

interpretation

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Rational Theologians and Irrational Philosophers: A Straussian Perspective

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The coolness with which Leo Strauss's pioneering work has thus far been received in specifically Christian circles is attributable in part to the disarray that afflicts present-day theology but it also has much to do with the cultivated ambiguity of Strauss's stance and posture in regard to revealed religion. Theologians, who are not the least spirited of people, thrive on opposition but generally require a target at which they can take aim. Like politicians, they tend to be more at ease even with enemies—they have had more than their share of them over the centuries—than they are with people of whom they cannot tell for sure whether they are friends or enemies. The matter is further complicated by the absence of any thematic treatment of Christianity anywhere in Strauss's writings or of any extended commentary by Strauss on the works of an unmistakably Christian author. One must presume that Strauss's demonstrated awareness of the most compelling arguments against the truth of divine revelation encompasses Christianity as well, but the observation is hardly conclusive since, as Strauss himself admits, the same awareness is already present in the Christian tradition and since in his particular case it goes hand in hand with an explicit recognition of the inherent limitations or logical pitfalls of any systematic critique of biblical religion.

In principle, one might have expected the more conservative wing of mainline Christian theology, represented preeminently by Roman Catholicism, to be sympathetic to Strauss's attack on modernity and his attempted recovery of classical philosophy, with which for a long time its own destiny appeared to be linked. Yet this has proved not to be the case. Even the genuine if somewhat distant respect with which Thomas Aquinas is treated in the central section of *Natural Right and History* as well as in other places was not enough to stir more than a passing interest on the part of Catholic scholars. For one thing, that respect is accompanied by a number of strictures regarding the efforts of a few unnamed but prominent and easily identifiable Thomists about whom the least that Strauss seemed willing to say was that the right hand did not know what the left hand was doing. Secondly, the accolade, if that is the right word, came too late to be of much help to those who stood to benefit by it. It occurred at a time when, in a frantic and perhaps misguided attempt to cut their losses, Roman Catholic theologians had already begun to forsake their Thomistic legacy in favor of a variety of newer though not necessarily better approaches to the problems of ethics and politics and, indeed, of theology *tout court*. Here as elsewhere, the main thrust of the Straussian enterprise ran afoul of some of the most powerful prejudices of the age. It undermined the currently fashionable theology by bringing to light

both its inner contradictions and its lack of continuity with the tradition to which its practitioners were supposedly dedicated. It is symptomatic of the prevailing climate of opinion that at the time of its appearance, John Finnis's recent book, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, should have been acclaimed by some people, and not the most hostile ones at that, as the long-awaited Catholic response to Strauss's *Natural Right and History* (NRH).

Truth to tell, few Christian theologians are well acquainted with Strauss's work and fewer still have engaged in a close study of the classics of the western tradition of the kind that could lead to more than a superficial understanding of it. As a result of his having indirectly laid the groundwork for a fresh insight into their own heritage, Strauss could still turn out to be of considerable assistance to them. If that should ever happen, however, it is more likely to be by the round-about way of an unpopular critique of the whole of the contemporary theological scene. My purpose is not to outline such a critique or indicate how it might proceed if it were to be undertaken, but merely to set forth a few of the reasons that seem to justify it. This may be accomplished by looking first of all at the unique position that Christianity occupies vis-à-vis the two other great religions of the western world, Islam and Judaism.

The simplest, most obvious, and hence most natural point of departure for any understanding of the specific character of Christianity appears to be the one indicated in the opening pages of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (pp. 9–10; 18–19). Whereas in both Islam and Judaism, Revelation takes the form of a Law or of a comprehensive social order regulating virtually every aspect of human life and thought, in Christianity it first comes to sight as a Faith or a set of teachings ("dogmas," as they were later called) which do not of themselves call for or encourage the formation of any kind of political community. Anyone who takes the trouble to read the New Testament attentively from this point of view cannot help being struck by its all but total indifference to problems of a properly political nature. It will soon be discovered that it shows no awareness of the distinction between regimes, does not indicate any preference for one over the others, imposes none of its own, and makes no concrete recommendations for the reform of the social order. It was meant to be preached to all nations but was not destined to replace them or meant to compete with them on their own level. It simply takes for granted that Christians will continue to organize their temporal lives within the framework of the society to which they happen to belong and, while it strenuously opposes all forms of injustice, it leaves the administration of public affairs to the authorities whom God has ordained for this purpose. Its dominant theme is not justice but love, and love as a political principle is at best a pretty fuzzy thing. Accordingly, it does not tell us *who* should rule, but in general *how* human beings, be they rulers or subjects, ought to behave toward one another, which is a different matter altogether.

