed with a wave of the hand. Rorty (writing in support of Rawls) describes religious opponents of liberal democracy as "crazy," with "the limits to sanity [being] set by what *we* can take seriously."[8]

In their avoidance of illiberal revealed theology, political liberalism and liberal antifoundationalism are indicative of contemporary political thought in general. This avoidance serves to highlight the early liberal theorists' preoccupation with revealed theology. In considering liberalism's founding documents, we see an often painstaking grappling with revealed religion in, for example, half of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan;* more than three-quarters of Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise;* Pierre Bayle's *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet;* and Locke's *First Treatise, Letter Concerning Toleration,* and *Reasonableness of Christianity.*[9] One sign of the change in liberal theory is that, with the exception of Locke's *Letter,* these books and passages are rarely studied or taught today. What was the *central* question for them—as both the practical and theoretical priority—is no longer, it seems, a question for us.

What, then, are liberal theorists to do in approaching this new form of an old issue? I make three suggestions. First, since there are crucial differences between Islam and Christianity, or more specifically, contemporary Islam and Christianity at the beginning of the modern era, we must assess those differences. There is, of course, already a substantial and useful scholarly literature in comparative religion, including comparative "fundamentalisms."[10] We should build on that literature with a view to assessing the differences between our situation with respect to radical Islam today and the situation of the early liberals with respect to Christianity in their day.

A few critical differences immediately come to mind. First, the liberals of the Enlightenment sought to transform the religious culture of their own societies. For Western liberals today, radical Islam finds its home in distant lands. Even if we did find in early liberal theory a model worth imitating (a question I mean to leave open), when we consider the prospect of a religio-cultural transformation today comparable to the one wrought by the Enlightenment, we are considering foreign societies. This fact raises the question of our right, and perhaps more decisively of our ability, to effect any such transformation.[11] Yet let me emphasize, mine is not, in the first place, a call to action (such as affecting a cultural transformation), but rather to an adequate theoretical understanding of our own situation in liberal society.

A second potentially crucial difference is that Christian theology seems to allow for a distinction between the secular-political and the religious (or for the "privatization" of religion) more readily than Islamic theology seems to do. The liberal doctrine of the separation of church and state builds on (or, rather, transforms) a traditional, preliberal Christian distinction between the sacred and the profane, and between temporal and spiritual authority.[12] In the words of Hamid Enayat, in contrast, there is an "inherent link between Islam as a comprehensive scheme for ordering human life, and politics as an indispensable instrument to secure universal compliance with

that scheme."[13] The heart of Islam, unlike Christianity, is law—divine law (*shari'ah*). Separation of church and state appears, prima facie at any rate, more theologically plausible than separation of mosque and state.[14]

Third, today's radical Islam finds itself facing an already far advanced and increasingly global modernity. Its spokesmen hold it up as the only true alternative, being rooted in Allah's revelation, to a failed and morally bankrupt western world; the failure of modernity in all of its permutations shows that human beings *need* divine guidance.[15] It has even been argued that radical Islam, like all contemporary "fundamentalisms," is an essentially modern phenomenon; or, to be more precise, *anti*modern or reactionary—in any case, not essentially premodern, as was the Christianity faced by the Enlightenment.

This is a prominent view among scholars of "fundamentalism." The deep antimodern thrust of radical Islam (and other fundamentalisms) is manifest. Yet I wish to raise an objection to the thesis that labels fundamentalisms as essentially modern phenomena. This view contends that religious fundamentalism's true basis lies in its reaction against modernity, and is therefore negative. The positive form that the reaction takes—whether Islamic fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, or even fascism—is incidental. It implies, therefore, that the basis of fundamentalism is not genuinely religious. But by insisting that fundamentalism be understood only within the modern horizon, this view risks underestimating the radicalness of the challenge to modernity—as if modernity were not radically controversial, but could be rejected only in a willful denial. And insofar as it denies a genuine religious basis, it also denies the claimed basis in revelation, which therefore never has to be addressed. The really hard question, which forces one outside the modern horizon, is avoided. Be that as it may, fundamentalism's antimodern thrust fails to prove that it is not, at least in the most important respects, akin to premodern religion. By what right does one assert that premodern illiberal revealed theology would not reject modernity in a manner akin to today's fundamentalists?

