

Introduction

The study of politics and its relation to religion is hardly a novel endeavor, nor is the philosophical exploration of this theme an exclusively modern one. The ancient world is replete with such examinations, culminating in Plato's *Laws*, a dialogue devoted to demonstrating that "the political philosopher has the authority to interpret and guide divine law."¹ But while ancient examinations of divine law are characterized by an effort to understand religion as a serious, comprehensive, and authoritative challenge to political rationalism, modern evaluations of religion appear to have far less interest in revelation or its adherents. In Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger takes great pains to understand the divine law and the attachment of its adherents, particularly with respect to the role of reason in guiding human life. In contrast, modern scholars of political theory tend to dismiss religion out of hand. It is not uncommon for a contemporary scholar to announce at the beginning of his or her study: "This is a book written by someone with very little interest in religion as such. What deeply interests me is politics, and political philosophy."²

Perhaps we should not be surprised by such indifference or even hostility to the study of religion and its contribution to political life. There is significant precedent for it. The term "civil religion" was first employed by Jean Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (4.8). Rousseau concedes that

flourishing political life requires religious belief on the part of the citizens but adds that Christianity is ill suited to such a role. He instead envisions a simplified form of Christianity more closely tailored to political life: “The dogmas of civil religion ought to be few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary. The existence of a mighty, intelligent, and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas. Its negative dogmas I confine to one, intolerance, which is a part of the cults we have rejected.” Rousseau emphasizes the importance of a civil religion that culminates in toleration: “Whoever dares to say: ‘Outside the Church is no salvation,’ ought to be driven from the State.” Yet the “dogmas” he lists are hardly original; indeed, they simply restate Baruch Spinoza’s dogmas of civil religion for liberal democracy as presented in chapter 14 of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Clearly Rousseau has inherited a view of civil religion that is already part of a tradition of political philosophy.

This tradition of civil religion contains several distinctive features, but perhaps the most startling is the remoteness of the justifications for it from anything resembling philosophical legitimacy. Spinoza, for example, insists that while these dogmas are salutary for political life, they can make no claim to any basis in fact or truth. He asserts instead that “each is bound to accommodate these dogmas of faith to suit his own grasp” (14.49). In other words, salutary religious beliefs are good for *others* (not philosophers or potential philosophers). Contemporary political philosophers have obeyed Spinoza’s command to the extent of downplaying or neglecting the claims of religion altogether. As for why the pursuit of political philosophy obliges one to reject such claims, Spinoza says that “the goal of philosophy is nothing but truth, while that of faith . . . is nothing but obedience and piety” (14.54). Nor is Spinoza alone in holding this view. Thomas Hobbes, who claimed to be less audacious than Spinoza, goes further in arguing that religion is destroyed by philosophical reflection: “Therefore, when anything therein written is too hard for our examination, we are bidden to captivate our understanding to the words; and not to labour in sifting out a philosophical truth by logic of such mysteries as are not comprehensible, nor fall under any rule of natural science. For it is with the mysteries of our religion as with wholesome pills for the sick, which swallowed whole have the virtue to cure, but chewed, are for the most part cast up again without effect” (*Leviathan* 3.32). If religion

and philosophy occupy separate and exclusive domains, it is no wonder that contemporary students of politics disavow any interest in religion.

The similarities between Rousseau and Spinoza on religion conceal the following difference: Spinoza's dogmas are the culmination of fourteen chapters of extensive scriptural analysis, including prophecy, law, providence, and hermeneutics. Spinoza adopts the point of view of a believer in revelation and attempts to show on those grounds that revelation is consistent with democracy and freedom. His argument moves from theological or biblical premises toward political analysis. Rousseau's analysis proceeds in the opposite fashion. He first determines which beliefs are necessary for a republic and then presents such beliefs in a scriptural garb. In other words, the political argument determines his theological claims—that is, his “civil religion.”

Of course, it may well be the case that for Spinoza, too, the political teaching presupposes the theological teaching. In fact, Spinoza directs us obliquely to this very point of view. He writes, for example, at the beginning of the *Treatise*, that “many suppose as a foundation for understanding Scripture and extracting its true sense that it is everywhere truthful and divine. Namely, the very thing that ultimately has to be established from an understanding of it and by strict examination . . . they state at the very outset as a rule for its interpretation” (preface.4). The correct method, he implies, does not assume that the Bible is true or that we can simply accept its authority. Instead he argues that we need to reexamine the Bible to determine which parts are true. Most of the *Treatise*, the first fifteen chapters, is devoted to this reexamination. Spinoza concludes that the Bible's essential teaching is *caritas*—to love one's neighbor as oneself. Curiously, this conclusion is sharply at odds with his political teaching in chapters 16–20, which present the striving for power, *conatus*, as the fundamental political fact. The emphasis on *caritas* appears to be a salutary teaching determined by bleak political facts.