Even as regards this question, its answers are not always as specific as one might like them to be. The commandments that it issues are not universal laws of

nature, possessed of an intrinsic intelligibility that would give us an inkling as to how they could be applied to particular cases; they are expressions of the will of a personal and loving God who expects, nay, demands the same kind of response from his creatures. Moreover, the situations that they envisage are typically one-on-one situations from which there are few definite conclusions to be drawn regarding the behavior that is appropriate when the welfare of the larger community is at stake. “Love your enemy” and “Turn the other cheek” may be valid maxims for the person who prefers forgiveness to revenge and would rather give up his life than take someone else’s, but they are less readily applicable to multi-lateral situations involving the safety and well-being of a third party for whom one is responsible and whom one also has the duty to love. To put it bluntly, the God of the New Testament is not a very political animal. His own agenda is strictly transpolitical or, to use a religious term, eschatological. It follows that any attempt to derive a coherent political program from the pages of the New Testament alone is bound to end in futility or madness.

This is not to deny that Christianity was fraught from the outset with grave practical consequences. What its defenders perceived as its greatest asset was from the standpoint of a political observer its most patent liability. By calling human beings to a higher destiny and reserving the best part of their existence for the service of God, it effectively destroyed the regime as a total way of life. It cultivated a passion for an elusive kingdom of God beyond history and thus tended to turn people’s minds away from the only realities that reason is capable of knowing by itself. In the process, civil society was displaced as the locus of virtue and the sole horizon lending meaning and substance to the activities of its citizens. The love of one’s own was no longer confined within specific borders and citizenship itself lost its fundamental significance. Even the greatest human achievements were robbed of their former splendor. In the words of Shakespeare, kingdoms were “clay” and it was “paltry to be Caesar” (*Ant. and Cleop.*, i.i.35 and v.ii.2).

Such are the real roots of the opposition that Christianity encountered when it first began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, and it is to this problem that its first apologists were eventually compelled to address themselves. The new religion would have gone the way of the radical sects of late antiquity had it not succeeded in demonstrating its adaptability to the needs of civil society. For the practical guidance that the Gospel failed to provide, one could follow the example of some early Christians and turn to the Hebrew Scriptures; but these were hardly suited to the task since, as Augustine pointed out, they were the source of the very difficulty to which Christianity was offered as a solution. The only viable alternative, and the one that finally prevailed, was to introduce political philosophy into the Christian scheme. The feat was a remarkable one, and all the more so as the new partner in the proposed alliance had to mend her ways before the marriage could be consummated. Like the captive woman of Deuteronomy 21:10–14, to whom she was often compared, she was forced to get rid of some

of her most precious adornments, in return for which she was granted a new lease on life and even allowed to prosper, albeit under more or less constant ecclesiastical surveillance. As long as she remained content with her lot and did not aspire to a higher status, her survival was insured.

For those who objected to the treatment and refused to acquiesce in it, an escape hatch was available. They could go underground, living as non-Christians in a Christian world and complying in deed if not in thought with what was required of everyone else. The predicament was not wholly unfamiliar to them. It had always been more or less that of the philosopher in the city and was rendered only slightly more precarious by the existence of a reasonably well defined religious orthodoxy and of an established authority capable of enforcing it. Besides, it had its advantages. It kept alive the notion of an ideal that transcends the limits of the political life and allowed for the preservation of the books through which the nature of that ideal could be explored. If, in Strauss's eyes, even a Lessing could pass for an "orthodox Christian," the situation was not all bad. To a philosopher, the new religious society still had the appearance of a cave, but a cave that was unique in that it was characterized by the officially sanctioned presence within it of that by means of which it could be illumined for the benefit of those who were capable and desirous of such illumination. For the basic philosophic distinction between nature and convention another distinction, which only partially parallels it, was substituted, namely, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural or between what human reason at its best is capable of discovering on its own and what it could conceivably learn only from some divine source. How the two might be related is itself a thorny question a fuller discussion of which would take us much farther afield than is necessary for present purposes.

Reasonable as this novel solution may have been in so far as it did its best to respect the legitimate demands of both faith and reason, it was not good enough to satisfy the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who proceeded to mount an all-out attack on it in the name of modern science. The long-term result was not in every respect the one that had been anticipated. Instead of destroying positive religion, the attack actually paved the way for its resurgence as a spiritual force in the West during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Christianity, which throughout the preceding century had been blamed for the evils of contemporary society, was suddenly hailed as the source of all that was supposed to be good in it, science and freedom included. The modern world was indebted to it for everything—*le monde moderne lui doit tout*—as Chateaubriand proudly announced in the Introduction to the first part of the *Genius of Christianity*, one of the most popular books of the century and the fountainhead of so many of the ideas later to be expounded with all sorts of new twists by de Tocqueville, Nietzsche, and countless others who came to the conclusion that the origins of modern political and scientific thought were to be sought in the ancient or the medieval Christian tradition. (I shall say nothing about Hegel, who restated the problem

with a philosophical depth to which Chateaubriand could not and did not aspire.) Far from opposing Christianity and modernity, it became fashionable to proclaim their fundamental agreement and stress the links that bound them one to the other.

