

Every Man a God-King

The danger of popular sovereignty

By Daniel McCarthy

THE LIBERAL BLOGOSPHERE had a ready explanation when Scott Roeder, a Christian of Old Testament convictions, murdered Kansas abortionist George Tiller. Roeder was what Andrew Sullivan calls a “Christianist,” someone who believes “that religion dictates politics and that politics should dictate the laws for everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike.” The term echoes the description of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda as “Islamist,” though Sullivan allows that “only a tiny few” Christian or Muslim extremists are violent.

In the West as in the Middle East, the story goes, fanatical believers in medieval moral codes want to impose their views on others, either by force of law or terror. But the trouble with this account is that Roeder’s actions cannot be reconciled with traditional Christianity—and what’s more, those Islamists may be less religiously motivated than most Americans believe.

One man who should know is Michael Scheuer, former chief of the CIA’s bin Laden unit. In *Marching Toward Hell*, he highlights al-Qaeda’s stated motives, which have more to do with Israel, U.S. foreign policy, and the domestic politics of Arab countries than with Mohammad and the Koran. Scheuer also reveals a surprisingly modern side to al-Qaeda: the group draws much of its strength from “the desire of Muslims to attain what Jefferson called the ‘inalienable rights’ that the Founders believed to be hard-wired into human beings simply because they are human beings.” Bin Laden, a would-be tyrant in the eyes of

the West, “is urging Muslims to liberate themselves from tyranny in order to attain life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in terms that are compatible with their Islamic faith.”

Shocking though it may seem, Islamists are not opposed to rights or popular rule, but their understanding of those terms is very different from ours. Then again, maybe they aren’t so different: Scott Roeder also killed in the name of rights—the right to life. But religion is only a secondary dimension in rights-driven terror. The primary one is political: the belief that the state must uphold the values of the people (rightly understood), and should it fail to do so, ordinary men may take action. What underpins this belief is not a creed but an ideology—republicanism. Its roots lie not in the Middle Ages or Middle East, but in modern Europe.

Political theorists have long recognized the dangers inherent in republicanism’s near cousin, democracy. James Burnham likened democracy’s potential for abuse to the doctrine of the Divine Right of kings—at an extreme, “the law [becomes] the expression of, or rather identical to, the popular will. There is no independent law, human or divine; or, if there is, there is no source other than popular will that can proclaim, interpret and judge it.” Whatever the people desire becomes licit; whatever they dislike becomes criminal.

Yet the evil that Burnham described is not limited to democracy. It afflicts every kind of popular government, where political right is understood as emanating from the bottom up rather

than the top down. In a republic—literally *res publica*, the public’s affair—the government’s business (legislating, judging, and enforcing law) is the people’s business, and the people’s business (the passions, interests, and values of individuals) always threatens to become the government’s. The Divine Right of the public thus goes farther than the Divine Right of kings. An absolute monarch might say, “*V’État, c’est moi*,” but he could never pretend, as popular government does, to embody all of society.

Over the past 400 years, the idea that government rests on the consent of the governed has come to dominate Western thinking—and indeed thinking all over the world—to such an extent that it seems less a proposition than a natural fact. Yet there is nothing natural about it. Indeed, even after four centuries, popular government remains a revolutionary idea that often drives its adherents to assume for themselves the prerogatives of the state. *Vox populi, vox dei*, the assertion that the voice of the people is the voice of God, has led to terror as well as representative government.

Ideologies can have real-world consequences even when they distort reality. Popular sovereignty and the consent of the governed can hardly be taken as literally true—thousands, let alone millions, of human beings cannot jointly exercise power, nor is it realistic to think such multitudes can long consent to exactly the same thing. In practice it doesn’t matter: “the people” is a concept more than a reality, and in various permutations on republican theory even the

concept may be reduced to something more manageable. For Marxist-Leninists, “the people” becomes the proletariat, which is led by the workers’ vanguard, the Communist Party. A very small number of people may thereby claim to speak, and act, for the largest of populations—the workers of the world.

