

## **Authority Beyond the Bounds of Mere Reason in the Schmitt-Strauss Exchange**

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### Outline

This essay reevaluates the Weimar writings of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, specifically, their intellectual efforts to replace, as a ground of political authority, Enlightenment rationality with, respectively, “political theology” and “Biblical atheism.” These efforts originate in the respective authors’ idiosyncratically Catholic and Jewish writings from the early twenties, culminate in their engagement over Schmitt’s Concept of the Political in 1932, and continue, with certain changes in orientation, into the early to mid-thirties, after the Weimar Republic had been usurped by the National Socialist Party state.

Both authors were deeply affected by the early twentieth century crisis of neo-Kantian thought in Germany, a crisis exacerbated by Nietzsche’s assault on moral philosophy and by the palpable horrors of the Great War. This crisis is perhaps best characterized as a widespread perception that Enlightenment rationality could not ground itself; in response, supporters scrambled to buttress Enlightenment thought by embedding it in various historical narratives, and detractors reveled in the fact that such a “rationality” was clearly susceptible to an unprecedented kind of dogmatism that was in fact fundamentally antithetical to reason, substantively understood. Schmitt and Strauss each insisted that Enlightenment rationality was unraveling into a way of thinking that violently rejected “form” of any kind, fixated myopically on human things

and lacked any conception of the external constraints that condition the possibilities of philosophy, morality and politics. Consequently, Enlightenment reason obfuscates “genuine” expressions of rationality and obscures the necessity of political order as such.

For Schmitt, specifically, Enlightenment rationality’s failure to ground itself philosophically revealed modern political thought’s parasitic reliance on premodern, transcendental forms of authority. Because the Enlightenment did not, as promised, deliver universal truths on which peaceful agreement could be based, mankind in the twentieth century was once again, after a brief hiatus of three or four centuries, searching for the substantive, extrarational, or rather prerational, foundations of political life. Whether superficially linguistic, ethnic, cultural, or economic, the post-Enlightenment basis of political existence would be, according to Schmitt, fundamentally “theological.” While liberals promote parliamentary deliberations, or a “gapless” system of positive legal norms, or universal principles enshrined in written constitutions, Schmitt insisted that nonrational leaps of faith were required to establish the irreducible bases of political authority.

For Strauss, while Orthodox Judaism, with which he expresses great affinity, was, as such, no longer available as a political resource, the historical-cultural notion of “the nation” prevalent in contemporary Zionism was too dependent on late Enlightenment, German-Christian categories to serve as a singularly Jewish ground of politics. Neither the religious belief associated with orthodoxy, nor the “timid doubt” exhibited by modern philosophic skeptics from Descartes to Cassirer, nor, for that matter, some characteristically German sublation or synthesis of the two, could, according to Strauss, provide a suitable political grounding in a post-Enlightenment epoch. On the contrary, he would assign this role to the “Biblical atheism”

exhibited by the great state theorists of the seventeenth century and recently revised by Nietzsche and Heidegger, an orientation that is reducible to neither belief nor atheism, moreover, one that can be characterized as neither modern nor traditional.

Even though, on Strauss's understanding, early Enlightenment figures, such as Hobbes and Spinoza, were atheistic enemies of orthodox religion and progenitors of the later unrealistically pacific and intellectually self-devouring forms of rationality associated with Kantian liberalism, Strauss admired their "harsh" and "courageous" attitude toward the prerational origins of authority, even if the early modern figures would attempt to legitimate this authority, after the fact, on rational grounds. Strauss attributes to their attitude of moral and philosophic "probity" the basis of an authority that could serve as an alternative to the politically soft and philosophically untenable "love thy neighbor" at the core of Enlightenment and liberal understanding of human sociality.

The phrases "political theology" and "Biblical atheism" each imply something religious that is qualified by association with something else; something that either renders religion more concrete or draws out of that which is apparently antireligious elements that were once associated with religiosity. On the one hand, politics and atheism make religion more concrete. Once the Enlightenment eventually banished religion to the interior of human conscience, both Schmitt and Strauss suggest, it essentially abolished the necessary foundation of all political order. Theology had been, before the German Enlightenment, simultaneously religious and political, although the authors will disagree on the extent to which Christianity could be, like, Islam and Judaism, political. The "biblical" in Strauss's formulation of Biblical atheism recalls the authoritative and authoritative role of the Biblical prophet who imposes law upon unruly human

nature and who cultivates the fundamental psychological disposition of awe or fear necessary to makes this founding possible. While God can no longer be the source of such fear or awe, a prophetic figure might still manipulate the fear inherent in the inherently fragile human psyche and necessary for stable human interactions. Whereas traditional atheisms associated with Epicureanism and Averroism was fundamentally soft, rejecting the harsh rigors of religious observance and diminishing the necessity for fear of the divine, modern atheism as expressed by a Hobbes or a Heidegger confronts the harshness of human existence, accentuates the necessarily fearful state this puts human being in fundamentally, and emphasizes the inescapable fact that human beings are in need of “rule.”

The “political” in Schmitt’s political theology accords with the divine-like sovereign power that executive actors must impose upon secular reality so as to save and reaffirm political order and provide the intellectual structures required for the elaboration and realization of morality in human affairs. Politics was fundamentally “theological” in at least three ways for Schmitt: (1) Political phenomena are not systematically predictable. Unforeseeable “exceptions,” which he compares to miracles, inevitably confound and threaten all rationalist political frameworks. An unrestrained political actor must be authorized to identify and confront them. (2) Legitimate authority requires requires a transcendent source. Divine command, or something like it, rather than the fundamentally groundless rational-legal norms generated by Kantian thought, is the only worthy and stable justification for political rule.

In addition: (3) A polity is constituted by people who believe in it, not by persons for whom it provides a framework for the pursuit of rational self-interest. Human beings identify with, and often kill and die for, political communities on extrarational grounds; they do not, nor

should not, calculate costs and benefits for their own economic advancement or personal self-preservation. Thus, while the idées générales governing European political thought and practice since the seventeenth century were justified in individualist terms, the return of concrete politics portends the preeminence of groups organized around specific “ways of life,” a point on which Strauss is in complete agreement. In his Zionist writings, Strauss associates individualism with assimilation, not with the life of “a people” properly understood.

In the paper, I will also highlight important differences in the ways that Schmitt and Strauss draw upon theological resources: Strauss searches for the functional equivalent of a transcendent, universe-creating God, who, by existing absolutely apart from humanity, makes truly rational philosophizing possible and who can stand as the source of a politically appropriate, profound form of fear and reverence in ordinary people. On the contrary, Schmitt often upholds the incarnation, in his words, “the fact that God became man in historical reality,” as the phenomenon that sets humanity apart from mere physical matter, provides guidance on the contents of morality and presents a model for the personal form, in a very substantive sense, that political authority should take. Ultimately the two thinkers may diverge most on the question of conscience and its relationship to the human need for “being ruled.” Conscience, as such, is a target for Strauss; unlike the Law, conscience is an irredeemable source of philosophical degradation and political anarchy. For Schmitt, conscience can and should maintain a place of prominence in moral philosophy, so long as it remains subservient to the authority of transcendental divinity (made flesh in political form).

Thus, unlike Heinrich Meier in his celebrated accounts of the two thinkers, I do not understand their differences in terms of a distinction between philosophy and theology, but rather

I understand them, more as Miguel Vatter and Nicholas Xenos do, as exhibiting two different forms of theologically influenced political philosophy, even if my assessment of the content and implications of their respective political theologies differ from those of these authors.