The Political Science Reviewer • Volume 46, Number 1 • 2022

Does Politics Need a Theology? Leo Strauss's Reflections on Hegel

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Leo Strauss devoted two seminars to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the first in 1958 and the second in 1965. At first glance, this work is an odd choice that Strauss made. Unlike Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, these lectures are not primarily concerned with political philosophy, nor did Hegel ever publish them (they survive as students' notes taken from his lectures). Yet in his first lecture in the 1965 seminar, Strauss cogently offers two reasons that explain his choice. First, "precisely the fact that that is a lecture and not a book is, in the case of Hegel at any rate, a great help, because Hegel is an unusually difficult writer and in his lectures he is much more easy to follow than in the works which he published himself."[1] Second, "Hegel's political philosophy proper as presented in the *Philosophy of Right* is essentially related to his philosophy of history; and one understands his political philosophy proper as philosophy of right better if one views the historical matrix out of which that philosophy emerged, and that exactly we find in the lectures on the philosophy of history. One can say Hegel was the first to make the understanding of the history of political philosophy an essential ingredient of political philosophy itself" (*LSH*, 17–18).

Although these are valid reasons that explain Strauss's interest in these lectures, why should we take seriously his lectures on

[*]A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Session on Political Theology II, at the Meeting of the Eric Voegelin Society on September 11, 2020. I want to thank Carol Cooper and David Walsh for making helpful comments on my paper.

Hegel's philosophy of history? Paul Franco, in his excellent introduction to the 1965 seminar, provides a partial answer to this question by noting that these lectures by Strauss are more accessible than his published writings.[2] Moreover, "Strauss adds some nuances in his lectures that are not present in the broad brush strokes of his earlier published writings."[3] Still, these reasons will likely satisfy only readers who are interested in Strauss: they are not bound to persuade readers of Hegel that they are worth reading. After all, Strauss wrote little about Hegel in his published writings. Moreover, what he did write tends to be severely critical of Hegel, especially for inspiring the rise of historicism.[4] This doctrine, as readers of Strauss well know, is, according to him, the most dangerous enemy of political philosophy precisely because it teaches "the inescapable dependence of thought on fate" (or historical context). This teaching discourages human beings from philosophically questioning the dogmas of their times.[5]

Despite these considerations, I intend to show that Strauss's seminars on Hegel have considerable merit that even experienced readers of Hegel can appreciate. Specifically, Strauss incisively demonstrates that Hegel is one of the few modern philosophers to question and scrutinize the traditional dualism between philosophy and religion, an opposition that, we shall see, Strauss himself embraces. In his careful analysis of Hegel's treatment of these two traditions, Strauss rigorously pursues important implications of Hegel's critique of this dichotomy. One of the most important implications here is Hegel's position that religion (in the biblical sense) is inseparable from modern politics. In particular, Protestant Christianity, as Hegel understands it, is the essential basis of modern self-government. Put differently, without Protestantism, constitutional democracy is impossible in the Hegelian system. Readers who are familiar with Strauss's surgical distinction between political philosophy and political theology may be surprised to learn that in these lectures Strauss reveals at times a cautious or qualified sympathy with some of Hegel's attempts to justify a theological (yet also philosophical) foundation for politics. After all, Strauss clearly states that political philosophy is "limited to what is

accessible to the unassisted human mind," while he understands political theology to be "political teachings which are based on divine revelation."[6] Moreover, any attempt at a synthesis or "harmonization" of philosophy and religion fails to address their "radical disagreement."[7] The question that I address in the following discussion is this: Is there any valid philosophical reason, according to Strauss, for accepting Hegel's view that biblical religion in its Protestant manifestation is the true basis for modern politics? In other words, does politics need a theology?

In the course of answering this set of questions, I refer to both seminars where it is appropriate. However, I focus mainly on Strauss's 1965 seminar mainly because, as Franco observes, these lectures show Strauss treating "the theologico-political problem in Hegel at even greater length" than in the 1958 seminar.[8] It is well known to his readers that Strauss understood this problem to be the greatest challenge that political philosophy has faced. In fact, this problem gave birth to political philosophy. As Strauss notes in *The City and Man* (1964), Socrates "originated" political philosophy when he questioned the gods of Athens and, therefore, the very basis of Athens itself.[9] In short, the theologico-political problem is not simply concerned with the often-conflicted relation between religion and politics, or whether religion has any role in the public square. Fundamentally for Strauss, this problem reflects the eternal conflict between religion and political philosophy.[10] Why should the "unassisted" human mind devoted to a life of reason welcome the presence of religion, with all its apparently irrational features, into the realm of politics? In alternative terms, how does a life devoted to "autonomous understanding" have anything in common with one devoted to "obedient love"?[11]

Hegel's "Secularized Christianity"

Given Hegel's opposition to the dualistic separation of philosophy and theology (or reason and faith), is the theologico-political problem even a problem for him? Franco, in his introduction to the 1965 seminar, alludes to an apparent contradiction that Strauss first brought to light in his treatment of Hegel in his 1958 seminar.

