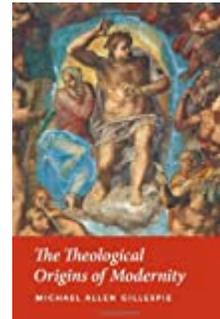




**Michael Allen Gillespie.** *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xiii + 386 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-29345-5.



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## **The Challenge Facing Theology: Modernity, Secularization, and Individual Rights**

Michael Allen Gillespie, a specialist in modern continental theory and the history of political philosophy, begins this recent book, which treats the genealogy of modernity in relationship to the Christian heritage, with a provocative *exergo* from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) ending with the famous lines about the relative desirability of reigning in hell versus serving in heaven. The work offers a strong vaccine against western arrogance, both for advocates of the superiority of Enlightenment's achievements and for enthusiasts of the necessity of the ties between Christian (especially Catholic) orthodoxy and (economic) liberty.

Gillespie's first chapter, "The Nominalist Revolution and the Origin of Modernity," serves as the author's main idea for the interpretation of the relationship between Christian theology and modernity. The following six chapters follow the philosophical-political path of key ideas in the western tradition and its path towards "modernity": Francesco Petrarch and the invention of individuality; humanism and the apotheosis of man; Martin Luther and Erasmus; René Descartes and Thomas

Hobbes. The eighth, final chapter analyzes the contradictions of Enlightenment and the "crisis of modernity."

Gillespie argues that the first modern thinkers were nothing but Christian thinkers whose theology might be contrary to official church doctrine, but not un-Christian in their intention. Even Niccolò Machiavelli is included in this series of modern thinkers, whose attitudes toward religion were complex but always rooted in a long-lasting marriage between the Roman heritage and the Christian worldview. Nominalists (especially William of Ockham) are always at the beginning of the intellectual path of these thinkers, who move along or beyond the lines drawn by early nominalists, while the debate over free will and human freedom is the last essential stop before the issue of modernity. Descartes "sought to construct a bastion of reason against this terrifying God of nominalism" (p. 171). His attempt ended with the "ontological argument" to demonstrate the existence of God—an attempt that could not save him from accusations of being a skeptical atheist. Hobbes's religiosity is unquestioned, unlike his orthodoxy, and his view of the world is "the re-

sult of his acceptance of the basic tenets of nominalism” (p. 209).

The last chapter speaks of an “early crisis of modernity,” whose power and effect is “broader, deeper, and older than the Enlightenment” (p. 257). Gillespie argues against the idea that the thought of Descartes and Hobbes was not an example of secularization, given the author’s assumption that “the secularization thesis is that God does not exist and that religion is merely a human construction” (p. 272). I share much of Gillespie’s disappointment in modernity and secularization, especially when he affirms that “the so-called process of disenchantment is thus also a process of reenchancement” (p. 274), given that “the Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) exaltation of human individuality is thus in fact a form of radical (although concealed) Pelagianism” (p. 275). Gillespie sees in the Enlightenment an impasse impossible to avoid, given its basic assumptions, and maintains that this impasse was the basis for the perversions of modernity taking place during the first half of the twentieth century (the world wars, the Great Depression, the rise of totalitarianism, and the Holocaust).

Besides some corrigenda in the Latin terms (for example: Catiline, not Cataline, p. 277, and *unio mystica*, not *mystico*, p. 282), the work can be recommended for many of its general prescriptions. Gillespie takes seriously the deep historical character of Christian theology and addresses current tensions between Christianity and modern philosophical thought and the western tradition and Islam. Just before the epilogue, Gillespie affirms that “we can only begin to take Islam seriously if we recognize the ways in which Muslims’ view parallel, intersect, and veer away from our own” (p. 287). Although the book is especially useful when it shows the importance of nominalism in the path of Christian theology towards modernity, its overall vision of the relationship of Christian theology and modernity needs to be integrated with other issues the book only deals with marginally. One issue is the critical relationship between

nature and grace, a problem that has had a huge, perhaps disruptive impact on the balance of the western (Catholic and non-Catholic) theological tradition, especially from the seventeenth century on. This issue constitutes a major rift in recent Catholic theology and its approach to the modern world and non-Christian religions. Another issue is the need to distinguish between modernity and secularization. Very few deny the modernity or postmodernity of some features of globalized Islam, even in its most radical interpretation, but secularization is typical of the geographical and intellectual focus of the book: the European-western theological-philosophical tradition. In other words, the problem that research needs to address is not merely the nexus of Christian theology and modernity, but also the separate relationship between Christian theology and secularization. On this second issue, we have seen in the last decades a radical shift from the 1960s and the 70s, when mainstream Christian theology advocated the need for a “secular Christianity,” to the present, when “secularization” seems to be socially unavoidable but theologically almost irrelevant and culturally voiceless for theologians—except for some individual contributions, like Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.<sup>[1]</sup> The role of individual rights in the religious discourse that confronts modernity seems potentially more important than secularization: “Moses gave Commandments to the children of Israel, not a code of rights.”<sup>[2]</sup> The issue of the “constitutionality-constitutionability” of religions and the relevance of individual rights lies at the core of the relationship between theology and modernity.

#### Notes

[1]. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[2]. Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150-1625* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 1.

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