

**Beyond the „Theologico-Political Predicament:“
Toward a Contextualization of the Early Strauss**

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I

In this paper I contrast the early Leo Strauss with Carl Schmitt and with one of Schmitt's strongest critics, the theologian Erik Peterson. The focus of this comparison is what Strauss called „the theologico-political predicament.“ My aim is to elucidate this term by relating it to what Schmitt called „political theology.“ On two separate occasions in the 20th century, political theology was embraced by reform Catholic circles to indicate an alternative to the division of the political world into a Capitalist and a Communist order, namely in the 1920s and in the 1970s.¹ Carl Schmitt's use of the term, coined by him in its modern sense in 1922 and immediately embraced by reform Catholic circles of the time, nevertheless stood aloof from this trend. Schmitt eventually embraced National Socialism and became a chief jurist of the Nazi state, a career cut short in 1936 by allegations, on the part of the SS, that he was insufficiently committed to the racial ideology of the party. Over the past two decades, Schmitt has been made the subject of an increasing number of studies. This recent flurry of scholarship and other ultra-conservative political thinkers approaches its topic either from a historical perspective (examining, for example, whether Carl Schmitt's engagement for the Nazi state constitutes a break or a continuum within his work) or it attempts to engage the inherent significance of questions first articulated in the theological-political debates of the 1920s and early 30s, such as sovereignty and the rule of law, the political role of the intellectual, the legitimacy of secularization, and the like.²

¹ After a period of dormancy, the term was revived among theologians of liberation of the 1960s and 70s. See, e.g., Dorothee Sölle, *Politische Theologie*.

² A lot has been written on Carl Schmitt in recent years. In the introduction to his dissertation on Schmitt, *Rekonstruktion des Politischen. Carl Schmitt und die Krise der Staatlichkeit 1912-1933* (Weinheim: Acta humaniora, 1992), Armin Adam already looks back on a wave of writings on

While primarily a matter of political science, political theology is also of interest to philosophy of religion, in particular when it serves to typologize and contrast traditions such as Catholicism, Judaism, or Islam, or larger formations such as polytheism and monotheism. Generally speaking, political theology deals with the grounding of the political in the religious or with religion as a source of political order. It presupposes an immediate and essential connection between religion and the political, a connection that may be equally endemic to the revealed religions as to their Ancient Near Eastern predecessors and their Greek and Roman counterparts with whom they have long since entered into various multiply hybrid combinations. Biblical and Jewish religion, especially when conceptualized as forms of „monotheism,“ have an eminently political dimension that is easily obscured by focusing on prophetic morality or on the purity laws of „rabbinic religion.“ Political theology thus augments the moralist and ritualist conceptualizations of religion prevalent in the study of religion since the 19th-century.

Strauss not only associates his early writings with Schmitt but also with the renewal of theology in the 1920s, and he mentions Karl Barth and Franz Rosenzweig as representatives of this renewal.³ The political theology of the 1920s has indeed an affinity with the neo-orthodox fideism of its time. The theologies of revelation of Barth, Rosenzweig, and others and the political theology of Carl Schmitt and others all proceed from a counter-critique of the Enlightenment critique of religion. The Enlightenment critique of religion engendered the secular, yet morally teleological, state and its corollary, modern, liberal, morality-based

Schmitt and suggests to distinguish between political and non-political (i.e. ultimately esthetic) attempts to examine the doctrine of Carl Schmitt. In the meantime , more work has been done, fuelled further by the publication, in 1991, of Schmitt's diaries from the years 1947-1951 (*Glossarium*, ed. by Eberhard Freiherr von Medem, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1991), but the „case“ of Carl Schmitt (Andreas Koenen) continues to be elusive. See Andreas Koenen, *Der Fall Carl Schmitt. Sein Aufstieg zum „Kronjuristen des Dritten Reiches,“* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995.