My second suggestion is that Western political theorists investigate Islamic political thought directly, engaging in what Roxanne Euben calls comparative political theory.[16] Islamic political thought, both past and present, is rich and complex, revealing in its similarities to, as well as in its differences from, the West's own complex tradition. Indeed, much of the foundational theological engagement between modernity or rationalism and revealed theology is taking place today within Islamic political thought. Questions that were once basic to Western political thought—such as reason versus revelation—retain their vitality in Islamic political thought.

My third suggestion for liberal theorists is, as I have already indicated, that a fresh reconsideration of the West's own early liberal philosophy on the question of revealed religion is called

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for. Although it was not Islam, but Christianity and Christian society that were the primary concern of the early liberals (except for Spinoza, who was largely concerned also with Judaism), their concerns were not so limited, but extended to revealed religion as such, including therefore, in principle, Islam.[17] And the liberal political alternatives they presented were understood to be founded on human nature, and hence possible anywhere, including in non-Christian societies. The early liberal philosophers viewed the problem posed by illiberal Christianity in a manner similar to the way many in the West now view the problem of radical Islam; and a nearly intractable problem it may well have appeared. To the mind of these philosophers, much of Christianity (although not only Christianity) was characterized by a politically volatile fanaticism that could not be addressed by ordinary political or legal means. For whatever sanctions the law could impose, they were met by a belief in far greater, divine sanctions, a belief rooted in the belief in revelation.[18] The source of the problem was seen to be a matter of belief, and the political solution had, therefore, to take place on a plane more basic than that of political institutions or law—the political solution had to take place, they supposed, on the plane of the beliefs in question. And so they sought to dampen religious zeal through what has become known as the Enlightenment, that ambitious project of religious, cultural, and political transformation to whom we in the West are heirs. Such was the political approach that, however related, must be distinguished from the theoretical approach proper, i.e., the philosophical answer to illiberal revealed theology. Can that answer, which grounds the political project, be proved solid? If so, how can we make clear its relevance to our circumstances? Or if the Enlightenment answer is flawed, where precisely does it fail? Is it an insuperable failure? Or are there other avenues to a solution?

The differences between Islamic society and Christian society provide one obstacle to a simple return to Enlightenment liberalism. Yet, we confront a more fundamental reason that such a return is problematic. The theoretical underpinnings of Enlightenment liberalism are widely thought to have been discredited, even for Western heirs of their project. Is not the more fundamental difference between our situation and that of early liberalism the fact that the Enlightenment's certainty that it had discovered the true political science, and even that a true political science is possible, has become radically questionable? This is no slight difficulty: Is it possible to meet the theoretical challenge of illiberal revealed theology? The problem is exacerbated or underscored by the unease or dissatisfaction with liberal modernity felt by many modern liberals themselves. If modernity has failed to solve the *political* problem posed by illiberal revealed theology, and if there is then reason to doubt that a human solution is available, the claimed necessity of depending on revelation for political guidance becomes harder to intelligently dismiss. We seem to have returned, on the most basic level, to the question of human versus divine guidance. Does not the "postmodern" critique of the Enlightenment willy-nilly reopen the door to illiberal revealed theology? We find that modern liberal theory faces a grave crisis originating from within, which may tempt one to view the challenge from without with dismay.

Yet, there are two reasons not to be dismayed yet. First, there is cause to believe that at least the most common grounds for rejecting Enlightenment liberal philosophy are based on a misunderstanding or caricature. Enlightenment liberal philosophy is a more worthy opponent than many of its critics suppose. According to a popular critique, an overconfident Enlightenment took for granted the capacity of unaided human reason to determine fundamental truths; whereas late or postmodernity is characterized by an acute awareness of the questionableness of all human understanding and, especially, human reason. Whatever merits this critique may have, it downplays, if not ignores, the fact that Enlightenment philosophy engaged in foundational philosophy, not because it ignored the questionableness of rationalism, but, on the contrary, owing precisely to an awareness that the claims of rationalism are radically controversial and in need of a foundational justification. The Enlightenment philosophers were well aware, moreover, that claims of rationalism are controversial above all *vis-à-vis* revealed theology. This is not yet, of course, to say that the Enlightenment's rationalist self-defense succeeded; and certainly its critics are justified in making sure that we do not take that success for granted (such, indeed, is one of the principal motivations for this essay). Yet one sign that many of the Enlightenment's critics fail to get to the bottom of things is their tacit acceptance of the Enlightenment's success in settling the question of illiberal revealed theology—the fact that for them too our question has not been reopened.[19]

