

William and Sarah Vesey, Abigail wrote a letter calling off her uncle, just three days later. “Between you and I, don’t be in a hurry about that. . . . Vesey’s place is poverty,” she wrote, “and I think we have enough of that already.”

Speculation in securities was hugely controversial at the time. During the war, some currency-strapped colonies paid soldiers, farmers, and traders in paper certificates. Desperate for gold and silver, the holders resold the paper to speculators at a fraction of its face value. Abigail bought a £100 certificate for

about £25. In four years, she collected £27 in interest. In another venture, she bought 1,650 acres of disputed former Indian land in



First Lady Abigail Adams was a shrewd speculator who pressed and wheedled her husband, John, to get out of farmland and invest in bonds.

Vermont, using four straw men to secure parcels for each of her four children. Despite her protestations that she had set her heart on the

investment, John responded flatly, “don’t meddle any more with Vermont.” John’s investment strategy could be summed up in a single word: *farmland*.

Writing from Paris, John found it easy to “wax eloquent about land’s ennobling qualities,” Holton writes. Abigail had to find sober tenants, handle their grievances, help them sell their crops, and collect rent. On a rhetorical level, she shared John’s repugnance toward speculation, and she was careful not to let news of her dealings become public. But for all John’s denunciation of

speculators, he allowed Abigail to make him one. In a sense, Holton says, she dragged him into the modern era.

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

# The Limits of Liberal Islam

**THE SOURCE:** “The Politics of God” by Mark Lilla, in *The New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 19, 2007.

TO MANY AMERICANS, THE rise of militant Islamism is inexplicable. Why can’t Muslims keep politics separate from religion? Behind that question, says Mark Lilla, a professor of humanities at Colum-

bia University, is an assumption that secularism is the natural condition of humankind. But it isn’t. The West’s own break with political theology was a unique historical event—and the fragility of that separation is underscored by the way political theology has occasionally returned, notably in Protestant thinkers’ support for Nazism.

We owe what Lilla calls the “Great Separation” of politics and religion in the West to Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Amid the furious wars of religion between Protestants and Catholics in 17th-century Europe, the English philosopher “did the most revolutionary thing a thinker can ever do—he changed the subject, from God and his commands to man and his beliefs.” Ignoring divine commands, Hobbes argued in *Leviathan* (1651) that peace must be the first imperative of life on earth, and that humans must surrender to absolute rulers in order to achieve it. An exhausted Europe accepted the secular prescription, as

later modified by John Locke and others.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) represented the proverbial fly in the ointment. No friend of organized religion, Rousseau nevertheless argued that human beings need religion both as an expression of their natural goodness and as a moral compass. The “children of Rousseau” flourished in continental Europe, especially after the traumas of the godless French Revolution and the Napoleonic conquests. Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel were among the thinkers who embraced a romantic vision of religion’s purifying force. Hegel argued that religion alone could forge social bonds and encourage people to sacrifice for the common good—it was the source of *Volksgeist*, a people’s shared spirit.

Among both Protestants and Jews in 19th-century Germany, these ideas bred a stolid liberal theology that prescribed “a catechism of moral commonplaces” and dutiful citizenship. But the horrors of World War I put an end to this complacent belief system. Germans were not alone in demanding something more exalted—the purchase on redemption that is the ultimate promise of biblical religion—but it was in Weimar Germany that the demand got its fullest expression. The Jewish thinker Martin Buber, later regarded as a kind of ecumenicalist sage, called for a “Masada of the spirit” and declared that “a beautiful death” was preferable to a plodding bourgeois existence. The theologian Karl Barth forged a more

militant Protestantism, and though he never rallied to the Nazi cause, a number of others did. The respected Lutheran theologian Emanuel Hirsch, notes Lilla, “welcomed the Nazi seizure of power for bringing Germany into ‘the circle of the white ruling peoples,’ to which God has entrusted the responsibility for the history of humanity.”

Is there a new Hobbes lurking among today’s Muslim thinkers? Lilla is respectful but skeptical of those who simply promote a more liberal and tolerant Islam. “The history of Protestant and Jewish liberal theology reveals the problem: The more a biblical faith is trimmed to fit the demands of the moment, the fewer reasons it gives believers for holding on to that faith in troubled times, when self-appointed guardians of theological purity offer more radical hope.”

Lilla has more hope for theological “renovators” of Islam, such as Tariq Ramadan, the controversial Swiss-born cleric, and Khaled Abou El Fadl, a law professor at UCLA. Just as Martin Luther and John Calvin found theological grounds for modernizing Christianity—ending priestly celibacy, for example—Muslim renovators are working to renew Islam from within. But Ramadan and El Fadl have been harshly criticized by Western intellectuals because they do not necessarily accept the Great Separation. That’s too much to ask, Lilla believes. Even in the West, the separation is constantly challenged. A self-confident, modernized Islam that is able simply to coexist with the West ought to be enough.

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

## Not Catholic Enough?

**THE SOURCES:** “The Faculty ‘Problem’” by Wilson D. Miscamble, in *America*, Sept. 10, 2007, and “Catholic Enough? Religious Identity at Notre Dame” by John T. McGreevy, in *Commonweal*, Sept. 28, 2007.

NOBODY REACHES FOR THE smelling salts when a college is accused of failing to have enough African-American, Latino, Native American, or female professors. But the University of Notre Dame is now embroiled in a growing dispute over whether it is hiring enough Catholics.

Catholic universities in the United States have a “Potemkin village” quality, writes Rev. Wilson D. Miscamble, a Notre Dame historian. With their crucifixes and chapels, they look like religious institutions from the outside, but inside the classrooms, students learn the same secular lessons they do in other universities. Notre Dame’s faculty was barely 53 percent Catholic in 2006, and a spate of Catholic retirements is coming. The history department, with 32 members, has only 12 Catholics, and when three new hires were made last year, only one was Catholic.

Notre Dame’s distinctive Catholic character and intellectual tradition are threatened by a hiring process that favors candidates who can boost its visibility among its secular peers, Miscamble charges. Despite a papal declaration that a Catholic university must “consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth,” Notre Dame hires atheists who deny that absolute truth even exists. Scholars who are branded “Catholic apologists,” or too polemical, meanwhile,