³ „Das Wiedererwachen der Theologie, das für mich durch die Namen von Karl Barth und Franz Rosenzweig bezeichnet ist, schien es notwendig zu machen, daß man untersuche, inwieweit die Kritik an der orthodoxen -- jüdischen und [p. 8] christlichen -- Theologie siegreich zu sein verdiente. Das theologisch-politische Problem ist seitdem *das* Thema meiner Untersuchungen geblieben.“ Leo Strauss, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften -- Briefe*, edited by Heinrich and Wiebke Meier (*Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 3), Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001, p. 7-8.

religiosity. If the modern state primarily derives from Enlightenment ideologies that aimed to destroy the political power of religion, the counter-critique of religion necessarily implies a critique of the modern liberal state. Political theology and fideist neo-orthodoxy share the awareness that the case of the religious sources of political authority, once considered settled by the Enlightenment critique of religion, had to be reopened. Political theology argues for a reopening of the case on the basis of a diagnosis of a lack of legitimacy of the secular grounding of the modern state, i.e., its autonomy, while neo-orthodox and existentialist theologies of revelation argue for its reopening on the basis of a phenomenologically or sociologically justified access to an immediate experience of the divine that makes liberal religion appear obstinate and dogmatic. Loss of political and religious authority—acutely perceived in Germany after the collapse of 1918—gave rise to a search for authority, be it political, religious, or both.⁴

The juxtaposition of Strauss, Schmitt, and Peterson will articulate some of the differences between political theology, fideism, and the political philosophy of Strauss. Strauss seems to me neither a political theologian nor a fideist. When he refers to a „change of orientation“ that took place around 1930, he describes it as an extrication from the „theologico-political conundrum.“ But while moving him beyond the seemingly inescapable alternative of atheism or orthodoxy, this „beyond“ cannot be conceived without its opposite. For the mature Strauss neither atheism nor orthodoxy commands authority and his concept of political philosophy aims to teach how to extricate oneself from this and any similarly complete alternative. But this should not obscure the fact that Strauss’s turn to the Ancients never loses sight of its main target, modern liberalism, enmity toward which may constitute the heterodoxy *par excellence* of the 20th century.

I.

The term „theologico-political predicament“ appears in the prefaces to two books published in 1965—one on Spinoza, the other on Hobbes—that Leo Strauss had first published, respectively, in 1930 and 1935.⁵ In the preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (U Chicago Press, 1965),

⁴ Gogarten may be one of those who simultaneously subscribed to an authoritarian state and an existentialist vision of religion.

⁵ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, transl. By Elsa M. Sinclair, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 1: „This study on Spinoza’s *Theological-political Treatise* was written during he years 1925-28 in Germany. The author was a young Jew born and

Strauss speaks of „the author“ of the book in the third person as „a young Jew (...) who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament.“ Switching to the first person, Strauss indicates his distance from this younger self.

The present study was based on the premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible. The change of orientation (...) compelled me to engage in a number of studies in the course of which I became ever more attentive to the manner in which heterodox thinkers of earlier ages wrote their books. As a consequence of this, I now read the *Theologico-political Treatise* differently than I read it when I was young. (SCR, 1997 edition, p. 31)

Strauss wrote this in 1962, when he was known as an advocate of the retrieval of classical political philosophy. The preface explains how the book on Spinoza is related to his currently held views with which he wanted to remain associated. Two years later, in the „Vorbemerkung“ (penned in October 1964) to the other book, which had first appeared in an English translation as *Hobbes' Political Science* in 1935, Strauss distinguishes the „theologico political predicament“ as the enduring theme of his inquiries. The apparent contradiction is easily resolved, namely, if the predicament indicates an unquestioned assumption that Strauss initially shared with his peers and that he made the subject of his subsequent investigations, which were aimed at extricating himself from the predicament.

The enigmatic term „theological political predicament“ thus indicates different attitudes toward a set of presuppositions, one naïve, the other critical.⁶ It names what Strauss perceived as the

raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theological-political predicament.“ And cf. the preface, also of 1965, to the first edition of the German original of Strauss's book on Hobbes (first publ. in English translation in 1935), GS 3, p. 7-8: „Das Wiedererwachen der Theologie, das für mich durch die Namen von Karl Barth und Franz Rosenzweig bezeichnet ist, schien es notwendig zu machen, daß man untersuche, inwieweit die Kritik an der orthodoxen -- jüdischen und [p. 8] christlichen -- Theologie siegreich zu sein verdiente. Das theologisch-politische Problem ist seitdem *das* Thema meiner Untersuchungen geblieben.“ (GS 3 = Leo Strauss, *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften -- Briefe*, edited by Heinrich and Wiebke Meier, Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001.