"Once again, he (Strauss) underlines the primacy of religion in Hegel. But unlike other societies—ancient Greece, for example—the modern state is indifferent to the specific religion of its members."[12] How can Hegel teach that religion is essential to politics even though the modern state does not care about the religion of its citizenry? Strauss clearly presents this problem in his first seminar, beginning with a direct quote from Hegel's lectures on the fate of Socrates in Athens:

> "Our state is entirely different from that of the Athenian people, since our state can be completely indifferent toward the inner life, even toward religion." That is the great paradoxy of the modern state, as Hegel sees it. It is based on the principle of subjectivity, of the infinite subjectivity, but because of this it does not control the subjectivity. In other words—we have discussed this on a former occasion—the modern state is based on what one could call a "secularized Christianity." But this does not mean that the citizen of the modern state must be a Christian—this would contradict the very principle of that state. That is a great difficulty.[13]

In this context, Strauss notes this "paradoxy" because it is consistent with one of his principal aims in these lectures, which is to show that Hegel was not a "totalitarian" worshipper of the state.[14] In fact, Strauss interprets Hegel as a liberal (although not democratic) defender of "the rights of man" (*LSH*, 52). However, what Strauss calls the "great difficulty" that this "paradoxy" raises is twofold. First, why does a modern state, dedicated to protecting the freedom or "subjectivity" of its citizens, need to "secularize" Christianity? Second, is "secularized Christianity" a confusing and contradictory synthesis that falsely conflates what is human (secular) with what is divine (religious)?[15]

In order to address these important questions, it is essential to understand how Hegel (according to Strauss) interprets the relation between philosophy and religion. As Strauss indicates in

the quote above, Hegel's approach to the theologico-political problem stands in sharp contrast to classical Athens, which was hardly indifferent to Socrates's views on the gods. How does secularized Christianity, then, relate to the traditions of Athens and Jerusalem as a whole? In *On Tyranny*, Strauss accuses Hegel and his twentieth-century interpreter Alexandre Kojève of doing an injustice to both traditions by imposing a false synthesis on them:

> Syntheses effect miracles. Kojève's or Hegel's syntheses of classical and Biblical morality effects the miracle of producing an amazingly lax morality out of two moralities both of which made very strict demands on self-restraint. Neither Biblical nor classical morality encourages us to try, solely for the sake of our preferment or our glory, to oust from their positions men who do the required work as well as we could. (Consider Aristotle, *Politics* 1271a10–19.) Neither Biblical nor classical morality encourages all statesmen to try to extend their authority over all men in order to achieve universal recognition.[16]

This passage *appears* to be consistent with the passage quoted from Strauss's 1958 seminar on Hegel. Taken together, Strauss suggests that a modern (Protestant) state secularizes Christianity for the purpose of requiring an "amazingly lax morality" that is "completely indifferent" to the piety of its citizens. This synthesis does an injustice to both Athens and Jerusalem that, whatever their differences, imposed "very strict demands on self-restraint" that are just the opposite of an easy indifference to the "inner life" of human beings. Ultimately, Strauss is targeting modern liberalism, of which Hegel is a defender, for watering down or filtering out the severe moral imperatives of Athens and Jerusalem while selectively synthesizing the political universalism of Athens with the moral universalism of Jerusalem. Several pages later, Strauss writes in *On Tyranny*: "Classical philosophy created the idea of the universal state. Modern philosophy, which is the secularized form of Christianity, created the idea of the universal and homogeneous

state."[17] In other words, the classical search for the best regime for all human beings melds uneasily with the biblical credo of equality before God, resulting in a regime whose citizens desire recognition for themselves at the expense of cultivating virtue.

This scathing critique of Hegel is not, however, Strauss's last word. To recall Franco, Strauss's seminars reveal more "nuances" than his published works do. Whereas Strauss in *On Tyranny* seemingly accepts Kojève's attribution of the "end of history" theme to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he is more critical of this reading of Hegel in his own seminars.[18] More importantly for my purpose, however, Strauss's lectures on Hegel show that the key to comprehending Hegel's defense of a modern and secularized "Christian" state is to understand Hegel as an opponent of unnecessary contradictions. Still, how successful is Hegel in reconciling the religious and the secular within the modern state, which preserves the freedom of all citizens—Christian and non-Christian?

The answer to this question lies in Strauss's interpretation of Hegel as a philosopher who is committed to reconciliation. The paradox to which Strauss points, albeit unclearly at times, is that Hegel seeks to reconcile apparent opposites in his philosophy of history. In his 1965 lecture on the role of reason in Hegel's philosophy of history, Strauss notes Hegel's interest in "the union or reconciliation of the concrete and the universal" by demonstrating "that reason is both the form and the matter" of history. More specifically, there is nothing outside of history or beyond the scrutiny of reason. In fact, what is rational is indistinguishable from what is providential. "Hegel speaks of providence . . . but it is a scrutable providence" (*LSH*, 26). Yet Strauss has serious doubts as to how successful Hegel is in synthesizing religion and philosophy:

> And in connection with his attempt to show that what he is doing is only to do consistently what is implied in the Christian or the Western religious tradition and therefore it shouldn't be paradoxical—it is paradoxical, you say, that everything is rational, but it is not paradoxical to say that God has created everything wisely. (*LSH*, 44)

If my reading of Strauss is correct here, he is suggesting that what appears paradoxical to the rational ("unassisted") mind is not paradoxical to the believing mind. Faith in God succeeds where reason fails. This conclusion is one that Hegel sternly repudiates, given his consistent position that faith must be thoughtful (and thought must be faithful). "God wishes no narrow-hearted souls or empty heads for his children." For Hegel, true believers are those who are "rich in the knowledge of Him; and who regard this knowledge of God as the only valuable possession."[19] Still, Strauss's reference to God's creation of all things raises a question that is central not only to his interpretation of Hegel's political theology but also to his own understanding of the history of political philosophy. What does creation mean not only to theology but also to philosophy and politics as a whole?

