

Reason, Revelation, and American Theocracy Rightly Understood

Ivan Kenneally

Tocqueville famously diagnosed American consciousness as deeply affected by an untutored Cartesianism; in his view, our intellectual debt to Descartes was undiminished by our ignorance of his bequest. Likewise, many have surprisingly judged the contemporary American political scene as indelibly shaped by Leo Strauss' philosophical legacy; in fact, Michael and Catherine Zuckert recently remarked, "A specter is haunting America, and that specter is, strange to say, Leo Strauss." The radical tension between reason and revelation, as Strauss depicts it, could be seen as analogous to the communicative chasm that has opened up between our nation's religiously inclined and its committed secularists; the incompatibility of reason and revelation finds its American expression in the political and cultural conflict between Darwinians and Evangelicals or, as Peter Lawler has observed, between those who think evolutionary Darwinism comprehensively accounts for the whole of human experience and those who think a full rendering requires recourse to revelation.

While it is likely Strauss's work is studied

IVAN KENNEALLY is an assistant professor of political science at the Rochester Institute of Technology. He is currently writing a book on the dangers technocracy poses to democracy.

even less than Descartes's, the many variations in American cultural discourse on Strauss's dichotomy are too numerous to catalogue here. It is sufficient to point out that the austere divide between the God-directed and Darwin-directed is an expression of the Straussian tension writ large over our cultural topography; apparently, our inability to see any hopes for a synthesis between reason and revelation means that we are all untutored Straussians now.

Rémi Bague's groundbreaking new work, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, is also haunted by the specter of Strauss even though Bague only specifically mentions Strauss once and in brief, parenthetical fashion. Still, despite his obvious respect for Strauss's work, Bague presents a searching challenge to the very core of Strauss's philosophical thought and ultimately to the view of modernity he espoused. Strauss famously declares the "theologico-political problem" the "central theme" of his investigations—he even describes himself as a "young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament." For Strauss, the irresolvable antithesis between reason and revelation was *the* explosive catalyst

for the whole of the Western tradition and expressed itself microcosmically at both the political and individual level.

At the political level, the problem is manifest in the fact that divine law presents itself as the ultimate and comprehensive arbiter of human experience, thereby precluding any facile liberal attempt to relegate religion to matters of individual conscience. The claim of divine law to extend to the whole of human experience makes a mockery of the distinction between public and private and its constitutional offspring, the separation of church and state. Furthermore, the incommensurability of reason and revelation at the level of individual choice means that any attempt to confront seriously the two available alternatives necessarily requires an arbitrary determination.

For Strauss, then, when it comes to the most important matter, we must choose and must choose willfully—we are left without any legitimate rational ground to defend subsequently what amounts to a primitive moral decision. If Evangelicals and Darwinians in America find themselves pitted against one other without hopes of reconciliation it would seem to be because they found the Straussian logic to be inexorable on this score. Apparently, Americans too are born in the grip of the theologico-political predicament.

Brague announces his intention, however, to “enlarge” the theologico-political problem and even to “move beyond its boundaries.” In the initial movement of Brague’s argument he prefers the formulation “theo-political” to theologico-political since the term “theology” already assumes the “project of a rational elucidation of divinity” which is “specific to Christianity.” While Strauss generally has little to say about Christianity, presumably because its attempt at a synthesis of

reason and revelation only obscures their mutual exclusivity, Brague considers the theologico-political problem to be a product of Christian categories; in fact, the term “theology” itself already presupposes a “way for the divine to pass through the prism of discourse (logos).”

While some sort of theological component is detectable in the other two major Western religious traditions, Islam and Judaism, it is mostly due to the palpable effect the development of Christianity had on both of them. Ultimately, Brague considers the term “theo-political” itself inadequate and inferior to “theio-political,” since the former term only specifically addresses the particular relationship between politics and God versus the more general mediation between politics and the divine. Even the term “theio-political” still only makes sense when understood through the unique prism of Christian interpretive paradigms. Christianity, for Strauss, is an historically anomalous tributary branching from the central philosophical development of Western consciousness. But Brague considers it to be a “highly revolutionary event not to be turned into something banal.” Therefore, Strauss’s discovery of the theologico-political problem is deeply suspect, according to Brague: it excludes the transformative impact of the Christianity actually responsible for its birth.