A second reason not to be dismayed: Our use of the term "the Enlightenment" (complete with capitalization) may cause us to neglect the fact that there is more than one model of enlightenment to which we might turn for guidance. Indeed, we find essentially premodern alternatives within Islam's own tradition (and there are Christian and Jewish parallels)—what could be called "theistic enlightenment"—alternatives that took the question of illiberal revealed theology at least as seriously as the modern enlightenment did. The Islamic (unmodern) enlightenment includes such powerful thinkers as Avicenna; Averroes; Avempace; Ibn Tufayl; and, above all, the acknowledged first philosopher of Islam, Abu al-Nasr al-Farabi. However distant their writings may appear to the modern Western reader, the continuing vitality of those writings becomes evident in the context of the perennial theological-political questions confronting us today—above all in their encounter with revealed theology and negotiation of the competing claims of human and divine political guidance. Wherever we may choose to begin assessing our situation, there is much work to be done.

Notes

1   Qutb 2003, 10.
2   The question becomes all the more urgent if, as some scholars suggest, radical Islam is only one manifestation of a broader, trans-religious phenomenon that crosses into Western liberal societies. See Kepel 1994 and

Lawrence 1989. Cf. Marty and Appleby 1993; Marty and Appleby 1995.

3 Roxanne Euben writes of the Western view of Islamic fundamentalism: "We are taken off guard, alarmed and frightened as if confronted by a ghost that should not be. Old specters haunt modern politics in new guises." Euben 1999, 6–7.

4 There are many possible guides on the question, more broadly, of the state of modern political philosophy vis-à-vis political theology. See, for example, Löwith 1957, Blumenberg 1985, Strauss 1953, MacIntyre 1988, and Taylor 1989. For recent attempts to grapple directly with illiberal revealed theology from two rather different perspectives, see Euben 1999 and Pangle 2003.

5 Locke 1975, ch. 18, § 2.

6 Article VI of the U.S. Constitution states: "This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land."

7 Rawls 1985; cf. Rawls 1996, xxxix–xlvii, 150–4; Owen 2001, chapter 5.

8 Rorty 1991, 188. For Rorty's approach to religion within liberal society, see Rorty 1994 as well as his modest "backpedaling" in Rorty 2003. Cf. Owen 2001, chapters 2–4.

9 Among Locke's works, we could add *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke states that the *Essay* was written following a discussion among friends "on a subject very remote" from that of the *Essay*. The *Essay* was an attempt to follow a different course in seeking "a resolution of those doubts which perplexed us." A friend who was present notes that the discussion was about "the principles of morality and revealed religion." Locke 1975, 7, xix.

10 See in particular Marty and Appleby 1993; Marty and Appleby 1995.

11 The situation is obviously different for liberal thinkers within Islam. On the question of liberalizing Islam, see Kurzman 1998; Soroush 2000; Dalacoura 1998; An-Na'im 1990; Moussalli 2003; Sachedina 2001. Cf. Martin et al. 1997.

12 This is not to say that Christianity is *necessarily* amenable to liberal separation and privatization. As the history of Christian political doctrine demonstrates, the political implications of Christian theology are deeply controversial. Even limiting ourselves to the history of the political theology of American Christianity, we see interpretations that range from John Cotton's union of the temporal and spiritual authority (or subordination of the temporal to the spiritual) to Isaac Backus's radical separation of them.

13 Enayat 1982, 1.

14 See, however, Soroush 2000.

15 Qutb 2003.

16 Euben 1999.

17 Hobbes 1994; Spinoza 2001; Montesquieu 1999.

18 Hobbes states: "The maintenance of civil society depending on justice, and justice on the power of life and death (and other less rewards and punishments) residing in them that have the sovereignty of the commonwealth, it is impossible for a commonwealth to stand where any other than the sovereign hath a power of giving greater rewards than life, and of inflicting greater punishments than death . . . eternal life is a greater reward than life present; and eternal torment a greater punishment than the death of nature." Hobbes 1994, XXXVIII, 1; cf. Hobbes 1983, VI, 11.

19 If we cannot take for granted the success of Enlightenment rationalism as a whole, we cannot take for granted its success in addressing illiberal revealed theology. For an extended treatment of this issue, see Owen 2001.

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