My title is really too broad. There are many religions and many ways they might connect with public life. Indeed the phrase “public life” is itself very broad. It certainly will include the political, but there is or should be much more to the public realm than the political. It is a deformation of public life if everything public is political. Many areas of public life should be seen as independent of politics, even producing a counterbalance to the political through the autonomous institutions spawned in and by those areas. These areas should include the law, the arts, sport, the military, education and much else besides. In the modern world much blurring of boundaries goes on between the political and the rest of public life. This is objectionable for all sorts of reasons which would have seemed obvious to nineteenth-century thinkers such as J.S. Mill, and should be obvious to us for different reasons, following our experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism. After all, totalitarianism is precisely the move on the part of the state to bring everything within its own control and direction.

Nonetheless the state and politics are necessary and desirable even as providing a framework in which people can lead peaceful and orderly lives, taking responsibility for what is rightfully theirs, pursuing their own projects and seeking their own salvation. Action by the state through the political process is also necessary on occasion to remove obstacles to liberty and opportunity, and also to give some legal backing to what the society as a whole regards as the basic conditions necessary for living together as a society. Of course, putting things like that may be consistent either with a great deal of state activity and regulation or with very little. My own position is a pluralist one in which the state and politicians should exercise far more care than they normally do in taking on themselves what is better seen as the prerogative of individuals, of their families and of autonomous institutions and organisations.

It is pluralist in two directions, however. There should first be a plurality of sources of power and influence in a society: the autonomous-institutions point. Second, it is pluralist in a more fundamental sense. While each of us might want to defend a particular view of life as being the right one or the best (for all, even), I believe that no one has such a comprehensive monopoly of wisdom as to have the right to impose that view on everyone else; this follows in part from a belief in human fallibility, which can be expressed in either secular or religious terms. So within the limits imposed by the very fact of a group of people living together, individuals should be free to follow and develop their own philosophies of life, including religious ones.

What those limits to freedom might be will no doubt vary from one society and from one mentality to another. Even within the broadly liberal conception of society presupposed here there will be differing conceptions of the limits of the acceptable in different times and places. Even within a very liberal or pluralist conception of society there will be some very specific limitations on what people might be allowed to do stemming directly from a joint acceptance of what will allow groups and individuals to pursue their own higher-level philosophies of life. In other words, there will have to be a degree of live-and-let-live on contentious issues arising from competing philosophies of life, which would condemn—and even legislate to prevent—actions which conspire to undermine the liberties enjoyed by all. To take some specific examples, we should condemn the bombing of abortion clinics (even if we are fiercely opposed to abortion); we should ensure that novels and cartoons can be published without fear of reprisals, even though we find them offensive and some find them blasphemous; and we should be on our guard against creeping censorship through the implicit acceptance that some areas are off limits to academic inquiry.

What I have to say derives from a specific reading of the Christian tradition, and from attempts within that tradition to find a modus vivendi with...
the secular world. But I will not be too disturbed if some modern Christians disagree with my conclusions, because there are trends within Christianity which strike me as part of that very swallowing up of everything in the political which I was criticising a couple of paragraphs ago.

A core element of religion is the relationship between the believer and God; indeed I am tempted to say that this is the key element, at least in the type of religion I am interested in. So what I say here will not apply to conceptions of religion, such as that proposed in at least part of the Old Testament, where the focus is on a chosen people rather than on saved individuals, and even less to that expounded by Durkheim in which, when primitive peoples worship their god, what they are actually worshipping is the tribe itself. Obviously in such essentially communal interpretations of religion there will be different accounts of religion and public life and also of the relationship between the individual believer and his god from the one I am here developing.

With this clarification, we can say that what is ultimately at stake in religion as I am taking it is the care of the individual soul, the turning of the soul away from fantasy and towards reality, and in Christian (as in Platonic) terms the soul is understood as having a destiny which transcends this life. In Christian mythology Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God, to be sure, but the kingdom was not of this world. It was hidden, like a mustard seed, and grew in the hearts and in the community of believers. Jesus’s kingdom was distinguished in this respect from the kingdoms and communities of this earth.