The fly in the ointment is that, quite apart from the question of its historical accuracy, the new argument was a pure and simple inversion of the old one. It pulled the bag inside out, so to speak, but did nothing to alter the terms in which the problem was posed. With rare exceptions, its leading advocates were mostly unaware of the extent to which they shared the perspective of their erstwhile adversaries. They, too, had come to look upon Christianity as a political or cultural phenomenon and could think of no better way to serve it than by defending it on those grounds. In retrospect, their account of it is barely more than a mirror image of the one they rejected. At no point does one sense that a real breakthrough had been achieved and that the issue had been raised to the level on which it could be profitably joined, if not completely resolved.

The argument had the added drawback of disqualifying in advance any attempt to probe more deeply into the problem. Part of it consisted in saying that the divinely revealed character of the Christian faith had never been questioned, let alone rejected, by the greatest thinkers of the past, as was evident from all that they had written in praise of it. The idea that they might have been "secretly incredulous" (Chateaubriand's expression) and had refrained from any frontal attack on it as a matter of necessity rather than of choice was dismissed as a contrivance of its latter-day opponents, a gigantic fraud perpetrated by the enemies of religion for the express purpose of casting further discredit upon it. It is no mere coincidence that the best case against the existence and even the possibility of an esoteric tradition extending as far back as antiquity should be the one put forward by Schleiermacher, the most famous name in early nineteenth-century Christian theology.¹

Needless to say, the Christianity whose victory was thus secured did not emerge unscathed from the battle. It was all too often a transmogrified and secularized Christianity, seemingly bent on making its peace with the modern world on the latter's terms and acceptable to its now weary critics because what it had to offer was not noticeably different from what they had been demanding all along. Lessing, who anticipated the new trend and was one of the first to denounce it, saw more clearly than anyone else at the time what its eventual outcome was likely to be. He left little doubt as to where his own preferences lay and was as fearful of the growing irrationalism of modern philosophy as he was of the new-found rationalism of Christian theology. As he puts it in a letter to his brother:

With orthodoxy, thank God, things were fairly well settled. A curtain had been drawn between it and philosophy, behind which each could go his own way without dis-

1. F. Schleiermacher, *Platons Werke*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1855), Vol. I, pp. 15ff.

turbing the other. But what is happening now? They are tearing down this curtain, and under the pretext of making us rational Christians, they are making us very irrational philosophers. I beg of you, my dear brother, inquire more carefully after this point and look less at what our new theologians discard than at what they want to put in its place. We are agreed that the old religious system is false, but I cannot share your conviction that it is a patchwork of bunglers and half philosophers. I know of nothing in the world in which human sagacity has been better displayed and cultivated. The real patchwork of bunglers and half philosophers is the religious system which they now want to set in place of the old, and with far more influence on reason and philosophy than the old ever presumed. My neighbor's house threatens to collapse upon him. If my neighbor wants to raze it, I shall sincerely help him. However, he does not want to raze it, but rather to support and underpin it in such a way that my house will be completely ruined. He must desist from his project or I shall concern myself with his collapsing house as if it were my own. (Letter to Karl, Feb. 2, 1774. Lessing, *Gesammelte Werke*, IX, Paul Rilla, ed. [Berlin, 1956], pp. 596–97. English translation in H. E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment* [Ann Arbor, 1966], p. 84; H. Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* [Stanford, 1957], p. 13.)

The diagnosis was amazingly perspicacious. Its accuracy is amply vouched for by all of the efforts that were subsequently made to break the old deadlock between faith and reason by relegating them to parallel but separate spheres of human existence or by collapsing them one into the other at the risk of obliterating the distinction between them altogether; so much so that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche could dismiss all theologians as philosophic babblers and all philosophers as crypto-theologians or “Schleiermachers,” that is to say, spinners of veils.

Later attempts to redress the balance, such as the one that goes under the name of Neo-orthodoxy, have only partially succeeded in rescuing Christian theology from the bondage of its new masters. Strauss's incidental remark to the effect that Neo-orthodoxy is not the same thing as Orthodoxy, for otherwise the “Neo” would be superfluous, is very much to the point. It is significant that two of the most influential theological works of our century should be entitled, one *Church Dogmatics* (by Karl Barth), and the other, *Systematic Theology* (by Paul Tillich). If the Cartesian and Leibnizian antecedents of the terms “dogmatic” and “systematic” suggest anything, it is that the break with the modern tradition was not nearly as clean as it claimed to be.

