

“Who will Rule, God or Man?” — Politics and the Sacred

By M. Ali Lakhani*

“Who will rule, God or man?”

This is the great constitutional question of human existence...

The perennial question is always whether we humans are to understand our presence on this earth as a vice-regency or trusteeship under the mandate of heaven and the divine commandments, or whether we must strive to emancipate ourselves from any higher dominion, with human supremacy as our ultimate aim.”

(Tage Lindbom)

A Principial Approach to Political Philosophy

“**W**ho will rule, God or man?” So begins *The Myth of Democracy* by the Swedish political philosopher, the late Tage Lindbom¹. The question posed by Lindbom lies at the heart of this essay because any discussion about politics leads inevitably to questions about the nature of the *polis*, and about the objectives of and criteria for government, and these in turn lead to metaphysical questions about human nature and the purpose and meaning of human existence. At core, questions about political philosophy require one to examine the underlying world view informing the conceptions which frame one’s thought.

An objection may immediately be noted: the terminology used by Lindbom in his formulation of the question about the governance of

* **Editorial Note:** This essay was written as a contribution to an anthology of essays which is planned to be published shortly by Oxford University Press under the provisional title, *Islamic Science, Political Philosophy and Economics: An Integrative Approach for the Physical and Social Sciences*. The other contributors are Osman Bakar, Waleed El-Ansary, and Adi Setia.

¹ Tage Lindbom, *The Myth of Democracy*, (William B. Erdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, UK, 1996), p18.

"God or man" may be unacceptable to many modern readers, embedding presuppositions about the existence and nature of God and of the "divine commandments". Might not these presuppositions dictate the only legitimate form of government to be a theocracy, thereby eliminating the so-called "separation of Church and State" which is so vital to many political philosophies in the world today? It is an understandable objection. Yet Lindbom's question remains valid, particularly if viewed a different way, where the metaphysical reality that he seeks to evoke is perceived beyond its semantic and theological limitations. The term 'God', which even theologically is a debated term, should be understood for our purposes as the underlying reality that pervades and transcends existence, and not in a particular theological or religious formulation that clothes that reality. The term 'divine' is better understood then as not merely a relativized or theological conception of deity, but as total reality in its most profound sense, representing that which is Absolute, Infinite and Perfect, the *summum bonum* of existence, whose imprint in contingent reality is termed the 'Sacred'². This conception of reality (denoted by terms meaning 'God' or 'divine' by theistic faith traditions such as the Abrahamic religions or Hinduism, and denoted by terms meaning 'Reality', 'Being' or 'Principle' by 'non-theistic' religions such as Buddhism or Taoism) is universal to all major traditions, and can be understood, if not accepted, by atheists and hard secularists alike. It is a conception that conforms to the notion of the *homo religiosus*, of Man as innately aware of his spiritual foundation, and as possessing as an attribute of his very 'nature' a sense of the sacred. Similarly the expression "divine commandments" can be understood to refer explicitly to the cardinal obligation of love, and implicitly to the metaphysical origin of that obligation³, which are common to all the faith traditions. In Christianity, these are referred to as the Supreme Commandments:

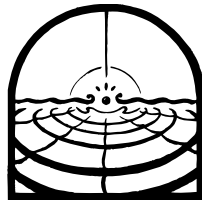
Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

(The Gospel of St. Matthew, 22:37-40).

² The term 'Sacred' is more clearly defined later in this essay.

³ Marco Pallis states that *the love of God contains the love of neighbors 'eminently', as cause contains effect*. From *The Sword of Gnosis*, edited by Jacob Needleman, Penguin Metaphysical Library, (Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1974), p71.

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

www.sacredweb.com