⁶ The language Strauss uses to describe this process of extrication is sometimes reminiscent of Plato („change of orientation“ invokes the turning from the shadows of experience to the source of light in Plato's simile of the cave) and sometimes reminiscent of Kant (in one passage Strauss alludes to the ten years it took Kant to articulate his own philosophy in writing, a period during which he continued to teach Leibniz-Wolffian metaphysics without having any faith in it). It also seems as if the extrication from the theo.-pol. predicament is a kind of enlightenment,

dominant presuppositions of the Weimar era intellectual elite and, at the same time, it critiques this presupposition as prejudicial. By naming the predicament without explanation he leaves it to his readers to find out what he shared with others and how he aimed to overcome this shared belief in his subsequent investigations. He merely indicates that his mature work aimed to demonstrate as prejudicial the assumption that the course of intellectual history was irreversible and that retrieving a pre-Enlightenment philosophical position as a serious alternative could not be dismissed. In fact, the Platonic metaphor of a „change of orientation“—we think of the painful act of turning around vividly described in the simile of the cave, a text the young Strauss uses repeatedly to indicate what he believes needed to be done in order to overcome the historicist prejudice—indicates first and foremost that what was needed was a critical examination of the presupposition that ruled out the possibility of retrieving a pre-modern point of view. This presupposition is something akin to the Hegelian concept of history with its synthesis of philosophical teleology and religious eschatology, versions of which prevailed in political theory and popular belief long after the rise of the pessimist and nihilist schools of thought that aimed to displace it.⁷ By making his anti-historicist move appear as a Platonic „turn,“ Strauss both indicates and masks the fact that his turn is as hyper-modern as it is anti-modern and hence historically mediated even where it is meant to step out of all historicization and retrieve the „natural difficulties of philosophizing“ that allow us to benefit from the teachings of Socrates.

II.

To speak of *the* „theologico political predicament“ as of a well known and widely shared set of presuppositions invokes the concept of „political theology“ made famous by Carl Schmitt’s 1922 publication, with this title, of four essays on the problem of sovereignty.⁸ Strauss makes this

illumination, or emancipation.

⁷ It should be noted, although this cannot be pursued here, that the task of retrieving a pre-modern point of view combines the historical and the philosophical in a manner prefigured and sought after in the programs of classical philology of Boekh and Steinthal that were of decisive influence for Dilthey and for the South-West German neo-Kantians who sought to establish a rigorous program of critique of the validity of historiography and of the Humanities in general. The link between 19th-century philology and 20th-century hermeneutics is explicitly made by Strauss’s friend and fellow-Heideggerian Hans-Georg Gadamer in the opening chapter of *Truth and Method*.

⁸ *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Munich and Leipzig 1922,

connection explicit by including in the 1965 edition of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* the essay on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* which, as he writes, contained the first published indication of his „change of orientation.“ Here Strauss also alludes to Schmitt's 1922 book on „political theology“in passing. In a critical move against the liberal assumption of the sufficiency of law to order the entire range of political problems, Schmitt had argued that sovereignty is revealed only by the state of emergency and that the sovereign is the one who has the power to invoke it. According to Schmitt, who reaffirmed and defended his views in a second edition published in the 1950s, this extra- or pre-legal authority distinguishes the political as the foundation of the state. The state is constituted by a political sovereignty that precedes the law and may in fact exist without it. Liberal political theory lacks the tools needed to analyze this duality of sovereignty and the law because it is insufficiently aware of its own religious roots.⁹ While in 1922, Schmitt regards the roots of the modern state as borrowed from the church and its authoritative claim to represent the divine order, his later writings and his distance from the Catholic reform movement of his time argue for an autonomy of the political rather than its grounding in religion.¹⁰

For both Schmitt and Strauss, the diagnosis of the displacement of religion is part of their respective theoretical concerns rather than a call for a return to religion. For Schmitt, political authority constitutes the biblical *katechon* that prevents society from falling into chaos. But his interest in religion is merely instrumental. For Strauss, at least after what he later called a „Thomistic detour“ via the medieval Jewish philosophers and their Muslim teachers, revelation is merely the myth of authorization of the law. But for Strauss even the political is instrumental. It is the price paid for the coexistence of a certain breed of men, called philosophers, with the ordinary humans that populate the city, a coexistence that forces philosophers to embrace a

second edition 1934.

