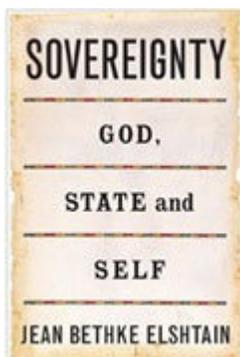


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Secular society sets us adrift from just society

by Ben Feuerherd



SOVEREIGNTY: GOD, STATE, AND SELF

By Jean Bethke Elshtain

Published by Basic Books, \$22

“Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God which is God’s,” declared Jesus, after examining two sides of a coin. Yet the questions raised by Jesus seem limitless. Is there one supreme sovereign power who reigns over the entire world? Is there a distinction between stately power and divine authority? Do the two overlap? Who gets the final say?

As popular thinking shifted throughout history, the answers to these questions did as well.

The Middle Ages, Jean Bethke Elshtain argues in her book *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*, newly published in paperback, was the period of dual swords -- the church and earthly political leaders competing for power over their constituents. This was not, as one may be inclined to believe, a period of theocracy.

Enlightenment thinking brought a further separation of church and state, with secular law, based on

reasoning, taking center stage. Today, Jesus might as well have been holding a mirror when raising a question about power in the world. Two thousand years after Jesus and a half-millennium after high medievalism, Elshtain argues, one earthly power now reigns supreme: the self.

The primary purpose of this book is to challenge modern secular thought.

To Elshtain, the idea that individuals are now the final authority and society is better off is completely backward. Because we no longer answer to the morality revealed to us by God and made sense of by theologians like Thomas Aquinas, society has not grown or matured. Her argument: By creating completely secular states and drifting into complete self-sovereignty we are moving further and further from a just order of society.

How in the world did we fall so far? Her answer is the essence of this book.

The 'story of the state,' she says, is usually told as a struggle between the forces of freedom and oppression, between Enlightenment and the 'Dark Ages,' between secular and church authority. The modern state was able to free itself from the shadow of clericalism through movements like the Enlightenment and the Reformation. No, Elshtain argues, warning to her theme, the secular state that emerged following the Middle Ages and the sovereign self that subsequently materialized from the secular state were not steps toward a more just and free society.

Nor were the 'dual swords' that ruled medieval society meant to be forged together, she argues. The sword of the temporal -- the political leaders -- and the sword of the spiritual -- the church leadership -- were never meant to be wielded by a single authority. This dichotomy faced challenges. Pope Boniface VIII, for example, believed both swords should be in the hands of the church, that a medieval king should have no power other than that granted to him by the pope. Church leaders like Boniface who attempted to assimilate power were struck down time and again.

Canon law was not the only legal system of the time, and as leaders from both sides of the dichotomy tried to overstep their bounds, they were checked by medieval civil law. Laws, Elshtain claims, were the 'little engine that never rested, an animated soul that infused the corporate body of Christendom.'

Human law, the product of reason and faith and modeled after the laws of God, is what separated medieval society from the absolutist states, and even the liberal democracies that later formed.

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Absolute monarchy is obviously contrary to the temporal and spiritual dualism that existed in medieval theology. Under absolutism, the monarch was now the sole sovereign leader and could act contrary to law if he saw fit.

The monarch could, in effect, act contrary to justice granted to the world by God.

But how can democracy, which by its nature -- or so we think -- is pluralistic, similarly be considered monistic? Because, Elshtain declares, public authority and human reason are the final arbiters, and there is no room to bring God or religion into public discourse. Little wonder, she writes, that society in a liberal democracy fails to match the duality of medieval life.

Finally, it was the individual who broke from the sovereign state to become the primary judge of ethics and morality.

So, Elshtain summarizes, the individual is no longer bound by the laws of God and is able, for the most part, to decide what is moral and acceptable in his or her own world. We now have the power to terminate a pregnancy or remove a feeding tube from an ailing relative -- two things Elshtain would definitely see as contrary to the order of society God wanted for individuals on Earth.

But are we better off now that this postmodern moral relativism has taken hold in society? Elshtain makes a moving case that we are drifting further from a correct order of society. She also makes her reader challenge norms we take for granted, not least that most of the progress we have made in the Common Era may be to our detriment.

Maybe moral relativism has taken too strong a hold on today's society. Maybe we should work toward laws that are more in tune to the laws of God. Or maybe Elshtain is asking too much of her audience.

It is hard to imagine a world where we can no longer be the king of our own castle. Our castle, after all, is not such a bad place.

[Ben Feuerherd is a freelance writer based in New York.]

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