On my understanding of Christianity, however, religion has all sorts of public implications in the sense that it imposes on us social duties. But these duties arise from the sacredness of each of us as individuals and from the individual transcendent destiny of each of us. It is because other people are sacred, individually, that we have duties to them, and because I am sacred, individually, that I have responsibilities to myself and others. In this sense religion is not essentially social in a worldly sense, and should not be seen as attempting to produce a political settlement on earth. From the point of view of the believer it is essentially individualistic, not in the sense that it is selfish, but in the sense that it is primarily concerned with the worth and fate of each of us as individuals, and how each of us responds to God’s transcendent self-revelation breaking in on us from outside time. Each of us, as an individual, needs faith and repentance, as the basis of the religious life. Each of us enters the world alone and leaves alone, and religion must focus on these moments of ultimate loneliness, particularly the last, as the point at which, pace John Donne, each man is very much an island, confronting in his nakedness his Maker. Religion is about the turning of the soul in preparation for this moment, and that is something each one of us has to do alone, even if it can be done only with the help of divine grace and from within a Christian community, and even if, once turned, we are helped by the community of the Church militant, journeying with that Church in the hope and expectation of ultimate membership of the Church triumphant.

The ethic which largely underlies contemporary Western societies, however, is that of liberal individualism. Some would see this philosophy as essentially secular, as arising in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. No doubt the prevailing political philosophy today tends to be a somewhat uneasy agglomeration of Enlightenment notions of human rights and of a broadly utilitarian approach to ethical and political questions. For all their differences both utilitarianism and human rights philosophies, by taking the individual (individual rights, individual pleasure and pain) as their starting point, feed naturally into the politics of liberal democracy. And both utilitarianism and theories of human rights in their secular forms will differ from religious views in making no appeal to a transcendent source of value or of any notion of the sacredness of the individual that cannot be analysed in terms of this world.

By contrast, as with Socrates in his prison, the religious view will see life as a journey through this life to a better world, provoked and borne up by intimations of transcendence on the way. While this view is not essentially communitarian, as I have already argued, the individual on his or her pilgrimage through the secular world will need to be supported by communities in various ways. First there will need to be a religious community which transmits and develops the religious message, and supports the believer on the journey, but there will also need to be the secular community within which the religious quest takes place. It is here that we see an important role for the state or political authority,

From the perspective of the religious life the state will be seen as necessary to provide a settled and secure order within which the religious life and community can flourish and develop.
even from the religious point of view. According to the Western-liberal concept of politics, a key role of the state is to provide security for those who live within it. This, of course, means protection of life and property within—and defence against threats from without. From the perspective of the religious life the state will be seen as necessary to provide a settled and secure order within which the religious life and community can flourish and develop.

But there is also a potential tension between church and state, especially if the state is secular. The religious perspective, being transcendent and appealing to a divine and timeless authority, will also provide a yardstick by which other institutions, regimes and customs can be judged. Christ’s authority is not of this world, and because it is not of this world, but of a higher authority altogether, it stands in judgment over this world. In particular, it will judge the actions of the secular state unfavourably if these actions are seen as compromising or undermining the sacredness of the individual—if, for example, the state in any way seems to be seriously abusing individuals for its own ends. From the point of view of Christianity, it is never expedient that one man dies for the people.

So is it ever expedient that one terrorist is tortured or sent back to where he is likely to be tortured? Is it ever expedient that an old person is quietly and gently disposed of, or a disabled foetus aborted, or embryos manufactured for research? Obviously these areas will be of central importance to religious moralists, and may well bring them into disagreement with a prevailing public ethic of utilitarianism and the prevailing politics of administrative convenience. Conflict of this sort should not seem surprising, when one reflects just how demanding the idea of the sacredness of the individual is, nor should we be shocked that others find this ethic inconvenient. What would be more shocking would be a religious collapse in the face of contrary public opinion, or perhaps more so, in the face of the convenient pragmatism so easily favoured by legislators and bureaucrats (though what not collapsing might entail in a secular or pluralist state is not always easy to determine).

As I have already suggested, it should not involve bombing abortion clinics even if we think abortion is wholly wrong. Living in a free society, as well as affording all of us freedoms, imposes restrictions on what individuals can do to others in their society even for what might seem the best and morally most urgent of reasons. On the other hand I am not at all clear what someone wholly opposed to embryo research on religious grounds should do if he or she were invited to go on the British government’s Human Embryology and Fertilisation Authority. That is unlikely, I admit, and liable to happen only through some oversight on the part of the bureaucrats. If it were to happen nonetheless, should it be seen by that individual as a chance to prevent some harm, or rather as collusion in what should not be given any support or credibility at all?