In this respect, Rousseau's presentation of the dogmas of his civil religion, as well as his more generally allowing political considerations to determine theological claims, is consistent with Spinoza's account. Not surprisingly, then, once the political argument is severed from the theological account, it is nearly impossible to take the theological argument seriously in its own right. Our volume, in contrast, is devoted to a study of the origins of civil religion in early modern philosophy, before the severance of politics

from religious life would or could be taken for granted—that is, when the theological and political dimensions of public life, and of the philosophical arguments concerning it, were still routinely connected to one another, however solidly or tenuously. We begin our study with Niccolò Machiavelli, the first of the early modern philosophers to suggest outspokenly that the tension between the goals of biblical piety and the goals of political life needs to be resolved in favor of the political. In the wake of Machiavelli's suggestion, and accommodating themselves to it, the subsequent thinkers in our volume each seek to recast and delimit traditional Christian teaching to serve and stabilize political life.

That is to say, in the theological dimensions of their various political-philosophical arguments, the thinkers in question each aim at remaking Christianity into what came to be called a civil religion, as our chapters will show. Machiavelli compares Christianity with the Roman religion it replaced historically and asks whether it is possible to revive something like the civic spiritedness endorsed by Roman religion on the basis of Christianity (Timothy Sean Quinn). Francis Bacon, in turn, cherry-picks Christian texts and doctrines to underwrite a civil religion that would encourage both scientific progress and the intellectual innovativeness required for it (Martin D. Yaffe). Hobbes seeks to discredit the Augustinian notion of the “city of God” as a community transcending the state, so as to reinterpret and hollow out Christianity's teaching about the human soul with a view to confining the soul within the total sovereignty of modern state authority (Mark Shiffman). And Spinoza, on the assumption that superstition is ineradicable from political life, insists on the complete rejection of miracles along with the consequences of such a rejection, including the belief in providence and transcendence, so as to replace older superstitions with newer ones, including the belief in progress (Steven Frankel). Other chapters focus on essential modern authors writing in the wake of the foregoing, including Rousseau (John Ray) and David Hume (Aaron Szymkowiak). These chapters present careful textual studies that show how the author in question forges an anti-Christian teaching on the basis of Scripture, pouring old wine into new bottles, in “spiritual warfare” meant (in Machiavelli's words) “to use the arms of one's enemy” to emancipate science and philosophy from ecclesiastical control and render religion subordinate to politics. For both saw subordinating religion to politics as the only alternative to subordinating politics to religion after the triumph of the Bible, and both championed

the reliance on human reason rather than divine authority. Consequently, these philosophers, too, were compelled to take issue with the theoretical as well as the practical claims of the Bible, including its teachings on miracles, creation *ex nihilo*, revelation, and a loving providential God.

Our volume culminates in the study of civil religion in America with chapters on John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu, the American founders, and Alexis de Tocqueville. The study of Locke exposes the profound tension between his political project and Christianity (Nasser Behnegar). As for Montesquieu, whom Madison famously describes in Federalist Paper 47 as “the oracle who is always consulted,” we have devoted two chapters of the book to explore his account of Christianity’s effect on civil religion in antiquity (Andrea Radasanu) and his particular influence on the American founding (Paul Carrese). An additional study on the founders’ approach to civil religion and the relation of church and state demonstrates the central importance of the question of civil religion to the American regime (Vincent Phillip Muñoz and Kevin Vance). The volume ends with Tocqueville’s account of civil religion and the American regime, which is seen to give rise to a new political science (Aaron L. Herold).

Differently stated, each of the chapters that follow may be said to contemplate the benefits and drawbacks of civil religion’s reordering of the relations between politics and religion with a view to pinpointing the ongoing issues at stake as they emerge in the writings of these early modern political philosophers.

