

The Disappearance of the Political in Comparative Religion: An Essay in Honour of Eric Sharpe

Ian Weeks

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak at this conference to honour Eric Sharpe. I first met Eric and Birgitta Sharpe when they came to McMaster University, in Canada, on an exchange for almost a year that took Hans Mol to Sydney. It was a great pleasure to show these visitors around Canada, and an even greater pleasure to become a friend of theirs. So it is a very great delight to share in these events to honour Eric's career.

Like some of you, perhaps, this invitation led me think about the appropriate form of paper for such an occasion. I read several examples of papers before I decided what I should do. In the end, it seemed right to me that such a paper needs to be rather more personal than academic papers usually are. So this paper is somewhat personal, although it comes to address what I consider to be a serious issue for the study of religion. I must also apologise for the fact that my discussion, for a while, takes me quite a long way away from Eric Sharpe. The long digression I make is necessary for the adequate statement of the problem I raise for today's discussion and to which I hope Eric and others of you will respond.

It is curious, given the circumstances of our meeting, that Eric's best known book, on the history of Comparative Religion, is so devoid of any comment about the relations of religion and politics. At the surface level, where we first met, at McMaster, politics were tearing apart one of largest departments of Religious Studies. While some of the conflict was probably personal as such collisions often are, the conflict between American and English scholarship was a fascinating and important aspect of the department. There were even deeper issues at stake here. The leading scholar in my area of work was George Parkin Grant, a scholar whose public presence in Canada was astonishing. At that time, when I went to McMaster, Grant was one of the leading academic critics of the war in Vietnam. What was particularly intriguing was to hear from Grant a *conservative* attack upon that war. As I got to know Grant better I found this was part of a much broader position in which the deep difference between modernity and ancient and religious traditions were investigated and analysed. Grant spoke to his nation as a public philosopher and as a prophet. I had not heard or seen his

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like before. Through him I came to know about a remarkable scholar, Leo Strauss, whose writings deeply influenced Grant in his critique of modernity.

Strauss was one of the Jews fortunate enough to have escaped the Nazi regime early in the 1930's. He went to Paris, London, and, eventually to the United States of America. At first, in North America, Strauss joined the many Jewish scholars who found sanctuary in the New School for Social Research, but soon, from there he went to the University of Chicago. At Chicago Strauss was Professor of Political Science for nearly thirty years. It is said of him that he rediscovered classical Political Philosophy. Strauss was not only a remarkable scholar, he was also a powerful teacher. There soon grew up around him a large circle of students and scholars whose influence has been very widespread indeed. Lewis A. Coser, in his book *Refugee Scholars in America: Their Impact and Their Experiences*¹, in which he discusses such scholars as Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Erwin Panofsky, Werner Jaeger, Erich Auerbach, Rudolf Carnap, Paul Tillich, Alfred Schutz, Karl Wittfogel, Karl Polanyi, and many others, concludes that:

... he alone among eminent refugee intellectuals succeeded in attracting a brilliant galaxy of students who created an academic cult around his teaching ... At present, in addition to scholars taught by Strauss, a second and even a third generation of Straussians dominates the teaching of political theory in universities and colleges ...²

One of Strauss' earliest books was a discussion of the philosopher Spinoza³, translated and re-issued in English, with a new Preface, in 1965. This remarkable and important book was precipitated in part by attempts within the German Jewish community in the 1920s to rehabilitate Spinoza from his excommunication by the Jewish community of Amsterdam in the Sixteenth Century. The discussion of Spinoza throughout the book and the discussion of the circumstances in Germany that led to the wish to rehabilitate Spinoza called into question almost everything that I thought I knew about religion and philosophy. In particular I came into

¹ New Haven and London, 1984.

² *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³ Leo Strauss *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, New York, 1965. Trans. by E. M. Sinclair, of *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft: Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischen Traktat*, Berlin, 1930.

