The Wrong Notion of Who and What Is God:  
At the Core of Modern Political Turmoil  
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This was one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic” columns that appeared during 2014 in Crisismagazine.com and The Wanderer and at his blog site (skrason.wordpress.com). He argues that the common strain running through such political developments as the rise of Islamism, modern political ideologies, and contemporary leftism is the fact that, one way or the other, they represent man trying to make himself God. To paraphrase Irving Babbitt and others, as the notion of God goes, so goes philosophy, and society and culture, and politics, and economics—the religious outlook is at the core of all other perspectives.

The great political philosophy scholar Leo Strauss was supposed to have said that the only two things in life really worth talking about are God and politics. That’s because at a most fundamental level they are inextricably intertwined. A skewed notion of the very nature of God and whether man acknowledges him—or tries to substitute himself for God—is at the crux of the turmoil, fanaticism, and destructiveness of the politics of our day and of much of the last hundred years.

This is seen well in two books of the last decade. Robert R. Reilly’s The Closing of the Muslim Mind (2010) finds the roots of what it calls “the modern Islamist crisis” that has turned the Middle East upside down and spawned the international terrorist threat in crucial developments in Islamic thought and theology of a thousand years ago. Within Sunni Islam, the earlier influences of Aristotelian—or any—philosophy were dispelled and a notion of God as pure and absolute will became permanently entrenched. This meant that no act by its nature is good or evil. Something is good or evil only because God—Allah—decreed it to be so, and He could easily decree just the opposite. This means that there is no genuine morality, no freedom of conscience, no role for reason, and no free will for men. At bottom, this is pure moral relativism. Nothing is intrinsically right or wrong: God can go either way. As Reilly puts it, this makes God a Nietzschean, a “legal positivist,” and a Thrasyumachean (“might makes right”). The ruling morality comes forth only from revelation, as explicated by Islam’s legal schools and clerical figures—backed up by supportive political powers.

Moral and theological positions cannot be sustained by reason—that isn’t possible—but only, in the end, by force. To be sure, Reilly says this perspective is not intrinsic to Islam, but controls Sunni thought.

It’s not hard to see how this perspective leads to the unquestioned following of brutal charismatic fanatics like Osama bin Laden, the kidnapping and enslaving of schoolgirls and chaining of pregnant women to prison floors for presumed “apostasy,” terrorist movements that have no compunction about killing innocent people, and totalist states. Representative government, in fact, has been a rarity in the Islamic world (Reilly tells us that it’s seen as a challenge to Allah’s sovereignty). After all, the proper relationship between God and Caesar cannot prevail when man has the wrong conception of God. While everything is done in the name of God, men—especially those who get enough power—effectively “become” God.

My Franciscan University of Steubenville colleague Benjamin Wiker’s 2008 book 10 Books that Screwed Up the World (And 5 Others That Didn’t Help) shows the widespread deleterious influence of the writings of leading modern Western thinkers, most of whom are categorized as political philosophers. What he identifies as the common theme running through the likes of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, J. S. Mill, Lenin, and Hitler (in Mein Kampf) is that there is no morality above man, because there is no God ruling over men. When God is abandoned, it is inevitable that morality is abandoned. So often, we encounter someone who will say that men can be moral and not be believers. Some will even make the claim that the great Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle illustrate this—ignoring the facts that Socrates said he was directed by God, Plato’s “Good” animating all of existence was stumbling in the direction of God, that Aristotle proved the existence of God by natural reasoning, and that piety was a great virtue for these and other great ancient philosophers. In fact, relatively few men can be moral without religious belief, and the ones that are tend to have glaring gaps. The more traditional the religion, the sounder its moral code.

The implication for politics of putting man in place of God, Wiker tells us, was the rise of modern ideologies (like communism, fascism, and Nazism)—which were, in essence, substitute human-fashioned religions—and the aggressive, brutal, and totalist states that came with them. The results, then, were the same as with Islamism. The only difference is that here men outright rejected God. Man becomes God in all but name.

Then, we have today’s leftism. What stands behind it, also, are the political thinkers in Wiker’s book. In spite of the defeat of communism a generation ago, most of today’s left embraces consciously or not a vulgarized version of Marxism. Nevertheless, its inordinate regulation of the
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business community instead of outright government ownership, eagerness to use Corporate America to promote its cultural agenda, and readiness to tolerate such things as the shameless pressure tactics—a kind of interest-group thuggery—of what Bill Maher (hardly a conservative) called the “gay mafia” also shows a dimension of fascism. Its extreme individualism and nearly maniacal moral nihilism ring of Rousseau and Nietzsche. Its long-time obsession with overturning traditional culture bears the imprint of the other writers—who might be called cultural radicals—that Wiker profiles: Charles Darwin, Margaret Sanger, Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mead, Alfred Kinsey, and Betty Friedan. If they—and contemporary leftism—don’t provide the well-developed theoretical schemes that the architects of modern political ideologies did, the practical effects of their assault on culture have been as pronounced as the latter’s were on politics. As with modern political ideologies and the predominant strain of Islamic thought that Reilly discusses, man is the measure of all things.

As time has gone on, the opponents of traditional—that is, sound—culture have continually used the state, and even international political institutions, to further their agendas.

Even if today’s leftists are not all the thoroughgoing atheists that Communists and Nazis were and are—although contemporary leftists have become increasingly, and more openly and aggressively, secularistic—practically speaking, man has become God for them. Along with that, they too have become increasingly intolerant and repressive (consider, for example, the HHS mandate, the silencing of moral opposition to the homosexualist agenda, and the suppression of dissenting views on university campuses) and insistent on more and more centralized state power to put their objectives into practice. The outline of, once again, the totalist state comes more sharply into view.

The bottom line for the sad, chaotic, and ultimately disastrous political developments accompanying the rise of Islamism, modern political ideologies, and contemporary leftism, again, has been the fact that, one way or the other, man has tried to make himself God. To paraphrase Irving Babbitt and others, as the notion of God goes, so goes philosophy, and society and culture, and politics, and economics—the religious outlook is at the core of all other perspectives.

I recall a political philosophy professor in my undergraduate days mentioning a famous passage in Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound. When Prometheus thunders, “I hate all the gods,” Hermes responds, “Your words declare you stricken with no slight madness.” The professor used the passage to illustrate the problem caused by modern political thought: when man pushes aside the transcendent, his hubris takes over and calamity follows.