But this is a practical question. It does not impinge on the right and duty of the Church to speak out clearly against what it believes to be seriously wrong, though even here there might be disagreements about just how this speaking out should be pursued. One might think here of what strikes critics of the Catholic Church as pusillanimity or worse in Nazi Germany, but what might also be seen as a degree of prudence which did not actually compromise the Church’s underlying stance. (This had been very clearly set out in the encyclical Mit brennender Sorge written, incidentally, by Pacelli before he became Pope Pius XII). Whatever we might think are the practical implications in specific cases, however, it is clear that a religious standpoint is one from which we will judge other values and decisions. The religious citizen or subject will see rulers as themselves under a higher law. This higher law—maybe in the medieval sense of natural law—is one to which we are all subject, whether in the political sense we are rulers or subjects.

In this understanding the religious person will take issue with the Roman view of the state, that in which the emperor is the sole source of law and divinely endorsed, and also with legal positivism, in which there is no law other than that which is determined according to correct constitutional procedures. He will also stand aloof from the more sophisticated form of legal positivism of some contemporary American theorists of law, who want to judge actual decisions of the courts and actual legislation in terms of what they, the theorists, take to be those principles which can be seen as best explaining the rights and liberties enshrined in American and British law. From the point of view of a religious thinker, the spirit of these laws (assuming we can identify what is meant) is itself a human artefact, and may be found wanting from a timeless, transcendent perspective. This sense of being found wanting will only be increased when it emerges that the spirit in question, as discovered by the theorists, turns out to be precisely that of the contemporary secular progressivism which religious people often find lax on questions of fundamental human values.

The sense that the religious community has values which are not necessarily identical with those of the secular power—and which in any case derive not from *raisons d’état* but from a different source altogether—allows us to rule out from the
religious point of view a number of possible relationships between religion and state. One, which we may call Kemalism (after Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the modern Turkey) would be where the church (or mosque in this case) is allowed to exist, but where its role is conceived as being essentially to support the secular power. We may indeed have problems with fundamentalist Islam (to which we will turn shortly), but one can hardly quarrel with devout Muslims who find Kemalism objectionable. If this is what living in a secular state is to mean, it is not surprising that religious people might reject secularism.

Staying in that part of the world, we might also glance at the Orthodox notion of the Turkokratia. This was a doctrine developed during the time of the Ottoman empire, when it seemed to the Orthodox hierarchy that survival depended on what amounted to collusion with the Turkish authorities. Again, there may have been reasons for this. But one cannot help reflecting on the extent to which the Orthodox hierarchies of the Eastern Bloc were prepared to collaborate with the authorities in communist times. All this may have been a legacy from the spirit of Turkokratia (which may not be extinct even after the fall of communism).

But Kemalism and Turkokratia are by no means the only ways religions can be compromised in their dealings with the state. A more difficult example, and one which may take us closer to home, might be the way the Catholic Church in general—and according to their enemies, the Jesuits in particular—were prepared to condone scandalous behaviour from Louis XIV and his court in order to give the Church an easy ride in France. Of course, it wasn’t put quite like that. The argument was that allowing the King concessions on sexual matters which would not be allowed to ordinary believers would be the means to the salvation of many thousands of those ordinary believers whose religious practice could thus be secured by maintaining the position of the Church in France. Of course, it wasn’t put quite like that. The argument was that allowing the King concessions on sexual matters which would not be allowed to ordinary believers would be the means to the salvation of many thousands of those ordinary believers whose religious practice could thus be secured by maintaining the position of the Church in France. It has to be said that this was ultimately a self-defeating practice even from the pragmatic point of view. Having compromised its sexual morality to suit the monarch, the Church was then in a weak position when it came to commenting adversely on the pointless and utterly immoral wars which disfigured the later parts of Louis’s reign (ironically at a time when, once married to the formidable and formidably pious Mme de Maintenon, Louis actually began to behave far better in his personal life). This example aside, maybe it could be asked whether there is not a degree of Jesuiticalness in the behaviour of the churches today in the sense of too easy an acceptance of the nostrums of secular morality. Observers quickly gain a sense that many church leaders are relativistic and flexible about moral matters, while others who stick to what they conceive of as timeless truths are made to seem obstinate and unfeeling.