No elections or other outward signs of popular approval are necessary to confirm the party’s status as the workers’ true representatives. Similarly, bin Laden does not need to put his authority to speak on behalf of the Muslim *ummah* to a vote. If need be, the popular revolutionary can simply redefine the people to suit his purposes—as including all virtuous Muslims, for example, but not apostates so designated by the leader. Even in non-revolutionary situations, the republican ideal can become separated from quotidian reality. In the United States, every four years it transpires that some people are more truly American than others—they are the “real America,” regardless of how outnumbered they might be by inhabitants of the coasts and cities.

For the revolutionary, the reality of wide public support is less important than the myth that popular will provides sanction for violence.

Republicanism is a potent ideology because it is psychologically participatory—it makes individuals feel imbued with the moral and political authority to remake their world, indeed to create law, a truly godlike power. The state exercises the roles of legislator, policeman, judge, jury, and executioner only as an agent—the principal is the people, and what powers an agent possesses, a principal must also possess. Moreover, since the will of the people is not necessarily identical with the will of the majority, a minority—even a single person—may claim to be the true voice of the public.

In the Anglo-American context, republicanism arose as a reaction against monarchical abuses. But kings

are not different from other people, not even in their appetite for power—what St. Augustine called the *libido dominandi*. When monarchy becomes tyranny, one man’s *libido dominandi* can run unchecked. But by making every man a germ of the state, popular sovereignty has the potential to unleash all men’s *libido dominandi*. The republican ideology owes its popularity not just to its ability to preserve liberties and the social order, but to the sense of empowerment it creates in individuals, the feeling of a libido fulfilled.

Yet because the republican spirit leads people to believe that their will and values should be expressed in government, it follows that when the state fails to live up to those expectations, individuals feel thwarted and alienated. A passion has been excited, then denied. If a king did not do what his people wanted, they could chalk it up to his personal flaws. But when a government that claims that it is people fails to do what the public—or the person who thinks he speaks for the public—demands, the

appointing himself as the new legislator, policeman, judge, jury, and executioner. The principal is merely recalling delegated powers from a faithless agent. And now the citizen may create a new government that better exemplifies his will and values. If Protestantism entails the priesthood of all believers, unmediated republicanism entails the statehood of all free men.

All of this is radically at odds with medieval ideas of politics, religion, society, and values. Nor did earlier Christians feel spiritually frustrated—less than fully Christian or human—because the Roman state permitted infant exposure. The Christian abhorred this practice, he sought to reason with the emperor to persuade him to ban it, and he took into his own home what infants he could. But he did not feel the need to commit violence, in part because he accepted that the sword was not meant for his hands. God appointed rulers, including wicked ones, to enforce law; no member of the public could assume that power for himself.

The idea that one’s soul and one’s

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entire theory of legitimacy upon which the state rests has been undermined. A practical justification for revolution and the psychological impetus for one (frustration) have emerged.

The republican ethos is a double-edged sword. So long as the individual and the public identify with the state, they are willing to expand its powers. Thus revolutionary France could enact the *levée en masse*—mass conscription—though the supposedly absolute king had never been able to do so. But once the citizen becomes alienated from the state, it loses all legitimacy in his eyes, and he believes he acts justly in

community depend upon the justice of one’s government—that self, community, state, and transcendent truth should all be aligned, or indeed identical—is a modern notion. The medieval Christian understood that while the king might rule by God’s leave, the king was not God and the king’s law was not necessarily the Lord’s. The king, of course, understood that however powerful in real terms the people or a legislature might be, neither was synonymous with moral right. Republicanism destroyed these distinctions, as the king’s power was absorbed by the people and the legislature. Now God’s appointed servant,

earthly legislative and enforcement powers, and the multitudinous interests of society were conceived of as having one body—the people.

