

Interpretation

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Book Reviews

Ernest L. Fortin, *Collected Essays*, 3 vols, ed. J. Brian Benestad. Vol. 1, *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity*, xiii + 349 pp.; Vol. 2, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order*, xiv + 399 pp.; Vol. 3, *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good*, xxi + 332 pp. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), \$62.50 paper.

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These three volumes contain essays and book reviews written over a period of more than thirty years by Ernest Fortin, a professor of theology at Boston College. Their central thesis is that modern political thought in the liberal West is in a crisis that requires a return to "classical Christianity" in order to make a fresh start in the quest for a viable political and moral order.

Fortin is a Straussian, a term which some will take as an epithet and others as an encomium for a theologian who has seen the light and become a rationalist. But J. Brian Benestad, who edited these volumes, assures us:

In pursuing his measured, dialectical return to classical Christian thought, Fortin takes the great 'Hellenic Jewish' political philosopher Leo Strauss as a guide. In so doing, Fortin is the world's only, or at least most visible and vocal, Straussian theologian. Fortin argues persuasively that the theologian must become, at least initially, a partisan of the uneliminable tension between faith and reason if he is to defend the possibility of theologizing in our time. Fortin thus is not an esoteric Averroist secretly siding with Athenian rationalism against biblical faith. Rather, as a scholarly theologian, he shows that a rejection of historicism, progressivism and liberationism in all its forms is necessary if the horizon within which faith is affirmed or rejected is to become recognizable again.

Classical Christianity was Christianity in "a fruitful engagement with pre-modern thought," i.e., classical Greek and Roman philosophy. The tension between Christian faith and classical philosophy, according to Fortin, is not primarily a conflict of mutually exclusive bodies of doctrine between which no rapprochement is possible. Strauss asserts that Judaism and Islam "present themselves first and foremost as divinely-revealed laws, or as all-inclusive social orders." He regards the Hebrew Scriptures as revealing a Law that requires humble obedience, not rational analysis. Fortin agrees that "the Bible in all its parts comes across as not only nonphilosophical but downright antiphilosophical." But, he adds, "Christianity . . . first comes to sight as a faith or as a sacred

doctrine, demanding adherence to a set of fundamental beliefs but otherwise leaving its followers at liberty to organize their social and political lives in accordance with norms and principles that are not specifically religious.”

One of the consequences of this difference among the three great monotheistic religions is that only Christian society organized itself under two powers and two laws, one ecclesiastical and the other civil, “each with its own sphere of competence and each relatively free in principle from interference on the part of the other. . . . The upshot was that one was usually able to study political phenomena in the light of reason alone without directly challenging the established religious authority.”

Another consequence is that, going beyond questions of political philosophy, Christianity is the only one of these religions “to have incorporated the study of philosophy into its curriculum,” transforming it “into an instrument capable of leading to a more penetrating grasp of [its] religious beliefs.”

As Fortin sees it, the tension between faith and reason has to do with the choice between them “as the respective grounds of two ways of life that are mutually exclusive in so far as each one claims absolute superiority over the other.” This tension became acute in the thirteenth century with the translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, when “the Middle Ages was introduced for the first time to a fully developed view of human existence that not only owed nothing to divine revelation but could plausibly be construed as a viable alternative to it.” Philosophy thus understood would no longer be the handmaiden of theology but its potentially deadly rival: “If it could be shown conclusively that God has nothing to do with this world, has no knowledge or control over human affairs, and does not mete out justice in the next world, theology was in ruins.” For, says Fortin, “What distinguishes the philosophical mind at its highest is its determination to withhold judgment on any issue in regard to which human reason alone is unable to arrive at a definite conclusion.” The fundamental point at issue between philosophy and revelation therefore seems to be whether reason is sufficient unto itself as a guide to life and to understanding of the world.

One may ask, of course, why unaided reason is better than aided reason. As Saint Augustine said, quoting a mistranslation of Isaiah, *nisi crederitis, non intelligetis*—unless you believe, you will not understand. Revelation may enlighten reason instead of replacing it. But, following Strauss, Fortin maintains that the tension between faith and reason can never be fully reconciled: “Perfected reason or philosophy cannot disprove the claims of divine revelation and divine revelation cannot establish its own claims except by means of arguments that are fully convincing only to those who have already acquiesced in its authority.” This leaves unanswered the question on what grounds one might acquiesce; could they be rational, even if not fully probative?

Fortin clarifies the reason for the irresolvable nature of the tension in these terms:

Only . . . a philosophy that has succeeded in giving an adequate account of the universe in terms of its intrinsic causes, as distinguished from a philosophy that understands itself as an unfinished and unfinishable quest for the truth, can claim to have ruled out the possibility of divine revelation; and, conversely, only a theology that has succeeded in dispelling the mystery in which it is ultimately grounded, even if by so doing it should destroy itself, can command universal assent.