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contact with Jewish thinking that did not begin with the assumptions about history, texts, religion and philosophy that my Christian education had given me. A fundamental aspect of this thinking was the degree to which Strauss understood Judaism *politically*. This was a shock to someone who had grown up with a good dose of the skepticism about politics that English gentlemen were assumed to have. I was intrigued by this and with Grant's help I pursued Strauss' writing.¹

Strauss' himself had followed a path that took him back from the modern world to Spinoza. From Spinoza he turned to Hobbes² and Machiavelli.³ Machiavelli he came to describe as the first wave of modernity.⁴ What was it that contrasted with the modern? Here most of what I had learnt in medieval philosophy and theology seemed to be turned upside down. Strauss turned first to Maimonides, to Marsilius of Padua, and then to the great Islamic philosopher al Farabi. From the medieval world Strauss turned to Plato, Aristotle, Aristophanes, Herodotus and Xenophon – and these, in turn came, at last, to have their place in the question of the relationship of Athens and Jerusalem.⁵ In turn this ancient world was continually placed into a critical relationship with writings about Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche.

I read, and have the privilege of owning, some thirty-one volumes of the unpublished transcripts of his seminars at the University of Chicago as well as all of his many books and articles. For years I have puzzled over this astonishing body of scholarship, trying to work out the reasons for the hatred, anger and fear, as well as the deep loyalty, affection and inspiration that his work seems to have generated. His work appears not to generate any half-hearted responses; nobody seems bored by him.

Strauss speaks very clearly from the viewpoint of a Jewish scholar. From that position he addresses the situation of Western

¹ George Grant wrote one article directly about Strauss – 'Tyranny and Wisdom' in his book *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, Toronto, 1969. The essay deals with a debate between Strauss and a leading Hegelian scholar Alexandre Kojève that is in Strauss' book *On Tyranny*, Ithaca, New York, 1963. On George Parkin Grant see the recent biography by William Christian, *George Grant: A Biography*, Toronto, 1993.

² Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*. Trans. Elsa M. Sinclair, Foreword by Ernest Barker, Oxford, 1936.

³ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Glencoe, Illinois, 1958.

⁴ In Strauss' essay 'Three waves of modernity' he sees Machiavelli as the first wave, Rousseau as the second and Nietzsche as the third.

⁵ See his essay 'Jerusalem and Athens' in *Commentary*, June, 1967.

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human beings in the second half of the twentieth century. It is clear that his speaking as a Jew is also essentially a political speaking. You cannot read Strauss and say 'well, on the one hand there is his Jewishness and on the other his political stuff'. To understand this Jew is to understand someone who understands that Judaism always has stood against Athens, and so also has always stood against Christianity. This political fact is shown to be of the essence of the internal life of Judaism, and of the essence of the experience of Judaism in the world. However this is not something that is true on the surface of Strauss' writings and teaching. It took me a long time to see that Strauss had settled on a remarkable strategy.¹ His rediscovery of classical political philosophy was presented in such a way that it would shape the judgements and perceptions of American political scientists and their political leaders in such a way that they would believe that they had a duty as Christians to protect Israel. In this strategy we can see two important elements of Strauss' thought and writing: we see the deeply political character of his views. As well we can see a practice of writing that is cloaked in indirection and secrecy. Both of these elements of his work ought to be of interest to those engaged in the study of religion.²

The roots of the political character of Strauss' understanding lies behind an interesting remark made by Professor E. L. Fortin when he remarks in an essay on Aquinas that:

Christianity first comes into sight as a faith or as a sacred doctrine, demanding adherence to a set of fundamental beliefs

¹ I have discussed this at some length in an article, 'Two uses of secrecy: Leo Strauss and George Grant', in Wayne Whillier (ed.), *Two Theological Languages* by George Grant and other essays in honor of his work. Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 43, Lewiston, pp. 82-93.

² Strauss' interest in secrecy and the importance he gives to the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching is one of the issues that leads many scholars to great anger about him. This too is very puzzling until the Protestant confidence in open and frank speech is understood. Strauss shares an interest in indirect communication with Lessing and Kierkegaard, and I think Strauss' understanding is by far the most profound. The topic is extensively discussed in Strauss' *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Glencoe, Illinois, 1952. Secrecy is, however, discussed and/or practiced in most of Strauss' work. Why is this matter so infrequently discussed in contemporary religious studies given the long history and frequency of the use of secrecy in most religions? It often seems as though scholars are saying, 'Secrecy was something that was practiced in primitive and ancient religions, but modern religion doesn't do this'. The purported justification of this implicit view would make an interesting thesis.