Although vastly different from liberal Protestantism both in its inspiration and its essential features, the Roman Catholic theology of the same period likewise failed to come up with a solution that could command universal respect. It responded to the challenge of modernity, not by settling its accounts with it, but by ignoring it in favor of a return to medieval thought in its pristine or premodern integrity. From its obscure beginnings about 1810, the movement grew to sizable proportions and gradually took the shape of a massive counteroffensive against the encroachments of modern thought. Part of its difficulty is that it inherited from its romantic past a touch of archaism of which it was not always able to di-

vest itself. Its impact, confined by and large to the Roman Catholic world, was only rarely felt by anyone outside of it. Nor did it produce any thinkers of the very first rank.

Worse still, it never fully came to grips with the single most important obstacle to any comprehensive reinstatement of premodern thought, to wit, the triumph of modern natural science. Its promoters opted instead for what Strauss describes as “a fundamental, typically modern dualism of a nonteleological natural science and a teleological science of man” (*NRH*, 8). In this crucial respect, they were at one with their liberal Protestant counterparts, with whom, interestingly enough, they have since been drawn into ever closer partnership. Strauss’s final verdict is that, their differences to the contrary notwithstanding, both groups are really “in the same boat.” Their leaders and chief spokesmen “all are modern men” (*NRH*, 7). This, more than anything else, is what lies at the root of the indifference, the skepticism, or the hostility that so often characterizes their reaction to Strauss. Their most common objection to the Straussian project is that it pays too little attention to modern science and thus fails to lay an adequate metaphysical foundation for itself. In short, Strauss’s position is neither dogmatic enough nor skeptical enough to please anybody today. To anyone who has never seriously questioned the primacy of epistemology or the modern commitment to the ideal of “scientific” certitude, the objection appears to be unanswerable. One can try to answer it, as Strauss does, by pointing to its contingent source in early modern thought, but only at the risk of arousing the antagonism of one’s critics. As the Introduction to *Natural Right and History* reminds us with the help of a quote from Lord Acton, “Few discoveries are more irritating than those which expose the pedigree of ideas.”

The deeper question, which is hardly ever addressed any more, is whether a more consistent return to the basic principles of premodern thought would be in the best interest of theology itself. What recommends the modern scientific view to a large number of theologians is that, to the extent to which it prescind methodologically from any consideration of first principles, it leaves the domain of religion intact and hence poses no great threat to its supremacy. Its danger, on the other hand, is that by depriving theology of the services of its traditional handmaiden it either empties it of its intellectual content or opens it up to the influence of a host of other ideas whose compatibility with the teachings of the Gospel has yet to be demonstrated.

Few people would go so far as to say that classical philosophy is the natural ally of revealed religion or deny that the decision to introduce it into the fold involved a certain risk. The Church Fathers called it a “noble risk,” *καλὸς κίνδυνος*, borrowing the phrase from Plato. Some of them, like Tertullian, balked at it. The shrewder ones thought it was worth taking, if for no other reason than that it could eventually lead to a better grasp of the Christian faith and of all that a wholehearted commitment to it entails. After all, it was generally admitted that philosophy could never be so sure of itself as to rule out the possibil-

ity of Revelation. As an unfinished and unfinishable quest for knowledge, it was in the position of having constantly to re-examine its own presuppositions. If no fundamental problem can be settled once for all, it could well be that the highest achievement of human reason is to prove, not indeed that divine revelation is possible—to do that would be to disprove its supernatural character—but that the arguments adduced against it are not sufficient to establish its impossibility. The matter finally comes down to a choice between a truth that is for the good of the intellect alone and a salutary or beatifying truth that represents the good of the whole person. Since, by definition, the issue between them cannot be decided on the level of philosophic reason alone, and since there is no higher principle on the basis of which a synthesis between the two positions might be effected, we are left with a fundamental tension at the heart of the so-called “Great Tradition,” a tension which Strauss did not lament but which he thought could be fruitful as long as one knew how to live it.

By showing that modern science has not replaced God and that History has not replaced philosophy, or by showing as no one has done in four hundred years that the claims of Reason and Revelation are inherently untouched by modernity, Strauss may have performed as great a service for theology as he has for philosophy. Living as they do in an age of unbelief, that is to say, in an age in which conviction is grounded neither in reason nor in authoritative tradition, Christian theologians may yet discover that they have as much to learn from him as they do from one another or from any of their new allies about the way in which they could regain some of their lost credibility.