Hegel and Strauss on Genesis

Hegel stands out as one of the very few modern philosophers to take the Bible seriously. Moreover, he is one of the very few to make the biblical story of creation central to interpreting the meaning of religion, philosophy, and history. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, he states:

> Man, created in the image of God, lost, it is said, his state of absolute contentment, by eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Sin consists here only in Knowledge: this is the sinful element, and by it man is stated to have trifled away his Natural happiness. This is a deep truth, that evil lies in consciousness: for the brutes are neither evil nor good; the merely Natural Man quite as little. . . . For the state of innocence, the paradisiacal condition, is that of the brute. Paradise is a park, where only brutes, not men, can remain. . . . The Fall is therefore the eternal Mythus of Man—in fact the very transition by which he becomes man. . . . God confirms the words of the Serpent. Implicitly and explicitly, then, we have the truth, that man through Spirit—through cognition of the

> Universal and the Particular—comprehends God Himself. (*PH*, 321–22)

This passage is extraordinary for three reasons. First, Hegel invites his readers (both philosophical and theological) to take a religious myth—the "eternal Mythus of Man"—seriously. He is thus rejecting the modern prejudices "that philosophy has no intrinsic interest in religion and that religious myths have become obsolete."[20] Second, according to Hegel's interpretation of the Fall, there is no knowledge without sin nor sin without knowledge (of good and evil). Human beings acquire knowledge (including knowledge of God) only because they sin. In other words, we cannot understand God apart from (or outside) of human existence (although the reverse is true as well). Third, the true meaning of human existence lies beyond nature, or the illusory "park" that was Paradise. There is nothing natural about sin or the knowledge of good and evil that enables sin. Hegel thus repudiates the conventional (literalist) reading of the Fall that sin is the punishment that God inflicts on human beings for disobeying His prohibition against eating of the Tree. On the contrary, if Hegel is correct, without this first sin, we would never acquire knowledge of the most important reality there is—namely, God.

Strauss takes some interest in Hegel's interpretation of the Fall because he correctly notes that this story helps Hegel explain the necessity of evil or sin in history. Yet Strauss does not believe that Hegel's interpretation is the orthodox one.

> So evil is necessary. How does he (Hegel) stand to the traditional view? Evil is of course not necessary. And this is connected with the fact that man was created perfect and it was man's fault, his sin, which brought about evil. And for Hegel it is the opposite. The beginning is evil, absolutely evil: the state of nature. And man is not responsible for that. And out of that, and only because the beginning is evil, can perfection be decisively due to human freedom. The reasonable state is the creation of man because his

> starting point was the most unreasonable. And a certain vindication, justification in a certain sense, of evil is of necessity a central part of Hegel's doctrine. (*LSH*, 177–78)

Later in the seminar, Strauss correctly notes that Hegel accepts Kant's interpretation of the Fall as a narrative that reveals the truth that "man becomes man only by virtue of this separation (from God), by this knowledge of his subjectivity (*LSH*, 282).[21] Nevertheless, Strauss does not believe that Hegel's interpretation of Genesis is the orthodox one precisely because Hegel appears to deny the biblical view that creation constitutes a "perfect beginning" (*LSH*, 112). Hegel's reference to a brutish "Natural Man" clearly reveals this. Yet Hegel, as Strauss reads him, must emphasize the imperfection of this beginning, even though it raises questions about God's perfection, because Hegel is determined to read the idea of progress (from imperfection to perfection) into Scripture. Strauss writes in "Progress or Return?":

> Yet precisely on the basis of the Bible, the beginning cannot be imperfect. Moreover, such additional important notions as the power of sin and of the need for greater redemption counter the effect of the notion of progress necessarily. Then again, in the Bible the core of the process from the beginning to the end is not progress. There is a classic past, whether we seek it at Mount Sinai or in the patriarchs or wherever else.[22]

Nevertheless, Strauss's version of Hegel must project this modern idea of progress onto the Bible so that he can present evil as necessary (progressive).[23] Strauss must demonstrate, in turn, that there is nothing fundamentally biblical about Hegel's approach, even though he at times concedes that it sounds vaguely theological. In his lecture on Hegel's idea of reason in history and the nature of spirit, Strauss describes Hegel's aim as one that seeks to demonstrate that "the vindication of providence means the justification of evil" (*LSH*, 58). Hegel's philosophy of the Bible raises important

questions. If evil is not necessary (rational?), as Strauss appears to believe *contra* Hegel, why does God permit the Fall to occur? In addition, if knowledge is a punishment for sin, why does the Bible reveal knowledge of this truth?

Strauss is silent on these questions. He also refrains from taking up directly the related question of the political implications that flow out of the Genesis narrative here. Even in his own lecture on Genesis, which he gave in 1957, Strauss does not directly pursue these implications.[24] However, he arrives at a conclusion that is analogous to what Hegel draws from his own reading of the entire book. This lesson is that Genesis—both the story of the Creation and of the Fall—devalues the authority of nature. Strauss writes: "Heaven is depreciated in favor of the earth, life on earth, man. What does this mean? For cosmology, strictly understood, Greek cosmology, heaven is a more important theme than life on earth."[25] The fact that Hegel and Strauss agree on the lack of importance that Genesis attributes to nature has important implications for political philosophy and political theology, which Strauss takes up in his 1965 seminar.

