

Responses to
“Transcendence and Society” by Jürgen Gebhardt
and
“The Priority of Existence in Medieval Political Thought” by James Greenaway

Glenn Hughes
(St. Mary’s University)

I will speak initially to the paper by Professor Gebhardt, and then say a few words about Professor Greenaway’s paper.

It seems to me Professor Gebhardt has done an first-rate job of concisely and accurately summarizing a critical need, and a process that is slowly groping its way, within the world of political science. This is the need to reconsider and properly appreciate the formative role of religious experience, religious consciousness, and religion in general in political life—in *all* political life, including that of modern and modernizing societies. As he points out, the idea that there is a purely secular or world-immanent political reality is a fallacy. What there is—and what political scientists must address if they are to do their job—is an ever-present “religio-political complex.” Political analysts of progressivist, secularist persuasion who have grudgingly accepted that their field of study must take seriously the religious dimension in global politics still tend, of course, to relegate religious motivation and activity to the realm of superstition and irrational belief, as opposed to the “supposedly objective rational and natural world” defined by positivist science. As Professor Gebhardt points out, this is a false dichotomy, based on a naïve philosophical anthropology, that “forces upon the symbolically articulated cosmos of human experience a bifurcation that is empirically unwarranted and destroys the morphological unity of the realm of human being.”

Since I am in agreement on all major points with this paper, I will just say a few words that expand on a few of its topics.

First: Professor Gebhardt decries the influential approach within political science that analytically marginalizes the 19th and 20th century messianic revolutionary movements and the resultant totalitarian regimes of the last century by considering them to be “pseudo-religious” rather than genuinely religious movements. His point, which I want to underscore in emphatic agreement, is that real religious experiences and sentiments reside at the center of these movements and regimes, despite their self-interpretations as purely world-immanent phenomena involving purely world-immanent human beings moving within a purely world-immanent reality toward a purely world-immanent goal. Their guiding experiences and goals may be said to be religious, not institutionally of course, but *existentially*, because human consciousness, being co-constituted by transcendent divine reality, is always motivated by an awareness of a perfect goodness and truth that transcends the finite realm. Human questioning and desire, and the struggle to find secure political shelter against the doubts and anxieties of mortal existence, is always moved by an affective orientation guided by awareness of and desire for an absolute truth and goodness that in truth is divine. This of course is why the leaders of such movements become deified. To use Martin Buber’s language: for true followers, Mao was, existentially speaking, related to *as* the eternal Thou. This is not “pseudo-religiosity,” it is deformed and demonic religiosity, since it is the fruit of an actual, if mismanaged, awareness of, passion for, and orientation toward divine transcendence.

Second: the need for political science to understand that political life is a “religio-political complex” is connected to the need for political scientists to analyze modern global developments in the context of the implicit and explicit *theologies of history* that have guided and continue to guide major actors and movements in the contemporary global political drama. The shock, consternation, uproar, and scramble for analytical explanations in the wake of 9/11

rarely advanced as far as recognizing that one cannot understand radical Islamist political movements—including those that are currently roiling Egypt and other Mid-Eastern locales—without grasping that the relevant motives and goals are embedded in religio-political consciousnesses that are aware, however inchoately or sophisticatedly, of their participation in a drama of history, and that the operative interpretation of that drama is finally theological. If one wishes to speak of a global “clash” in this context, it is above all a clash of theologies of history—and until political scientists bring a deep understanding of philosophies and theologies of history into their analytical perspectives, they will be weak interpreters of the global political scene.

Third, and finally: Professor Gebhardt performs a valuable service in describing briefly the quite recent, post-Kantian emergence of the concept of “transcendence” and its related concept of “immanence” for use in philosophical, theological, and political analyses. What I would like to say about this emergence is this: it represents a crucial step in all these fields, because it introduces a properly scientific term—or rather, pair of terms—that, as science requires, is explanatory and exegetical, rather than descriptive and exhortatory. “Transcendence” means, very exactly: a realm of meaning, or reality, that is not intrinsically conditioned by space and time. “Immanence” is reality that is intrinsically conditioned by space and time. Political science needs such precise terminology if it is to analyze the religio-political complex of human living. It is helpful, of course, when postmodern philosophers and others refer to, say, the “presence of the absence of presence.” But that is an existential-poetic way of evoking insight into transcendence. As writers such as Marcel and Jaspers, Levinas and Voegelin have shown, the concepts of *transcendence* and *immanence* are needed in philosophical and political science.

I haven't left myself much time to respond to James Greenaway's paper, so I will focus my response on one thought about it, after offering a brief impression of the paper as a whole. It is a long, detailed, excellent paper on the developing recognition in medieval political life and thought and legal thinking of the "existential authority of persons" as a third "center of authority" beyond the Gelasian dual authorities of *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, of church authority and imperial or state authority. In the context of this discussion, Greenaway's treatments of the contributions of Ockham and Aquinas toward the recognition of the existential authority of persons, as illuminated by the Christian understanding and valuing of persons as such; of the emerging interpretation of *ius naturale* as the subjective rights of individual persons; of Aquinas's differentiation of four kinds of law; and of what might be called the commandment of love as an immeasurable value that exceeds even the obligations of political justice—all are lucid and, as far as I can discern, accurate.

Now for my thought. I believe that the phrase "existential authority" might contain some ambiguity, from a historical perspective. From certain comments in his paper, one might gain the impression that Greenaway is suggesting that only in medieval times does there emerge a recognition of the political significance of an existential authority grounded in the insight that persons belong to and within an order that radically transcends them. In his closing paragraph he writes: "Medieval thought has bequeathed to us the notion that man finds his beginning and his beyond in the immeasurable, the ineffable, the non-existent" and that it "is in loving openness to the luminosity in existence that politics and law find their proper place." (30) My thought is: That particular notion was not initially bequeathed to us by medieval thought. We know already from Plato, in fact, that humanly conscious existence is grounded in and oriented toward "the immeasurable, the ineffable, the non-existent"—specifically, in the transcendent Idea of the

Good “beyond being”—and that it is in loving openness to the luminosity of existence, such as in the loving openness of Socrates, in relation to which both politics and law find their proper orientation. The difference is that the Platonic insight is still embedded in hierarchical assumptions regarding the existential status of persons. Existential authority and its political relevance is indeed recognized, but in terms of the exceptional person—Socrates, or the *spoudaios*—whose existential authority is not based on personhood as such. Perhaps the development Greenaway traces in medieval thought is the long-in-gestation emergence into political and legal life of certain consequences of the specifically Christian insight into the equal spiritual value, and thus natural rights, of *all* persons, rather than the initial appearance within political consciousness and life of an existential authority *per se*.