To be sure, changes in Christian theology and politics preceded the emergence of popular sovereignty. Perhaps ironically, Protestantism midwived the republicanism that Osama bin Laden is now using to transform the Islamic world. As Scheuer writes,

The Protestant Reformation of Messrs. Luther and Calvin was precisely an effort to restore the direct relationship between man and God and to eliminate the intermediary role played by the corrupt priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church. Bin Laden, by slowly negating the ability of regime scholars to put a break on popular enthusiasm for jihad, has ensured the continuing growth of the worldwide Sunni insurgency he is inciting.

“The direct relationship between God and man” entails not only a spiritual connection but a political one as well—the passing of the sword to the people. Although medieval Islam had no formal hierarchy comparable to that of the Catholic Church, it nonetheless recognized a distinction between rulers, subjects, and religious authorities. Francis Fukuyama recently noted as much in the *Wall Street Journal*:

There was a functional separation of church and state. The ulama were legal scholars and custodians of Shariah law while the sultans exercised political authority. The sultans conceded they were not the ultimate source of law but had to live within rules established by Muslim case law. ...

This traditional, religiously based rule of law was destroyed in the Middle East’s transition to moder-

nity. Replacing it, particularly in the Arab world, was untrammelled executive authority ...

Islam effectively moved from a medieval system of religion and politics to what amounts to a latter-day version of the Divine Right of kings. Islamists like al-Qaeda are fighting not for medieval values but the more modern cause of popular religious and political self-determination. Bin Laden is closer to John Locke than to Savonarola.

The West can do little to help the Islamic world negotiate a path between bin Laden’s Jacobinism and the House of Saud’s autocracy. Certainly the Muslim example of corrupt princes legitimized in their oppressions by servile clerics suggests that Divine Right can be as great an evil as popular revolution. The most we can do is refrain from stoking the fires of nationalism and popular resentment by ending military operations against Muslims and ceasing to prop up tyrannical rulers. There might still be an Islamist revolution—but then, every popular revolution eventually has its Thermidor.

We have problems enough with republican ideology at home, in the form both of a state that still derives excessive power from popular sentiment—as the outbreak of patriotic mania after 9/11 demonstrated—and of individuals like Scott Roeder who express their frustrations by anointing themselves citizen revolutionaries. In each way, the identification of the individual and the masses with the state encourages the blurring of boundaries between coercive power and popular values.

There is no question of the United States adopting a medieval disposition of powers. The most we can hope for, as James Madison wrote in *Federalist* 10, is “a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.” A popular enthusiasm for politics already exists in the U.S., and that pas-

sion entails a desire to see one’s values prevail in law. The proper channel for this kind of passion is a legislature. By their very nature, legislatures give voice to many views and are inefficient at promulgating decisive action. Legislatures are timid and consensus-seeking—or in a better light, they are deliberative and cautious. Either way, they do not quickly give energized factions among the people what they want.

Legislatures break up the conceptually monolithic popular will. They give it enough play that revolutionary frustration does not easily arise, yet the legislative process is so tedious that passion cools even as it seeks to realize its goals. No wonder Congress is so full of mediocrity. When legislatures are bypassed by courts or the executive, however, an opposite phenomenon occurs. Unpopular court decisions, because they give no voice to the public, generate tremendous resentment—as *Roe* and the civil-rights decisions of the Warren Court amply demonstrated. The executive, on the other hand—including not only the president but the efficient (relative to the legislature) agencies at his command—gives expression to popular mania all too readily. Again, 9/11 is a good example: the crisis stoked popular emotions, and the executive harnessed those emotions to create an extraordinary array of new powers.

Fundamentally, however, the root of republican evils lies in the individual character. The state’s efforts to shape that character can only be counterproductive. Instead, what is to be desired is strong religion that construes natural and divine law as checks upon personal political action rather than authorizations for it. In a democracy or republic, the Christian should pay less heed to Tom Paine and more to St. Augustine’s *City of God*. ■

Daniel McCarthy is TAC’s senior editor.

Shepherd Watch

AS SOON AS I STEP DOWN from the bus, out of the plastic yellow light, darkness and silence descend like heavy curtains. The street where I grew up is blanketed in night: the houses hide their faces behind their wings, and only the thin voices of crickets and cicadas keep me company.