Hegel and Strauss on Nature and History

My emphasis on Strauss's agreement with Hegel on the true meaning of Genesis should not, of course, obscure the enormous disagreements between them, which Strauss brings to light in his seminars. In his 1965 lecture on Hegel's treatment of Middle Eastern history, Strauss clearly sides with Hegel on the biblical devaluation of nature while repudiating Hegel's attribution of "history" to the Bible:

> It is very strange, the way Hegel regards the belief in miracles as manifestly impossible. That was for him settled by the Enlightenment. But the historical question—in that I think that Hegel is right because, as I have said on more than one occasion, there is no Old Testament expression for nature. And therefore, when people speak of the Psalms speaking of nature, that is in a strict sense incorrect.

> By the way, it is also important that there is no Old Testament word for history. This is equally important. There is one old Hebrew word which could lead to the notion of nature on the one hand, and history on the other. It means, literally translated, "generation": "these are the generations of" and so on. This expression was used in Hellenistic times for nature. But it means more immediately what happened to these generations, i.e., it means more history. But the concept itself is alien, and Hegel somehow is aware of that, as we see. (*LSH*, 186–87)

What Strauss says here is consistent with his conclusions in his published writings, which also deny the presence of "nature" and "history" (at least in the philosophical sense) in the pages of the Bible.[26] For my purpose, however, there are two major implications that arise from Strauss's hermeneutic.

First, Strauss is correct to point out Hegel's problematic denial of a "concept" of history within the Hebrew Bible. In lecture 7 of his 1958 seminar, he already notes that Hegel's treatment of Judaism is rather conflicted. Although Hegel, according to Strauss, seeks to understand the contributions that both Greece and Judea made to the West, he still "regards the Jewish element as a rather insignificant part." Yet Strauss immediately adds that the Old Testament becomes "infinitely more important," in Hegel's eyes, in his discussion of Rome and Christianity. In his 1965 seminar, Strauss also correctly attributes to Hegel the traditional Christian position that the New Testament is superior to the Old Testament despite the fact that "Judaism has seen, and this is a great step, that man as man is a sinner, wholly alienated from God and yet to be redeemed by God. The carrying through of this is to be found, not in Judaism, according to Hegel, but in Christianity" (*LSH*, 284). In short, only through Christianity is humanity reconciled with God. Once again, Hegel's interpretation of Judaism is problematic and even contradictory. In his lecture on the Roman world, which directly follows his commentary on the Fall, he declares that the "nature of God as pure Spirit, is manifested to man in the *Christian*

Religion" (*PH*, 323; author's emphasis). Yet he also indicates that the story of the Fall, the "eternal Mythus" of all human beings, has revealed the truth that reconciles humanity with God. "Sin is the discerning of Good and Evil as separation; but this discerning likewise heals the ancient hurt, and is the foundation of infinite reconciliation" (*PH*, 323). Thus, Hegel's interpretation of the Fall ultimately contradicts his undemonstrated position that reconciliation with God is absent in Judaism. For if God reveals the truth about humanity (and God) after the Fall, then the "foundation" of reconciliation is already set.[27]

Second, although Strauss agrees with Hegel on the Bible's devaluation of nature, beginning with the Book of Genesis, his disagreement with Hegel on the presence of history as a "concept" in the Old Testament is just as problematic as Hegel's conflicted interpretation of Judaism in history. While we have seen Hegel, in the tradition of Christian triumphalism, privilege Christianity over Judaism, he never denies that the Old Testament is the "beginning" of human history. How, though, can history "begin" with the Bible? Is there not history (in the pagan sense) before the Bible? In his 1965 seminar, Strauss is genuinely puzzled by Hegel's twofold insistence that a true beginning is both historical and biblical. Where does prehistory fit into his philosophy of history? "Why are the prehistoric times—Hegel doesn't speak about the times, but they are somehow implied—so much longer than the historical times?" (*LSH*, 120). Moreover, why is Hegel so determined to reject the classical (pagan) account of nature as the true beginning and end of human life? Strauss ultimately answers this question by agreeing with Hegel that there is no "philosophy of history" in antiquity:

> They (the classics) would speak of the city, or rather of the best polity which is according to nature. Here we see of course the opposition with Hegel very clearly. . . . For Hegel, as we know, the natural state is a state of absolute barbarism. For the classics the natural state would be the state of perfection, if they would use that term. The classics

> would also say—and here there is an agreement with Hegel—that it is essential to realize that the good is not the ancestral. The classics saw that there is a great variety of ancestral orders, but they did not make an attempt to arrange these ancestral orders in an order of a progressive kind. . . . From the classical point of view there is no possibility of a philosophy of history. Or if you want to stretch the expression "philosophy of history," you must say the philosophy of history is reduced here to one single proposition: confusion, confusion, confusion. Always different. (*LSH*, 166)[28]

The lack of order or necessity that Strauss attributes to history should not surprise his experienced readers. In this seminar, he states outright that he is "not a Hegelian, and I do not believe that one can say that history is rational" despite the fact that "one must not underestimate the immense intellectual power which was Hegel's and by virtue of which he brought to light many interesting things" (*LSH*, 163). Strauss's sincere admiration for Hegel does not dissuade him from believing that history lacks an ultimate meaning. In *Natural Right and History*, he accuses historicists of arriving, unwittingly perhaps, at this very conclusion. "To the unbiased historian, the historical process revealed itself as the meaningless web spun by what men did, produced, and thought, no more than by unmitigated chance—a tale told by an idiot."[29] Still, why does he insist that true philosophers must avoid the philosophy of history?