Quinn’s chapter argues that Machiavelli considers the relationship between Christianity and civil society of paramount importance to the success of a regime, as is evident not only in the plan of his *Discourses on Livy* but in his progressively harsh treatment of Christianity, both explicit and covert, which spans all three books of the *Discourses*. At the same time, Machiavelli praises the ancient Roman civil religion for its power to cultivate spirited souls fit for ruling, or, as he remarks of Romulus, men “armed with virtue and with arms.” Yet Roman religion, as Machiavelli in fact acknowledges, was too weak to withstand Christianity, eventually succumbing to it. Thus Machiavelli is left with a problem, first confronted in his treatment of ecclesiastical principalities and its “unarmed prophets” in *The Prince*: how to revive a civil religion after the fashion of Roman religion on the basis of Christianity. Quinn explores this question by analyzing Machiavelli’s accounts of Roman religion and of Christianity in his *Discourses*, which

offers a more fulsome analysis, or at least a less covert analysis, of the issue of religion than does *The Prince*. After examining his introductory remarks about the relationship between Christianity and the “new modes and orders” he wishes to introduce, the chapter treats, in turn, Machiavelli’s discussion of Roman religion (book 1) and his explicit critique of Christianity (1.12, 2.2, and 3.1). The aim of Quinn’s analysis is twofold: to reveal the political problem Christianity poses, in Machiavelli’s view, and to indicate more generally his argument for the necessity of a civil religion that will cultivate future princes for future republics.

Yaffe shows how Bacon’s high-tech society of the future, whose contours he traces in his political-philosophical parable *New Atlantis*, evidently requires not only his prior refounding (*instauratio*) of philosophy or science so as to reorient it toward the practical goal of the “conquest of nature,” a refounding he sketches aphoristically in his *New Organon*, but also his co-opting of biblical theology so as to recast Christianity into a civil religion for that society, a recasting on display throughout the *New Atlantis*. Both books are seen to underwrite what Yaffe considers Baconian society’s putative, if theologically problematic, need for a biblically based civil religion that would encourage both scientific progress and the intellectual innovativeness required for it, though limited to its horizon.

Shiffman reminds readers how the “City of God,” as articulated by Augustine and developed and institutionalized through subsequent centuries, provides orientation and concrete community for a rich understanding of the human person and the fulfillment of human potential. In this Christian humanism, the fullness of the person, made possible through communion with a personal Creator, unfolds in several dimensions that acquire fundamental anthropological significance: humility, grace, conversion, vocation, sanctification, natural law, and conscience. As constitutive dimensions of human fulfillment, these aspects of humanity transcend the confines of earthly political authority, providing recognizable and communally acknowledged grounds for the inherent limitation of political authority. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes, seeking to discredit the City of God as a community transcending the state, reinterprets and evacuates each of these categories so as to reconquer the human soul and confine it within the total sovereignty of modern state authority.

As has already been mentioned, and as Frankel’s chapter spells out further, in preparing the reader for his argument in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

on behalf of liberal democracy, Spinoza presents a critique of biblical religion that culminates in a civil religion. This civil religion leaves ultimate sovereignty to the state in all matters of religious belief while presenting the general guidelines for acceptable theological views. For the most part, Spinoza's account emphasizes freedom and toleration, with one notable exception: his critique of miracles in chapter 6. Spinoza insists on the complete rejection of miracles along with the consequences of such a rejection, including the belief in providence and transcendence. Scholars have struggled to explain why Spinoza wishes to demolish the belief in miracles and, more generally, how his critique contributes to his overall political project. The purpose of Frankel's chapter is to explain Spinoza's critique of miracles in light of his political project. As Frankel shows, Spinoza hopes to replace older superstitions with newer ones, including the belief in progress.

Behnegar notes that the surprising power of resistance to liberal democracy in the Middle East has stimulated a renewed interest in reexamining the relationship between liberalism and religion. His chapter takes up the question of whether Locke's political philosophy is rooted in biblical premises or in this-worldly inferences of natural reason, a question that has played a large part in the impasse in Locke scholarship between the Straussian and Cambridge schools of interpretation. After disentangling this question from the polemical context of Leo Strauss's thesis, the study intervenes in this debate by examining the quotations from the Bible in the *Second Treatise*, interpreting the meaning of each passage in the original text and comparing it to the view that Locke claims it supports. Considerations of space limit Behnegar's focus to those quotations that are used by Locke primarily to address normative questions as opposed to historical-anthropological ones. His chapter sheds new light on many of these passages, while confirming Strauss's view that there is a profound tension between the general Christian position and Locke's political theory. Behnegar concludes with some reflections on Locke as a writer (modifying some of Strauss's comments in *Natural Right and History*) and on the significance of our study for contemporary liberalism as a living creed.

