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Title: Mark Lilla and Hallowed Secularism

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Last Sunday (8/19), Mark Lilla, professor of the humanities at Columbia University, wrote the lead article for the New York Times Magazine, on the topic of religion and public life. He called the American system “the Great Separation”. His self-congratulatory thesis was that while America limits politics to eminently political issues, some people in the world—read Muslims—have regressed to the 16th century wars of religion, which center around God and salvation, which are, apparently, not eminently political issues. I was so angry with the article that I wrote the following letter to the New York Times. Since I have never had any luck getting a letter published in the New York Times, I am reproducing it here: To the Editor: It is rare for a well-known scholar to write an article for the New York Times at once arrogant and incoherent. But Mark Lilla managed it. (The Great Separation 8/19). Lilla's thesis is that in America we have chosen to limit politics to secular topics in order to eliminate religious strife. First, who is this we? Both Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, the author of the wall of separation metaphor, saw the conflict over slavery as God's judgment for national injustice. Did these two just not get the secular message? Second, what makes the secular nature of politics a matter of choice? Global warming is a political issue. But human greed destroying God's creation is also a religious issue. You don't get to decide ahead of time that politics excludes religion. Finally who says religion is a unique force for violence? It was unconvincing for Lilla to suggest that WWI and WWII were in any sense religiously based wars. They were not. Nor was the Cold War, which really did threaten the apocalypse Lilla wrongly attributes to religion. Nor was the disastrous American invasion of Iraq about religion. That war was either about spreading democracy or getting cheap oil. Maybe secularists should press for a separation between imperialism and politics rather than between religion and politics.