⁹ *Politische Theologie* is mostly an attack on the constitutional theory of Hans Kelsen, the most eminent liberal theorist of the Weimar Republic.

¹⁰ The shift to a totalization of the political is particularly evident in the preface to the second edition of *Politische Theologie*, published in 1934, but written in Nov. 1933 when Schmitt joined the NSDAP. See Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, „Vorbemerkung,“ 2nd edition, Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1934: „Inzwischen haben wir das Politische als das Totale erkannt und wissen infolgedessen auch, daß die Entscheidung darüber, ob etwas unpolitisch ist, immer eine politische Entscheidung bedeutet, gleichgültig wer sie trifft und mit welchen Beweisgründen sie sich umkleidet.“

peculiarly exoteric art of writing needed to communicate with the few while protecting themselves against the righteous ire of the many, whose politically necessary beliefs the philosophers must call into question.

In his critique of the presuppositions of modernity, Strauss moves from the assumption that the difference between belief and unbelief constitutes the only decisive and ultimate difference to a denial of this assumption. This denial articulates itself in investigations into the rhetorical stance of the political philosophers of the past. The difference between modern and pre-modern political philosophy is not so much the recognition of religious authority as instrumental but rather the fact that modern philosophy makes this instrumentality explicit in order to destroy the political power of religion while absorbing into itself the kinds of moral assumptions that demand religious authority to be believable. The 18th-century Enlightenment considered the religious authority of law a spurious and extraneous sanction, and began the process of the naturalization, the historicization, and, inadvertently, the relativization of moral values, removing the necessary yet illusory support of the *katechon* and setting modernity on its path toward nihilism. Although the Enlightenment critique of religion was unable to disprove the truth of the revealed doctrines of creation, revelation, redemption, original sin etc., it nevertheless assumed that its criticism was sufficient to dislocate the authority of religion from its hold on politics, relocate it to the private sphere, and make it a matter of opinion. In other words, it was not philosophically strong enough to prove the truth of atheism but it was politically strong enough to establish an atheistic outlook as the regnant principle.

Neither Strauss nor Schmitt help religion to recover from this blow. Schmitt works toward a retrieval of political authority for a society corrupted by a set of false or borrowed beliefs. Strauss explores the possibility of returning to a state of nature that has always been with us (the characteristic of „nature“ is its eternal or perpetual presence, but it is also the dialectic other of society/history etc.) but obscured by the historicist prejudice (the characteristic of historicism is that it assumes that we are collectively moving toward perfection and are hence different from and in some decisive sense superior to those who came before us, a view that is most persuasive when combined with romantic forms of naturalism or pantheism).¹¹

¹¹ Schmitt and Strauss both work anamnetically, trying to retrace the origin of the crisis they

Schmitt could be seen as a royalist or, more exactly, a cesarist who, in an age of parliamentary democracy seeks to reinstate the rule of a strong man, a Hobbesian monarch or a Xenophantian tyrant, who meets the requirements of the character of sovereignty. Strauss, however, is only partially concerned with the character of a Schmittian or Hobbesian sovereign. His true interest is in the contrast between the king and the philosopher, to name the most eminent example of the natural differences between „men.“ For Strauss the authoritarian state is instrumental to the restoration of the difference between the *aner* and the mere *anthropos*, between the wise man and the tyrant. To restore this difference one must comprehend it, which is the task of political philosophy, a practical and political form of action since it produces not just a kind of thought but a kind of person, the political philosopher. This is exactly what, according to Strauss, the moderns have forgotten, the unity of thought and thinker, and the path he proposes toward the retrieval of the forgotten truth about „man“ is a kind of *paideia*, constituted, among others, by an attentive reading of the classics.¹²

III.

Not all budding intellectuals of the 1920s chose to articulate their discontent with liberalism in form of a political theology. Another class, so to speak, is constituted by those who regarded the project of a political theology as misguided while sharing the basic intuition that the political problem was ultimately tied up with the religious one. Among those who recognized the instrumentality of religion in the thought of Schmitt for what it was were Ernst Michel and Erik Peterson. I focus on Peterson since he engaged the concept of political theology in his book *Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (1935) and because he was very close to Schmitt until they parted company when Schmitt joined the Nazi party, which, like Heidegger (and many

diagnose to a point in the past before things began to degenerate. This method is clearly inspired by Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*.