To conclude that Strauss is dismissive of history *in toto* would be a mistake. He even credits the classics with having a "philosophy of history" if by history one means the movement of cycles in time. After referring to Xenophon's account of the battle of Leuctra in 371 BC, he alludes to a "defensible philosophy of history surely worth considering." What is this? "That is what the classics fundamentally meant. They didn't deny that there are certain rhythms. For example, there are states which emerge, develop, have a peak, decline, and are destroyed" (*LSH*, 167). (As Eric Voegelin similarly explains, the classics saw meaning "in history" but not the ultimate

meaning "of history." In this context, Voegelin quips, "Aristotle wrote an *Ethics* and *Politics*; he did not write an *Historics*."[30])

Taken together, these passages clearly reveal that Strauss is utterly unsympathetic with Hegel's progressivist account of history, which insists that history is both rational and meaningful. Strauss is even more anti-Hegelian here because he appears to deny that there are any important differences between Athens and Jerusalem on the meaning or direction of history. Neither tradition offers a philosophy of history that explains the meaning or progress "of" history. Yet this is not Strauss's last word on what counts as history in the Bible. In his essay "Jerusalem and Athens," he returns to the Torah to articulate an interpretation of history that is absent in his other works:

> Man originally lived in the garden of Eden, where he could have eaten of the tree of life and thus have become immortal. The longevity of antediluvian man reflects this lost chance. To this extent the transition from antediluvian to postdiluvian man is a decline. This impression is confirmed by the fact that before the Flood rather than after it the sons of God consorted with the daughters of man and thus generated the mighty men of old, the men of renown. On the other hand, the fall of our first parents made possible or necessary in due time God's revelation of His Torah, and this was decisively prepared, as we shall see, by the Flood. In this respect the transition from antediluvian to postdiluvian mankind is a *progress*. The ambiguity regarding the Fall—the fact that it was a sin and hence evitable, and that it was inevitable—is reflected in the ambiguity regarding the status of antediluvian mankind.[31]

It is hard to find any element of this rich passage that Hegel would dispute. Like Hegel, Strauss now acknowledges that there is an ultimate meaning *of* history (in the providential sense). Moreover, this history would not have happened without the Fall, "the eternal Mythus." History, then, begins with the Fall, not with prehistory.

Without the paradox of sin, which is an act of freedom (evitable) and necessity (inevitable), there would be neither history nor human understanding of God's revelation. In fact, there would be no Torah, covenant, or Bible without the Fall. Most shockingly, this movement of history is "progress."[32] Unlike Greek historiography, which presents history as the cyclical movement of inevitable fortune and misfortune that mortals can neither control nor understand, history in the biblical sense reveals the truth about humanity, sins and all. Despite his determination to separate the philosophy of history from the Bible, Strauss must admit that there is a meaning "of" history.

Hegel, Strauss, and Protestant Theology

What does all of this have to do with Protestant political theology? In his seminars on Hegel, Strauss rarely connects the meaning of Genesis with Protestantism (although, in his 1958 seminar, he briefly notes that Thomists would disagree with "extreme Protestant or Calvinist doctrines" as to whether the Fall led to "the deletion of the natural conscience[33]). Strauss also doubts that Hegel is a sincere Protestant or even a Christian, given his disinterest in miracles and the immortality of the soul. For Hegel, "the verbal inspiration and miracles are of no interest whatsoever." However, "the central dogma, God having become man," is most essential (*LSH*, 98). Yet Strauss is particularly interested in Hegel's insistence that the modern state must have a Protestant basis without requiring that all its citizens be Protestant. How does this political theology fit into what Strauss understands to be Hegel's aim, which is to present "the true Christianity, the distilled essence of Christianity," which is the belief in the God-Man? (*LSH*, 99).

As we have seen, in the 1958 seminar Strauss notes that Hegel's idea of the modern regime is "indifferent" to the particular religious beliefs of its citizens, even though the basis of the regime is historically Protestant. In the 1965 seminar, Strauss repeats this observation, noting once again the difference between Socratic Athens and modernity (as Hegel understands it). "The Athenian state had to be concerned with the faith, belief, opinions of the

individuals. Therefore, Socrates was justly accused and condemned. But the modern state is, or can be, altogether indifferent to the religion of its members. That is very strange" (*LSH*, 252). Strauss is referring to Hegel's view, which is evident in both *The Philosophy of Right* and his lectures on the philosophy of history, that a modern Protestant polity can still tolerate citizens who are not observant Protestants. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel contends that Protestantism has been so successful in advancing the cause of reason that it can afford to trust the goodwill of all its citizens to practice morality:

> For on the one hand it was the *Protestant World* itself which advanced so far in Thought as to realize the absolute culmination of Self-Consciousness; on the other hand, Protestantism enjoys, with respect to the moral and legal relations of the world, a tranquil confidence in the [Honorable] Disposition of men—a sentiment, which [in the Protestant World,] constituting one and the same thing with Religion, is the fountain of all the equitable arrangements that prevail with regard to private right and the constitution of the State. (*PH*, 444; author's emphasis)

Hegel is silent here on whether the "sentiment" that is the "fountain of all the equitable arrangements" that constitute the modern state includes the legal requirement of adherence to Protestant faith among its citizens. What is evident is Hegel's assumption that moral sentiment and the legacy of Protestantism align in a manner that reinforces the blessings of the modern state, including "private right" and a "constitution."