This tension, however, need not be deplored: “It can be fruitful as long as one knows how to live it, or as long as philosophy remains open to theology and theology to philosophy.”

The conversion of the Roman Empire and the subsequent medieval world to Christianity had the significant effect on political thought of denying the primacy of the political:

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 object of one’s strongest and most noble attachments. . . . One’s eternal salvation mattered more than the fate of empires.

The Christian view of the world transcends the limits of unaided reason and not only relativizes politics but sees the universe as contingent, dependent on the continuing creative act of God, and governed by His providence. Although, as Fortin insists, there is no particular political theory or political order that can be deduced from the New Testament, and therefore churchmen should be reluctant to make statements on most political issues, a Christian world is very different from a pagan one, and a universe created by a personal God is by no means the same kind of place as an uncreated one.

Fortin also follows Strauss in seeing modern political philosophy as having arisen in the seventeenth century out of “a radical critique of and final break with the entire tradition of ancient and medieval thought.” The break may have been prepared for by certain late-medieval philosophical and theological theories, in particular the nominalism of William of Ockham and others, and was consummated by Machiavelli toward the beginning of the sixteenth century. Fortin describes it in these terms:

The new theory is most clearly distinguishable from the old by its doctrinarism. It is no longer guided by a discussion of the various political regimes and, ultimately, the best political regime. Rather, it teaches that there is one and only one just or legitimate regime, and it further holds that this just regime is attainable anywhere and at anytime. Its elaboration was the result of the cooperation of two basic premises: the realism or anti-utopianism [e.g., of Machiavelli] which had been the soul of the modern development since its inception, and the transformation of

science into a project ordered exclusively to the conquest of nature and the relief of man's estate. Hence, what had begun as a critique of utopianism became itself a utopia, but a realizable one: Thanks to the benefactions of modern science and the newly-positing identity of its goals with those of civil society, man could look forward, not indeed to a new heaven, but to a new earth with its glittering prospect of a 'shared, abundant, and secured' but otherwise unregulated life. . . . Popular enlightenment would succeed where both Christianity and classical philosophy had failed, not by effecting a change in the cave dwellers, but by inundating the cave with new light.

It is the essence of Fortin's thesis that, to the contrary, the modern project has itself been a failure because of its "desire to enhance the effectiveness of human activity by lowering its standards." In Straussian terms, modern thought has lowered the sights in order to ensure that politics would aim at goals that it could be sure of reaching. Fortin's thesis is that the modern project, as it has flowered in today's liberalism, has failed because from the beginning it contained the seeds of its own collapse:

I refer to such notions as individual or subjective rights and their substitution for duties as the primary moral counter; the state of nature and its concomitants, viz., social contractarianism and the denial of the naturalness of civil society; the repudiation of natural teleology and its replacement by scientific mechanism; freedom as self-determination or autonomy versus heteronomy; popular sovereignty as a requirement of justice; the theory and not just the practice of religious pluralism; the idea of progress; and, more recently, the extrusion of ethics from the realm of politics, value neutrality, and the radical historicity of human thought.

Or, as he puts it on another page, since the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "the whole of modern thought . . . has been a series of heroic attempts to reconstruct a world of human meaning and value on the basis of Rousseau's and our own purely mechanistic understanding of the universe."

Fortin is therefore severely critical of liberal democracy but, I would add, not because it is democratic but because it is liberal and has degenerated into "a permissive egalitarianism that guarantees everyone the right to think and choose as he pleases." The freedom of thought and speech that was once defended as an incentive to pursue the truth has been detached from that end because we have come to believe that the quest is futile. "The new wisdom is that there is no wisdom. Since all absolutes are ruled out, only freedom is left—absolute freedom, of course."

But this idea of freedom has a destructive effect on democratic government: "In the absence of any natural hierarchy of ends, it becomes impossible to rank people on the basis of the choice that they make of this or that particular value." It is also impossible to rank objects of choice, since liberals now believe that it is choice that creates value and not the other way around. "Modern man

looms before us as a blind cyclops,” says Fortin, “deprived of any horizon that could lend permanent meaning to his life and left with no criterion that would enable him to distinguish between the right and wrong use of the immense power that the emancipation of technology has placed at his disposal.”

All citizens being equal, all their choices are of equal value, so long as they do not prevent fellow-citizens from exercising their freedom of choice. Popular government thus becomes a mechanism for registering and reconciling people’s subjective choices. In this situation both revealed religion and classical political philosophy are left with nothing to offer in the way of intellectually valid public guidance:

Liberal democracy is unique among regimes in that it does not seek to define the goals of human existence or produce a specific type of human being. Its object is rather to provide a neutral framework within which each individual is allowed to choose his own goal and find his own way to it. . . . Contrary to its stated aim, [however,] liberal democracy breeds a specific type of human being, one that is defined by an unprecedented openness to all human possibilities. What this leads to most of the time is neither Nietzschean creativity, nor a noble dedication to some pre-given ideal, nor a deeper religious life, nor a rich and diversified society, but easygoing indifference and mindless conformism.