It is easy to understand and up to a point to sympathise with the tendency of religious people to seek accommodations with the secular world. After all, even within an institution claiming divine guidance, doctrine does develop, and not all insights from the secular realm are misguided, even from a religious point of view. There is always the genuine possibility that some of what religious people take as being divinely inspired is itself simply an aspect of contemporary and local practice. In fact there may be a far worse temptation for the religious person thinking about the relationship between the church and the world than engaging in casuistry or attempting to sympathise with or reach accommodations with the better and more humane elements of the secular world. That temptation at first sight seems to be the opposite position: instead of making religion consonant with the world, one tries to make the world in the image of religion by setting up some form of theocracy, in which the rules and practices of the public realm are themselves determined by religious edict.

There have, of course, been theocracies in Christian history, notably the Geneva of John Calvin and the Muhlhausen of Thomas Müntzer (much admired in East Germany, by the way). There are also the attempts to set up Islamic states, run by religious authorities, such as those of the early caliphas and those in Iran today and Afghanistan under the Taliban. The very notion of the Dar-al-Islam, central to Islamic thought, envisages a pure society run on Koranic lines, in which there are no distinctions, except of administrative divisions of labour, between the religious, the legal and the political. During the Christian Middle Ages and for some time subsequently the Papacy itself was a secular ruler (though it is not clear to me that there was any rigorous attempt there to set up a theologically inspired regime).
Theocracy as used here refers to a political set-up in which the government is in the hands of religious leaders by virtue of their being religious leaders, who then attempt to impose a theologically-inspired regime on the people. Its advocates would doubtless say that such a regime would be the best possible one because its precepts and aims would be pure, unworldly and inspired by transcendent values and insights. To go back to the kingdom of the New Testament, could we not, by political means, achieve a society founded on the virtues of the New Testament and inspired by the spirit of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount? In such a society people would be more just, more humane, more equal, more virtuous and more compassionate; oppression would be absent, and the people, freed by the nature of the regime from the pursuit of selfish ends, would do what was best from a timeless point of view, because, encouraged by the politico-cum-religious authorities, they would see that it was the best and they felt happy in its pursuit.

What is involved in theocracy as so defined has a striking resemblance to Plato’s Republic, ruled by philosopher kings in the interests of virtue and with an eye on the ideal world above. Theocracy here would not, of course, involve the rigid class stratification we find in Plato, but even without that it would still suffer from many of the defects of Plato’s vision, the best once more being the enemy of the good. Even if we are religious, we should be careful here. Indeed, we should be particularly careful not to be seduced by the perennial excuse offered by advocates of utopian visions from Plato himself onwards (assuming for the moment that Plato was actually arguing in favour of his republic)—the excuse that when, as inevitably happens, a utopian project ends in tears and worse, the fault is not with the vision, but with a specific, flawed attempt to implement it.

This excuse is a monumental mistake. The theocratic vision is itself fatally flawed, and flawed in the first instance for a good theological reason, namely that of original sin. Human beings are imperfect and so are human institutions, manned and used as they are by human beings. This fundamental fact experience has shown us to be universally the case even aside from the actual doctrine of original sin, and the point ought to be granted even by those who do not accept original sin in its theological sense. Even if an institution is founded in the name of faith or virtue, enshrining within itself the highest principles and standards, it will not be immune from corruption. This point applies to churches too, as history amply demonstrates. Looking at history and keeping original sin in mind, the wonder is not that the Catholic Church in 2015, say, is imperfect in all sorts of ways; the wonder rather is that it has moved away from some of the grosser imperfections of the medieval church.

In fact, leaving aside a theological belief in the divine guidance of the church, we might be able to offer a purely historical explanation for the morally improved state of the Catholic Church today compared to the fifteenth century. For much of the medieval period, the church was a powerful secular ruler as well as the religious authority; monasteries and bishoprics were often politically powerful and rich in their own right. As institutions of power they gave those heading them careers of immense wealth and prestige. So major religious institutions and even the Church itself became prizes to be seized and fought over (much as the big state bureaucracies are in our own day). In being prizes to be seized and fought over, they were easily diverted from their ostensible aims, and began to be run mainly for the benefit of those running them, as we saw with the Papal states (and as we see in today’s nationalised health service in Britain). In short the medieval Papacy itself became an Italian princedom, in behaviour little different from the other states of central Italy—though actually having a bigger influence throughout Christendom than its neighbours, owing to its universalist religious pretensions, its claims to a divine mandate, and its wealth from the donations of the faithful.

