

Interpretation

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Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers does a fine job of setting out what Catholics have learned from Leo Strauss. It gives a valuable account of Strauss's intellectual affinities and disagreements with major Catholic intellectuals of the twentieth century, including Heinrich Rommen, Yves Simon, Jacques Maritain, Charles McCoy, Benedict XVI, Ernest Fortin, and Alexandre Passerin d'Entrèves—including a fascinating history of Fr. Fortin's attempted engagement as a student of Strauss with a subsequent generation of the new natural law theorists: Germain Grisez, John Finnis, Russell Hittinger. It even includes some background on the change from Fr. McCoy's chapters on Augustine and Aquinas to those of Fr. Fortin in later editions of the Strauss-Cropsey *History of Political Philosophy*. There are many intelligent and engaging discussions of Strauss's thought and Catholic responses to it.

Many of the authors contained in these pages side with Strauss against "modernity," without engaging in a serious inquiry into the connection between Christianity and modernity in Strauss's thought. Only Ralph Hancock attends carefully to Strauss's views on the connection between Christianity and modernity (cf. Holloway's passing remark at 203)—and he does not attempt to side with Strauss against modernity so much as attempt to understand the connection Strauss sees, which makes his chapter one of the best in the book.

Having established their agreement with Strauss in his criticism of modernity, the authors, especially in the first half to two-thirds of the book,

proceed with a foray into Strauss's errors regarding Christianity. In effect, these are moments of defense of Christianity. Often this takes the form of a denial of Strauss's putative claim that a synthesis of reason and revelation, of Athens and Jerusalem, is impossible. One wonders whether something crucial is not being missed, namely, what Strauss means by questioning such syntheses (or "harmonizations," as he alternately puts it).¹ Does he mean that "Rome" has effected no combination of reason and revelation—such as reason in the service of faith or faith clearly set atop reason? Or does he mean that the tension between these two is so great that one must achieve a "position" of superiority in the end, despite appearances to the contrary? A review of the history of Christian theology may indicate that there have been battles within Christianity between reason and revelation—for example, in the dispute between the Thomistic tradition and the Scotist or at least Ockhamist tradition. Yet such disputes are never considered in this volume when Strauss is criticized for questioning the possibility of an enduring synthesis or harmonization.

Another area of disagreement with Strauss is over natural law. The key exception to this disagreement is the fine chapter by the editor of the collection, Geoffrey M. Vaughn, "Wisdom and Folly: Reconsidering Leo Strauss on Natural Law." Vaughn articulates quite well what are Strauss's criticisms of the natural law. Above all, it loses sight of the primacy of the best regime and even of regime as such—in the name, ironically, of law.²

Others in the volume who take issue with Strauss's critique of natural law consistently fail to consider the context of his critiques, namely, not just Thomas vis-à-vis Aristotle but also and perhaps especially Thomas vis-à-vis Machiavelli (NRH 156–64). This inattention is closely related to the already mentioned tendency to claim that we, Catholics, side with Strauss against modernity. It is here, in the rise of Machiavelli as a response or reaction to Thomas, that Strauss comes closest to indicating how Christianity may have led to modernity. No matter how much contemporary proponents of natural law may insist on the flexibility of the natural law and its embrace of prudence, they fail at their own peril to attend to Machiavelli's reasons for rejecting the natural law. His reasons are not wholly unrelated to the differences between

¹ Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 104.

² Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 144. Hereafter "NRH."

classic natural right proper and Thomistic natural law. Strauss cannot side with Catholicism and natural law against modernity as profoundly as many of these authors insinuate because he gives subtle and not so subtle indications that he saw the Machiavellian turn toward the extreme situation, or the state of nature as the modern ground of contract theory, as a reaction to the natural law's attempts to overextend the claims of law beyond "what is for the most part" to a categorical judgment, as V. Bradley Lewis comes close to underlining (see 58–59 with 205).

Although Maimonides (28) and Alfarabi (282) are both touched on lightly (and in the latter case dismissively, apparently owing to the influence of Tanguay's particular reading of Alfarabi in the thought of Strauss), little or no effort is devoted to understanding what Strauss saw in them, as a way of trying to understand why he questions the Christian synthesis. More surprisingly, given the amount of attention devoted to the natural law, little attention is paid to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, despite Fr. Fortin's observations about that work's importance in his own intellectual formation (124–25). Although I recollect some reference to the "law of reason" in this volume, amid all of these defenses of the natural law, no mind is paid to Strauss's most extended discussion of natural law and its parallels in the Jewish and Muslim traditions. In the "Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" in *Persecution*, Strauss draws attention to the Jewish equivalent of the natural law tradition, namely, the "rational law" tradition of Saadya Gaon and *Kuzari* author Yehuda Halevi—not, *pace* David Novak, Maimonides—which Saadya and Halevi inherited from the Mu'tazilite theological tradition in Islam.

Regarding the importance and status of the theoretical or perhaps the metaphysical in Strauss's thought, the pieces by De Ligio and Stoner are quite profound and engaging. What exactly Stoner means by a nondogmatic metaphysics (284), however, is not as clear as it might be. Often the place of Plato in Strauss's thought is touched on, and the tendency among Catholic interpreters, for example McCoy, to read Plato as an ill-formed Aristotle is beautifully captured by V. Bradley Lewis, but too little effort is devoted in this volume to examining the link between Plato and the medieval Jewish and Islamic traditions, on one hand, and Aristotle and the medieval Christian tradition, on the other. Are these differences merely a matter of taste? Or do they reveal something essential about why Strauss upholds the philosophic way of life even in the face of the promise of Christianity? Frequently our authors look down on what they take to be the impoverished fideistic tendencies of Islam and Judaism (e.g., 39). Yet Strauss may prefer philosophy and

law to philosophy and faith because adherence to the law remembers politics, while faith can readily leave politics and thus much of life behind. It is the total character of the Law that interests Strauss vis-à-vis philosophy as a way of life. Though Christianity can fill an entire life, it cannot be a way of life in the sense that the polis was (99n19 and Hancock's chapter). Obviously, Christianity has found ways to vaunt its universalism over the particularism of both the polis and Judaism. Yet Strauss finds in divine law as a political law in Athens and Jerusalem a commonality that is missing between Athens and Rome. Though Athens and Rome may both seem to concern beliefs or opinions, that concern can sever the individual from political life. And what else was the starting point of Strauss's inquiries than the problem of tyranny, which would seem to be an inherent tendency of any regime in which individuals are severed from the polis? As Ralph Hancock shows so eloquently, Christianity's glorious harmonization of universal and particular transcends the limits of any mere polis. In doing so, it cannot but forget the best regime in favor of the natural law (cf. NRH 144).