

## Christian Social Thought

### Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem

**Heinrich Meier**

**Marcus Brainard (Translator)**

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Professor Meier's study of Leo Strauss's work contains about 125 pages of text divided into four chapters and two previously unpublished Strauss lectures, "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy" (1940) and "Reason and Revelation" (1948). The title really does indicate Meier's focus—the theologico-political problem (chap. 1) as the major theme in Strauss's writings. According to Meier, this means that Strauss devoted his life to the explanation and defense of philosophy as a way of life. To do this, argues Meier, Strauss had to look at the critique of the philosophical way of life by politics and religion as well as the philosophical attempt to prove that revelation is impossible.

In his lecture on reason and revelation, Strauss argues that philosophy must show that revelation is impossible in order to justify its own existence. Choosing philosophy as a way of life may be fundamentally wrongheaded if revelation is possible. "If there is revelation, faith is infinitely more important than philosophy—philosophy ceases to be *the* way of life. [B]y accepting revelation, the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher if he does not transform revelation into philosophy (Hegel) and thus sacrifice revelation to philosophy" (171). This may seem to be a stark formulation to students of Augustine, Aquinas, or More. These great Christian thinkers had a profound knowledge of philosophy, but their lives were based on faith in revelation, not on philosophy as an autonomous way of existence. Strauss and Meier would not look at anyone as a philosopher who took his highest principles from revelation and lived a life of loving

obedience to God. The fundamental alternative is either “human guidance or divine guidance” (149).

Strauss does come to the conclusion that neither Spinoza nor any other philosopher has refuted the possibility of revelation. Philosophy is compelled to admit the possibility of revelation and to concede that the choice for the philosophical way of life is not a “rational necessity” but a choice of the will, an unevident decision, an act of faith, just as is the choice to believe in revelation. Thomas Aquinas says, “faith implies assent of the intellect to that which is believed,” but quickly adds that the intellect is not compelled to assent but only does so “through an act of choice.” Aquinas and Strauss have no disagreement regarding the role of the will in the acceptance of revelation.

A well-known Catholic student of Strauss, Ernest Fortin, often explained Strauss’s dichotomy between faith and philosophy as opposed ways of life. He also kept explaining Saint Augustine’s notion of one wisdom. He would draw a large circle on the board to represent revelation and a smaller circle within the larger to designate philosophy. While philosophy “has “been superseded by faith as the supreme norm and guide of life” (*Classical Christianity and the Political Order* [2]), Augustine still regarded it as crucial for Christianity for a number of reasons. Philosophy complements revelation “by supplying knowledge and guidance in areas concerning which revelation was silent or incomplete.” Philosophy also helps to explain and defend Christian teaching, to correlate the realms of Peter and Caesar, and to provide common ground between believers and unbelievers. In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes how he began to love wisdom as a young man by reading Cicero and how philosophy helped liberate him from his erroneous religious opinions.

Augustine’s love of wisdom, his philosophical knowledge, the influence of his mother and friends, and divine grace eventually led him to embrace the life of faith without abandoning the search for knowledge through reason. Augustine never described the choice between philosophy as a way of life and faith in revelation the way Strauss did. Augustine was not surprised or nonplussed that his love of wisdom or philosophizing led to Christian belief, whereas Strauss said, “I must explain ... why philosophy cannot possibly lead up to the insight that another way of life apart from the philosophical one is the right one” (see “Progress or Return”).

The second great theme in Meier’s insightful book is Strauss’s studies in the history of philosophy (chap. 2). Early in his life, Strauss had noticed the deadly effect of historicism or historical consciousness on life and thought. According to that view, says Strauss, “all ‘truths’ and standards are necessarily relative to a given historical situation, and ... consequently, a mature philosophy can raise no higher claim than to express the spirit of the period to which it belongs” (132). Strauss characterized historicism as dogmatic, lamentably self-complacent, the prime obstacle to the recovery of philosophy as the search for truth, and the generator of a second cave “lying below the Platonic cave” (56). I know of no scholar who has written so brilliantly on the meaning and implications of historicism (cf. “Natural Right and History,” 9–34). If that is all Strauss had done, he should be forever remembered.

Meier notes that the belief in historical consciousness strengthened the acceptance of prevailing opinion. Plato had famously observed that most people accepted prevailing opinions and, therefore, lived in a cave, the liberation from which was very difficult. Liberation from erroneous opinions is even more difficult today because of the second cave created by historicist thinking. Strauss saw his studies in the history of philosophy as a way of overcoming the unnatural ignorance produced by historicism. Unlike in the time of the ancient Greeks, book learning is now necessary to rise from the second cave into the Platonic cave. Strauss's brilliant studies of the ancient and modern philosophers revived the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns by showing how modern philosophy was a decisive break with Greek philosophy and the Bible. He showed how philosophers wrote esoterically to protect themselves from society and the nonphilosophers from philosophy, and he described the waves of modernity that led to the present impasse of historicism. After reading Strauss, one is likely to see the wisdom in the following statement from his 1940 lecture: "It is after all *possible* that the truth, or the right approach to the truth, has been found in a remote past and *forgotten* for centuries" (125).

Chapters 3 and 4 are entitled respectively "What Is Political Theology?" and "Why Political Philosophy?" Chapter 3 discusses the concept of political theology in the light of reflections on the subject by the German political theorist Carl Schmitt. Meier previously published a book on what he called the hidden dialogue between Schmitt and Strauss, who had written a review essay in 1932 on Schmitt's work, *The Concept of the Political*. This chapter does not directly complement the other three. Meier rightly says that chapter 4 "identifies the place accorded to the confrontation with the theologico-political problem in the inner structure of political philosophy" (xiv–xv), and thus fits in well with chapter 1.

Professor Meier, who is editing the collected works of Leo Strauss in German, reveals his profound knowledge of Strauss's thought in his brief book. One would, therefore, hope that he would write more extensively on other Strauss themes developed in his historical studies.

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## Economy of Grace

**Kathryn Tanner**

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Kathryn Tanner sees structural similarities between Christian theology and economics. Both circulate goods. Whereas God circulates the greatest good via a gift, capitalism circulates economic goods via competitive exchange. Her goal in this book is to challenge and change the current economic system of exchange with the vision and practice of an economy of grace.