Once it became a secular power, the Church was potentially more dangerous than a purely secular state, precisely because of the divine authority it claimed for itself. That gave its adherents and leaders an extra tool, so to speak, in the furtherance of their ambitions, which in turn was sure to attract to its ranks people whose own ambitions were far from those of the Church in its pure state. To take another example, people are sometimes surprised that the Taliban and the Iranian theocracy, or perhaps more accurately, people acting in their name, indulge in great cruelty. They should not be; the power claimed by these theocracies in the name of Allah makes it inevitable that psychopaths of all sorts will be attracted to them, in much the same way that a communist system will reveal and release hundreds of little Lenins in every village and commune, and a fascist system similar outgrowths of little Hitlers. Worst of all, once a church has been subsumed into a theocracy, it will cease to perform the essentially critical role it has in society when it is clearly separate and independent. Far from being the greatest role religion could play in our imperfect world, theocracy is actually its greatest temptation.

This can be illustrated by the changing attitude
of Dante to the Guelphs and the Ghibellines of his time. The Guelphs were the party in Italy (and Florence) who were broadly in favour of the Papacy and its power, while the Ghibellines favoured the establishment in Italy of rule by the emperor. As a Florentine leader, Dante was initially a Guelph, but his experiences in Rome and Florence and then in exile convinced him that a politically powerful Papacy would inevitably suffer from all the defects sketched above. Not for nothing does Dante consign a number of Popes to hell, including his arch-enemy and contemporary Pope Boniface VIII. They used the Papacy and its power as if it were a secular principedom.

But secular power, which is bound to corrupt and compromise the Church once they become intertwined, does have a positive role to play in stopping wars and in ameliorating discord and crime. And it could do so under a wise and powerful sovereign. Because Dante hoped Italy might fall under the beneficent rule of the putative Emperor Henry VII of Luxemburgh, he moved towards the Ghibelline cause after his exile from Florence. These hopes were dashed with Henry’s death, but Dante’s own experiences allowed him to develop in The Divine Comedy a picture of the clear separation of the roles of church and state—the church being concerned with salvation (only) and the state with providing the conditions of peace and security which we (and the church) all need in our journey through the world.

Actually there was nothing very new in Dante’s political vision. Writing on the papal reforms instigated by Hildebrand (Gregory VII) in the eleventh century, which attempted to sever the close relationships which then existed between church and state, the historian Reginald Lane Poole wrote (in Illustrations of the History of Medieval Thought and Learning, 1884):

It is perfectly clear that if the church was to exercise that sway which all Christians agreed it ought to exercise over the consciences of men, it must be as free as possible from those ties which bound it to the secular state.

Further, as Gregory regarded civil government as a human institution deeply polluted by its sinful origin, there could be no preferred type of regime, such as monarchy for example (so much for the divine right of kings). Indeed, “granted only the superiority of ecclesiastical power, there was no concession she [the Church] would not make in favour of popular rights”. Also we find in the writings of Manegold of Lautenbach, a follower of Hildebrand, a eloquent statement of the theory of the social contract as any in the seventeenth or eighteenth century.

Are we now seeing a new kind of tension in church–state relations, however, in what strikes me as an aggressively strident official secularism, lambasting what is referred to as “religious fundamentalism”? I am thinking here of attacks on what in Britain are called faith schools, whether Christian or Muslim, and also of the British government’s use of charity and equality legislation to confine the activities of religious charities, such as adoption agencies, within its own vision of the good life.

At the most general level the question raised by faith schools is that of the responsibility for the education of children. Where does this primarily lie, in the hands of parents or vested in the state? We can all follow Mill (in On Liberty, Chapter 5) in agreeing that the state has a duty to ensure that education actually takes place, while insisting like Mill that the responsibility for carrying out and directing that education ought to be that of the parents who have brought their children into the world. Like Mill one could argue, on broadly liberal grounds, that a general State education [would be] a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another … [and that] in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it [would] establish a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.