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but otherwise leaving its followers at liberty to organize their social and political lives in accordance with norms and principles that are not specifically religious. This basic difference goes hand in hand with the difference that one notes in regard to the order of the sacred sciences within each religious community. The highest science in Islam and Judaism was jurisprudence (*fiqh*), upon which devolved the all-important task of interpreting, applying, and adapting the prescriptions of divine law and to which dialectical theology (*kalam*) was always clearly subordinated. The highest science in Christianity was theology, whose prestige far exceeded any that was ever accorded to theological speculation in Jewish and Arabic traditions.¹

It is not my purpose here to debate the adequacy of Fortin's distinction as a characterization of the differences between Christianity, on the one hand, and Judaism and Islam on the other. Rather, the distinction is necessary in order to begin to understand Strauss, for whom it is basic. The fundamental importance of law, for Strauss, underlies his view of the absolute seriousness of politics, and of the relation between politics and revelation. Politics is the essential form of the human living out of law, of revelation, in society.

Now this is not an essay on Leo Strauss. I have chosen to say a few things about Strauss in order to show that there can be account of religion that is quite unlike anything that appears in Eric Sharpe's history of Comparative Religion. The difference in Strauss' case is to do with his Judaism, but it need not only be such Jews who would make out a case for a close relationship of politics and religion. At the very least such a position would seem to be true about any religion that is either the conqueror of another religion or a religion that is a conquered religion.²

At the beginning of the dialogue *Protagoras* Plato tells a charming creation story. A long time ago when the gods created all the creatures they faced a difficult problem. After all the animals and other parts of the 'lower' creation were done the gods found that they still had to create human beings, but, at this point they found that they had run out of all the specific attributes available to

¹ E. L. Fortin 'St Thomas Aquinas' in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds.), *History of Political Philosophy*, 2nd edn, Chicago, 1972, p. 226.

² For a fascinating recent study of such religiousness see Yirmiyahu Yovel's *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 2 vols, Princeton, 1989. Yovel's study deals with the Marranos of Spain, Jews who were forcibly converted and terrorized under the Inquisition.

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give to creatures. As they debated what to do, Prometheus took matters into his own hands and stole fire from heaven and gave it to human beings as their special gift. With this gift, he hoped, they would create all the arts, which would be their special ability. Unfortunately the humans' use of fire led to the creation of weapons as well as to all the wonders of the arts. Not only this; the noise of war disturbed the gods about their own business and led them to petition Zeus to wipe out all these noisome creatures. But Zeus was loath to give up on human beings and after much thought he sent Hermes off to the world of men and women with a second gift, which Zeus hoped would bring peace for ever. He gave to human beings the divine art – the art of politics.¹

Today we are all more likely to agree with Strauss and Plato, at least in thinking about the political character of religion. We might also, I think, be rather more skeptical than Plato seems to be. We would tend to think that Plato told this story in order to assure 'the powers that be, that they were ordained of god', and to make sure that the mob knew this as well so that they treated their rulers with proper respect.

The contrast between the last decade of the twentieth century and 1976 when *Comparative Religion: A History* was first published is remarkable.² Today, in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the subsequent analysis of colonialism, of feminism, of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and of the discourse of post-modernism, we view the world with a more suspicious eye, one that assumes that politics and power are very much at the root of everything. Today it would be unthinkable to write a history of the growth of Comparative Religion without noticing the essentially political character of religion and of the study of religion.

Why, then, is the subject of politics completely missing from Eric Sharpe's book? Part of the answer is to do with the emergence of a

¹ This story is wonderfully retold and transformed by Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Indianapolis, 1965. Pico's version of the story owes much to Machiavelli and also to the author's wish to assure his rulers that they could do anything they wished to do, because they were free by nature. Here politics is turned into the rather more venal art that we moderns are so used to.

² I do not mean to suggest that there were not people in the middle of the century who saw a deep connection between religion and politics. Of course there were. Such a connection, historically, has always been understood in most traditions. What is puzzling is that these people are either not discussed by the comparative religionists or by Sharpe. Why, for example, is Vittorio Lanternari's *The Religions of the Oppressed* missing?