As Radasanu observes, Montesquieu may be known better for his departures from Machiavelli than for his debts to the Florentine master—though there are certainly some studies that focus on the latter as well. On the topic of religion and its role in political life, Montesquieu may seem to offer a complimentary account of Christianity's positive effects on politics. In

The Spirit of Laws, he praises Christianity's gentling effects on politics and international relations, particularly as compared to pagan Rome's rapacious expansionary war practices. He also, however, points to Christianity's large role in giving a bad name to commerce, a specifically modern turn on which progress in the establishment of gentle mores and limited government vitally depends. Indeed, Montesquieu's praise of Christianity turns out to be greatly qualified: not only is it at odds with modern commercial mores that prize this-worldly well-being, but it turns out to be of dubious usefulness to political life in general. Montesquieu, in a manner reminiscent of Machiavelli, privileges the political sphere and ultimately proposes that religion must give way to political exigencies. That Christianity fails to do this is a matter that Montesquieu takes up in various writings and in various (albeit sometimes quiet) ways. Radasanu's chapter focuses on Montesquieu's comparison of two Romes: the politically successful pagan one and the disastrous empire that allowed Christian concerns to undermine political ones. All three of Montesquieu's major political writings are considered—*Spirit of Laws*, *Persian Letters*, and *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*—but especially the last mentioned, which has Machiavelli's own *Discourses* as a starting point.

Carrese remarks on how Abraham Lincoln's American statesmanship echoes George Washington's "Farewell Address," the last of many such echoes in Washington's career of Montesquieu's argument that free government must shape the morals or manners of its citizenry, especially by harmonizing Christianity and good citizenship (*Spirit* 24). Not all of those echoes were drafted by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, nor is there evidence that Lincoln read Montesquieu. The point is that the spirit of moderation permeated American thought even if the source was not invoked. Among the most famous lines of Washington's Farewell Address are declarations that "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports"; that "A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity"; and that just policies are "recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human Nature." Nor can we suppose that "morality can be maintained without religion," for while "a refined education" might serve for exceptional minds, "reason and experience forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." A Montesquieuan spirit more obviously informs the sequel, that "virtue or morality is a necessary spring

of popular government.” It is a small step to Lincoln’s statement that only under God could America have a new birth of freedom from the horror of near self-destruction and to his invocation of humility and charity in the second inaugural address as a further call to rebirth. To the extent that such characteristically American harmonizing of the spirit of liberty and spirit of religion draws upon modern philosophy, Montesquieu is the indispensable if often unacknowledged influence.

As Szymkowiak points out, for Hume the civil role of religion is inseparable from its connection with the passions. Like many other British thinkers of his era, Hume warned against the dangers of “enthusiasm,” which he had come to associate with the varied sects arising in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Hume’s strategy for dealing with the largely chaotic politics of enthusiasm was, however, not entirely clear. It was articulated most fully and consistently not in his works on religion but in his *History of England*. In the third volume of that work, Hume enters a “digression concerning the ecclesiastical state,” in which he directly advocates the establishment of a state church. He argues that this would encourage a kind of torpor through material comfort, thwart “interested diligence” among the clergy, and foster moderation in the polity. Tensions in Hume’s “co-optation” strategy are evident from Adam Smith’s famous attack on it in section 5 of *The Wealth of Nations* and also from Hume’s own treatment of seventeenth-century independency in the fifth volume of the *History of England*. Smith argues that Hume has underestimated the extent to which religious imagination suffuses political action, and consequently that public competition among sects would better facilitate political moderation. In *History 5*, meanwhile, Hume complicates his own account by stressing the *positive* role of enthusiasm in generating civil liberty. It would appear that a statesman must respond to the historical predicament of his nation in advancing or neglecting establishment, yet *pace* Smith, there exists no clear historical-material arc of development by which he can judge the matter. Szymkowiak’s chapter traces the relative strengths of Hume’s position, especially against the nascent historicism of Smith. Still, what Szymkowiak will call Hume’s moral-historical “externalism” involves problems that can be obviated only by entertaining a possibility Hume refused—namely, that theological particulars might work as political causes.