Without going into details, let me record my impression that in Britain as the state has regulated education more and more (particularly since it nationalised the curriculum and exams twenty years ago), what Mill says has been largely borne out in experience. The state clearly has no monopoly of wisdom (or even no wisdom at all) on educational knowledge, which is Mill’s point. One could add to Mill’s refreshing pluralism here the more specifically religious conviction (which I share) that children do not belong to the state or its agencies.

Further, if the state insists on funding education in such a way as to put private education out of the hands of most families, then it will have to
countenance not just the existence of religious schools but schools of other sorts. In equity, if there is parental demand, it will have to fund them too. After all, families of Catholics, Mormons, Muslims and Scientologists all pay taxes just as much as the families of agnostics, atheists and secularists.

What, however, if some of these schools teach Islam or creationism? I am inclined to ask simply, “What if they do?” and leave it at that. But that then raises the question: just how deep does our liberal pluralism go? I am assuming here that there are limits to what is tolerable, given what I said earlier about mutual tolerance. So if a school was manifestly abusing children physically or psychologically as part of a supposed religious ritual, or urging its pupils to train as terrorists, then action should be taken, swiftly and firmly, to stop this. But teaching that Islam is the only true religion and that ideally its remit should include the political, or that the world began a mere 10,000 years ago—these claims hardly fall into those categories. Do they in any uncontentious sense amount to abuse at all?

Maybe they do. But rather than the state issuing lists of doctrines proscribed in all schools, or issuing a list of its own approved “values” to be inculcated in all schools, we will do better just to accept that there may be at the margins a degree of irresolvable conflict between religion and whatever is the prevailing ethos. Actually I suspect that with mutual goodwill all sorts of reasonable compromises are possible in this area, and that they will in the main be made. After all, children of creationist parents will mostly do public exams in science, and plenty of Muslims are prepared to live under the Dar-al-harb and to engage in its political processes. So the discomfort many of us might feel in the area of schooling can in the main be ameliorated. But where compromises do not seem to be possible, a genuinely pluralist, liberal society ought to act permissively towards religious dissidents, just as religious people should act permissively towards the existence of abortion clinics.

On whether Christian adoption agencies should be forced to accept homosexual couples as prospective adopters (in the UK) or whether religious institutions should be compelled to finance sexual behaviour contrary to their beliefs (in the USA), the situation seems to me to be clearer. The state is simply abusing its power in forcing religious people either to act against their principles or not act at all, where what they want to do compromises no one’s freedom. After all, homosexuals are not being barred from adopting through non-religious agencies, nor church employees from purchasing contraceptives; so if it is a question of equality, the state has already secured that. But these cases set a wider and worrying precedent, in that in them the state is using the law to enforce a code of ethics which is in itself contentious. It goes too far beyond any general consensus on what is required for us as a society to live together to be a justifiable case for legislation.

Nor does the illiberal abuse of state power stop there. In Britain recently we have had the (Conservative) Education Secretary insisting that schools teach gay rights as part of the “fundamental British values” teachers are supposed to respect in their work. She did not make it clear what would happen to a teacher who told a class that he or she opposed gay marriage. Equally, under the protection of fundamental British values (a nostrum actually introduced to protect schools from the incursion of radical Islam) the British school inspectorate has criticised Jewish (!) schools for being insufficiently explicit about homosexuality and Christian schools for being insufficiently diverse in their approach to multiculturalism. The state and its agencies are thus using their power to enforce views on which there are honest and deep disagreements in the population. Taken far enough, such a state begins to look like its own church—a theocracy in reverse—imposing its doctrines on a surprised and perhaps alarmed people. We have already reached a point at which religious people should in all logic join forces with Millian liberals to shelter under the freedom Mill advocated and to protest at their violations by an over-mighty and illiberal state power.

Throughout this paper I have defended a pluralist view of society in which religion has a role to play distinct from that of the secular power or sovereign. Anticipations of this view can be found in the Middle Ages. It would be fascinating to think that the limited, pluralist state of Western democracy is itself the descendant of a powerful strain of medieval Christian thinking represented by Hildebrand, Manegold and Dante, at least in the limited role that strain accords to religion in the political realm. Given this, and given the contemporary examples we have just looked at, it would not be entirely unfitting if in these post-religious days, religion itself becomes a guardian or advocate of the classical liberal state and of its proper limits.

Anthony O’Hear is Garfield Weston Professor of Philosophy at the University of Buckingham, Director of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, and editor of the journal Philosophy.