Although Strauss does not discuss this passage, he probably has passages like this one in mind when he questions Hegel's expectation that this faith tradition will survive with sufficient strength to act as the moral compass of the modern state. Strauss has his doubts, which he reveals in the 1965 seminar. "What becomes of the nonphilosophers in this final stage?" (*LSH*, 253).

> For the time being we can say the people at large are still religious. Hegel does not raise the question, but he forces us to raise it: How long will this last? We don't need Hegel to become aware of this problem, but Hegel was aware of it, and this is of crucial importance to understand Hegel's notion of the end of history, the end in the old sense of the word: the peak of history, the completion of history has been achieved in Hegel's time. But isn't this, as we have heard him say before, that the owl of Minerva begins its flight in the dusk—isn't this the status of religion, namely, that the philosophers transform the religious truths into philosophic truths? But this means of course that the religious truths are considerably changed. (*LSH*, 253)

Strauss correctly notes that Hegel is "aware of this problem," although he does not explicitly refer to Hegel's answer. In *The Philosophy of History*, he writes:

> Plato in his *Republic* makes everything depend upon the Government and makes Disposition the principle of the State; on which account he lays the chief stress on Education. The modern theory is diametrically opposed to this, referring everything to the individual will. But here we have no guarantee that the will in question has that right disposition which is essential to the stability of the State. (*PH*, 449)

While Strauss would likely agree with Hegel that simple reliance on the "individual will" is insufficient, he also takes aim at the kind of "education" that Hegel offers to his citizens, who are "nonphilosophers." This education amounts to the "secularized Christianity" that embodies Hegel's synthesis of Protestantism and the Enlightenment.[34] Strauss doubts that Hegel succeeds in what he calls the "transformation of prephilosophic religion into philosophy" because, as we have seen, Strauss adheres to the strict or dualistic separation of philosophy and religion. He makes this clear

in his discussion of Hegel. "The traditional view was that there is a difference between faith and reason. Faith is supernatural and has suprarational insights. Faith needs, since it is not rational in itself and in its object, external credentials: tradition and miracles" (*LSH*, 253). Thus, Hegel's philosophy, which "is to have shown that the substance of the faith of Christianity is rational" requires "considerable sacrifices": these include "the belief in miracles and in the sacredness of quasi-sacredness of the biblical text, the biblical stories" (*LSH*, 254). What, then, is left of Protestant theology, after Hegel?

Hegel and Strauss on Athens and Jerusalem

The answer to this question requires some discussion, once again, of how Hegel and Strauss interpret Jerusalem, or the tradition of biblical revelation. Is Hegel's political theology (which is also philosophical, according to Hegel) faithful to Jerusalem? We have already seen Strauss accuse Hegel's "secularized Christianity" of undermining, as he wrote in *On Tyranny*, "the very strict demands on self-restraint" that both Athens and Jerusalem impose. Do these traditions, however, agree on what "self-restraint" is? In "Progress or Return?" he also argues that these traditions differ on what "completes" morality.[35] What does he mean? Strauss writes:

> Greek philosophy has frequently been blamed for the absence from it of that ruthless examination of one's intentions which is the consequence of the biblical demand for purity of the heart. "Know thyself" means for the Greeks, know what it means to be a human being, know what is the place of man in the universe, examine your opinions and prejudices, rather than "Search your heart." . . . Now this necessarily tends to weaken the majesty of the moral demands, whereas humility, a sense of guilt, repentance, and faith in divine mercy, which complete morality according to the Bible, necessarily strengthen the majesty of the moral demands.[36]

Although he does not cite Hegel in this context, Strauss's seminars on Hegel converge with his own insights on the opposition between

Athens and Jerusalem that he emphasizes here. This convergence raises important questions. Is Jerusalem, or biblical revelation, more modern than Strauss would like to admit? Put differently, does Hegel's political theology manifest the spirit of the Bible, despite Strauss's arguments to the contrary? Is "secularized Christianity" both biblical and modern?

In his 1965 seminar, Strauss explores Hegel's view that the "essential defect" of Greek history and thought is the absence of an "absolute beginning with the free individual, be it the passionate individual or the conscientious individual" (*LSH*, 241). What else did the Greeks not know? Strauss refers to Hegel's perspective that the Greeks lacked both an ego and a conscience. "In other words, the infinite subjectivity as the pure certainty of itself is alien to the Greek mind, the thought that the ego is the soil for everything which claims to be valid. Therefore, we find dependence on things *alien to the ego, nature* (*LSH*, 217; emphasis added). The absence of an ego is consistent with the absence of a conscience. "They (the Greeks) don't know anything of the *Cogito ergo sum*, to put it very simply, which is for Hegel the fundamental principle. Or, as Hegel also put it, the conscience did not exist for the Greeks" (*LSH*, 219). The implication of this philosophy of history is obvious for politics. Strauss remarks, "The Greeks did not know the conscience or the good will, i.e., bowing only to the law which one has given to oneself and only on that basis bowing to the law of the land" (*LSH*, 236).