As Alexis de Tocqueville saw and Fortin agrees, “Christianity and democracy could live in peace with and support each other . . . but the harmony between them had been purchased at the price of an extraordinary accommodation to the spirit of modernity.” Fortin does not propose rejection of democracy or of its principle of religious freedom. But he is skeptical of the good effects of Vatican II’s *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (“The record to date is not reassuring”) and says that “no one who has given any thought to the spiritual confusion, not to say bankruptcy, of modern life thinks that the separation of church and state is always and everywhere the best possible solution to the problem.” On the other hand, “America is not about to renege on its commitment to the principle of separation” so the best we can do is to accept it while becoming aware of and attempting to mitigate “some of its less desirable features.”

Yet Fortin does not advocate or want a theocracy. He admits that it is too facile to assert that the Church (he is thinking primarily of his own church, the Roman Catholic) should refrain from statements on political matters, since some political issues are also very much moral ones. “Political issues,” however, “are inherently controversial and divisive. They rarely admit of clear-cut solutions and leave room for reasonable disagreement on the part of decent and thoughtful persons.” For this reason the Church should be hesitant to involve itself in them.

The leaders of the Catholic Church in the United States, Fortin believes, have tended to ignore that advice.

Prodded by a growing number of progressives within their own ranks and on their own staff, the Roman Catholic bishops of this country have seen fit to pronounce themselves on virtually every major issue to come up for public discussion in recent years, from the ratification of the SALT Agreements and the Panama Canal treaties to nuclear disarmament, military conscription, conscientious objection, multinational corporations, capital punishment, national health insurance, federal aid to nonpublic schools, and world hunger.

Fortin is dubious of the wisdom of such intrusions into the political process because "the Church has not been divinely mandated to restructure society." Her role is to teach the divine revelation, to inspire the faith that accepts it, and to inculcate the way of life that follows from it. These doctrines will include an overarching view of the universe, of the moral order found in it, of the nature of man and society, and of their relationship to God the Creator and Redeemer. Such doctrines furnish the framework of moral and political judgments by stating the higher goals of men and societies, and marking the outer boundaries that laws and policies may not transgress. These are no small contributions to the establishment and maintenance of good and just social orders. But they do not lead by mathematically exact reasoning to detailed conclusions about cutting the capital gains tax, welfare reform, or the peace process in the world's varied trouble spots.

There is more, much more, to Fortin's writings than the above sketch indicates. Although, as a collection of previously published essays, his volumes are not a full and detailed account of Christian political thought, they serve to fill a gap in the way the history of political theory has too often been taught, skipping from Cicero to Machiavelli, with a nod to Augustine and Aquinas in between. He deals extensively with Augustine, Aquinas and, at somewhat surprising length, with Dante, but also with such early Christian writers as Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, and Arnobius. He also has several critical essays on ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary natural-law doctrines. Among more recent writers he discusses at some length are Nietzsche, Troeltsch, Hans Blumenberg, Gadamer, and, of course, Leo Strauss.

As Fortin himself says, "A number of interlocking themes, all of them controversial, form the warp and woof of these collected essays." He is not a man to shun controversy and will not be surprised when he encounters it. I will conclude by mentioning a few bones that I have to pick with him.

I have never agreed with his insistence that modern papal teaching on natural or, as we now say, human rights is a significant departure from traditional natural-law doctrine, which emphasized duties over rights. He attributes to Aquinas the view that "even without divine grace [human] nature is complete in itself and possesses its own intrinsic perfection in that it has within itself that by means of which it is capable of attaining its end." But this is an understanding of Aquinas that is no longer commonly held. Finally, Fortin acknowledges that

Dante wrote as a Christian, but says that whether he also thought as a Christian is open to question.

Applying Strauss's methodology to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Fortin makes Dante out to be an esoteric writer who may have concealed his doubts about the truth of the Christian faith, in a poem that most readers would take as an allegory of that faith, but whose true meaning perceptive readers would understand. "It would be interesting to say the least," Fortin comments, "if Dante, the author of the most famous Christian poem in our tradition, had slyly refused to pronounce himself on so crucial a matter." But he adds that "the contention that the deeper layers of the *Comedy* leave room for doubt concerning the religious convictions of its author runs counter to the bulk of contemporary opinion and is apt to be greeted by a fair amount of skepticism by most readers." Indeed.

Ernest Fortin is a controversial writer, but therefore thought provoking. He is also vastly learned, widely read in several languages, and informative. And, for all of his pessimism about the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the present age, he ends on a note of hope: "The sense of disintegration that so many of our thoughtful contemporaries have experienced is itself an invitation to undertake a fresh or nontraditional assessment of the tradition to which the ruling consciousness of our day is the mostly unconscious heir."