¹² Strauss's working hypothesis is that the social science of the ancients is superior (i.e., closer to the truth of the matter) to that of the moderns; it must be so because modern social science is more remote from the facts it claims to know in that it is predominantly based on the rejection of its predecessors. To the very least, a critical evaluation of the modern way of reading the ancients and understanding them better than they understood themselves cannot even be attempted unless one has understood them as they understood themselves.

others), he did only in 1933.¹³

Peterson shared with others associated with the journal *Hochland* the general disappointment with modern secularism. In the wake of war and revolution, this diffuse and widely connected group which included a number of converts to Catholicism (including Edith Stein) belongs among the many circles of the time who tried to imagine a „third way“ between communism and capitalism. They agreed that religious faith was called for now more than ever as the source of orientation in a world perceived as completely disoriented. Schmitt belongs in this group to the degree that his theory of secularization confirmed the sense that modernity had been sailing under a false flag and that the legitimate source of governance in Europe could not but be based on the religious tradition of the West. In contrast to Schmitt, however, the genuinely Catholic impulse of this movement is evident in its skepticism toward purely nationalistic projects. Catholicism was to them coeval with Europe and Europe had a future only to the degree that it was able to retrieve its Christian foundations, albeit in a postliberal key.

In opposition to his friend Carl Schmitt, the erstwhile Protestant, then Catholic, theologian Erik Peterson argued that, from an orthodox trinitarian point of view, it was heretical to imbue the state with the transmudal authority of the church.¹⁴

IV.

Surely, at least in the case of Strauss, it cannot suffice to look at the Christian roots of the

¹³ On Peterson's life, work, and influence see Barbara Nichtweiß, „Erik Peterson. Leben, Werk und Wirkung“ in *Stimmen der Zeit* 208 (1990), pp. 529-544.

¹⁴ The Schmitt with whom Peterson takes issue is the one who had made a stellar career among Nazi jurists, ascending to the highest level of visibility in the NS law associations. At the height of Schmitt's career as the „crown jurist“ (Gurian) of the Nazis and shortly before his ouster from all party-related positions, Peterson publically denies the Christian legitimacy of Schmitt's embrace of National Socialism. By attacking his erstwhile friend Peterson also argued against the *Reichskonkordat*. On the origin, context, reception, and meaning of Peterson's monotheism treatise see Hans Meier, „Erik Peterson und das Problem der politischen Theologie“ in *ZfP* 38/1 (1991) pp. 33-46. On Peterson and Schmitt see Barbara Nichtweiß, „Apokalyptische Verfassungslehren. Carl Schmitt im Horizont der Theologie Erik Petersons“ in Bernd Wacker (ed.), *Die eigentliche katholische Verschärfung ... Konfession, Theologie und Politik im Werk Carl Schmitts*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1994, pp. 37-64.

Western synthesis of religion and politics. One may expect that Judaism played a role in the formation of Strauss's anti-liberalism, and that this role will be different from the one it played for non-Jewish ultra-conservatives. It is of interest to see the place of Judaism in these respective construals of political archetypes. Strauss may appear unusual in that he was a Jewish thinker who examined, articulated, and perhaps harbored principles of right wing politics, anti-liberalism, counter-revolutionary or reactionary theory, a theory that was usually more than a little anti-Semitic. One of the reasons why Strauss may be of considerable interest today is that he seems to represent the possibility of articulating anti-liberal political theory without recourse to any rhetorical or substantive anti-Semitism.¹⁵ He seems to provide the living proof that it is possible to endorse anti-liberal principles without subscribing to anti-Semitism, which today is virtually universally discredited, at least in polite society. Today, indeed, the right-wing is more likely to be pro-Israel than the left.