In *The Law of God*, Brague’s “principal interest” is not the theologico-political problem but rather the “genesis of the modern world in Western Europe.” These are not disconnected subjects, though, since in breaking from Strauss’s articulation of the problem Brague also, by extension, decisively breaks with Strauss’s portrayal of modernity. Strauss famously dissects the unfolding of the West into a philosophical tug of war between the ancients and the

moderns and even attempts to reinvigorate this contest for the sake of revisiting the questionable victory of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, the modern scientific dismissal of classical philosophy. Hence, in Strauss's view, the birth of the modern creates a fundamental rupture with antiquity thereby reducing the Middle Ages to "a time of latency between two summits." One is tempted to infer that Strauss largely neglects the Middle Ages for reasons similar to Hegel's—that it achieved nothing other than the philosophical systematization of Christian doctrine, as if this in itself were too unspectacular to deserve further scrutiny.

By way of contrast, Brague assigns a special historical significance to the Middle Ages—"certain key concepts" that "took form in the ancient world" actually "peak in the Middle Ages." Even more importantly, Brague contends that the "modern age did little but draw the consequences of decisions that been taken long before." The Middle Ages, in fact, constitute a "watershed moment in many areas" and, Brague explains, it can lay claim to be the "apogee of divine law." If the "theio-political problem," as Brague redefines it, is merely a subset of the "theio-practical" problem, or the problem of how the divine intersects with the whole domain of practical action, and the "divine law constitutes precisely the theio-practical" idea *par excellence*," then the Middle Ages must provide a unique portal into our understanding of the "theio-practical." For Brague, therefore, the Middle Ages provides the frame of reference we sorely need to understand not only the nature of divine law, but also its transformation out of the crucible that forges modernity.

Leo Strauss memorably describes modernity not only as a rejection of classical philosophy but also as an intended

repudiation of the Christian Thomism that had dominated the schools running up to the dawn of the Enlightenment. In this way, one could say that his reading is decisively influenced by Machiavelli, who in Strauss's view saw Christianity as *the* obstacle to be overcome in order to usher in the new modes and orders of modernity. However, Brague argues that the "claim to have definitively left the Middle Ages" first appeared within Christianity and that Christianity itself has in many ways made our modern societies possible. The modern project of comprehensive secularization, or its mission to sunder the divine from law in the service of individual autonomy, is "only made possible, in the final analysis, by the Christian experience of a divine without a law." In fact, Brague proposes that the very notion of a modern state, or of citizenship, or of the separation of church and state, or our fundamental interpretation of democracy, or the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and even atheism and the idea of secularization itself are all ultimately inheritances of a Christianity that modernity set out to reject, but instead deeply but unwittingly absorbed. Modern consciousness seems particularly colored by what Nietzsche would have referred to as *resentiment*, given that it owes its character and existence to a patrimony it now publicly denies.

In *The Law of God*, Brague never specifically mentions American intellectual discourse, but he does observe that generally today there is "constant talk about the distinction between the religious and the political." In an essay entitled "Are Non-Theocratic Regimes Possible?" in the Spring 2006 *Intercollegiate Review*, he does directly speak of the "struggles that constitute the contemporary American 'culture wars'" in this vein. There, Brague marshals powerful evidence to demonstrate that our

central notions of individual conscience and democracy are fundamentally Christian in nature and that further, even our understanding of political life is fundamentally theocratic, if that is taken to mean that it is based “upon assumptions that are theological in character.” While Brague does concede that within modernity the “idea of a divine law did not totally disappear,” the typical modern analysis “empties it of all content, which is perhaps worse than simply being forgotten.”

Our most divisive intellectual tensions are peculiarly Straussian in form but no longer particularly productive or philosophically fecund, are borne out of self-delusion regarding the foundations of modern political life, and may, to the

extent that such discourse blithely assumes the possibility of a human society “with no reference to the divine,” be a dangerous species of “suicidal dialectics.” In other words, Brague would argue that our feckless debates between the God-directed and the Darwin-directed are the residue of a Straussian preoccupation which is “a serious problem in appearance only.” Even though Brague never mentions America in *The Law of God*, our internecine disputes turn out to be remarkably emblematic of modernity as a whole. Anyone interested in moving beyond the stilted parameters of our own historically and philosophically dubious expression of the theologico-political problem should study this powerful and profound work.