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new academic discipline and the problems of it finding its place alongside other disciplines. It is instructive to notice how much later Politics became a university discipline. We should also notice that many of the early writers came to Comparative Religion from various kinds of textual studies. Some were Biblical scholars and others came from Classics.¹ The mid-nineteenth century was very interested and concerned with the textual concerns of the Higher Criticism and a great deal of energy was spent in defending this new discipline. Perhaps this too is a reason why the new discipline tended to keep to a rather narrow focus.

But these reasons are not completely satisfying, for many of the key intellectual figures in the history of Comparative Religion in fact had interests in politics and in political matters. Running through many of the authors was a fascination with power and purity, associated with the search for a truer kingship than could be found, they thought, amongst the Greeks and Jews. Some of these scholars undertook such a search in order to save Europe and the world. Such a search and variations on it fuelled much of the fascination with the Aryans and with Zoroaster. Nor is it surprising that many of the same people are to be found in the groups and organizations that saw the various Reform Bills as a dangerous and unacceptable tinkering with democracy that would destroy true religion, and opposed every extension of the franchise as treasonable. A truer picture of the situation can be found, for example, in David Nicholls' book *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.² More recently scholars have begun to suspect something of this background in the work of Mircea Eliade and in his connections with the Iron Guard. One wonders if Eric Sharpe avoids discussing the role of politics in the Comparative Religion movement because quite often the politics that were espoused were rather questionable.

Another aspect of the puzzle emerges as we recall that at the same time when we see the emergence of the Comparative Religion, Evangelical Christianity in England was in the midst of the Great Awakening. This was one of the periods of the greatest influence of Christianity. An important part of its successful influence is the very political achievement of the abolition of slavery. Closely related to

¹ It is interesting to notice that 'textual studies' did not include English literature in the mid-nineteenth century. I remember once reading Nettleship's *My Philosophical Remains*. In a letter from the 1860's, if my memory serves me well, he remarks on moves to introduce English literature to the curriculum of the university, finding this an improbable academic discipline.

² London and New York, 1989.

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this is the growth of the idea that Empire entailed the duty to educate and elevate the conquered people. The close connection of the dominant religion with these very political undertakings is, I think, important for defining the space on the intellectual map that is left for Comparative Religion. The new discipline attempts to define itself in ways that allow it to distinguish itself from Evangelical Christianity in order that it can claim to be academic and impartial. This choice, however, creates a situation that eventually serves to conceal the political meanings and ideology of their practices from the practitioners of the new discipline themselves. For some this might have been convenient; for others it was a consequence of the conditions under which their discipline arose.

Today the study of religion is more often able to see that religion is always something to do with human power and meaning, and that as such religion is essentially and always political. The full consequences of our present perception are hard to anticipate. What are we to think about the comparative philology, for example, when we consider the suggested political sympathies of the editor of the huge *Theological Wordbook of the New Testament*? What are we to make of Martin Heidegger's political sympathies when we read his philosophical works? Issues such as this can be found for every religious founder or prophet and, without exception, for every scholar. The problem is that every man and woman, and every community, who thinks, writes, talks, lectures, prays and preaches are recommending some symbols, changing some symbols and denying others. All of the symbols of religion are contested and contestable images of meaning, of power and of order.¹ As such, who would be so bold as to think that the politics that is inevitably involved, visibly or hidden, will always be seen to be good, clean and true?

Now I have gone a very long way, in this paper, to raise several questions:

- Why is the political dimension missing from *Comparative Religion: A History* except for a very brief comment on nationalism in chapter VIII?

¹ I am referring here to the terms Eric Vogelin uses in his monumental but incomplete study *Order and History*, 4 vols, Baton Rouge, 1974. It is unfortunate that Sharpe did not consider this study for it sees a great deal of the nature and character of the political character of religion.

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- Is the political really absent from the writers discussed in that history?
- Can there be any writing about religion or any religious writing that will be completely non-political?
- If writing about religion cannot be free from the political, how must scholars of religion deal with this – both objectively and subjectively?

It is with great pleasure, and some sense of relief, that I address these questions to our guest of honor, Professor Eric Sharpe. I am sure he will have wise and eloquent things to say about all of this.