According to Ray, Rousseau’s chapter in the *Social Contract* on civil religion, a term he was first to use, has been carefully scrutinized by scholars

of the first rank, including Ronald Beiner, Paul A. Rahe, and Hilail Gildin, all of whom have found it to suffer from serious logical inconsistencies. For Rousseau, only national religions that do not divide sovereignty can be civil religions, yet these are impossible in modernity. Although Rousseau insists that Christianity as a transnational or universal religion cannot be a civil religion, the dogmas he proposes in the final paragraphs of the chapter substantially overlap with the dogmas of Christianity, making it unclear how his dogmas escape the very criticism he levels at Christianity. By the time Rousseau published his chapter on civil religion in the *Social Contract*, the Enlightenment's attack on Christianity had achieved its primary intellectual task of biblical interpretation, with the result of greatly reducing, at least for intellectuals, the authority of clergy to declare, for the mass of common humanity, the meaning of sacred Scripture and the details of its dogmas. Rousseau thus entered the debate after great damage to the authority of the clergy to declare God's will had already been accomplished; he evidently did so with the objective of shoring up the most basic religious beliefs necessary to the support of law and morality while preserving the private sphere of belief from intolerance. The American example, in the writings of Tocqueville and of Lincoln, seems to demonstrate that Rousseau was wrong about the adaptability of Christianity to particular national cultures and thus its utility to the maintenance of freedom in democracy. Although perhaps wrong about Christianity's capacity to serve as a civil religion, Rousseau must be credited with the restoration in political philosophy of the positive benefits of religion to civil society.

As Muñoz and Vance recall, in the landmark "wall of separation" church-state case *Everson v. Board of Education* in 1947, the Supreme Court turned to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to announce the meaning of the establishment clause. Ever since, scholars and judges have appealed to the American founders to interpret the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom. A broadly shared methodological commitment to originalism in church-state matters, however, has not produced much agreement on the bench. An underappreciated reason why is that while the founders agreed about the existence and importance of a natural right to religious freedom, they disagreed over how to separate church from state. The aim of Muñoz and Vance's chapter is to explain the founders' shared and competing understandings of religious freedom. They begin by explaining the founders' common understanding of the existence of a natural right to religious liberty.

They then consider the founders' disagreement over how that right ought to limit the scope and exercise of governmental power. By better understanding how and why the founders agreed and disagreed about religious liberty, they suggest, Americans today might more accurately and thoughtfully deliberate about how best to protect our "first freedom."

Finally, noting how recent scholarship has illuminated the way that the political philosophers of the Enlightenment sought to transform Christianity to support the requirements of modern democratic politics, Herold's chapter examines Tocqueville's critical reflections on that project of religious transformation, as well as his attempt to contribute to it while also moderating it and correcting what he saw as its crucial deficiencies. Unlike that of his Enlightenment predecessors, the religious outlook of Tocqueville's time was decisively affected by modern philosophy. In America, Tocqueville observed the theologies of thinkers like Locke ascendant and virtually unopposed, with the result that souls were largely alienated from the biblical beliefs and sentiments that the Enlightenment had sought to dampen. Tocqueville, however, perceives an unforeseen danger in this alienation: Americans as he describes them are affected, in ways they hardly have the vocabulary to describe, by the loss of certain distinctly human experiences and concerns, including a devotion to community, to an entity greater than oneself, and—connected to these—a desire for an eternal and perfect existence. At the same time, however, Tocqueville regards democracy, in spite of its tendency to hide these experiences from us, as fundamentally just. Tocqueville's political science therefore faces a complex challenge. On the one hand, how can he craft a civil religion for a people that has been decisively shaped by modern rationalism, and among whom religion is consequently on the decline? And on the other, in recovering a sense of what the Enlightenment rebelled against, how can Tocqueville preserve and protect those core aspects of liberal and democratic politics that he regards as fundamentally just and integral to human flourishing—aspects whose absence from the biblical tradition in fact helped motivate the Enlightenment's hostility to it? Tocqueville's attempt to balance or reconcile these twin concerns, Herold argues, forms the centerpiece of his political science. Thus understanding this attempt helps us understand not only his relationship to prior thinkers but also his complicated view of democracy's justice.

Our volume will appeal to scholars in the history of political philosophy, political theory, and American political thought. The analyses in it will be

of particular interest to students who wish to understand the relation of modern political theory to the American founding. Last but not least, the volume's overall approach—the careful study of original texts—is meant to let readers move quickly to the theoretical heart of the role and meaning of civil religion in modern liberalism.

NOTES

1. See Mark Lutz, *Divine Law and Political Philosophy in Plato's Laws* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), 3.

2. Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.