Is Greek philosophy, which is surely more sophisticated than Greek politics or history, exempted from Hegel's tough judgments here? After all, did not Socrates, out of conscience, question the gods of Athens? Strauss astutely notes that Socrates's questioning does not amount to an appeal to a standard of justice or freedom that transcends the gods or the laws.

> The limitation of the Greeks was the immediacy of the validity of the gods and the law. They were simply there. No question arises. Just think of Plato's *Crito*. The laws appear to Socrates. They are there and no one asks where they come from. They have not gone through the universal

> doubt of modern times and the deepening of that by Kant, one might say." (*LSH*, 244)

If Socrates, then, appeals neither to freedom nor conscience as a standard that is above the laws of Athens, then who is on the side of right in that conflict? Strauss correctly restates Hegel's conclusion that "the fate of Socrates is a true tragedy because both the city of Athens and Socrates were right. This collision, perfectly justified on both sides, made it highly tragic" (*LSH*, 245).[37] What is truly tragic here is the lack of a "conscience" (or individual will) that, according to Hegel, characterizes modern (or Protestant) self-government. Consequently, "the Greek standard of natural justice appears to him (Hegel) to be just a custom, and there is no fundamental distinction between that and a particular law" (*LSH*, 225). Strauss offers a stark conclusion: "Do Plato and Aristotle ever mention the conscience? Never. The term comes up later, but not with our meaning, in some Stoic texts. But it does not exist in Plato and Aristotle" (*LSH*, 225).[38] In other writings, Strauss offers a pivotal reason for this fact. The personal god of Scripture loves humanity (and demands that human beings love each other) with a severity that is absent in Greek philosophy and religion. "In all Greek thought, we find in one form or the other an impersonal necessity higher than any personal being; whereas in the Bible the first cause is, as people say now, a person."[39] Moreover, the "faith in God as love, as the basis of all men's love for one another, of universal brotherhood," is not universal, given that pagan religions (e.g., Buddhism) do not "require God as love, a personal god."[40] Only a personal god in this sense could be the foundation of the conscience.

It is striking that Strauss never actually expresses disagreement with Hegel's interpretation of the Greeks. The reader is left, once again, with the task of relating Hegel's philosophy to Strauss's own writings on Athens and Jerusalem. We have already seen Strauss, in his essay on Genesis, agree with Hegel (without actually citing his works) that the story of the Creation and the Fall reveals this paradox: that only by knowing sin do we know God and only by knowing God do we know what sin is. (This "God" is clearly not a deity known to Socrates, who would be shocked by the idea that we

can know the Good yet deliberately commit injustice.) The knowledge that the Bible reveals to humanity is, according to Hegel, the very basis of modern politics. As Strauss shows in his own account of Genesis, freedom, not nature, is the basis of sin. This conclusion is Hegelian to the core. Once human beings know that they freely choose to sin, or that morality is not based on nature, they must obey God. Indeed, there is no excuse but to obey God because they have the freedom and moral duty (or conscience!) to treat human beings as creations of God. Hegel writes:

> What therefore remains to be considered is, those conditions of humanity which are the necessary corollary to the consideration that Man is Absolute Self-consciousness—his Spiritual nature being the starting-point and presupposition. These conditions are themselves not yet of a concrete order, but simply the first *abstract principles*, which are won by the instrumentality of the Christian Religion for the *secular state*. First, under Christianity Slavery is impossible; for man is man—in the abstract essence of his nature—is contemplated in God; each unit of mankind is an object of the grace of God and of the Divine purpose: "God will have all men to be saved." Utterly excluding all speciality, therefore, man, in and for himself—in his simple quality of man—has infinite value; and this infinite value abolishes, *ipso facto*, all particularity attaching to birth or country. (*PH*, 334; author's emphasis)

Besides distinguishing between the "second principle"—free subjectivity—and the ancient appeal to "the Fortuitous" or "Chance," Hegel further explains why the Greeks lacked a proper standard of freedom and authority:

> It follows thence, that what we observed among the Greeks as a form of Customary Morality, cannot maintain its position in the Christian world. For *that* morality is spontaneous unreflected Wont; while the Christian principle is

> independent subjectivity—the soil on which grows the True. Now an unreflected morality cannot continue to hold its ground against the principle of Subjective Freedom. Greek Freedom was that of Hap and "Genius"; it was still conditioned by Slaves and Oracles; but now the principle of absolute Freedom in God makes its appearance. Man now no longer sustains the relation of Dependence, but of Love—in the consciousness that he is a partaker in the Divine existence. (*PH*, 334; author's emphasis)

Once again, Hegel's attribution of the truth of morality to Christianity alone is untrue to his own understanding of Genesis, where we have seen him acknowledge that Judaism reveals the same truth. However, there is one major implication that flows out of these long passages that I have quoted. Significantly, no return to paganism is possible. Once God reveals the fundamental freedom and equality of all (sinful) human beings before Him, any "unreflected morality" that denies this truth cannot "hold its ground." In this sense, Hegel declares the "end of history" by insisting that human beings cannot transcend the truth of the Bible. None of this denies that there will be violent and tyrannical attempts to deny or suppress this truth (in our own age, dictatorships still exist and proliferate). Hegel merely shows that these attempts are both irrational and immoral. Neither nature nor custom serves as a valid excuse for harming the rights of other human beings. Human beings have no legitimate choice but to obey and respect, out of a God-given conscience, the "Love" that God requires of them. Even if Strauss stops short of explicitly accepting Hegel's interpretation of Christianity's influence on the modern idea of freedom, even he concedes that Hegel, not Plato, presents freedom as a right that all human beings possess.[41]