If I am not mistaken, Strauss did not begin his Zionist career with the conviction that liberalism had to be overcome in order to pursue the goals of statehood.¹⁶ Quite the contrary. In 1923, when others advocated rebuilding Blau-Weiss on the model of Italian fascism (with Walter Moses in the role of a Zionist *duce*),¹⁷ Strauss endorsed the values of discourse and debate and an abstention from any premature „declaration of principles,“ values that Schmitt (and the later Strauss as well) denounced as characteristic of the age of parliamentary democracy, i.e., of a „system“ that didn't work since it failed to recognize the essence of sovereignty. The early Strauss was in this sense a liberal rather than a conservative. What shamed him into abandoning his liberalism is not clear. He later reports on a few meetings with Jabotinsky who inquired what the youth organizations did to prepare the future members of the Jewish state for their task.

¹⁵ This, at least, has been the suspicion raised against Heinrich Meier's project of publishing Strauss's works in German. Robert Howse, for example, considers Meier „one of the leading apologists for Schmitt in Germany.“ See Robert Howse, „From Legitimacy to Dictatorship--and Back Again. Leo Strauss's Critique of the Anti-Liberalism of Carl Schmitt“ in David Dyzenhaus (ed.), *Law as Politics. Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 56.

¹⁶ On this and the following cf. the introduction to Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921-1932)*, translated and edited by Michael Zank, Albany/NY.: SUNY Press, 2002.

¹⁷ On Walter Moses and fascism as a model for Blau-Weiss see Jörg Hackeschmidt, *Von Kurt Blumenfeld zu Norbert Elias. Die Erfindung einer jüdischen Nation*, Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1997, pp. 193-221.

When Strauss answered that they were studying Hebrew and Jewish history Jabotinsky asked about rifle training. What unites the later Strauss with that represented in his early writings is the disinclination to compromise. He rejects cultural Zionism („Buberism“) as an atheism in disguise, i.e., as a dishonest spiritual position and one that merely waters down the political imperatives of Zionism. Later Strauss gets embroiled in a fight of statements and counterstatements on the relation between Zionism and orthodoxy. Here he declares that the enemy is no longer on the left (cultural Zionism) but on the right (religious Zionism). But his open advocacy of Zionism as a modern atheistic political movement is not welcomed by the (modern atheistic) political leadership who, at the time, is engaged in building coalitions with the newly constituted religious Zionist movement in the orthodox camp. At this point Strauss realizes that his atheism is forced to go underground. Neither as a politician nor as a philosophical author in the context of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is he permitted to express his true opinion openly. The radical honesty that drove his early political engagement is discarded in favor of exotericism, a form of conformism on the surface and a message stating its opposite beneath the surface, whereby the youthful mandate of radical honesty is preserved in the communication of one's true opinion to the few who can discern it between the lines. Strauss eventually despairs of Zionism as a solution to the Jewish problem. The theologico-political predicament in whose grip the young Jew found himself thus appears to arise from the experience of an honest atheist in a Jewish political movement whose realization needed belief. His turn to Maimonides (articulated in *Philosophy and Law*, 1935) is prefaced by the statement that orthodoxy has become inaccessible to the modern (atheist) Jew and that Zionism (atheism) is not likely to resolve the problem of Jewish existence. In his subsequent writings on Spinoza Strauss considers the historicization of the law, accomplished by Spinoza, as the reason why the law has been deprived of its divine authority, making the modern construal of a liberal Judaism a mere atheism in disguise. But the Platonic interpretation of the law that Strauss identifies as the consensus among the medievals similarly deprives the law of any philosophic significance. The remaining role of the law is political, and politics is defined by the classical teaching about the natural differences among „men,“ a teaching that biblical revelation, at least in its orthodox interpretation, seems to confirm as well, namely by the very doctrine of the election of Israel.

Strauss believes that the political authority of religion is irretrievable because, contrary to what had been the assumption of the Enlightenment, religion never had but political authority. In order

to function as it once did it has to be believable. Once it loses its believability it has become politically useless. He denies, however, that a secularized version of biblical faith (belief in the goodness of man as opposed to belief in the benevolence of divine providence) is the sufficient or even natural ground of society. If the (spurious but functioning) religious belief in the benevolence of the deity no longer works, then its secularized offspring (belief in the goodness of humanity) cannot work either. The true opinion of the philosopher is irreducibly skeptical concerning the truth of any ultimate assertion but this skepticism collides with the need for trust and purpose (or even the illusion thereof) that alone makes governance possible. The philosophical truth cannot be expressed openly but it ought not to be eliminated either or else the natural difference among „men“ can no longer prevail. Against Spinoza's overt teaching he denies that the critique of religion has disproved the truth of revelation. But despite such overt agreement with the orthodox counter-critique of religion Strauss does not truly believe in the truth of revelation because, like Maimonides and his Muslim teachers (and like Spinoza), he considers belief in providence of political rather than philosophical validity. Leaving the shell of religious and liberal conventions intact (i.e., bowing to the external need for social and political stability)— seemingly contributing to their reinvigoration by reading the classics for the sake of understanding them as they understood themselves—Strauss pursues a program of destabilization of conventional meanings that may be dangerous to the existing order (i.e. liberalism) but at least conducive to the recognition, among those willing to engage in it, of the natural differences among „men.“

