

Fawcett: Fear government laws based on religion? Sorry, all politics is theological

Has anyone coined a term to describe the irrational fear of the government imposing laws based on religion? If not, I humbly suggest “theocrapobia.”

In the United States, Alabama’s ban of abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected has resulted in a widespread rash of theocrapobia.

It has crept into Canada, which seems especially vulnerable to it in the wake of the election of Jason Kenney and the United Conservative Party in Alberta.

The comparisons to the Puritan tyranny of *The Handmaid’s Tale* (based on the novel by wealthy white Canadian feminist Margaret Atwood) predictably rolled in, and the accusations that women are in danger from regressive religiously inspired legislation are likely going to be with us for a long time.

The image *Handmaid* evokes gives us an indication of what theocracy means to these people: regressive, irrational laws that restrict people’s freedom based not on any public interest, but on personal religious beliefs that should remain private.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democratic congressman from New York, summarized this in a tweet accusing pro-life Republicans of secretly wanting to turn America into “a creepy theological order led by a mad king.”

The mistake of those panicked commentators isn’t that they think the ban on abortion is a theocratic move. That’s more or less true. What they’ve missed, though, is that *all politics is theological*, including theirs.

The debate between pro-lifers and pro-choicers (and among different pro-choicers) has to do with when a fetus becomes a baby with moral rights. In other words, when does a bundle of cells become a person?

How you answer this depends on how you define human nature. This is a philosophical question – one of the oldest ones – relating to that branch of philosophy dealing with ultimate reality, metaphysics. It also touches on ethics, the philosophical project dedicated to answering the question: what are human persons supposed to do? In other words, despite philosophy’s reputation for abstraction and irrelevance, we find that all political beliefs are really philosophical beliefs.

The problem, as the great medieval thinker Thomas Aquinas pointed out, is that philosophy, like mathematics, can only reason from premises; it can’t provide

or prove those premises.

For example, if you think humans have dignity and worth because of their rationality, you can deduce a lot of irrefutable consequences from that. But what if someone picks a different premise to start from – for example, that *no* human being has *any* moral worth? You can justify ruthless totalitarianism from that premise. (It's been done before.) Can you refute that *premise* from philosophy itself? No, it seems that you can't.

Thus, we see the brick wall into which the abortion debate collides: there's no agreement on the fundamental metaphysics of what makes a human being a person. Worse still, if there's no way to get at whether these premises are true or false, we're in danger of falling into a nihilism, where we can't be sure of anything.

So if philosophy cannot prove its own premises, then where *do* these premises, and their authority, come from?

You could answer this sociologically: our assumptions are shaped by cultures, which develop historically. But culture, we should remember, is etymologically linked to *cult*. The real answer is that these premises ultimately come from religion.

Defining "religion" has always been a slippery task, but what all religions have in common is that they all make claims and assertions about ultimate reality and about morality. They tell stories about us – "metanarratives," as the postmodernists call them – that supply the premises that philosophy works from. The famous medieval axiom that "philosophy is the handmaiden of theology" was fundamentally correct.

Thus, controversially but irresistibly, all political beliefs are philosophical beliefs, and all philosophical beliefs are theological beliefs.

In many cases, a religion's entire purpose is to provide an ethical code for a society, a general cosmology, and a network of communal rituals to observe. This was what Confucianism was for China, and what Shintoism was for Japan, for many centuries.

In the West, meanwhile, each country has its own variant of Enlightenment liberalism supplemented with various national myths and holidays (holy days), which perform exactly the same sociological function of providing a universe of moral premises. (Note the quasi-scriptural status of constitutions and charters.)

This goes all the way back to the ancient world. The Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish*, is not just a theogony and cosmogony justifying the Babylonian religion. It is also a political manifesto justifying the Babylonian empire.

In it, Marduk, the chief god of Babylon, creates the world by destroying a chaos monster, ripping her in two to make the earth and the sky. He subdues the gods of the other nations, kills a rival god, and out of his blood creates humanity so the gods can have slaves.

This is not just an origin story for the cosmos. It is also about the metaphysics of society. The ultimate truth is chaos; humans are by nature dangerous and rebellious; the only way to impose order is through violent suppression. Thus, you have the political philosophy that rationalized the oppressive Chaldean regime, a philosophy that was actually theology.

Compare this to the Genesis account of creation, where humans are molded by hand from dust, not blood. The world is created in a systematic week-long conflict-free sequence. Adam and Eve are not enemies of God; they are made in His image. They are not slaves; they are given dominion.

The picture of the world, and of society, is an orderly cosmos governed by humans with a divinely imbued dignity. It is clear how liberalism, with its idea of human rights, developed from this, and it should not surprise us that much of Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* is taken up with interpreting the opening chapters of Genesis.

Liberalism is just one of many premises taken for granted in politics today that began as an explicitly theological concept. Abortion, as we have said, is about personhood. But the modern concept of "person" was invented by Christian theologians to explain the mysteries of the Trinity (one God, three persons) and the Incarnation (one person, two natures). The pro-choicers are reasoning from a theological concept, albeit with their own spin on it.

Other examples are just as ironic: the main argument for gay "marriage" – that two consenting people in love should be allowed to choose each other – is taken from the Christian theology of the sacrament of matrimony, which was utterly different from the norm in the ancient world, where consent had nothing to do with marriage.

How often do we hear talk about being on "the right side of history," as though history were the tribunal of what is right and just – an idea we get from Hegel, whose system is essentially a Prussian translation of the medieval heresy of the Franciscan fanatic Joachim of Fiore? Even religious tolerance, which the theocraphobes so highly value, is not a religiously neutral idea. Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* justifies tolerance by quoting the Bible's commandment to love our enemies.

All of these are governing political assumptions that are actually theological concepts. Friedrich Nietzsche, who described himself as a "genealogist," was infamously frustrated with the modern world for not recognizing that all its moral and philosophical systems were essentially theological in origin. For Nietzsche, this was the reason we should do away with them. Should we?

While popular media like *Handmaid's Tale* and *The Crucible* may have conditioned us to think of theological states only as oppressive and backward, remember that figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Tommy Douglas were pastors who saw their politics as the implementation of their religious beliefs.

No less a figure than the Hindu activist Gandhi (deeply influenced as he was by Tolstoy's vision of Christian nonviolence) would have had no problem with "I don't accept a politics without religion. Polity is a servant of religion."

Ocasio-Cortez herself wrote an article for the Jesuit magazine *America* justifying her prison reform proposals with reference to her Catholic faith, and in a tweet, she invited Republican lawmakers to support her proposed ban on high credit card rates for low-income users because of the Bible's prohibition of usury.

It was meant to expose right-wing hypocrisy, but it equally revealed her own inconsistency when it comes to religiously inspired legislation. Every politician with a moral cause he cares deeply about is reasoning from a premise that comes from a worldview deeper than politics or philosophy. Every righteous politician is a religious crusader.

If we don't recognize this, there are others who do. The chief Nazi jurist and political philosopher Carl Schmitt wrote texts on political theology that bluntly recognized that all political concepts are just secularized concepts, and, in his Hobbesian vision, the State had assumed the role of God. In the Third Reich, we see the consequences of *that* political theology. It takes us back to the calamity of the *Enuma Elish*. If we want an alternative order, we need an alternative theology.

We can still disagree and reject each other's theological premises. But, as a culture, we should shove aside our Atwoodian paranoia, confront our theocophobia head on, and candidly admit that we're all theocrats of one sort or another. Our conversations over health care, the economy, and other clearly religious issues would be much more healthy, honest, and productive if we did.

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