Notwithstanding his occasional interpretation of the Protestant state as one that is indifferent to the religious beliefs of its citizens, in these passages Hegel clearly shows that a modern (Christian) state cannot be indifferent to citizens who deny the "infinite value" of their fellow human beings. Belief in miracles and the immortal soul does not define good citizenship. Those who fail to act in accord with

"Love" (of their neighbors, which includes all human beings) are not true citizens. In this sense Hegel reconciles the religious with the secular. Love of God is no different from love of humanity. Although Hegel does not expect human beings to be angels—we are all sinners, after all—he believes that a state is illegitimate unless it respects (and has a citizenry that respects) the rights of all human beings. All this requires a conscience that, according to both Hegel and Strauss, is central to the biblical tradition. This truth is equally philosophical, theological, and political.[42]

Notes

1. Leo Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Hegel*, ed. Paul Franco (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 17. This volume contains the 1965 seminar on Hegel. Henceforth cited as *LSH*.
2. Paul Franco, "Introduction to the Transcript of Leo Strauss's 1965 Course on Hegel's *Philosophy of History*" (*LSH,* 5).
3. Franco, "Introduction," 8.
4. See Sara MacDonald and Barry Craig, *Recovering Hegel from the Critique of Leo Strauss: The Virtues of Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).
5. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 29.
6. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 13.
7. Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 104.
8. Franco, "Introduction," 12.
9. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 13.
10. Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
11. Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 104.
12. Franco, "Introduction," 12.
13. This excerpt is from lecture 8 of the 1958 seminar. Henceforth cited by year and lecture number. The entire seminar is available at https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/hegel-philosophy-of-history-autumn-1958/. I reproduce material from this seminar in accordance

with the principle of fair use as outlined by the Leo Strauss Estate. The quotation from Hegel at the beginning of the passage is from the German text of Hegel's lectures. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, Zweite Hälfte (Bände 2–4), ed. Georg Lasson (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988), 646.

14. In lecture 9 of the 1958 seminar, Strauss adds: "You see how far Hegel was from any totalitarianism. That is absolute nonsense."
15. Elsewhere Strauss questions the coherence of the "very common notion" of modernity as "secularized biblical faith." See his "Three Waves of Modernity," in Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. with an introduction by Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 82–83. Jeffrey A. Bernstein explores this issue in the context of the 1958 seminar in "How Leo Strauss Approached Hegel on Faith and God," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 45, nos. 1–2 (March–June 2018): 72–90.
16. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny, including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 191.
17. Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 207.
18. Strauss notes that Hegel's reference to America as "the land of the future" may lead to the conclusion that he "does not claim the end of history has come" (*LSH*, 84).
19. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 15. Henceforth cited as *PH*.
20. Brayton Polka, *Rethinking Philosophy in Light of the Bible: From Kant to Schopenhauer* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 45.
21. See Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," in *On History*, ed. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1963).
22. Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 96–97.
23. Strauss writes in "Progress or Return?": "Progressive man, on the other hand, looks back to a most imperfect beginning. The beginning is barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme scarcity. Progressive man does not feel that he has lost something of great, not to say, infinite importance; he has lost only his chains" (89).
24. I have argued elsewhere that Strauss must ultimately concede that the biblical condemnation of idolatry (which begins with Genesis) has enormous implications for modern politics and political philosophy. See my "Leo Strauss on Nazism: A Theologico-Political Interpretation," *Political Science Reviewer* 42, no. 1 (June 2018): 218–53.

25. Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 369.
26. See Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 104, 111, and 117.
27. Polka, *Rethinking Philosophy*, 44–45.
28. A few pages later, Strauss adds that "Plato's dialectics has nothing whatever to do with history" (*LSH*, 168).
29. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 18.
30. Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 4 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 258. Voegelin also notes, "The classical meaning *in* history can be opposed by Paul with a meaning *of* history, because he knows the end of the story in the transfiguration that begins with the Resurrection" (258; author's emphasis).
31. Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 388–89. Emphasis added.
32. Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity*, vol. 1, *Hermeneutics and Ontology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 257.
33. This quote is from session 3 in the original transcript.
34. Strauss discusses Hegel's attempt to connect Protestantism and the Enlightenment in other lectures (*LSH*, 306, 328, 350).
35. Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 105 and 109.
36. Strauss, "Progress or Return?" 108–9.
37. See also Hegel, *PH*, 270.
38. He adds that spiritedness (*thymos*) is not the same as conscience (*LSH*, 226).
39. Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 110.
40. Leo Strauss, "Introduction to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 2013). 426. Strauss gave this public lecture in 1960.
41. See Strauss, "On A New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13, no. 3 (1946): 358. "Whatever may have to be said about Hegel's attempt to trace to Christianity the idea of the freedom of the individual, or of the rights of man, he saw with unsurpassed clarity that when Plato indicates the absolute superiority of 'the individual'

to society or the state, he does not mean every individual, but only the philosopher."

42. Hegel writes in paragraph 270 of *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press paperback, 1967): "[T]he doctrine of the church is not purely and simply an inward concern of conscience. As doctrine it is rather the expression of something, in fact the expression of a subject-matter which is most closely linked, or even directly concerned, with ethical principles and the law of the land" (170).