Empty Bottles of Gentilism
Glenn W. Olsen

Some tend to view academic administrators as failed scholars, or scholars who have published just enough to get what they really wanted, perhaps a deanship. Francis Oakley, emeritus professor and emeritus president, has been a teacher, scholar (with a long list of publications), dean, and president of Williams College. He also has held such offices as the presidency of the American Council of Learned Societies, and his career defies all easy generalizations. A historian of ideas, in Empty Bottles of Gentilism, the first of three volumes to treat The Emergence of Western Political Thought in the Latin Middle Ages, Oakley gives the latest fruit of a well-spent life. In this reviewer’s view, this volume is best designated by its subtitle, for the subject in view is kingship and the divine. It is not as full a history of “the emergence of Western political thought” like some of its predecessors: the brothers Carlyle’s standard work has discussions of subjects such as “property” hardly broached here, and fuller treatments of figures such as Cicero. The present volume does not even mention Lactantius. But if the subject is the relationship of kingship and the divine in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, this is a fine book indeed.

Oakley challenges the popular belief that the “inherently secular” politics of the present originate in the ancient world, in Hellenistic and late Roman political thought and institutions. Here readers will have to consult their own experience. In the department of history in which I have spent most of my life, no one—well maybe a couple youngsters—holds the views Oakley calls popular, but one floor up, in the department of philosophy, almost everyone does. Here we must leave aside final resolution of the question of whether it finally makes sense to speak of an inherently secular politics, or whether that is what we have today. Marx himself acknowledges that, a priori, certain questions such as the existence of God must be excluded from political thought because a materialist philosophy is not possible unless by definition God does not exist. Many have noted that this kind of “secularism” begins in as much an act of faith as any religion, and is one more form of religion. If this is true, Oakley’s volume would need a certain amount of reformulation.

But his overall argument, to be developed in the second and third volumes, is that modern secularism is a product of the medieval, not the ancient, world (though with precedent in Judaism and Christianity), and that seems right in the sense that modern secularism attaches itself to the saeculum in a way not found in the ancient world. Certainly Oakley is right to see the common depreciation of medieval political thought as grounded in the secularist triad, ancient-medicival-modern. The idea has been that the ancient world had a “natural” politics, the medieval a “supernaturalist” politics, and that the modern world recovered the secular point of view of the ancients. Oakley, knowledgeable

Glenn W. Olsen is professor emeritus of medieval history in the University of Utah. His most recent book is The Turn to Transcendence: The Role of Religion in the Twenty-first Century.
medievalist that he is, wishes to show that the medieval contribution to the history of political thought is greater than, and different from, that commonly attributed to it. He certainly is correct. His historiographical comments throughout the volume are generally useful.

The Novelty of the Modern Period

A general introduction describes the plan of the three projected volumes. Oakley intends a global perspective in which the passage from ancient to medieval is seen as a passage not from secular to supernatural but from one form of religious consciousness to another. The development of the Western world has not been secular-religious-secular but religious-religious-secular (if one pursued my comments above, a case could be made for religious-religious-religious, since politics will always be religious because humans are religious). In any case, Oakley nicely emphasizes the novelty of the modern period, with its preoccupation with the nation-state, its views on the artificiality of the state, and its deep commitment to autonomous individualism. These are the things that need explaining, and proper explanation leads to the medieval world.

There follows a prologue on “Kingship and the Long Shadow of the Archaic Past.” This reminds us that kingship has been the most common form of human government, and that the political common sense of the race for most of its history has been that “kings are sacred.” Next is a three-chapter prolegomenon, well written as always, on “Cosmic Kingship in Mediterranean Antiquity” down to about A.D. 300. Like the book in general, this is based mainly on a well-chosen but largely English-language bibliography, including an unusual number of “oldies but goodies” (how charming to see C. N. Cochrane’s Christianity and Classical Culture described as “a fine book that has stood the test of time”). The age of Constantine is viewed as the coming together of two legacies, and the succeeding centuries as a time of successfully reconciling the Roman inheritance with that coming from the biblical religions, which Oakley gives more attention to than do most histories of political thought, making the crucial distinction between archaic sacred kingship and the logic of creation, in which God is understood as qualitatively different from anything created. This latter places severe limits on the sacrality that could be attributed to Israelite kings, or anything other than God, in this sense disenchanting the world and making it more difficult to view the state as “the embodiment of the cosmic totality.” We may properly speak of this as a secularization. In comparison with the peoples around them, for the Israelites, the static or timeless state of archaic man fades, and the category of history gains importance. Yahweh, and no man, is the supreme king.

Alongside traditional Jewish views with a this-worldly messianic expectation, there also were branches of Judaism that stressed a heavenly Messiah and the spiritual and supranational nature of the Kingdom He would found. This was the immediate background for Christianity, which in a revolutionary fashion separated religious from political loyalties, thus continuing the desacralization of the political. It took centuries for this to work itself out.

The second part of the book, consisting of six chapters, is on this “Long Twilight of the Sacral Kingship in Greek and Latin Christendom (c.300—c. 1050).” Again we begin with historical orientation, which among other things describes the origins of European cultural unity, especially in the ninth century. The story continues to the
beginning of the pontificate of Gregory VII—for the most part the closing point of volume one of Oakley’s trilogy—which marks a radical challenge to regal sacrality and imperial control of the Church. Chapter five then reverts to “Patristic Affirmation: The Greek Fathers and the Eusebian Tradition in Christian Rome, Byzantium, and Russia.” This chapter begins with a consideration of early Islam but, after a section on Alexandrian thought, largely focuses on the attempt of the Eusebian tradition to fill up the Hobbesian “old empty bottles of Gentilism” *(Leviathan*, pt. 4, ch. 45) with Christian wine. Not just to fill them, but to move the Christian Church toward unity with the empire, into a Christian society closely related to the Kingdom of God.

Oakley believes that by the mid–fourth century such a view was revealed to be a dream, but he also notes the persistence of Eusebius’s political vision for centuries to come. The tenacious idea was “the conception of the imperial government as a terrestrial copy of the rule of God in Heaven.” Because “the church, taken to be coterminous with the empire, was itself the all embracing unity,” there is no cognate in Greek to the Latin “Christendom.” Oakley’s comments on the Iconoclastic Controversy could be improved by reference to Thomas Noble’s *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, presumably published too recently (2009) for Oakley to have consulted. I doubt that Oakley’s comments on Pope Gelasius I will stop continuing disagreement over exactly what Gelasius meant by this or that phrase, but at least a position emerges.

Chapter six discusses the Latin Fathers. Although the principal interest is the mature Augustine, whose distance from Eusebius is readily acknowledged, the observation also is that in the early Middle Ages the Augustinian view failed to drive out the Eusebian. Thus, while the mature Augustine confined sacred history to the biblical narrative itself, no longer thinking that a “providential history” could be written of postbiblical times, it was the Eusebian idea that tended to prevail in the Middle Ages, East and West (and still influenced those forms of American exceptionalism that understand America as a uniquely blessed or chosen nation, a “light to the world”). Oakley not only sees Augustine’s views here as a desacralization of Roman history but also follows R. A. Markus in designating postbiblical time as “secular,” neither sacred nor profane.

I wonder whether it is right to attribute to the mature Augustine theforeswearing of any attempt to “sacralize” the present age. That said, Oakley gives an excellent account of the tensions between those passages in the *City of God* that seem to identify the City of God with the visible Church and those that think of both Cities as invisible. A final section traces the interpretation of Augustine into the early Middle Ages. What has been called “political Augustinianism” is in fact the reassertion of archaic ideas of sacral kingship.

Chapter seven turns to “Sacral Kingship in the Germanic Successor Kingdoms.” The main point here, so far as the overall argument is concerned, is that the tendencies toward desacralizing monarchy found in the New Testament or Augustine were blunted in the early Middle Ages. The Anglo-Norman Anonymous is used to illustrate the move from theocentric to specifically Christocentric kingship at the end of the period covered in this book.

The next chapter, on the centrality of the nobility, treats “Fidelity, Consent, and the Emergence of ‘Feudal’ Institutions.” I think the introduction, here and elsewhere, of Walter Ullmann, a scholar of Oakley’s youth, more confusing than helpful. In my opinion Ullmann’s tendency to
highly schematic overgeneralizations little advanced the field. Oakley, in trying to clarify Ullmann, makes things worse, saying, for instance, that, though of course Aristotle did not possess the Christian distinction between natural and supernatural, his understanding of the natural “comprehended in some degree that which under the influence of the Christian tradition we ourselves have become accustomed to classifying as ‘the supernatural,’” I dare-say that the “we” here makes more sense if “we Protestants” is intended rather than “we Catholics,” because for at least those Catholics who accept the high medieval (Thomistic) distinction between natural and revealed theology, by definition if it is in Aristotle it is part of the natural. Oakley, in spite of his having cited Henri de Lubac, identifies the divine with the supernatural in implicitly “Protestant” fashion. These qualifications aside, this chapter does a good job of explaining the place of feudal institutions in the history of Western constitutionalism, and makes useful comparisons to experience elsewhere, especially in Japan.

The final chapter turns to the ways in which the clergy came during this period to form a “caste,” and the papacy rose in importance. This chapter gives a good summary of the first millennium of papal history insofar as this involves the powers and definition of the papal office. An epilogue presents a thoughtful historiographical reflection on the tendency of recent scholarship to see the Gregorian Reform as less discontinuous with the papal past than previously asserted. Oakley emphasizes that the Gregorians did think of themselves as revolutionary and thus both draws this volume to a close and prepares the way for his second volume.

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**Divorced from History**

This book reminds us that almost all the common currency of political thought today, Right or Left, is, from the point of view of most past human experience, quite provincial. Central words such as “liberty” are so separated from their earlier history and meanings that few conservatives understand that what is now understood as “being free” is roughly what St. Augustine meant by “going to Hell.” Few liberals consider how incoherent it is simultaneously to want “autonomy for all” and consideration for the least favored among us. Though Oakley’s volume will not tell us whether we are to align ourselves with earlier human generations and reject most of the political thought of the past several hundred, “secularizing,” years, it gives much of the material necessary to forming judgments on such matters. Although to the end statements are made which one would like to qualify, this is a fine book.

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**Conservatism and the Limits of Politics**

*George W. Carey*

**Bringing Home America: How America Lost Her Way and How We Can Find Our Way Back** by Tom Pauken (Rockford, IL: Chronicles Press, 2010)

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I must immediately enter a disclaimer. As Tom Pauken notes at the outset of his book, he was a student of mine during his undergraduate days at Georgetown in the 1960s. He was, I should add, a bright, inquisitive, and introspective student, the