This isn't how I remember our street. When I was little it seemed noisy and alive at night—parties down the block, dogs and sirens and the tidal rush of D.C. traffic down 16th Street. Shepherd Park in those days was feral suburbia, an enclave of apple trees and drug deals, lilacs and car thefts. It was shady in both senses of the word.

Now the fences are higher, and the cops finally scared off the dealer across the street. D.C. is marginally more competent—winters are no longer bring-your-own-snowplow—and shockingly more expensive. Our little street is hushed, held in suspense like a rocking cradle. Even the azaleas seem more tasteful now: no more camp clashing purple next to orange next to pink. The elementary school got new playground equipment after the year when the slide had no slide, turning it into a diving platform with mulch instead of water. I remember hiding in the old equipment, with sun baking the battered metal, burning my knees when I wasn't careful.

The school was Afrocentric, with an almost entirely black student population. To this day I can't name a single white boy I went to school with. We learned the seven Kwanzaa virtues; I am relieved that parents prefer to name their girls after *imani* (faith) and *nia* (purpose), rather than, say, "cooperative economics." I don't remember much

racial tension, but then, I was a deeply self-centered child and weird enough that my skin color was not one of the obvious targets of teasing. I do recall one teacher asking me, essentially, "Does 'bumpin' mean 'good'?" (Yes.) When I was very young, I thought most people in America were black, like all the authority figures in my world except for my parents and President Reagan. I got the good parts of black childhood culture—handclap rhymes and "Honey, I Love," double-dutch and the dozens, all my candied memories—without the burden. I didn't hear about having to be excruciatingly careful with the cops, about "good hair" and the paper-bag test until much later.

In the fall, the Japanese maples flared red, heat lightning shook the sky, and I started thinking about my Halloween costume. I was a melodramatic child, with a mossy tendency toward deliberate obscurity. One year I trick-or-treated as "the ghost of a wolf." No matter how bizarre my disguise, I always hoped someone would recognize me, open the door and know instantly who I was supposed to be. Of course, this never happened. Still, I loved Halloween: loved wandering in the acrid night, my costume like a secret shouted in a private language. A mask is above all an attempt to communicate, to create and reshape meaning over the silence of skin.

Shepherd Park is crowded between Rock Creek Park on the west and Maryland to the east and north. On a spring night, as my father nosed the car down into a fog-hung valley west of home, we might see a deer cropping grass by the roadside in a flurry of cherry blossoms. Go in the other direction and the night finally makes noise, amid Georgia

Avenue's beauty salons, Caribbean take-outs, and liquor stores. ("Last Liquor in D.C." is a geographical rather than apocalyptic advertisement.) To the north, the signs are now in Amharic, and the Sunday buses fill with light-skinned, high-cheekboned women in white dresses and headscarves, on their way to the Orthodox churches.

Home's southern border was less well-defined. I'm never sure how far south you have to follow Georgia before you're in somebody else's neighborhood. Once you get past the caesura of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, every syllable of the street comes to vivid and variable life. Partiers spill over the boundary of their stoop, with a red plastic cup of beer in one hand and the stroller handle in the other. A dreadlocked boy, in a black T-shirt with white print reading GIRL, ducks into a fish shop with his friends.

A knot of older black men sits on the yellow curb at the edge of a parking lot. They watch me go by, and we attempt to exchange the casual, don't-mind-me glances of city dwellers, but I calibrate the length of my glance or the quirk of my lips incorrectly and convey something I don't feel. One of the men says dryly, fightless and unhumbled, "Don't be scared, ma'am. We ain't gonna hurt you." I don't remember what I said in return, something quick and clumsy.

The night is a map of different kinds of silence—from the settled hush of leafy streets to the blank defeat of miscommunication. I wish I had a mask to speak the words my skin can't say. ■

Eve Tushnet is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. She blogs at <http://eve-tushnet.blogspot.com>.