focused on particular texts, individuals or traditions with their exacting detail, even few of the more recent studies that represent the beginnings of openness to interdisciplinary conversation and experimentation, have provided as much provocation and heuristic power as has Harpham's book. It is the book's consistent but careful generalizability, the very thing that generally causes traditional scholarship in every field and discipline to groan and pout, that distinguishes the book. It is in making asceticism generalizable that is the book's lasting impact. Great and lasting impact will be felt especially upon those who, like the reviewer, have lived with the details in the trees for a time. Some among such types now welcome a light that provides a different view – a fuller, more expansive view of the forest and of more complex relations between many of the trees. In other words, Harpham has helped many so-called specialists in religious and theological studies see more sharply some of the complexities of the phenomenon of asceticism in general and the rhetorical and political relations between asceticisms. In persuasively and artfully subjecting asceticism to cultural criticism Harpham has provided a heightened window onto a complex phenomenon that now has the potential for aiding cross-cultural explorations about rhetorical and political formations and orientations. The limitations and vulnerabilities and criticisms that attend such explorations do not outweigh the possibilities for the expanded view and sharper understanding of a phenomenon that has endured in so much of the history of human consciousness and orientation. For challenging us with the possibilities all readers are in Harpham's debt.

The book should be read by all students of history of religion, theology, philosophy, cultural criticism, and interpretation theory.

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This book effectively challenges the reign of secularization theory in the interpretation of early modern political thought and, on a deeper level, contests the adequacy of secular and universalist rationalism in political theory itself.

Fundamental modern notions of political authority and legitimacy are typically grounded in the work of authors such as those treated here. Mitchell seeks to demonstrate that they constructed their theories not from universal reason alone, but from inferences about the particular import of biblical history. Such are the "threads that hold together the fabric of early modern
political thought" (18), as represented here by Luther, Hobbes, Locke and (at one remove) Rousseau. To ignore – or be ignorant of – the theological framework of early modern thought is to misrepresent these authors (for example, by identifying ahistorical social contract theory as their fundamental contribution), and perhaps thus inadvertently to deprive cherished principles of democracy and equality of their authoritative grounds.

As the title indicates, Mitchell’s authors, and Mitchell himself, hold that “the authorization for a politics of justice cannot stand on the faculty of reason alone”, but requires “another horizon of history which reason alone cannot grasp” (4). He points out that the lack of scholarly interest in the historical-mythic frameworks of explanation and interpretation in the thought of his authors is vastly disproportionate to its importance in their own work.

A major source of Mitchell’s orientation is Nietzsche, whom he quotes at the end: “Only a horizon ringed by myths can unify a culture. . . . Over against this, let us consider abstract man stripped of myth, abstract education, abstract mores, abstract law, abstract government; . . . a culture without any fixed and consecrated place of origin, condemned to exhaust all possibilities . . . .” (152)

In an era when God’s hiddenness or absence was increasingly felt, the authors studied here searched out new grounds for a “politically authoritative history” – history that “discloses the constitutive ground and situation in which human beings find themselves”, and “implores that this action be taken and not that, in order that the truth of the partially revealed and concealed God/nature not be violated” (133).

What Mitchell uncovers, then, is the irreducible mythic structure which authorizes early modern political thought, and by extension our own. The theories examined here shelter under master narratives that provide (borrowing from Clifford Geertz) both a “model of” the totality of things and a “model for” appropriate action in it. Thus, “the self must act in accordance with, and within the parameters set by, the truth of its authoritative history” (136).

Mitchell convincingly reads the work of the first three authors as political theologies (73). He sees as the “genius of Hobbes and Locke” – but Luther must be given equal credit here – “that they locate God close enough to authorize a form of political life, yet distant enough to assure that political conflicts are never ultimate conflicts” (131).

All Urgently seek to articulate what is normative about a particular political order even though God is hidden or absent: “That which is binding on all four authors is disclosed to the soul either beneath reason in faith (Luther), to reason from Revelation (Hobbes and Locke), or before reason through the heart (Rousseau).” (3) In each case, the soul is situated in a history (or rather a myth) that is “confirmable” through faith, revelation, or the heart – but “most emphatically . . . not by reason alone!” (18)