

Maybe the West Isn't as Secular as We Thought

The West stands for secular law while Muslims want to impose a religious Sharia law, right?

Not so fast, says Remi Brague, professor of philosophy at the University of Munich. In his essay ["Are Non-Theocratic Regimes Possible?"](#), Brague argues, "The two conceptions of law that face each other [Western and Muslim] both rest on a *common* basis, which is the idea of a divine law." He maintains that Western and Muslim countries are both forms of that term so abhorrent to modern ears: "theocracy."

Crazy, huh? Mmm maybe... maybe not.

Usually when people hear the word "theocracy," they think of a government ruled over by a priestly caste or figure. The thing is, though, that a theocracy in this sense has rarely existed in either the Western or Islamic worlds.

Brague thinks a more useful understanding of theocracy is one in which a government's law is founded "on assumptions that are theological in origin." And in this sense, both Western and Muslim countries fit the bill.

Most of you well know that the Western world was built on the synthesis of Hellenism and Christianity. In both ideological realms, as Brague explains, law was seen as an attempt to imitate or reflect divine law. It was gleaned from conscience, which ancient and Christian sources agreed in seeing as "the trace in man of something divine."



According to Brague, religious assumptions are still present

in Western law today. He points out that, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, elections were held in Christian countries and monasteries based on the very idea that each person had a divinely-inspired conscience and thus could (theoretically) be counted upon to express the will of God. "Vox populi, vox Dei," as Alcuin wrote in the ninth century—"the voice of the people is the voice of God."

One could also point to the religious assumptions underlying the West's exalted principles of freedom and equality, which are originally rooted in the Christian understanding of God's creation and human beings' possession of the "image of God." Many thinkers have pointed out that—in spite of modern, secular hopes—the idea that people *are* and *should be* free and equal cannot be arrived at through a purely empirical process.

In the West, over the past two hundred years or so, we have attempted to disavow the religious underpinnings of our law and society. But though we disavow it in word, one starts to wonder: is it even possible in deed?