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April 2, 2011: The Great Separation

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Title: The Great Separation

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4/2/2011—Last night, my wife Patt and I listened to lectures 3 and 4 in The Teaching Company's Skeptics and Believers: Religious Debate in the Western Intellectual Tradition (listened, that is, after the dog chewed up the lecture disc we were going to watch). The series is taught by Grinnell Professor Tyler Roberts and it is quite good. Roberts ended the lecture by referring twice to "the great separation" from Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (2007). I think this is a mistake. Lilla blames the intertwining of religion and politics for the holocaust (what religion was Hitler again?). Lilla praises Locke and Hume for suggesting that religion and politics should be separate enterprises and criticizes naïve liberal theology for thinking that religion could contribute to politics without running the risk of fanaticism. I have written elsewhere of the truncated politics that results from Lilla. But his real error is not being pessimistic enough. People don't need religion to hate and kill each other. His mild politics makes the same mistake he attributes to mild religion—he imagines this is a way that can stave off murderous hatred. No mechanism can accomplish that—only the hard work of daily healthy political work. But Roberts was making a historical mistake in his use of Lilla. I often hear the assumption that the Establishment Clause enacted the separate realms theory. Government is one thing and religion is another. The separation that resulted from the end of the wars of religion in Europe in 1648 did begin to separate political life from the institutional church, and did begin to separate science from religious oversight, but it did not, and was not thought to, end God's concern with the justice practiced in human society. Just ask yourself this—did Thomas Jefferson believe that God would punish America for the sin of slavery? If so, there cannot be a separation between politics and God. That is the view of the founding generation, however we must adapt that view to our secular society. Here is what Jefferson said about slavery in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), and though he was notoriously inconsistent, I don't think he wavered here—"Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever."