

## Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers

**Geoffrey M. Vaughan (Editor)**

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press,  
2018 (360 pages)

The German-American philosopher Leo Strauss is arguably one of the most influential political thinkers in American history. To get a sense of his importance, note that Strauss is a rare case of a philosopher who has a school of thought—Straussianism—named after him. He and his disciples gained so much influence in some departments of political science, think tanks, and academic publications that Straussians can afford to divide themselves along geographical lines—East Coast and West Coast Straussians—that also correspond to different interpretations of Strauss’s teachings.

This new book edited by Geoffrey M. Vaughan is a collection of essays intending to answer a relatively simple question: Why does Leo Strauss matter to Catholics? Moreover, in order to fulfill this task, the essays seek to analyze Strauss’s thought while aiming at the Catholic intellectual horizon, hence shedding light on the similarities and differences between the German-American philosopher and Catholic thought.

The book is divided into three sections—natural rights, Strauss’s thought and the Catholic worldview, and the Straussian interpretation of religion and political philosophy—and unfolds this common ground between Straussianism and Catholicism through two main axes: first, the question of natural law as common to both Strauss’s philosophy and Catholic thought, and second, the problems that involve political modernity as criticized by the Catholic Church and Straussian philosophy alike.

The underlying argument made by the editor and contributors is that regardless of the differences that may exist between Strauss’s philosophy and Catholic thought, there is much to be learned by a Catholic reading Strauss. Vaughan makes clear from the outset the reasons why a book about Strauss from a Catholic perspective makes sense: there are many affinities, and Strauss wrote almost nothing about Catholic thinkers. Both assessments, however accurate, need more context to be understood and to show the first problems that a Catholic reader of Strauss will need to reckon with.

Strauss wanted a return of the old questions about political life, with a clear claim about the superiority of the classical understanding of human nature—goals aimed at by the Catholic Church as well. Since the French Revolution, a return to classical political philosophy had become the primary goal of the Vatican, aiming to build an intellectual counterpoint to the so-called errors of the modern world denounced by Pope Pius IX. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the teachings of Saint Thomas Aquinas flourished within the church, culminating in the papal bull *Aeterni Patris* proclaimed by Leo XIII in 1876, which placed the Angelic Doctor at the center of Catholic thought.

By invoking a worldview contrary to the modern liberal spirit, Strauss appealed to natural rights and the return of the classics, which resonated perfectly well with the teach-

ings of the Catholic Church. Therefore, Strauss wrote and spoke with words and ideas with which Catholic intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century were entirely familiar.

However, there are not as many similarities as the editor suggests. The fact that Strauss, who was a historian of ideas, wrote almost nothing about Catholic thinkers can only signal either an unforgivable intellectual lapse or masked hostility.

In many ways, Strauss's thinking is not a return to the teaching of the classics, but something thoroughly modern. For instance, he was a critic of Aquinas and thought that religiosity and philosophy were, in the last instance, incompatible. According to him in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1954), philosophy takes the man away from the religious experience; therefore, a true philosopher can never be a true believer. In Strauss's interpretation of the history of ideas, philosophers commonly conceal their hostility toward religions by using rhetorical subterfuge to deceive censors. Straussian hermeneutics divides philosophical thought into an exoteric dimension accessible to the careless reader and an esoteric one accessible only to initiates. The latter is the one that matters, and it is invariably devoid of a religious spirit.

Another noteworthy omission is any mention of the close intellectual relationship between Strauss and Carl Schmitt, the principal Catholic political theorist of the Weimar Republic. Schmitt had a significant influence on Strauss in his formative years and even provided him with the letter of recommendation that allowed Strauss to leave Germany for an academic career in the United States, first at the New School of Social Research and later at the University of Chicago. Schmitt, for his part, was so impressed by the comments Strauss wrote about his own *The Concept of the Political*—a book that owes much to Saint Augustine's thought—that Strauss's comments were included in subsequent editions of the book. Besides that, both of them were genuinely interested in Thomas Hobbes's philosophy and the political-theological problem.

Besides the two reasons the editor presents, there is at least a third reason that makes Strauss important to American Catholics, especially the conservative ones, which the editor fails to mention. Strauss had considerable influence over many post-World War II Catholic intellectuals and—despite being sympathetic toward liberals and the Democratic Party—he helped to shape the modern conservative movement. Willmoore Kendall—not mentioned once in the book—is perhaps the most prominent among them.

Despite these omissions—which highlights the absence of an intellectual portrait of Strauss that would help the reader not versed in his philosophy to understand the debate the book addresses—and the general laudatory tone, the book manages to fulfill its promise to present a broad picture of the dialogue between Strauss's thought and Catholicism. Ralph C. Hancock's essay "Leo Strauss's Profound and Fragile Critique of Christianity" is probably the best essay in the collection because it delineates certain contradictions of the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, rational thought and spiritual revelation, a subject often dealt with in Strauss's writings, and because it adopts a critical stance that contrasts with the laudatory tone that prevails throughout the book.

## Reviews

The structure of the book, divided into essays, does not help either to deepen the central debate or to fully develop the arguments around a very complex subject. Still, the book provides an overview of a complicated intellectual issue primarily for an audience familiar with the debate between Catholicism and Straussianism.

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