V.

What can be said about the „theologico-political predicament“ as a larger theme to describe the preoccupation of the anti-liberal theorists and in what sense does Strauss show it to be a false alternative from whose grip one must liberate oneself? The formula signifies the centrality of the debate on religion and the state in the general political crisis in the wake of war, revolution, and the disenchantments associated with the liberal system of Weimar.

To be sure, the ubiquitous sense of crisis provides only a general precondition for a broader discussion of the theologico-political predicament. Those unpersuaded that the ills of the time were caused by economic factors to be addressed by economic policies (i.e., the non-Marxists) were looking for spiritual causes that qualified as profound enough to account for what appeared

as a *total* crisis. The possibility of order itself was in question¹⁸ and it seemed as if there was agreement, at least on the right, that order could not be reestablished without a thorough analysis of the religious roots of order. Simply put: Europe (and eminently a Germany beset by the ills of defeat and the experience of revolution) had to decide whether to become fully atheistic or return to some form of Christian identity.

At the same time, to consider a resolution of the theologico-political problem as the condition of the possibility of the emergence of a new order meant that the two dominant forms of economic-political order, i.e., Anglo-American-style liberal capitalism and Russian-style Bolshevism were deficient. Strauss, Schmitt, and Peterson agreed that this deficiency had something to do with the deficiencies of the Enlightenment, its flawed concept of rationality, its unacknowledged and unjustified secularization of religious beliefs, etc. None of these thinkers mistook what they wrote for value-neutral scholarship but they all considered their historical or descriptive analyses as necessarily of practical and political significance. In the case of Strauss the search for a *handlungsbezogenes Wissen*,¹⁹ however, culminates in a dismissal of both religion (orthodoxy) and politics (atheism) and a turn to the question of the right life instead, which he considers the key philosophical question.²⁰

The theologico-political predicament is thus an Either/Or precipitated by the Enlightenment critique of religion, that can be overcome if and when it is possible to show it to be a false alternative. This seems to be the meaning of Strauss's move „beyond“ the theologico-political predicament. It is possible to read the program of extrication articulated by Strauss since the late 1920s in a number of ways and it is fraught with ironies and ambiguities: the metaphors Strauss uses to articulate his „turn“ or change of orientation locate Strauss firmly in the intellectual and political contexts of the late 1920s while denying the relevance of any particular location; the program of „learning by reading“ and „reopening the old tomes“ redirects philosophy to a seemingly philological task („understand a philosopher as he understood himself“), which is

¹⁸ Cf. Karl Graf Ballestrem and Henning Ottmann, „Einleitung“ in *Politische Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990, p. 7.

¹⁹ Ballestrem and Ottmann, „Einleitung“, loc. cit.

²⁰ In this respect, the Jewish problem is for Strauss only „the most manifest symbol of the human problem,“ in other words, it is unexceptional. See LS, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (1968), p.

expected to resolve no less than the crisis of modernity and follows a strict set of often strange hermeneutical rules (cf. „The Literary Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*“); finally, despite his rants against Bolshevism Strauss never condemned National Socialism; in fact, he called a *reductio ad hitlerum* the view which condemns a position only because it happened to have been shared by Hitler. Yet it is difficult to locate Strauss on any particular point of the political or religious spectrum of conventional political philosophy since he denies that one may be a philosopher and a believer at the same time.

Whether or not I have succeeded in establishing the historical and intellectual situation that Strauss had in mind when speaking of the „theologico-political predicament,“ it seems safe to say that his program of extrication from the theological and/or political certainties on which we generally rely continues to provide a worthy challenge to our philosophical abilities.

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